



## Truth Telling, the Media, and Society

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What are the media? – apart from plural, of course: no survivor of school Latin could think them anything else. To answer the question, perhaps we should remember that they used to be called ‘the media of communication’, and more recently, but again I think no longer, ‘the mass-media’? Even if it is falling into disuse, ‘mass media’ is a usefully specific term. It draws attention to a crucial feature that may help us in the task of definition, and that certain older technologies of communication have in common with the new digital technologies. For the older technologies - first books, then newspapers; first gramophones, then radio; first cinema, then television – are like the internet, Twitter and to a certain extent even Facebook, in that they are means of *mass* communication. With mass media we are not dealing with communication in general, not even communication in the most basic and oldest form - spoken language and the bodily gestures that may go with it. These oldest forms of communication operate between those who are physically present to one another, visible to one another or within earshot, and are not peculiar to the human species. But the two distinguishing characteristics of the communication we are concerned with today are firstly that it links people who are not physically present to one another, indeed may not know and may never have the possibility of knowing, one another because the numbers involved are so large, and second that it is - partly for that reason - peculiar to humans. Attempting to understand what the media are is a venture into anthropology, but an anthropology that recognises that humans live not just in societies but in mass-societies. The first step in our investigation today therefore has to be an attempt to clarify the nature of the human mass-society within which the mass-media operate.

We can start from the undeniable, but widely denied, fact that man is a social animal. Despite the biological and archaeological certainty that since their emergence humans have, like their chimpanzee relatives, lived in groups, there has for some centuries in Western Europe and its North American extension been an extremely powerful though scientifically baseless ideology asserting that humans are originally isolated individuals. We shall, however, make no progress in understanding the role of the media in our social life if we allow ourselves to be influenced by the ideological assumption, going back to Hobbes

and perpetuated in our own day by John Rawls, that social relations are somehow posterior and logically subordinate to pre-existent and pre-social individuals. From such a view it would follow that the media are simply what connects these individuals to one another, possibly competing with, or even substituting for, other social relations. Whether we call it neo-liberalism or neo-conservatism, this view, both of society and the media, is fundamentally erroneous.

We need here to be rather careful about our use of terms. So far I have been using the term society to refer to the collective life of human beings in general but from now on I shall give it a more specific reference, since there are at least three different ways in which we think about each of the large and relatively self-contained collectivities into which we usually divide the human race, what we loosely call countries or nations. We can think about each of them as an economy, as a state, or as a society in the narrower sense, which I shall define in a moment. These three dimensions of our collective existence correspond to three fundamental human needs or drives all of which have to be satisfied if the collectivity, and ultimately the species, is to survive. There is the need to provide the necessities of life - food and such other sources of heat as fire and shelter - that is the basis of the *economy*. There is the fear, the need to ward off the threat, of death: that is the basis of the *state*. And there is the desire, the need for the collective, to reproduce (of which the desire for sexual congress is only a subordinate and individual aspect): that is the basis of *society*, in the sense in which I shall be using the term. Let me deal with these in more detail.

In the economy all the manifold needs and desires of our personal lives, in so far as they can be satisfied by labour and its products, are brought into relationship with the similar needs and desires of others. By being given a price the work that I do can be exchanged for the goods that feed me. But that work of mine does more, even though its effects soon recede beyond the horizon of my personal vision. The breadth, depth, and subtlety of the market is so vast that most of it is unknown and unknowable by the mind of the individual who participates in it. Through the bank with which my greengrocer saves my work may be used by a property developer in Singapore to pay his builders' wages. But note the crucial condition that underlies and underpins the market's operations. It is only by being given a price that my work can enter and help construct the system of exchange that extends beyond the reach of my power to comprehend it. Price, the system for measuring which is called money, makes my work and its products exchangeable wherever the currency in which they are priced is acknowledged, regardless of whether I have any knowledge of the transactions involved. I do not know what the coins that come to me on pay-day have been doing before they reach me, nor do I know what transactions they enable once they

have left my hands. But the condition on which money is capable of receiving the general - possibly universal - acknowledgement that makes it an instrument of all those transactions, only one or two of which are immediately known to me, is that its general or universal exchangeability is guaranteed by an agency other than any individual participant in the sequence of exchanges that we call the market. The coinage, we say, is legal tender - that is, the law requires that it be accepted as a medium for the payment of debt and so for the execution of contracts. The authority that issues the coinage - let us call it Caesar, whose image is stamped on it - is the authority that formulates, imposes, and upholds the law, and just as the coinage is universal and impartial, making no distinction between me and the greengrocer and his bank, in the measure of price it makes available to us, so the law is universal and impartial, applying to all equally.

There is therefore another dimension to the collective to which we all belong, another way of defining it. We are not only the totality of those engaged in exchanging with each other the products of labour, we are not only the economy. We are also the totality of those subject to the law - that is, we are also what is called the state. The state is a collective constructed by the second basic drive I mentioned, the fear of death, or, in its inverted form, the threat of death which the collective is able to impose. The tribe protects me from the strangers who would kill me, but requires me on pain of death not to act as if I were a stranger myself. According to Weber, the state is defined by its possession of the monopoly of violence over a specific territory. The ultimate sanction of the abstract and universal rule of law is the power to impose the threat of death, even where, like the power to take the king in the game of chess, it is never exercised. The state is thus fundamentally distinct from the economy. The law does not bind us through an economic transaction, for it is the law that guarantees the integrity of economic transactions in the first place (for example, by defining and preventing fraud). The law binds us through the sanction of physical force. If we do not do as Caesar decrees, we shall eventually be subject to physical constraint - thrown into prison or put to death, or, if our resistance is shared with a significant number, subjugated by the army. Conversely, the economy depends on the absence from its operations of the threat of force. If a man fingers a knife while suggesting that I sell to him rather than to another, the market cannot establish a price for what I am selling. A transaction under the threat of death is not exchange but enslavement. By keeping the ultimate and infinite threat of death out of the marketplace, by suppressing rackets, for example, the state ensures that *only* the relative needs of all parties - not the intimidation of one party by the threat of violence - determine the exchange of goods and labour and the (finite) price at which the exchange occurs. The ability of the state to guarantee the existence and proper functioning of the

economy is dependent on the fundamental distinctness of their areas of competence and of the drives that power them.

However, distinct though the state and the economy necessarily are, the economy has to pay for the protection the state supplies – for the laws that regulate it, the armies that keep its towns peaceable and its trade routes free of pirates, and the currency that enables it to price its goods. The coin of the trader is also the coin of the tribute. By its monopoly over the threat of death the state acquires its power to tax and by means of the vote all who are subject to the law that imposes taxes have a hand in making it. By means of the vote we all share in deciding how the monopoly power of force shall be applied to ourselves collectively: how the law shall be applied to assist, underwrite, or regulate the market.

The vote may seem an insubstantial, even abstract, bond of political union, but it is as essential to the operation of the modern state as money, equally insubstantial and abstract, is to the operation of the modern economy. In both cases we are dealing with an extraordinary creation of human intelligence, a device that has enabled human beings to collaborate in collective endeavours of a size that is enormous in relation to the individual participants. While it is possible that I may have a passing, doorstep, acquaintance with my MP, just as I may exchange pleasantries with that greengrocer to whom I hand a banknote, I will have no more personal knowledge of the vast majority of those who join with me in electing a government, or of those affected by the laws the government passes, than I have of the lives through which my ten pounds dance, satisfying desires as they go, after the greengrocer has deposited them with a bank. This disproportion, both between the individual economic agent and the size of the economy as a whole, and between the individual voter and the size of the electorate which, through its representatives, administers itself as a state, is intrinsic to the civilization that over millennia the human species has learnt to build. By means of organizational devices of which money and representative government are the most prominent, we have learnt how to live a collective life in intimate association with vastly more people than we can ever know personally, with whom we are in relationships, both of desire and of force, that are too diverse and complex for us ever to fathom. We have learnt to live with ignorance – ignorance not about the non-human world, but about ourselves and our own doings. There can be a science, a mathematically predictive science, of non-human nature, but there cannot be such a science of human economic or political affairs. If economics were a science the best economist would be the richest person in the world, and a high proportion of economists, as the Queen noticed, would have foreseen the crash of 2007–8. If politics were a science, not only would we be living in the kingdom of heaven, but political scientists, and perhaps even the politicians

themselves, would have better predicted the outcome of the British general election in May of this year. Because the economic and political systems are so large that they are beyond one individual's comprehension, and because they are permanently being modified by the participants' reaction to the imperfect – even incorrect – knowledge of them that the participants have, the behaviour of the systems is necessarily unpredictable by any one person. Out of the conscious and purposeful actions of individual agents, motivated by the first two drives I have identified – desire for the means of subsistence, and fear of death – two structured areas of ignorance and uncertainty have been created that enable vast numbers to meet their needs and live together in peace and good order, two forms of collective living that are unique to human beings: the economy and the state.

The same is not true of the third drive – the need for reproduction – and the form of collective living to which it gives rise that I have called 'society'. Society is not unique to human beings: all animals are driven to reproduce their species and many have developed ways of living together that protect and nurture their young and pass on to them the habits and skills they will need to survive and reproduce in their turn. We social animals reproduce not only our genes but also our knowledge and the practices that maintain and reinforce the social bond. Human society is based on the families and extended kinship structures that hold the reproductive group together through all the variations of erotic attraction: heterosexual and homosexual, parental and infantile, loving and aggressive, sublimated, moral, and altruistic. We have learned from our parents, or from figures in our lives with a parental role, and we want to pass on our learning as parents or quasi-parents in our turn. We have been cared for in illness or pain and want to care for those in whom we see our own experience reflected or repeated. We enjoy the company of siblings and cousins and those with whom we may eventually mate, and we seek means of extending varying and translating or sublimating that pleasure into other forms. Hospitals and schools, the institutional care of the orphaned and the elderly, associations of the charitable and like-minded, clubs of every type, all grow out of the feeling that we are or ought to be one family, caring collectively for those we have engendered or who engendered us.

That feeling, however, – that we are all one family –, a feeling inherited from our pre-civilized and even pre-human past, has strict limits. In a famous article of 1992 – 'Neocortex Size as a Constraint on Group Size in Primates' – the anthropologist Robin Dunbar argued that the size of social groups among monkeys, apes, and humans was determined by the size of the brain, since that determines the number of meaningful relationships we can cope with intellectually. For human beings, with their relatively large brain, that number, now known as the Dunbar number, is around 150, and anthropological

and archaeological evidence bears out that groups whether of hunter-gatherers or of neolithic villagers or of Roman legionaries have tended to keep within that limit: larger groups tend to split up and break back down into units smaller than 150, and even in modern industrial companies it is recognized that a group of 150 is the largest within which colleagues can act together efficiently. When more than 150 of us are gathered together – no matter in whose name – we have left society behind and entered the crowd, the mass. That however – and this is where my argument diverges from that of Dunbar and evolutionary anthropology generally, and takes on a more Hegelian character – is precisely the point at which we become uniquely human. For it is at that point – as we cross the frontier of 150 – that we enter the economy and the state, the realm of social ignorance, where the number of our relationships has become too great for our brains to cope with.

The economy comes into existence when our exchange relationships cross the boundary between knowledge and ignorance: when I exchange goods with you not because you want what I give you but because you can exchange it with someone else who is not known to me. We enter the economy at the point where we have to grow up, leave the family, and go out into a world in which we have to work for people we do not know and will never meet. As for the state, it comes into existence when the violence of a social group other than our own is brought to bear on us not in order to destroy us but in order to suppress our own violence towards groups we do not know, or know only as undifferentiated strangers. The state steps in, for example, when our family feeling, our feeling of belonging to our own group, has turned into tribalism; when we come up against others who, we think, do not belong, and resort to physical violence against them, and a vendetta begins. The state, then, drawing on the much larger numbers of those who live beyond our territory and beyond our ken, retorts upon us, the feuding families, the violence or threat of violence we have ourselves invoked, subjugates us, taxes us, and allows us to continue as two of the many neighbouring tribes living in peace within a united kingdom. Loyal Englishmen still don't trust the Welsh but within the state they live at peace with them, except of course at Rugby matches.

So it is not quite true to say man is a social animal. Man is a mass-social animal; it is not society but mass-society that makes us human. And it is what we call the media that make mass-society possible. It is not language, the capacity for symbolic communication within the reproductive group, that is distinctive of our species, for some rudiments of that capacity are to be found elsewhere in the animal kingdom. It is the capacity for understanding and returning communication from outside the family, even, once the age of writing had dawned around 3,000 BC, from those who have not been, are not,



and never will be physically present to us. Writing is the first technologically enabled form of mass-communication, the first medium for the transmission of a message between those not physically present and not personally known to each other. It is the first mechanism for transmitting a truth formulated within a society, within a group no larger than the Dunbar number, into the realm of social ignorance, into the mass. The first use of writing is therefore to serve not personal communication between people who know each other, but impersonal communication between those who do *not* know each other, to serve the economy, as did the still undeciphered cylinder seals of the Indus Valley civilization, or to serve the state, as did the cuneiform stele bearing the legal code of Hammurabi, king of Babylon. In their first beginnings the media already reveal their essential character as mass-media, as a technological means of linking the limited society of those physically known to one another – say, Hammurabi and his advisers – to the realms of mass ignorance, the economy and the state, – say the distant town of Hammurabi’s empire in whose temple or market place the stele is erected. The essence of the media, their defining feature, which determines both the truth and the untruth that they tell, is that they represent the absent to us as if it were present, the realm of necessary ignorance to us as if it could be known – they represent the economy and the state to us as if they were society.

Books, newspapers, radio, TV, the internet, create an imaginary society in which the physical means through which we have personal knowledge of each other within a Dunbar group – language, sight, and hearing – are technologically enhanced to give us information about those remote from us in space, or in the chain of economic or political cause and effect. Perspective is foreshortened, the dimensions of a mass-population are reduced to those of a society no larger than the Dunbar number; the millions about whom, or to whom, the information is made available are shrunk to the size of an audience in a studio or a lecture-theatre or a few case-studies or a panel of victims, just as in a newspaper the multifarious activities of the human race over 24 hours are shrunk to a few inches of headline. People known to us through the media, possibly but not necessarily what are called ‘celebrities’, are people we all – all the millions of us who are linked in the mutual mass-ignorance of a state or an economy – know as if they were prominent members of our society of 150. We can therefore imagine ourselves in relations with them that are not the unconscious economic and political relations we normally have with people physically and causally so distant from us. As if we were all one family, we can have the conscious feelings towards them that derive from the reproductive drive that forms and defines society: we can feel erotically attracted or repelled, caring or hostile, respectful or rebellious, obligated or generous. The imagined community of a

single family is superimposed upon the real mass-community – the economy or the state – in which such feelings are neither generated nor relevant. None the less, the imagined community, created by the media, is as capable as money or the vote of linking the state to the economy and of having a real effect on both. This link can be established in two ways, one positive, one negative.

In a positive sense the enhanced, virtual, or imagined society created by the media can be envisaged as identical with the state and the economy, a third aspect of the mass collective to which we all belong, a public sphere characterized not by ignorance but by knowledge. The knowledge is illusory, of course, – there cannot be full knowledge of all the ramifications of our economic and political interconnections – but for as long as we are in the public square created by the media we suspend our disbelief. While in this theatre of the mind, we accept the illusion that we can know how all our choices to sell our labour and satisfy our needs interact and how we can collectively deploy the political power of force to intervene in that market and modify our own collective behaviour. Our reactions to the information the media have condensed or foreshortened for us become – through such similar foreshortening devices as studio discussions or opinion polls – part of the information itself. And in this form, as what is now called ‘public opinion’, our reactions, presented as a collective threat to use the power of the vote, are passed on to those representatives of ours who take the decision whether and how to deploy the ultimate power of force. A fine example of this process was provided for us some years ago by the case of the Chinese cockle-pickers press-ganged into working under appalling conditions on the sands of Morecambe Bay and drowned when the tide came in too fast for them to escape. Individually, we may have known no one in China, may have consumed only a jar or two of cockles in the course of a year, and may never have been to Morecambe Bay. But in our millions we learned through the media of the cruelty and negligence of the cockle-pickers’ employers who callously let them drown, and we wanted, and through the condensing and foreshortening media said we wanted, legal and administrative action to be taken against the gangmasters. When that action was taken we felt we were living in a *humane* state, that is, a state which used its power to require employers to show to their employees the *social* virtue of physical care, a virtue that can be shown only to those physically present to us in a society whose size is limited by the Dunbar number. As economic agents, the millions of us represented by the media outcry had only the slightest real connection with the Chinese migrant workers and the only consequence for us of an improvement, or indeed deterioration, in their working conditions was a scarcely perceptible rise or fall in the price of cockles. But through the imaginary society of the public sphere the state had been moved to interact with the economy



and some lives, the media enabled us to hope, had been changed for the better, even while remaining totally unknown to us.

However, the pretence, intrinsic to the media, that the mass-collective we live in is a society rather than an economy or a state, has also a negative aspect, if the element of pretence is overlooked and the disbelief we are suspending is forgotten. As they have become more interactive, the media, by giving more agency to the individual, have made much more prominent the disproportion between the individual and the mass and have obscured the role of the economy and the state in holding them together. On the internet, the society the medium symbolically represents is all too often reduced to one – not a city-state discussing in a public square, but a lone voice at the centre of an empty football pitch in a packed but indefinitely vast stadium. Instead of being the means for projecting private virtues into a public space, for giving social significance to our mass existence, the media, and particularly the internet, can become the means for individualizing and privatizing the public space, for reducing our collective existence in the economy and the state to a matter of private passions. This process is not necessarily harmful in itself. For centuries newspapers carried personal columns and classified advertisements which bypassed the normal markets, auctions and corporate systems of retailing, to put individuals in touch with each other for the exchange of goods and services. The advent of digital electronic media has vastly expanded this adjunct to the economy to the point where its enthusiasts can imagine it – however unrealistically – not as an adjunct but as a substitute and not only for the economy. Particularly in their modern, expanded form, the media can appear to replace altogether the vast network of hidden but real relations that make up the state as well as the economy, and to substitute for them the simple direct relationship of one individual to another. The medium itself is the message in the sense that it encourages the illusion that the life of the nation is like a phone-in chat show with no filtering of calls and all 60 million of us can have our emails read out at Prime Minister's Questions. The considerable success of e-Bay and Air B&B as self-regulating markets, directly linking buyer and seller, can conceal that even they are dependent on such external support systems as currency, transport, the policing that prevents the disposal of stolen goods, and the ultimate possibility of recourse to the courts in the case of a dispute. These are all, directly or indirectly, interventions of the state to maintain and safeguard the functioning of the economy. The most determined attempt to exclude the state from the digital market and to privatize it completely is represented by Bitcoin which is essentially a private bank issuing its own notes in digital form. Since however it lacks the crucial state power of enforcement, and so the resources of taxation, it must eventually, like its predecessors in the pre-digital age,

succumb to fraud or insolvency or simply the jealousy of central banks, and be assimilated into the existing state-based financial institutions.

It is the fantasy of a collective life free of the state, the fantasy of a society free of the hugely varied and mediated power of force, that is responsible for the most obvious abuses of the media, particularly, but not exclusively, modern digital media. There has always been a tendency for passions to rise higher in writing than in the spoken word but what is now to be seen on Twitter or the comments sections of public websites has reached an unprecedented level of fury. Threats of rape, murder, and flaying alive are commonplace, as are insulting comments on others' age, appearance, or private parts. The violence of expression and imagery on the internet is deeply revealing of the nature of the mass-media in general.

The degree of violence is partly explained of course by the symbolic and representative nature of the medium. In the end it's only words, words, words, and what the blogger or tweeter wants, or says he wants - it is nearly always he - is action: But the frustration the medium imposes goes further, for the words are not directed at a person embodied in the same room as the man at the keyboard or mobile phone, and if the person were so embodied it is most unlikely that the words would be used. Rather the words are directed at a symbolic face or phantom standing in for the vast fog of ignorance, the mass of the millions with which the internet purports, impossibly, to establish individual contact. It is that failure to deliver the individual contact that the medium seems to promise that fuels the frustration and the anger - the anger at the disproportion between the self and the mass. In normal, embodied, social life, of course, our irritation with another will be kept in bounds by various psychological and behavioural inhibitions. These inhibitions are absent in the electronic mass medium for two interrelated reasons of great interest. In the first place, the source of the media abuser's frustration is itself a source of comfort and security: because it is all only words, words, words, the tweeter need not fear, or thinks he need not fear, any retaliation worse than words. Isolated before his computer or phone screen he feels safe from any more tangible intervention by those he is in imagination addressing. He is therefore, secondly, abstracted and detached from a fundamental fact of collective life, the mechanism on which the state, law, and the collective order of the mass are based: the retorsion of violence upon those who would perpetrate it. The state retorts the power of force, the capacity we all have for violence against others, upon those who would subvert it, even upon ourselves. That power is exerted upon us in a multitude of indirect ways, through regulation, custom, bureaucracy and even occasionally by the physical presence of the agents of law and order - but from all of this the media abuser feels himself exempted. The internet is,

or at any rate feels like, a state-free world, a world in which our own aggression is not held in check by the aggression that makes possible our mass-life in the state, our distinctively human life.

An analogous illusion of a state-free environment lies at the root of another, more dangerous intrusion of irrational violence into our technologically sophisticated collective life – road rage. The example of road rage can perhaps help us to understand not exactly the mindset of the media abuser but rather the distortions of perspective that falsify the realities of that collective life of ours, whether on the internet or on the motorway. Cushioned in the car as at the computer, warm, with vision reduced to a screen or a windscreen, and with hearing comfortably blanketed in both cases by a personal playlist from iTunes, modern human beings do dangerous or socially unacceptable things, utter insults and obscenities that they would not dream of at a cocktail party or their workplace, or even at home. They do so, again, whether at the computer or in the car, not only because they are the victims of a deceptive feeling of safety, but because they have been transferred into a much reduced, a foreshortened, social environment. On the motorway you are thrown together with an arbitrary collection of fellow-vehicles, with which you may share much of your journey – the silver Mercedes that keeps overtaking you and then falling behind, the rattling Fiat that does a steady 69 mph in the middle lane – and you have to find a *modus vivendi* with their peculiarities rather as if you were a Hobbesian or Rawlsian group of savages shaping up for a social contract. Apparently lacking, however, because concealed from us by our technological cocoon, is the possibility of the retorsion of our aggression upon ourselves by an external third party with more violence at its disposal than we can muster, that in our non-motoring existence keeps the mass of us in order. But of course in reality the violence is only inches away, just the other side of our cocoon's metal skin: the imminence of a collision may suddenly chill our fighting spirit with a realization that the weapon of death or mutilation that we are wielding may turn against us; if the aggression survives the threat of an accident it may explode on the hard shoulder, that lawless no-man's-land, when the drivers emerge from their cocoons into society and the Mercedes and the Fiat acquire angry human faces intent on a Hobbesian war; and it will only finally be tamed when blue lights and sirens herald the arrival of the state.

It is not for nothing then that the internet is also called the information highway. It is haunted by the possibility of the violence that the seemingly absent state was invented to eliminate. But what the analogy with the motorway does not bring out is the dispersed and largely invisible nature of state power. That so much of state power is located in the realm of ignorance is crucial for an understanding of the most extreme form of media abuse – terrorism. Terrorism lives

and flourishes through a malign paradox: it achieves a state-sized effect by what are mostly little more than family-sized means. The perpetrators of a terrorist act normally amount to little more than half a dozen; the victims rarely exceed the Dunbar number, and often do not go far into double figures. What is done – the explosion of a bomb, a shooting spree, mowing down a bus queue – is all too readily comprehensible and essentially small-scale. Yet such an act can paralyze a city of a million or more for days – an operation for which in wartime an entire army division might not be adequate; thousands of police and troops may be mobilized to secure a population who have little or no grasp of what is being done to protect them; and vast sums of money may suddenly be appropriated to take elaborate bureaucratic or military measures to prevent a repetition. There is an extraordinary disproportion between the act and the effect, just as there is a converse disproportion between the scale of the state security effort and the individual plots, sometimes involving only one or two people, it sets out to foil, sometimes, inevitably, without success. The state apparatus that can keep a whole nation paying its taxes cannot prevent a millionth part of its population from performing acts that can make our current Prime Minister claim our country is facing ‘an existential threat’. Even though you are considerably less likely to be the victim of a terrorist attack than to be involved in a road accident, the fear of the lesser probability dominates public life far more than the other and greater risk. The number who died in the monstrous recent attacks in Paris, 130 at the moment, is almost insignificant in comparison with the 10,000 who die in France every year from suicide (the highest rate in Europe). But how much media attention has been given to France’s suicide statistics? And media attention of course is the crucial point. The disproportion between society-size terrorist event and state-size political effect is a disproportion already familiar to us from our discussion of the nature of the media. The media symbolize state-size phenomena in society-size images and analogues – the electorate symbolized by a studio audience in *Question Time* – or conversely they give to a society-size event – picking up the dead body of a child on a Turkish beach – a state-size significance, both through a process of symbolization I have called foreshortening. And it is the media that are the single indispensable condition for the success of terrorism. Terrorism is a parasitic growth on the media and cannot exist without them. That is how terrorist violence differs from state violence. State violence – acts of war, for example – have their effect regardless of whether they are recorded, or filmed. If an army has control of a territory, the local population will do as the army tells them regardless of whether John Simpson reports or ignores their plight. But acts of terror have their effect – they terrify – precisely and only through being reported, through providing news items, ‘stories’ as they are called, images and videos of

cruel and violent acts, that have in themselves almost no practical effect on the economy or the state. Through the media, the terrorist's use of the means of force, properly the instruments of the state, is brought symbolically into our own homes, and turns the materials of our personal life in society – our visits to restaurants, music and sports venues, churches and shopping malls – into representations of a personal and social threat to life and limb, representatives of an existential threat to us personally as if it were an existential threat to our state. An existential threat to our state – apologies to our Prime Minister – would be invasion by a foreign power: no terrorist organization can make us think it remotely likely that we shall soon hear tanks thundering down the M40 to take out Oxford; but by means of a television image of the devastated Bataclan they can make us think it far more likely than it really is that, thanks to a bomb or a machine-gunner, we shall not survive our next visit to the Eagle and Child. Contrast the real significance of the bald and strictly unvisualizable UN statistics that 220,000 people have so far been killed and perhaps 11 million so far displaced in the war in Syria, where the existence of a state really is at issue, with the purely symbolic significance of a photograph of a western hostage selected by Isis for beheading. The one is war, the other is terror, and it is only the media that magnify the individual atrocity so that it acquires a global significance that could not possibly attach to a road death or even a family homicide. The terrorist is the extreme case of the media abuser for he breaks through the barrier between words and action, between the realm of social knowledge and the realm of mass ignorance, that so frustrates the name-caller at his computer: the fictional brutality ever more realistically evoked by computer games, the real blood and mayhem that lie potentially just on the other side of the metal skin of the cocooning car, that imagined and unrestrained violence that always implicitly accompanies the reduced, foreshortened, state-free collective life represented by the media, spills over at last into the terrorist's snuff videos, whether he makes them himself or has them made for him by the world's news organizations. The thrill of being a terrorist is essentially the same as the thrill of being an internet troll: it is the thrill of achieving a media existence free of social, economic, and political constraint, an existence which has both the global reach of a symbol, such as only the media can supply, yet also the undeniable and supremely satisfying reality of causing pain, and denying existence, to visible others, a reality which the media seem in the end frustratingly always to withhold. The troll almost gets there; the terrorist actually achieves it, even if he has to blow himself up to do so.

There is a deep narcissism shared by the terrorist and the troll. Terrorists live outside the economy, being funded mostly by patrons or crime, and outside the state and they also live usually in greatly reduced forms of society, relating only superficially, if at all, to those

outside their conspiratorial group. The media-abuser similarly is free not merely of the external discipline imposed by a state: he is not subject either to the internal discipline, the necessary restraint of one's own desires, imposed by the need to reach the compromise that in the market is the condition of an agreement to exchange. The solitary figure sitting before the computer screen or fixated on his mobile phone oblivious of everyone around him in the railway carriage is therefore detached from the reality of both economy and state. But he is also detached even from the reality of society, from the immediate, the non-mediated, reality of all those bodies to whom he could speak or show care or whom he could just watch, whether in the carriage, or the street or the restaurant or even his own kitchen. Instead the medium offers him the imagined society of the 'internet community', of the group of friends on Facebook, of the other abusers who have joined him on the comments column. Similarly the terrorist has no interest in those immediately around him except to obliterate them, and takes refuge in the imaginary community of his Caliphate or of the martyrs in his imagined heaven. This triply detached individual, detached from society, economy and state, is surely familiar to us. He is the Hobbesian individual, the originary lie of the Euro-American neo-conservative ideology, the antithesis of the human, not prior to civilisation but posterior to it. The ultimate neo-con is the ultimate nerd. And in the end terrorists are just nerds too, not the alien enemies of Western civilization but its extreme and cancerous outgrowth. Without the media, the Western media, they would not exist at all.

We can conclude then that the mass-media are indeed a message, a message that is both a great truth and a great untruth. By enhancing the means of communication available to us, in Dunbar-limited society - seeing, hearing, speaking, gesturing - the media give our imaginations access to our collective economic and political life, the size and complexity of which is such that we can never know the truth of it directly. When that limitation is accepted, when the necessarily symbolic and representative nature of the truth that the media tell us about our mass-existence is admitted, then they can serve as an instrument to make that mass-existence humane: they can constitute a public square in which discussion can inform action, in which the virtues that originate in society and are confined to it, the virtues of care, affection, sociability, tolerance, propriety, respect, duty, and the passing on of wisdom, can be translated into political and economic terms, and in which we can affirm our collective identity, whatever it may be, not so much with pride as with a good conscience. If however the press, television, radio and the internet-based media encourage us to think the symbolic relations they establish between representative individuals are the reality of the unknown relations established between us all in our mass-existence as an economy or



a state, and if they claim to be able to substitute for those indirect collective relations in the realm of ignorance direct and visible relations between pre-social, pre-economic and pre-political individuals, then, like much of the secular ideology of Euro-America, they will be telling us a great untruth.

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