



Media Portrayals of Death and Dying

By Timothy P. Meyer, PhD

The topics of death and dying have been a part of most cultures and societies throughout the world since the invention and development of the movable type printing press by Johan Gutenberg in the 15th century. Current western culture has experienced a steady flow of content on death and dying as the various media technologies have evolved from print to the electronic media of radio, television, and film, to the Internet as the most powerful and pervasive purveyor of such content. Most recently, the aftermath of the earthquake that produced the tsunami tidal wave disasters on December 26, 2004 has resulted in unprecedented media coverage of the aftermath and its horrible, graphic consequences.

Images of devastation, lost lives, famine and disease have filled the television networks around the world and have been transmitted and retransmitted over the Internet. These images of real-life death and dying remain juxtaposed against TV commercials for extremely violent video and computer games that use simulations of death as the centerpiece to attract customers, many of whom are minors, and against a mind boggling array of fictional television programs and films that also incorporate numerous images of death and dying, most of which are central to the main storyline that frames the programs/films.

The Enduring Popularity of Violence in the Mass Media

Violence of course has been a societal staple predating the mass media and where there is violence, there are generally dying and/or death as accompanying consequences. Modern portrayals of violence and death, however, especially through the electronic media of television and film, have been characterized by some unique styles of presentation. Some aspects receive unusually heavy emphasis, while others are barely included. Some dimensions or characteristics of violent acts are omitted entirely. Using unique and powerful technology, film and TV violence portrayals are presented in ways that are not and cannot be a part either of observation of or participation in real-life violence. Production or editing techniques package violence in unprecedented and often bizarre ways that audiences come to regard as being “natural,” when, of course, these presentations are anything but.

Acts of media violence, dying, and death are represented via various dimensions and to varying degrees (see Potter, 1999, for an excellent summary and review of the research on media violence and its effects on viewers). Stages include provocation, the violent act

itself, and consequences. The consequences stage is the part where dying and death are presented directly or are implied or referred to in the storyline. Those who make television programs or films frequently take narrative short-cuts which are easily recognized, usually involving undeserving victims of violence who frequently suffer and die, followed by revenge as the main motivation to apprehend and punish, usually violently, the perpetrators who also experience suffering and death as the object of revenge (e.g., Meyer, 1972). The primary focus is on the violent act itself because such acts readily lend themselves to what interests most viewers of media violence: movement, action, and the chance for vicarious participation in antisocial behavior that is not possible or is actively discouraged in real life. Consequences are usually abbreviated and edited to include only glimpses, or they are verbally or visually implied.

Some movies go to great lengths to show graphic consequences, including death, calling on an impressive arsenal of special effects, props, or make-up, to shock or impress viewers. Graphic consequences are rarely presented in television portrayals of violence because of regulatory policies of the Federal Communications Commission, viewer complaints to the network or TV station carrying the program, or to advertisers whose commercials are carried on these programs. Movies abide by a ratings system that warns prospective audience members of the content or restricts admission for those who are not adults (i.e., the *R* or *NC-17* rating).

Violence and Death Are Regular Content Features in TV News and Information Programs

Acts of media violence are incorporated into fictional or reality content. Dying and death, topics highly attractive to audiences, are two popular items for television news (Duwe, 2000). In news coverage, visual images are usually limited to consequences when cameras go to the scene of a violent event and are allowed to record the aftermath. Most often, reporters are limited to words to describe what happened and to whom because of law enforcement investigations at the scene. In these cases, viewers have a readily accessible memory store for what they envision having taken place, due to repeated portrayals of violent acts in fictional TV programs or films.

Death and dying are also featured topics on local and national news programs (see Moeller, 1998). Deaths of celebrities (and news stories that foreshadow such deaths when celebrities are “dying”), people with local, regional, or national prominence (e.g., civic leaders, elected officials), or victims of natural disasters or accidents routinely fill the time allotted for news programs. Suicides of prominent people locally or nationally are routinely reported on television, while less prominent suicides are covered mostly in newspapers (Stack, 2000).

On the national and international levels, death and dying are staples of reports on wars or terrorist acts ranging from battlegrounds in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War to Afghanistan and Iraq in the present. Advances in technology have allowed viewers around the world to vicariously experience the consequences of war and terrorism. For events involving numerous deaths and suffering that occur in countries or areas where media access is difficult, or where there is no perceived interest on the part of U.S.

television viewers, coverage is nonexistent early on, late to arrive, and short-lived, despite the continuation of death and dying (e.g., Bacon, 2004).

Research on the images of death and dying in the media has not been comprehensive in terms of wide-ranging content analyses with inquiry frequently limited to specific events or content that is accessible and “manageable” regarding available resources necessary to undertake such projects. Two fairly recent examples of such topics include Princess Diana and John F. Kennedy, Jr. Other researchers have examined some actual and potential consequences of how the media represent (misrepresent?) death and dying. Holbert, Shah, and Kwak (2004), for example, assessed the relationships between crime-related TV viewing and the endorsements of capital punishment and gun ownership, noting that media emphasis on crime stories in both fictional and reality content exaggerated the degree to which crimes actually occur, thus biasing some viewers to endorse capital punishment as a deterrent to such crimes.

Media Images of Death and Dying: A Complex Issue

The media spend a great deal of time and space on events connected to death and dying. Such an emphasis suggests that human beings have a certain degree of fascination with these topics. Audiences drive the commercial media because they are important to advertisers seeking to reach them, and it is the advertisers who provide most of the revenue, hence profits, for the media industries. Like most media representations, however, death and dying are topics that receive very selective coverage and representations. Representations are chosen using a complex set of criteria, balancing audience interests, who is in the audience, perceived community standards, individual decision-makers’ sensibilities, and laws, regulations, and policies that affect the media’s portrayals of death and dying. There are consequences for what is shown, and perhaps most importantly, for what is **not** shown regarding death and dying.

Researchers continue to make slow, but steady progress examining these consequences, noting the effect of “desensitizing” audiences due to repeated depictions of violence, suffering, and death. Some viewers come to accept violence and death as commonplace, despite the fact that most of such portrayals are works of fiction. When real life violence and death occur, viewers fail to register appropriate levels of concern (or even outrage?) that such violence has become part of their daily existence (Potter, 1999). A final area that is largely ignored by the media revolves around the aftermath of death. How families and friends come to terms with someone’s death and how they manage to cope are important aspects of the death process, but they are usually abbreviated or omitted from media portrayals because they do not lend themselves to action and excitement. The consequences of such omissions as well as other omissions and representations remain essential topics of future research.

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