About half a century ago, when watching the emergence of the world-wide network of radio broadcasting, Alfred Weber (Max Weber’s younger and less famous brother, but an astute sociologist himself) observed that the world had become a much smaller place and so it became scarcely possible honestly to maintain any kind of pretence of ignorance of what was going on. I did not hear Alfred Weber speak, I can only read his words in print. And yet when I read them, I hear a mixture of two emotions in Weber’s voice: anxiety and hope.

Anxiety: would the admittedly frail humans be up to the new challenge? Would they prove able to carry with patience, integrity and dignity the enormous burden of information – all that knowledge of human misery, of the evil being daily done and the pain the victims suffer? Would not they rather – cowardly, basely, despicably – seek escape from that burden behind mutual slanders, vilifications, petty squabbles and outright hostilities, spying the culprits and the villains everywhere except in their own homes?

And hope: perhaps now, when we all know of each other’s pains and can no longer seek excuse in our ignorance, we will face up to our responsibilities and rush to help each other out of misery, whenever, wherever, by whomever help is needed? Perhaps we will rise to the ethical challenge out new knowledge contains?

I wonder what Alfred Weber would have said were he aware of what was to happen fifty or so years later; were he to know that the time would come when a billion of TV screens, or more, would be switched on around the globe at any moment of the 24-hour long day; if he imagined a time when one could say of the planet-wide TV empire what had been said in Weber’s time of the British Empire: that the Sun never sets on its round-the-globe expanses...

It is not just that the sheer volume of information produced, broadcast and delivered has grown in the last decades exponentially. The quantity of information ‘available’ (the word ‘available’ must be, indeed, written in inverted commas, as the moment when human mind could still hope to ingest and assimilate all the information on offer and, tantalizingly, ‘within reach’, has been long passed) is fully and truly unprecedented; but yet more consequential has been the change in the quality of information delivered to the family homes around the planet.

Radio, as the newsprint, told stories; stories that one could believe or not, feel strongly about or not, take to heart or not. Television supplies images – crisp, bright, sharp, lucid, dramatic, spectacular images; images ‘more real than reality’, certainly more technically perfect than any reality can dream to ever be. It is now the televised

* Testo integrale della relazione tenuta in Università Cattolica il 29 marzo 2004.
images that set the standards by which the quality of the ‘real thing’ is measured. You find above the goods displayed on shop shelves the label ‘as seen on TV’ – as the most authoritative, ultimate confirmation that the thing you are looking at is the real stuff you are looking for. What confirms the quality of the goods in shops, applies as well to the standards of human self-affirmation. Descartes could now perhaps modify his *cogito*: I have been seen on TV, therefore I am... As the ‘other reality’ that television cameras were originally thought to be grasping and re-presenting has been slowly, but relentlessly downgraded by the cameras’ technical perfection and their operators’ skills, one can no longer ignore, let alone to depreciate or disdain the images on the screen on the authority of (as Ranke, the great historian, famously postulated two hundred years ago) *wie es ist eigentlich gewesen* (‘how did it truly happened’). For all we know, what you’ve seen on TV is precisely what did truly happen...

And so we all are now – consciously or not, willingly or not – *global bystanders*; eye witnesses to the wrongs done to human beings everywhere in the world. We do not just hear of evil – we see evil being done, though we do little, if anything at all, to repair the damage, let alone to ward off the damage before it be done. In the daily replayed world-wide drama of human misery we are cast in the role of *spectators*. We have been shown evil in action, we have seen the terrifying outcomes of evil action and we can no longer claim ignorance: lack of knowledge would testify solely to the absence of good will, since we could and would know, if we only wished.

Being a bystander means being exposed to enormous ethical challenge. Seeing evil in action pricks and hurts conscience. Could I do something to stop it? Did my actions (or my inaction, for that matter) make a difference? Did they perhaps help, however indirectly, the evil to be done? We feel guilty, even if the feeling is vague, difficult to pinpoint, and even if we would not admit the guilt if charged; and we have good legal reason to deny the charge – in most cases the charge would not stand in any court of justice – and even if it stood a chance to convince the jury clever lawyers will find convincing arguments to prove our innocence. But conscience is quicker, subtler and more obstinate than even the most rational arguments of reason. The sense of guilt won’t go away. The lines dividing bystanders from perpetrators and their collaborators are drawn firmly and clearly only in law courts. In moral consciences boundaries are dim and easy to erase... It may be proven in the court of law that what the defendant did or refrained from doing made no difference. Moral conscience won’t be placated. The gnawing suspicion that difference could be made, if we have only tried strong enough, will stay. And inability or unwillingness to make a difference would not assuage the moral pain: if anything, it would add to the guilt. Despite all explicit denials of guilt, one would recognize guilty consciences by the passion with which guilt is denied.

There are other symptoms as well; for instance, the spectacular career made by the title of a paper published in an obscure journal by Edward Lorenz a couple of decades ago: ‘Can the flap of a butterfly’s wing in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?’. The ‘butterfly effect’ has become since a household terms and is nowadays on everybody’s lips. To reach such celebrity status, the term must have struck a sensitive chord and bring into light something exiled to the dark depths of the subconscious. Are we not all like that Brazilian butterfly? Happy-go-lucky to flap our wings, only to learn a few days later of the Texan tornado, but never guessing the connection between the two events? With such suspicion, one can hardly live in peace; would not one rather seek, keenly and desperately, the way to exile the suspicion again? And what way is better to the banishing it out of sight and out of thought than to deny, all the evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, its truth? Short of that – to deny suspecting, let alone knowing, that truth?
Once a most popular form of the denial of guilt – ‘I did not know’ – the communication explosion of our times has made all but unfeasible. And so its status of the most common form of denial is taken over by casting the sufferers outside the realm of moral duty: they suffered indeed, but they brought the trouble upon themselves - through their sloth or ill will, indolence or foul intentions. They are not really human, not ‘fully human’ at any rate, not the human beings of the kind we are – and so they do not deserve the treatment owed to human beings. Doing nothing to mitigate their pain is not therefore a sin or a moral defect, quod erat demonstrandum.

The attraction of such an excuse is strong, and grows stronger with the rising volume of victims of which, thanks to the ubiquitous and obtrusive images, we are aware. The temptation is overwhelming. It is also an invidious temptation that needs to be resisted, lest the outcome of information explosion shall be adding an insult to injury, spawning yet more inhumanity and more of the bystander-style callousness. In as far as it prompts such excuses and makes them a seductive option, the celebrated information explosion presents a danger to humanity and may well portend ill to the prospects of human community. Rather than adding to our understanding, more information may well make the understanding yet more difficult to attain.

Another popular way of denying the guilt is a ‘there is nothing I can do’ (or ‘I have done all I could’) formula. Such an excuse is by no means fanciful. It is corroborated daily by the common experience of men and women of our individualized society, a society that renders human bonds frail and volatile, and presents commitments (particularly long-term and unconditional commitments) as inadvisable, treacherous step to take. In this kind of society most people at most times find themselves obliged to act under conditions of acute uncertainty and feel their own condition as insecure and difficult, perhaps impossible, to control. They live, as Pierre Bourdieu described it, in the atmosphere of continuous and apparently incurable precarité; and people who feel precarious, unsure of their own actions and distrustful of other ‘people’s like them’ actions (people who, to quote Bourdieu once more, ‘have no grip on the present’) are unlikely to muster enough courage and determination to confront reality in a struggle for a better, more humane alternative. Instead, they are nudged to seek, as Ulrich Beck suggested, biographical (private) solutions to systemic (socially produced) troubles; a task for the great majority of people impossible to handle, let alone to handle effectively and to their satisfaction.

Such necessity encourages a ‘wait and see’ attitude: keep both your hands free, beware of mortgaging your future, remember that teaming up with others is good only if the contract includes an ‘exit on demand’ clause. The excuse ‘there was nothing I could do’ reflects that attitude. Once that attitude is taken, the verdict ‘I can not’ derives its apparent self-evidence from its tacit, yet firm assumptions: I should better not – and so I would not... That attitude does not encourage the search for means and ways to do more than has been done – that is, more that one thought could be done by a ‘sensible and prudent’ person. And so it does not prompt to seek a deeper understanding of what has been ‘seen on Tv’. Indeed, what purpose such a deeper understanding would serve? It may require more commitment; it may require assuming more responsibility; it may create more constraints; it may prove counterproductive to the job of ‘seeking biographical solutions to life troubles’.

These are indeed formidable obstacles to the recasting of knowledge supplied by the flow of information into the understanding of the world of which that information informs; and so also obstacles to the transformation of bystanders into actors, able to repent the neglect of responsibility and repent the guilt feeling that, however ingenious the excuses, can
only be silenced for a time, but would not go away. These obstacles make yet more difficult the task of facing up to the ethical challenge set by (to quote the words of Hannah Arendt written down in connection with German war crimes) ‘the century of bystanders’:

To assume responsibility for all crimes committed by human beings, in which no one people are assigned a monopoly of guilt and none considers itself superior, in which good citizens would not shrink in horror at German crimes and declare ‘thank God, I am not like that’, but rather recognize in fear and trembling the incalculable evil which humanity is capable of and fight fearlessly, uncompromisingly, everywhere against it’ (Essays in Understanding, Harcourt Brace, 1994, p. 132).

Let us not confuse seeing with understanding; seeing sometimes bars understanding instead of helping it. Information flooding from TV screens blinds as it dazzles. Swimming through the information tide leaves no time to pause and reflect, to put two and two together and to draw conclusions. All that is particularly irksome and potentially devastating when it comes to lifting the bystanders from their plight of passive and speechless spectators. Connections between the ‘events’, each shown on TV for a brief time until the next episode fills the screen, are almost impossible to trace. They are neither shown nor implied. Pictures of hungry people hide rather than expose the livelihoods destroyed by free market competition and high-tech ‘improvements’ that make traditional way of existing unviable and redundant. Pictures of corpses strewing innumerable battlefields of tribal wars conceal rather than reveal the ‘aggressive selling’ of ever ‘new and improved’ weapons. Pictures of emaciated or bleeding bodies cover up rather than unravel the need to heal the wounded souls and rescue human dignity from humiliation. This may be in part an editorial fault – the news could be composed and edited differently. But depth-analyses do not make ‘good television’. As the head of one of the broadcasting giants put it – news need to be served as coffee: hot and strong. News are of no use once they stop entertaining, and they do not hold the entertaining power once they cool down.

Like all of us when facing charges, television also has its valid excuses. TV companies operate in a hotly competitive market; high ratings (that is, pulling viewers to the screen and keeping them there) are for them, with but little exaggeration, a matter of life and death. Besides – in rushing from one episode to another and stopping at none, people in charge of broadcasting only follow the general trend of culture that had already primed and tuned their viewers well before the TV operators learned the art of survival. We live, as George Steiner, acute observer of contemporary fads and foibles, put it – in a ‘casino culture’, where time is sliced into separate games and one game has no bearing on another. In such culture, all offers (not just the televised offers) are calculated ‘for a maximal impact and instant obsolescence’. In such culture, time is the most precious of commodities. Whatever takes more time than the casino-trained viewers’ attention may endure, is doomed. And the permanent shortage of time, that bane of all media vying for attention, privileges banal ideas – sound-bites that appeal to the ubiquitous yet un-reflected upon commonsense and to popular uncritical beliefs. And it casts into disadvantage all critical, unorthodox thoughts that always demand time, and ever more time, to ponder and reflect. In the war of ratings, human critical faculty is the first casualty. The odds against understanding are overwhelming.

All too often speeding up the flow and expanding the volume of information portends ill for the chances of understanding. In this, the media – the way they are positioned in contemporary social and economic settings – can be seen as accessories to misdeed. True, their great merit is to present (even if by default rather than design) the
ethical challenge which may, in principle, lead to the moral awakening. But in their present practice they did little (and not as much as in principle they could) to prompt such awakening. Understanding, poorly served by the media, is a preliminary condition of lifting the bystanders to the level of a moral actor.

One should beware however from laying the blame solely at the media’s door. Conceivably, there is more that TV can do to assist understanding; it does not do nearly enough, and more often than not it does the opposite to what could and should be done. But there are limits to what media can do. Understanding is indeed the preliminary condition of moral action – but not the only one; a necessary, but not sufficient condition. There are other conditions as well, for whose absence media could not be blamed since they have little control over their shape and dynamics.

Crucial among those other conditions of moral action on a societal (presently planetary) scale is an effective agency able to make the word flesh – to reforge moral intuitions and ethically inspired designs into effective resistance against evil and successful struggle against human deprivation and misery.

Since the beginning of the modern era the role of such agency was played, though with mixed success, by the institutions of the nation-state. The present-day globalization manifests itself however in the divorce between power (ability to do things) and politics (going about doing them), once locked in a ‘till death do us part’ wedlock inside those institutions - the democratic institutions of territorial states. Life conditions of contemporary men and women depend now on powers roaming the planetary, extraterritorial expanses free from all effective political control and effective ethical supervision – while all political instruments developed through the modern era and receptive to ethical principles remain, as before, territory-bound; their jurisdiction and sovereignty remain local. Power and politics no longer overlap – and the traditional question ‘what is to be done?’ is increasingly elbowed out by another: ‘if we knew what needs to be done, who would do it?’.

The acting capacity of extant agencies is not up to the task. There is a yawning gap stretching between planetary spaces of free power flow and the fenced-off places administered by nation-states and their subsidiaries; a gap that the states, whether singly, severally or collectively, cannot bridge. The alternative – non-governmental – agencies, which reject the misleading and incapacitating policies of ‘thinking globally, acting locally’ and instead aim at actions as planetary as the global powers that need to be bridled, tamed and subjected to a democratic control, are yet to learn, through a long series of trials and errors, how to act effectively – in view of the solidary resistance of global powers jealous of their spoils and local political agencies jealous of their administrative entitlements.

Media can do quite a lot (even if doing it won’t come to them easily) to help us to understand this state of affairs. But the world wouldn’t change simply because we understand its working better. Understanding does not suffice to remake the world more amenable to humanity, to fight back oppression, deprivation and humiliation and secure the triumph of ethical demand over selfish preoccupation with local, tribal or other sectional interests. The other gap, that between understanding and effective action, needs yet to be crossed, and this won’t occur just thanks to the rising volume or even wider content of communication. And by no stretch of imagination this can be done by the media on its own. Divorce between power and politics portends ‘privatization’ of morality – and in its effect the disempowerment, the incapacitation of human resistance against evil. This situation spells out trouble to the moral self. Mind may be clearer, the eyes sharper – but the hands are too short to reach where the hearts want them to. We face the prospect of a planet inhospitable to morality.
But there is hope as well. On a crowded planet, where all of us depend on each other, where we all, so to speak, mutually assure vulnerability of each of us, where we are all in the same boat and must sail together unless the boat flounders and we sink together – for the first time in human history the instinct of survival and the ethical commands point in the same direction and advise the same conduct.

This is an unprecedented chance to morality. Starting with the abominable Cain’s challenge to God ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (the question from which in Emmanuel Levinas’ view all immorality began), Cain’s demand of an explanation why should he feel and care for another human (What is there for me? What has he done to deserve my care? What would I profit from caring?) ethical philosophers went out of their way to demonstrate that self-interest and morality do agree – or at least could coincide if you thought hard and tried harder yet. None of the solutions they proposed proved to be however truly satisfactory. None escaped criticism, none was uncontested. In a human species sliced into tribes each trying and hoping to eke out their existence and make it blissful on their own, care for others meant more often than not compromising once own well-being. Moral duty called for self-sacrifice which self-interest emphatically, and stoutly, rejected. Where philosophers failed, history has finally succeeded. Once you find yourself with the rest of humanity in the same (planetary) boat, the choice is between talking with, and caring for, each other – or going jointly to the bottom. Immorality may promise short-term gains, but even that promise is misleading and if believed would in all likelihood spell trouble. In the long run (and the ‘long’ is in our high-tech era getting abominably short), it can be only suicidal. One may fear for the human species that never before faced a similarly awesome challenge. But we may also hope that never before our shared humanity stood a better chance. The choice is ours – and media can go a long way towards inspiring us to choose the right one.

RÉSUMÉ

La télévision a mis à disposition une quantité étonnante d’information: on est tous, en un certain sens, des «spectateurs globaux», témoins oculaires de ce qui se passe partout dans le monde. Etre spectateurs signifie s’exposer à un énorme défi éthique. Si d’un côté notre rôle de spectateurs nous rend, au moins du point de vue moral, complices, avec nos efforts de refouler notre sentiment de culpabilité («il n’y a rien que je puisse faire»), de l’autre les médias ouvrent la voie à la transformation des spectateurs en acteurs. Voir et comprendre est certainement le fondement de l’action morale, condition nécessaire mais pas suffisante. Les médias peuvent aider à comprendre, mais il faut combler le vide entre la compréhension et l’action. Dans cette èpoque d’incertitude et de vulnérabilité globales, sans doute pour la première fois dans l’histoire, instinct de survie et impératif éthique semblent aller dans la même direction.

RIASSUNTO

La televisione ha reso disponibile una straordinaria quantità di informazione: tutti noi siamo, in un certo senso, «spettatori globali», testimoni oculari di quanto accade ovunque nel mondo. Erette spettatori significa essere esposti a un’enorme sfida etica. Rimanere passivi spettatori può renderci, almeno dal punto di vista morale, complici delle ingiustizie cui assistiamo, pur con i nostri sforzi di rimozione del senso di colpa («non c’è niente che io possa fare»). Tuttavia i media aprono la strada per la trasformazione degli spettatori in attori. Vedere e comprendere è certamente la condizione preliminare dell’azione morale, una condizione necessaria ma non sufficiente. I media possono aiutare a comprendere, ma occorre colmare il salto tra la comprenzione e l’azione. Nell’era dell’insicurezza e della vulnerabilità globali, forse per la prima volta nella storia, istinto di sopravvivenza e imperativo etico sembrano puntare nella stessa direzione.