

The Unjust Measure of Pain: Public Wrath among Talk-Backers after a Particularly Brutal Case of Child Murder

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Abstract

This paper examines the content of 1553 messages sent by participants to an Israeli newspaper talkback internet site after a grandfather confessed to murdering his grandchild. It focuses on grief, mourning, and calls for punishment which took the form of public ritual in the media. Analysis of the messages sent after news of the confession indicates a common denominator not only of compassion for the child, but also contempt, anger, indignation, and demands for incommensurate revenge. Specifically this paper examines the nature of the messages that encouraged forms of lynching by this virtual mob. It explores participants' perceptions that the crime, if not severely punished, would endanger the community, the sanctity of the family and the innocence of childhood.

Keywords: Talkbacks, public wrath, rites of degradation, murder of children, filicide.

1. Introduction

Today, the media have obviated the need for large gatherings of people to act as witnesses or react to punishment; instead individuals can stay home and still be morally involved (Box, 1971). The transmission of these events usually reaches climactic proportions when moral degradation is ceremoniously condemned. More than any other event, media reports and the public airing of outcomes provide the impetus to elicit and reaffirm public support and recognition of the moral boundaries of society.

Although perhaps simply a feature of the electronic age, newspapers, radio and television offer much the same kind of entertainment as public hangings or a Sunday visit to the local jail (Erikson, 1966). In this process, deviant forms of behavior define the fringes of society and supply the framework within which its members develop an orderly sense of their own cultural identity. Today's internet has declarative functions of punishment, and Nietzsche's statement that inflicting suffering "is an all too-human *festive* proposition" (1996, p. 50) could still be valid in this mediatized context.

This paper investigates a modern expression of public temper by examining the ways in which participants in an Israeli talk-back internet site reacted to the murder of a child. The site is an example of a new form of social living and belonging in which people express

opinions and emotions without intermediaries (Baym, 1995; Valier, 2004), by eliciting intense human feelings and forming networks of personal relationships (Rheingold, 1994). The virtual expression of wrath and acute suffering provides a way of touching a stranger's life and leaving one's mark without being affected by others in any palpable way. This corresponds to a particular conception of proximity and closeness at a distance (Greer, 2004).

2. Methodology and Limitations

This article examines a total sample of 1553 messages sent by participants in a talkback site (the *ynet* site of Israel's most popular daily newspaper *Yediot Ahronot*) after a grandfather confessed to murdering his grandchild (<http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3581952,00.html>). The participants' mourning and compassion (with regard to the victim) and their suggestions for punishment which included vindictiveness and degradation (towards the perpetrator and some of the family) are analyzed.

This subject is an apt choice for a study of internet surfer responses. First, there was an exceptionally high volume of messages, at least in the early stages of the story, in comparison to other criminal events. The second reason has to do with the consistent contents of the messages. Public wrath, indignation, vindictiveness and a uniform outburst of grief and sorrow were the only voices (excluding 21% of the total made up of irrelevant messages, responses to responses, responses without content, technical questions and speculations).

Despite the quantity and the formal variety of the messages, a qualitative text analysis (Riessman, 1993) and an interpretive approach (Agar and Hobbs, 1982) showed that the content of the messages was very consistent, and that this public spoke in a 'unique temper'. This consistency emerged through first and second level coding procedures that clustered the data in analytically relevant ways (Grinnell, 1997). Categories were extracted to identify the cultural significance of these messages (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). The themes and their implications are examined below.

On a methodological level, the study of public temper in a virtual forum should be regarded with some caution, since those participating are not a representative sample of the population at large. The online population includes only people who have access to computers, which requires a certain level of technical skill and financial resources. A further methodological limitation is that this study has no control over the individuals involved. For example a respondent could send more than one message or pose using a pseudonym (Fialkova and Yelenevskaya, 2001).

However it is more than plausible that this site represents the face of Durkheimian public temper, or at least a form of public discourse in one of the 'village squares'. The general public outcry and irrational call for the death penalty, revenge and retributive punishment have been reported in the academic literature in cases of terrorism and heinous crimes (Garland, 2005; Marquat, Ekland-Olson and Sorensen, 1994; Sarat, 2001).

3. The Confession of the Crime

The main details of the story, based on the *ynet* site, which were loosely translated into English by a CNN correspondent, are briefly described here (<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/09/11/israel.suitcase.girl/index.html>).

Initially the case of 4-year-old Rose Pizam's disappearance in August 2008 was likened to that of Madeleine McCann. But a few days after Roni Ron, Rose's 45-year old grandfather was arrested, he confessed to the police that he had stuffed her body into a suitcase and dumped it in a river. Ron first claimed he accidentally killed Rose when he slapped her in a fit

of rage. The family drama also centered on Rose's French non-Jewish mother, Marie Renault-Pizam, aged 23. She had a longstanding affair with Roni Ron, her estranged husband's father, with whom she had two other children after leaving Benjamin Pizam and moving to Israel after a custody battle in France in which she was awarded Rose.

At this stage the mother, Renault-Pizam, denied any role in her daughter's disappearance. She told police she thought Ron had sent Rose to an institution in France, although police in fact had evidence of a telephone conversation that showed she knew of the child's fate. She was also arrested.

Rose's great-grandmother (the mother of Ron), Vivienne Yaakov, reported the girl missing in late July, saying she had not seen her great-grandchild for about two months. Yaakov told police that Roni Ron had taken the child and that she had never come back. Police searched Roni Ron's apartment in mid-August and arrested him.

The body of Rose was found in a river a few days later. Currently (October 2010), the trial is ongoing and the mother and the grandfather. Still under arrest, have yet to be sentenced.

4. Content of Messages

4.1 Crime and Ambiguity

Israel has witnessed different cases of filicide in the last two decades (at least two dozen, Cavaglione, 2008, 2009) What made this case different, and made many talkbackers state that this was the most heinous case of filicide on record, was its symbolic ambiguity (Douglas, 1966). When a parent or relative kills a family member, the motivation is always considered ambiguous because a family member has violated the commitment to protect a child. However in the case of Rose, ambiguity existed on other levels as well, not least of which the fact that her body was not initially found.

First, Rose had been subject to a custody battle between her parents who lived in two different countries, the Jewish father in France and the non-Jewish mother in Israel. Marie Pizam was awarded the child because she was considered not abusive and better able to guarantee Rose's welfare. Second, the enmeshed relationship within the family can be termed ambiguously "liminal" (Turner, 1967): a 23 year old woman who is already the mother of 3 children (by two different fathers), who was married and divorced from Benjamin Pizam, started an affair with her father-in-law. In addition to infringing the order of monogamy (and the taboo of incest/adultery), the age difference between mother and father-in-law was also striking. The defining lines of territoriality (Israel/France) ages (23/45 years old), and inter-generational intimacy (father/father-in-law) were infringed. Finally, purely from the standpoint of Mosaic religious law, Rose was born out of a forbidden relationship, the offspring of a relationship between an adulterous woman, or the product of incest between close relatives (Leviticus 18, 15 and 24-25). These points of confusion, ambiguity and promiscuity were highlighted by participants in the talkback. For example:

'This is the price of Jewish assimilation among the Nations. The mother is a Gentile, so the child'.

4.2 Grief and Mourning

Greer (2004) noted that when people become emotionally involved in high profile cases such as when the victims are children, participating in their suffering and sharing in their grief is one way of outwardly and expressively demonstrating one's depth of feeling – of proving

one's humanity – in a cynical and fragmented society (for the case of Israel see: Ajzenstadt and Cavaglione, 2004, 2005; Sznajder and Talmud, 1998). This collective mass mourning shares the intense anguish of unknown others, and can lead to the development of an economy of suffering and pain in which members compete to appear the most hurt, and therefore the most human. In this sense, Greer claims, leaving a message on the web provides a fast-acting but short lived (and commodified) antidote to the uncertainty and anxiety that characterizes the post-modern alienated human condition. In the messages Rose was portrayed as 'innocent', 'pure', 'a little doll', 'poor little girl', 'killed twice, first her mind and then her body'. This image of the victim was also idealized by messages like 'angel face', 'angel born in Hell'. Other participants expressed grief and identification with the victim in messages such as 'the heart cries and doesn't believe', 'I just want to cry, sweet Rose I have no words, Poor girl'.

Her loss was also ritualized following patterns in traditional Judaism. For example she was declared to be 'a Just/Righteous (*Tzadik*) according to our religion'. A *tzadik* is a title given to a person who behaves in accordance with justice and morals, and exhibits the highest standards of behavior. Despite the fact that her body was not found at this stage and her Jewishness was uncertain, this act of mourning can be seen as a strong symbolic manifestation of aligning together around the fundamentals of traditional Judaism.

Participants expressed their sorrow regarding the public's powerlessness to help her in the past or in the present. 'I cannot stop crying. What a baby doll. I could give her so much', 'how can such purity be taken from us.

This attitude of grief and powerlessness also included appeals to a transcendental Power. For example:

'Now she is in a place where she can be hugged, may she rest in peace'. 'Only God will help', 'May God be compassionate. We need salvation'.

Partaking and sharing grief can be seen as 'a gesture of cohesion', to use a term coined by Gusfield (1963). In a (virtual) ritual of meeting together, there are common feelings of pain: 'Cry, beloved country', 'the county hugs you, Rose'.

4.3 Soul Searching

Greer (2004) also points out that in messages sent to virtual space after cases of heinous murders there is a process of idealized re-examination of social norms that takes the form of romanticized images of the family, school, institutions of criminal justice and even the state. This view echoes to some extent the functionalist Durkheimian concepts of deviance as a reinforcement of social cohesiveness and the clarification of social rules (Box, 1971). Permissiveness and a general decline in values including eroded moral standards, a lack of respect for others, and individual selfishness are advanced in a simplistic and naïve way as the sole cause of individual crimes.

Many messages stressed moral decline and called for soul searching: 'how could it happen among us?', 'look at the schools today and you will see the face of the State in 20 years'. In contrast to an idealized past when the public believed that no heinous crimes were ever committed (because of the basic fundamentals of traditional Judaism and Zionism), for many participants a dystopian future becomes an incontestable fact:

'Sodom and Gomorrah, it would be better if we were destroyed', 'apocalypse soon'.

The contrast between the idealized Biblical Israel of antiquity promised to the Chosen People and its present decay also appears as a central theme: 'We were supposed to be a Light unto the Nations', 'we call ourselves the Chosen People? Where have this People gone?'

In Jewish tradition Torah (Old Testament) study and careful observance of its commandment are considered to be a *fence* against wickedness, considered to be a state where the individual is dragged down from evil to evil until he finds himself sunk into its very depths (Luzzato, 1966, p. 79). In a moral panic of this sort there is a tendency to combine problems into a single threat. By engaging in this process of convergence, the press urges its readers to orient themselves not just to an incident, one type of behavior or even a type of person, but rather to a whole spectrum of problems and aberrations (Cohen, 1973, p. 9-10). Defining a behavior as extremely deviant, for instance by comparing it to a curse that endangers society as a whole, has symbolic boundary-maintenance (Douglas, 1966). In fact, in many messages the crime was depicted as 'disgusting' and 'poisoning'. The country was seen as contaminated, and the perpetrator and his relatives were depicted as 'dregs', 'scum', 'garbage'. There was a call for 'eradicating people like them from our society', 'expel them to France, there they will be executed'. Like excrement, waste or refuse, the situation was perceived as dangerous as long as the criminal 'who is a stain on humanity' remains within society: This explains the suggestion to expel dirt and pollution, so as to recreate a symbolic sense of inner *order* (Douglas, 1966).

Among Israeli surfers, expelling, rejecting or annihilating the defiling deviant was only part of the action. Numerous messages reflected a call to tighten turf borders by a greater presence of "policing agents" (Erikson, 1966) to protect the cultural integrity of the community. The symbolic borders of society and their "demarcation" (Douglas, 1966) were represented by the physical borders of the country, which should have acted as a shield: 'how could they get into this country?', 'after many cases of killing and domestic violence among new immigrants we have to control whom we accept into our country, with the immigration services, etc.'

Dangerous behaviors were perceived as brought to Israel by people who feel no sense of belonging and have no commitment to Israeli society or its tradition. They are seen as having no bonds to Judaism, the Zionist ethos or basic moral values in general:

'Of course! French-Moroccans!', 'I hate infidelity in women, in particular those from France', 'They are not Jewish'.

In this process of soul searching there were many "gestures of differentiation", where the dividing line between *we* and *them* was heightened. This can explain why Ron's crime was compared to that of a terrorist, the ultimate enemy in Israeli culture: 'Death penalty for terrorists and crazy killers. Their place is not among us, but below ground, rotting like their victims'.

Demonization is a process that allows the problems of society to be blamed upon 'others' who are usually perceived as being on the fringes of society (Young, 1999). In particular in this crime, the demons were not only the strangers but people who had become strangers. One of the characteristics of demonization is distancing, a process which basically involves explaining crime or deviancy in a way that denies that it has any relationship with the core values and structure of society. The strategy of control and the ritual of accusation and punishment also serve to purge and thereby restore the body of the community as a whole to its proper relation to God (Kitsuse, 1962).

Thus Ron became a non- person 'May his name be deleted'. There was a call to purge him from the social body, then 'God will deal with him'.

4.4 Revenge

Revenge is often driven by more than rational crime control or traditional forms of incapacitation. It is often motivated by the feeling that a person who has harmed another individual is rotten to the core, evil through and through, and thus a legitimate target of hatred (Murphy, 2000). Vindictiveness can be also seen as supportive of self-defense and the moral order, a complex mixture of good and bad elements. It avoids the simplistic reductionism often found in those who condemn this feeling (Murphy, 2000). The indignation that prompts individuals to seek retribution is usually reserved for those perceived as having betrayed a bond of common moral community. Punishing serious crimes is itself one of those rituals that contribute to a society's identity as a self-respecting moral community (Oldenquist, 1986).

In some of the messages the extent of revenge matched the extent of the crime with the whole transaction of being wronged and taking revenge coming out on the plus side. In this sense, the gratification of the revenge outweighed the harm that elicited it. Some participants clamored: 'I am ready to execute these people', 'give them to me!'

There was also an element of omnipotence, and unlimited expansion of the ego which went beyond the simple mechanism of an eye for an eye (Marongiu and Newman, 1987). One message read: '50 life sentences are not enough for that bastard'. The general attitude of the participants was that the crime was beyond any due process, any just measure of pain, and beyond any commensurate 'due calculations', or 'consequentialist' or 'utilitarian' goals. For example: 'No clemency. New laws!' or 'the whole country wants revenge!' The participants expressed their fear that today's criminal justice system is too 'soft', and hence one of the causes of heinous crimes. The law and order perspective is best captured in the frame of a faulty system. This view regards crime as a consequence of impunity: people commit crimes because they know they can get away with them. The police are handcuffed by liberal judges. The prisons have revolving doors for serious offenders (Sasson, 1995). As indicated in one message, 'he will sit in a 5-star prison with TV and internet, playing backgammon every day, get food, classes and amnesty or parole after 18-20 years'.

Expressions of revenge among the participants could be divided in demands for imprisonment and calls for capital punishment.

'May he rot in jail', 'I wish that he couldn't see the light and rot in jail'. These images capture forms of harsh imprisonment like the 'hole', the dungeon, and the classical Panopticon (of the beginning of the 19th century) but also the modern form of the American super maximum security prison (King, 1999).

Although capital punishment was strictly curtailed in Israel in 1954, and only applies to cases of genocide (the Eichmann trial), treason and crimes against humanity, the messages appeared to either ignore or transpose this: 'Israeli citizens demand the death penalty', 'I am for the death penalty. Who wants to join me?', 'I cannot stand it that he will sleep, eat and live on my account. Death penalty! For many, the death penalty should become public and painful, with images of a nostalgic return to pre-classical (Beccaria, Bentham) forms of punishment: a "hanging day" a public spectacle of slow and harsh suffering (Spierenburg, 1984): 'An eye for an eye. To be hung in the square and we people will stone them', 'justice! If it is true, he should be executed without trial and be stoned in front of all the people, to deter other psychos, in this deteriorating country'. Forms of torture, hard labor, slavery, and other original ways to inflict pain were also proposed, and constituted a grotesque type of catharsis or emotional compensation: 'Find an island in the middle of the ocean and send all these psychopaths there', 'the death penalty slowly on the rack', 'he must be thrown into the sea so that the sharks will eat him'.

4.5 Stigmatization

Cromer (1978) pointed out that even today crowds sometimes gather to witness more infamous defendants on their arrival and departure from court. However, the media in general is another perfect arena for judging and shaming the defendant before his arrival in court. These public rites are designed to alter identities, to ascribe a stigma. Degradation ceremonies take the form of a publicly delivered demonstration that the accused is not who he appears to be but is otherwise, and in essence a lower species. If successful they culminate in the ritual destruction of the person (Garfinkel, 1956).

For a stigmatizing degradation ceremony to be successful, Garfinkel argues, the accused person must be ritually separated from others. He must be placed outside and turned into a stranger (p. 423). One of the ways a deviant is degraded is by changing his status, by being depersonalized and treated as a mere instance of a discreditable category rather than as a full human being (Schur, 1980).

Personal expressive idiosyncrasies consisting of individual traits such as posture, speech patterns and facial expressions do not stand alone as concerns information. They convey the social significance of these gestures and are reinterpreted by the audience (Goffman, 1959).

For example, in many cases facial expressions became a topic of subjective interpretation in the messages.

'Is he a grandfather? Look what he looks like!', 'they look so young! Whores'.
'He deserves death penalty. He has the face of a serial killer', 'only because of his face= 15 years in jail', 'you can see in his face that he is a bastard killer', 'he looks very dangerous. Probably it is not his first murder'.

Other attributes alternated between the binary stigmatization of mad and bad (Conrad and Schneider, 1980). On the one hand: 'They need therapy', 'how sick can a person be, for God's sake', 'this is an abnormal family', 'two psychos, who do not deserve to be parents'. On the other hand, the criminal is portrayed as bad, inhuman, and sometimes like a beast. 'He is a beast', 'he is like a jackal', 'even animals take care of their offspring. Human animals should rot in prison, right away', 'completely bestial', 'there are people whose morality are like apes'. For others his state was more abject than those of subspecies of animals: 'He is not a human being and not even an animal. An animal is better than him'. A more degrading attribution is that of a monster. For example: 'Monsters', 'when did they get married those monsters?'
Sometimes the stigma of labeling extended to the individual's close friends, associates or relatives. Ervin Goffman uses the term 'courtesy stigma' to describe this phenomenon. Mary Douglas refers to "contagion". For many participants, the punishment, like blood revenge, should be related to familial relations, arguing that not only Ron but all his family deserved harsh punishment: 'I hope they will be in jail for their entire lives', 'jail for his whole life, for him, his wife and the child's father who abused her (Rose) in France. No clemency, amnesty or parole', 'they all deserve death by torture, suffering what Rose suffered'.

In this over-generalized and all-comprehensive attitude, anyone who launches a defense of the criminal must be discounted and such a position discredited. Wrath extended to the legal system ('Judges who are too lenient should also be executed').

4.6 Retrospective Interpretation

Another form of degradation is related to retrospective interpretation where participants see the character of the person as deviant (Schur, 1980). The public assigns deviance by reinforcement of deviant stereotypes and selective depictions of various events in the past. In

this process, a previous identity may be viewed as the exception to the rule, and the new reality may become the prime definer. In other words, the audience may suggest that what they are now is what, after all, they were all along (Garfinkel, 1956).

In particular there was a process of oversimplification and polarization that emphasized Ron's and Marie Pizam's negative traits and actions, and mitigated their positive ones. Lofland posits that once people reach a satisfactory explanation of an event, they reconstruct an understanding of the process so that initial decisions or definitions appear normal, natural and coherent (1966, p. 150).

Cromer (1978) noted that the various allegations concerning a suspect's behavior are only the first stage of his ritual destruction. In order to ensure a complete degradation, the crime of which he is suspected must be portrayed as indicative of his personality as a whole. The imputation of criminality presents the audience with the opportunity of reconstructing both the character and biography of the person being denounced. In the case of Ron, at this stage the public was not informed about his past and background. The "affair" was enough to condemn him:

'This is incest according to Judaism. And those who have no Torah, have no problem killing children and to make two little bastards', 'he has to be hung. Sick, idiot. He stole his son's wife and killed his grandchild. Gaaaarbage!', 'this whole criminal act, in order to keep on f**king this woman without being bothered by the baby', 'when did they get married those monsters? When they were 10 years old?'

The chain of evil was also seen as inter-generational, deriving from an original sin in the past, as one participant stressed: 'We have to look into their genealogy'.

5. Conclusion

Emile Durkheim drew attention to the expressive qualities of punishment when he argued that all "healthy consciences" come together to reaffirm shared beliefs through the dutiful indignation that constructs public wrath:

We have only to notice what happens... when some moral scandal has been committed. They stop each other on the street, they visit each other, they seek to come together to talk on the event and wax indignant in common. For all the similar impressions which are exchanged, there emerges a unique temper... which is everybody's without being anybody's in particular. That is the public temper (1947, p. 102).

Based on a structuralist, functionalist and consensus sociological approach, this paper deals with the public temper in the responses of talkback participants on the *Yediot Aharonot* newspaper website after a brutal case of child murder. It examined the contents of 1553 messages sent after a grandfather confessed to murdering his grandchild. Analysis shows that the participants expressed a "unique temper" of grief, indignation and demands for incommensurate punishment.

From a theoretical Functionalist standpoint these messages appear more akin to acts of symbolic solidarity, social bonding, and a way of finding common denominators which clarified and reinforced the norms of the Jewish community through acts of grief and denunciation. The murder prompted soul-searching and realigned people in society, while creating symbolic rituals of solidarity and disapproval, public degradation, condemnation and hostility to stereotypical foreign, evil and deviant others.

On a methodological level, the study of public temper in a virtual forum should be regarded with some caution, since those participating are not a representative sample of the population at large. Further research could be based on a different quantitative methodology, and the population not involved in the web.

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