MiW Roehampton 7.3.09

The media and the therapeutic: the case of journalism

Barry Richards

Juxtaposing 'media' and 'therapy' can raise several questions. For example, can our mediatised culture be described as a therapeutic culture? Or, an overlapping but different question, can media consumption be therapeutic? This paper will be of relevance to the second question, about the therapeutic potential of the media for individuals, though will not directly address it. As for the first question, whether we live in a 'therapeutic' or 'therapy' culture, let me begin by offering a broad perspective on it. Simply put, the answer is yes, we do. As the American sociologist Philip Rieff (1966) so presciently described it, we are living amidst the 'triumph of the therapeutic', in a culture characterised by preoccupations with feelings and relationships, and with reflection on, and aspirations for the better management of, emotional life. Admittedly, this is more in some areas of culture than others, and is not a comprehensive victory. It is present in a lot of media content, most obviously in dominant television genres such as soaps and many reality shows, insofar as these are dramatisations of emotional relationships. It is now well-established in organisational life, for example in some human resources management practices. Various versions of it have been influencing educational and welfare practice for many years. But there are many places which a therapeutic discourse has not yet reached, for example (as I'll be discussing shortly) it only occasionally appears in the language of everyday democratic politics.

Moreover, the concept of 'therapeutic culture' is or ought to be a complex one, and we should reject attempts to define it in simple or polemical ways. But for at least a decade now it has been apparent that there are some ongoing social and cultural trends which can be grouped together because they concern changes in how emotion is understood and managed. In a paper with Joanne Brown (Richards & Brown, 2001) we outlined a model of its various components and traced its major manifestations. We saw it as comprising, at its best, elements of emotional expressivity, of critical reflection, and of conscience. We also stressed the need to avoid simple blanket

judgements about it, as social progress or as cultural decline, but to assess its merits carefully in each specific example, given the wide variations in the content and the context of 'therapeutic' phenomena. Nonetheless we argued that an overall assessment is possible, that the rise of the therapeutic as we defined it can be seen as a good thing, albeit with many qualifications and reservations. It represents an increase in a society's emotional capital, in its resources for understanding and managing emotional and relational life.

Before developing that idea little and considering where the media come into it, let us consider one further remark about the general idea of the therapeutic in contemporary culture. The term 'therapeutic culture' is preferable to 'therapy culture', as Frank Furedi (2003) terms it, because many of the key developments are not linked to any practices of 'therapy' per se, and are not derived from the expertise of therapists. They are more like spontaneous 'capillary'-level changes in popular, professional and organisational cultures. They are about the therapeutic management of emotional life, but not about the specific practice of therapy. Those who know Furedi's work will know that for him therapy culture is a disaster wreaked upon us by the social imperialism of the therapeutic professions, who seek to absolve individuals of all responsibility for their actions. This is a basic misunderstanding of therapy, as well as a misreading of the trends themselves, but we will not go further now into the deficiencies of Furedi's homogenising polemic (see Richards, 2007).

Instead let's turn to the relationship of therapeutic culture to the media. If contemporary culture is therapeutic, how does this relate to the heavily mediatised nature of our culture? What part have media played in the emotionalisation of everyday life and in the rise of therapeutic values? Media content can and does elicit all of the emotions we feel in relation to the social world – envy, admiration, resentment, compassion, alienation, belonging, and so on. The media are clearly a powerful component of our emotional lives. Media content can excite and seduce, and it can stimulate and satisfy. There is an overwhelming prima facie case for seeing the media as the means by which emotionalisation of various kinds has been rolled out across contemporary culture. This not to say that the media have in themselves 'caused' the emotionalising trend, but they have certainly transmitted and propagated it. As to whether the media are a major driver of therapeutic culture, in the sense of

that term used here, that is another question. I am defining it as marked by, amongst other things, gains in emotional capital, with strengthened capacities for reflection and self-management, and for the exercise of conscience. If the media were driving this, there would increasingly be media content which offered to its consumers opportunities for reflection on their emotional lives and on the feelings of others. This content would enable us to explore emotional complexity, to recognise and tolerate pain and internal conflict, to empathise with others, and to relate reparatively towards them. It would thus be contributing to the development of greater reserves of emotional capital amongst media consumers and users.

There are many studies of media outputs which can be used to assess whether or to what extent this kind of content is now to be found, especially in entertainment genres such as soaps and reality TV shows. I will not go into that extensive area here, but would like instead to point the debate towards a different kind of media content, that relating to politics, i.e. the news. I have been particularly interested in the relationship of politics and news to therapeutic culture. This relationship will be played out in the 'emotional public sphere', which I define as the emotional dimension of the political public sphere, or as the emotions which are involved in the political life of a nation (Richards, 2010). We all inhabit an emotional public sphere, a constant accompaniment to the traditional public sphere of debate and contestation, often overlooked even though it may be of decisive importance in determining political events.

There are a number of ways in which the therapeutic has impacted upon and begun to change aspects of our political culture, as I will mention shortly. But overall our emotional public sphere is still fairly unreconstructed, therapeutically. Official political discourse is ritually adversarial and rationalistic - emotionally unreflective, to say the least. There is an 'emotional deficit' in most forms of political communication (Richards, 2004). Some of the reasons for it are understandable. If a politician begins to explore the emotional undercurrents around a particular issue, and thereby to challenge a perception of the citizen as a purely rational being, he or she could risk being accused of contempt for voters. Or the politician who admits to some inner conflict and uncertainty risks derision for weakness. This indicates that the politicians are certainly not the only ones to blame; journalists are heavily implicated in the

emotional restriction of everyday politics, since most of us know politics almost entirely through its presentation to us in the news media. So journalists join with politicians as the leading shapers of the emotional public sphere. They both have particular responsibilities for the predominant patterns of public feeling. I have suggested the term 'emotional governance' to refer to this task of public emotion management, which is a variety of 'emotional labour'.

The news media are therefore agents of emotional governance, and are influential in shaping public emotions. Of course there are other influences, such as dense interpersonal networks and word-of-mouth influences amongst the political and business elites and other main actors involved, which may be paramount. Critics of 'media effects' theory may argue that even amongst the wider public the formative influence of the mass media on opinion and feeling cannot be assumed. Moreover the long-term impact of the web on the public sphere has yet to be clarified. While the rise of blogging and the growth of 'citizen journalism' do not seem likely to displace the professional journalist, nor to dissolve the dominance of major news channels and print titles, they clearly complicate the picture. But I am assuming that the mainstream news media are and will remain crucial in shaping the emotional public, albeit in ways that are often complex and not yet fully understood.

To some extent the news media have led some tendencies in the emotional public sphere in recent years which could be seen as therapeutic or at least proto-therapeutic. Two major illustrations of this are in the role of news in generating public conscience about global suffering, and in the increasing personalisation of leadership. For both, it is television news in particular which has led the way, in a combination of technological and social factors. The introduction of television itself, then of colour, and images of ever-improving quality, has brought distant peoples and domestic politicians to us in vivid, near-palpable ways. This facility has meshed with two broad socio-cultural trends, one towards the emergence of a world public, or at least of national publics open to mobilisation on international issues, and the other being the growth of therapeutic culture with its emphasis on individuals as persons.

The fact that these phenomena have all occurred in recent decades perhaps enables us to suggest that there has been a *re*-emotionalisation of the public sphere, after a phase

in the post-WW2 period when, at least in the UK, the cultural changes brought by the consumer society and by de-industrialisation left the discourse of politics behind, so that it was increasingly out of touch with the public and unable to make much emotional connection with it. Now, a partially de-traditionalised politics is potentially more in tune with the public, and the emotional dimensions of the public sphere are more evident.

One example of this is the role of the reporting of famine in underpinning the success from the 1980s onwards of new initiatives to encourage charitable giving, which required new levels of public awareness and compassionate feeling (whether based primarily on empathy, guilt or anger). A second is in the intensifying scrutiny of political leaders as persons, and the greater attention paid to their personal relationships. (This is one of a number of areas where the rise of the therapeutic converges, sometimes confusingly, with developments in marketing and in celebrity culture). Audiences now have much more opportunity than in the past to undertake this scrutiny directly themselves, by watching close-ups of political actors performing in interviews and meetings, but also there is abundant media commentary on and analysis of their temperaments, relationships and qualities. There is a large debate around this trend, with many decrying it as the debasement of politics to soap opera, while others see in it potential for re-engaging citizens and re-establishing trust in new ways based on emotional connection and judgements of authenticity.

How do the direct producers of the discourse of news think about their work and its relationship to therapeutic values and to the expanding discourses of emotion? The Media School at Bournemouth University has undertaken a study of emotional literacy amongst news and current affairs journalists (Rees & Richards, 2010; Richards & Rees, 2010). There is a growing interest amongst journalists in the emotional dimensions of their work, mainly driven by a concern with the stresses experienced by reporters exposed to traumatic situations, and an American-based organisation called the Dart Centre has pioneered the delivery of training modules for journalists and journalism students which develop critical reflectiveness on the emotional aspects of reporting and of work in the newsroom. Our research project sought to link this development, in what we might call, reviving an old-fashioned term, ‘mental hygiene’ in news production, with the broader political and theoretical

questions around the contributions of news to the emotional public sphere, and thereby the relationship of mediatised politics to therapeutic culture.

We talked with around 100 journalists and journalism students, in a mixture of individual interviews and focus groups, about what they thought were the major emotional issues in the work of journalists, and how they thought they could be best trained or prepared for them. These were not for the most part domestic political journalists; the areas of work which lend themselves most readily to discussion of journalism and emotion are war reporting and general local reporting, so we are talking here about news and the emotional public sphere in a broader sense than national democratic politics. I will summarise a few of the findings. What they add up to, I suggest, is a picture of a profession struggling with a growing awareness of the importance of emotion in its work yet unable to think clearly about the implications of this for journalistic practice and for professional identity.

For example, the idea that journalists have to be 'detached' in order to be able to report accurately is still a dominant one. While some respondents took up what we might call the post-positivist view that objectivity is impossible, most saw some kind of objective distance as a prerequisite of good reporting. However there was some confusion about what this means, with 'objectivity' meaning emotional distance in some contexts and political neutrality in others, although those are substantially different things. Also there was for some people an unresolved contradiction (which was sometimes also an unacknowledged one) between an insistence on objectivity and a recognition that some situations must evoke strong feelings in any humane observer. One respondent saw journalism as not just about accuracy, but as a practice of story-telling and building in emotion as well. Most respondents, however, did not integrate the dual principles of objectivity and sensitivity.

Moreover there is also a tension between this prominent ideal of objectivity and another equally prominent category in the professional discourse of journalists, that of the 'gut feeling'. This refers to the belief that a good journalist will 'instinctively' know whether a story is newsworthy or not. So journalists are required by axioms of their professional discourse to be both objective and intuitive, both detached from and tuned into the narratives they produce. That discourse does not furnish its subscribers

with ways of reflecting on this problem of their ambivalence. This is one of a number of points at which a measure of therapeutic discourse in the training of journalists could be of value.

Another prominent theme in the interview material was concern for the source when the journalist is interviewing a witness, victim or relative. This was generally expressed in terms of the need to show sympathy, support and respect for interviewees who are likely to be stressed, vulnerable and quite possibly traumatised (and on top of that are 'giving you their life on a plate'). Some respondents acknowledged that the journalist should not risk adding to the interviewee's distress by being intrusive, though only one respondent explicitly entertained the idea that there was a conflict or potential conflict of interest between journalist and source. But most common was the idea that a sensitive and empathic interviewer could elicit the best story, in journalistic terms, by encouraging or allowing interviewees to reveal more, to give 'their' story, and thereby get the most natural and full account.

This scenario is very plausible if we are talking about a practicing a certain model of good journalism, in which emotional authenticity and complexity are valued. However it may not address those areas of practice where reporting and editorial practices seek stereotypical emotional performances, and where there could as a result be a conflict of interest between source and journalist. For this reason we may ask whether the harmony of interests between journalist and source which our respondents tended to see more often, while no doubt reflective of their own practices and values, suggests some avoidance of problems that can arise when reporting carries the risk of compounding the distress of the source. This is not to deny that the work of reporting in creating a public space for personal experience may at times in itself be of benefit to sources. Some participants in the research commented on the potentially therapeutic value to sources of getting their story told and out there, of having their experience acknowledged by media coverage. Overall though there was little awareness of any adverse effects that media exposure might have on the source's subsequent state of mind; the concern was focussed on the process of the interview.

This lack of focus on the 'downstream' effects of reporting links to another feature of the data, which is the relative lack of attention paid to the emotional effects on

audiences of what journalists produce. In journalism generally there are recurrent and intense debates about whether to run certain photographs or footage of injury or death. These debates are often framed in terms of consideration for the victim, though may also draw on arguments about offending sensibilities, that is about the emotional impact on the consumers of these visual materials. But there was little consideration in our data of how in less dramatic ways, in the constant flow of everyday news, audiences and readers might be affected emotionally by what journalists are producing. So although there is a growing awareness of the emotional dimensions of journalists' relationships with those they are in face to face contact with, in the public and also amongst their colleagues, there is a very undeveloped sense of any issues concerning the input which journalists are making to the emotional public sphere.

To conclude: some media content producers in drama and factual genres may be amongst the drivers of therapeutic culture, by producing content which explicitly addresses emotional life and offers ways of exploring and managing it. But this is not the case for mainstream news journalism, the producers of which are not mindful of the inner worlds of their consumers – nor indeed are they consistently attentive to their own inner worlds or those of their sources. This could perhaps be just the way it is; news might always, for various reasons, be largely outside the therapeutic. Or, it may not be immutable. Both politics and news journalism may both become more influenced by the therapeutic values which are dominant in popular culture. Given the fluidity and hybridity of so many contemporary phenomena, and the interpenetration and condensation of different spheres of activity and value (Richards, 2000), the latter seems more likely. This however is not inevitable; this could develop as an interesting case of a professional ideology resisting a cultural trend by calling on older, contrary elements of the wider culture. In so doing it would not just be acting on its own principles, but would also be enacting something for broader interests, those of people antipathetic to the therapeutic.