

Propaganda: The Accusation is More Important than the Verdict

If we're truly honest with ourselves, we would recognize news ultimately as a form of gossip. Who's having business trouble? Which actress embarrassed herself? What do the elite think about fashion? Some of it is valuable, but most of it is merely entertainment for us.

As such, salacious accusations of misdeeds get "clicks". Beyond generating revenue and wreaking havoc in the lives of the accused, accusations can also provide a propaganda service to political, personal, or ideological goals, which is something we should keep in mind.

In *The Rape of the Mind*, Joost Meerloo, a psychologist and survivor of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands during World War II, warns us of the dangers of accusations and trials primarily done for propaganda purposes.

Indeed, any trial can be used as a weapon of intimidation; it can, in a subtle way, intimidate jurors, the witnesses, the entire public. In [totalitarian countries], some higher courts exist only to carry out this function of intimidation; their purpose is to prove to their own citizens and to the world at large that there is a punishing and threatening force controlling the government and that this force can use the judiciary for its own purpose.

An apparently objective official investigation may become a weapon of political control simply through the suggestions that inevitably accompany it. The man who is under investigation is almost automatically stigmatized and blamed because our suspicions are thrust on him.

He continues:

*Any trial can be either an act of power or an act of truth. ...
The power to investigate may become the power to destroy...*

One of the great traditions of America and Western Civilization is the idea that a man is innocent until proven guilty. Unfortunately, with mass media, an accusation, investigation, or trial can quickly become a very public act. That is why many people will note the danger of “trying someone in the court of public opinion”. The public is not privy to all of the details of the accusation or investigation, but through mass media it can become intimately involved in the case, coming to see itself as a jury of the masses.

Radio and television have enhanced the hypnotizing power of sounds, images, and words ... Our technical means of communication make of the people one huge participating mass. Even when I am alone with my radio, I am technically united with the huge mass of other listeners. I see them in my mind, I unconsciously identify with them, and while I am listening I am one with them ... It is partly for this reason that radio and television tend to take away active affectionate relationships between men and to destroy the capacity for personal thought, evaluation, and reflection.

Such a mass jury is obviously not a healthy thing, nor would it be possible without the tools of mass communication. Such is Meerloo’s warning.

We may call mental blackmail the growing tendency to overstep human reserve and dignity. It is the tendency to misuse the intimate knowledge of what is going on in the crevices of the soul, to injure and embarrass one’s fellow man. Mental blackmail starts wherever the presumption of guilt takes the place of the presumption of innocence. The hunting up of dirt

and sensation in order to embarrass a victim we see very often carried on by the yellow press. It is not only playing up indecency, but at the same time it undermines human judgment and opinion. And by its sensationalism it precludes and prejudices justice in the courts.

And there, again, is the great danger. Whether we care to admit it or not, mass media (especially social media) is a powerful tool for propagandists and various political and ideological forces. The news is aimed not at our intellect, but at our emotions. And because the news media have limited resources, what they do report upon and how they report is a reflection of their values and beliefs.

All of these insights are really nothing new, but they are a good reminder. When men are accused of misdeeds, be careful to join the mass jury too quickly. Sit back, watch, listen to both sides, and reflect before coming to an opinion about a person or group. You may even want to refrain from ever casting judgment when the details and evidence are wanting.

Ultimately, if we want to maintain our traditions, in this case the tradition of innocence until guilt is proven, then we as individuals must be in the habit of practicing those traditions.

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