



Listening past difference: Towards a compassionate ethics of communication

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Abstract

This article attempts to contribute to the discussion about reading the Bible in a contemporary social and political context by highlighting one of the most pertinent influences on our understanding of that context, namely the global media. While the article therefore does not claim any authority in terms of Biblical hermeneutics, it hopes to make a modest contribution to our understanding of how we experience our place in a globalised world, how we make meaning out of the images and messages circulating around us every day, and how we respond ethically to the pervasive nature of global media, especially in the South African context. The central question to be answered pertains to the ethics of mediation, representation and communication in a world marked by difference, inequality and struggle. Of particular importance is the question of how we communicate with each other across the many differences that lie between us.

Keywords

Compassion, ethics, globalisation, listening, media

1. Introduction

The international news organisation Reuters (2015) recently published a collection of 56 of the agency's best pictures over the course of three decades. In a grisly parade they lined up, the human flotsam and jetsam on the shores of war, disease and disaster: the baby cradled in the hands of a Russian officer after he rescued her from a besieged school in Chechnya; a man clinging for dear life to the top of a floating vehicle in the flood waters of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, much like a teenage boy would hang on to a surfboard; Israeli soldiers crying at the funeral of

a comrade, looking every bit like the confused teenagers they really are; a Georgian man clutching his relative among the ruins of what might have been their house before the bombs exploded. Almost all of them are crying: a woman's face contorts from tear gas in Istanbul, a mother and daughter are forlorn among the ruins of an earthquake in China's Sichuan province, looking for their father and husband; an exhausted immigrant's face looks numb as he crawls onto a beach in the Canary Islands, while tanning holidaymakers in the background pay no more attention to him than they would a stray dog; the fingers of a malnourished child pressing against his mother's lips, as if clinging to the breath of life itself.

The pictures of grief, beamed to us by the media from every corner of the earth, are almost too much to bear. Indeed, as Yeats' well-known poem 'Stolen Child' declares: *the world's more full of weeping than you can understand*.¹

The global media are usually the channels through which images like these reach our living rooms and intrude into our comfortable lives. They bring us pictures and stories of 'distant suffering' (Moeller 1999; Chouliaraki 2006; Silverstone 2007), which not only confront journalists and editors but all of us as media audiences (and, increasingly via social media, co-producers and co-distributors), with several ethical questions. Such as: how do we respond ethically to the pain of Others? Moreover, how do we engage in a dialogue with those Others that are ostensibly differ from us, culturally, socially, politically and geographically? What normative frameworks should we use to evaluate right and wrong in multicultural societies, and a globalised world?

These are questions that media ethicists have busied themselves with over the past decade (e.g. Christians et al., 2008; Ward & Wasserman 2008; Wasserman 2010), but they are also questions for all members of the postmodern, global society having to deal with difference, contested values, and the challenge of communicating in an environment filled with incessant chatter and ambient noise.

1 Yeats published the poem in 1889. Full text available here: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/stolen-child>

These may seem like luxurious questions to ask when there are urgent problems to solve with regards to the global economy, terrorism, poverty and disease. But it stands to argue that precisely because these problems are rooted in the long histories of cultural conflicts, social inequalities and asymmetrical power relations, the question of how we relate to Others that are somehow different from us, is central to many of the pressing questions we are facing today. Furthermore, because of the pervasive influence of the media on postmodern society, media representations have an influences on our moral development and the ethical choices we make in relation to Others.² We only have to consider the clashes erupting around the world after the publication of the so-called Mohammed Cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* in 2005, or the killing of cartoonists at the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* this year, to realise that the mediation of difference in a global society is no frivolous matter.

The dominant media ethical framework adopted by South African self-regulatory bodies like the Press Council (www.presscouncil.org.za) sees the media's primary role as that of a watchdog over power, with some checks and balances to ensure it also exercises some social responsibility. Within this normative conception, power is usually defined primarily in terms of political power, and more specifically, government.³

This rather narrow notion of the media's primary ethical responsibility is usually justified through a consequentialist argument – the media will contribute to human flourishing for all citizens in a democracy if it ensures that government is accountable to its citizens. In other words, a vigilant, 'watchdog' type of journalism is likely to have good consequences as it will ensure that government responds to the needs of its citizens. Of course the underlying assumption is that the media is able to speak on behalf of citizens. Journalists often invoke 'the public interest' as a justification for their ethical choices, such as the invasion of someone's privacy, the dissemination of sensitive information or an attack on someone holding political office. This adversarial stance is also defended in terms of a Rawlsian social contract which allows the media the right to freedom of speech.

2 (see for instance Silverstone's [2007] notion of living in a 'mediapolis')

3 For a more detailed discussion of South African normative ethical frameworks, see Wasserman, 2013a.

An opposing view is that adversarial journalism may contribute to the widening of social rifts by setting up an ‘us’ and ‘them’ discourse. This view is especially relevant in a country such as South Africa, which remains socially and economically highly polarised and unequal after centuries of colonialism and apartheid. It could be argued that an adversarial journalism aimed at a legitimate government may widen the gulf between the historical supporters of liberation movements and other sectors of society, or between ethnic groups.

The relative merits in terms of the media’s role in a transitional democracy is a topic that falls outside the focus of this paper.⁴ Of importance in the context of this paper, where the focus falls on the ethical dimensions of the media’s representation of and facilitation of communication with Others, is that the notion of voice and speaking is usually central to discourses of the media’s role in society. The idea that the media ‘speaks on behalf of’ citizens, that it ‘represents’ the public interests, and, especially, that it ‘gives voice to the voiceless’ are heard often when media defend their practices.

Rooting the media’s ethical responsibility in these terms, locates it in the tradition of liberal democracy, derived from Western Enlightenment. It means that the emphasis tends to fall on individual rights rather than relationships. While this approach might be good for conceptions of democratic life that foreground the necessity of limitations of power, it is not very well suited to either a local context marred by histories of violence, inequality and social polarisation, nor for a globalised, postmodern world where divergent cultural value frameworks and signification systems are brought into close proximity through global media. For both local and global audiences, an ethical orientation rooted in Western individualistic thought is at odds with communalistic understandings of communication and responsibility as found in many African societies for example, and, secondly, it does not place an imperative on the media to bridge the divides between communities or establish relationships between the producers and consumers of news on the one hand and the distant Others that form the subjects of media discourses. Nor can the ethical questions emerging from this environment be limited to the traditional producers of media, i.e.

4 See for instance Wasserman, 2013b for a discussion.

professional media workers, but they have become pertinent for all of us that are part of the new global media ecology where the erstwhile clear dividing lines between media producers and consumers have become blurred.⁵

One of the major ethical problems that have arisen in the current global media context is that of moral relativism (Christians et al. 2008; Caldwell 2014). As an alternative approach, a more dialogic approach to ethics, rooted in universal protonorms of human dignity, dialogical truth telling and nonviolence, rather than globalised Enlightenment values, has been proposed (Caldwell 2014; Christians & Nordenstreng 2004).

To further develop the notion of protonorms as universal values that may transcend a globalised Western normativity, and that could contribute to a mediated communication ecology based on mutuality, relationships and diversity rather than an individualised, monistic and adversarial ethos, this article wants to explore the notion of ‘listening’ as a central ethical concept. As noted above, the concepts of ‘voice’ and ‘speaking’ are often central to the liberal-democratic notion of media ethics. By inverting the focus on speaking to that of listening, this article wants to suggest an ethical orientation that is better suited to the ethical dilemmas raised by contemporary global media – difference, otherness and complicity in power relations. In order to do this, the media’s location within relations of power firstly needs to be acknowledged.

2. The media and power relations

When thinking about the ethics of the media within a broader societal context rather than merely in terms of narrow professional concerns, such as membership of a media organisation, or in terms of procedural questions such as ethical codes used in the self-regulatory process, we define the media’s responsibility not in the first instance to its own norms and standards, but in terms of its relationship with other stakeholders in society. In this context, power relations between the media and other members of society become important considerations.

5 See Ward & Wasserman, 2014 for a discussion of “open ethics” in this new participatory, online environment.

It has long been an accepted fact in media studies that the routines of news production tend to reproduce the views of powerful interests in society. In this regard, it is important to realise that the media do not provide a *reflection* of reality, but a *representation* thereof. While positivistic understandings of media communication may emphasise the factual elements of media reports, and journalists themselves often also use the notion of ‘objectivity’ – a problematic term with a long history (Ward, 2006) to deflect criticism of their practices and worldviews (using rhetorical defences such as ‘don’t shoot the messenger’ or ‘we only provide a mirror of reality’), a substantial engagement with media ethics in contemporary society has to acknowledge the media’s own position in networks of power:

The media, then, do not simply “create” the news; nor do they simply transmit the ideology of the “ruling class” in a conspirational fashion. Indeed, we have suggested that, in a critical sense, the media are frequently not the ‘primary definers’ of news events at all; but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in *reproducing* the definitions of those who have privileged access, as of right, to the media as ‘accredited sources’. From this point of view, in the moment of news production, the media stand in a position of structured subordination to the primary definers (Hall et al. 1999:255).

As far as the South African context is concerned, previous studies⁶ have indicated that South African media tend to amplify the voices of those that are already in positions of power and authority. The poor and the marginalised are usually treated as subjects of news stories – talked about, rather than given the space to talk themselves.

If we want to move beyond facile statements about the media being the ‘voice of the voiceless’ and rather acknowledge the asymmetries of power in media production, the critical question we should be asking is: Whose voices should the media be listening to, and how should it listen to them?

6 See discussion in Wasserman (2013b) of the coverage of the Marikana massacre, for example, where media mostly consulted elite sources from the political and business spheres instead of the miners who were directly impacted by the events.

The media's location within global neoliberalism, in which news becomes a marketable commodity, has further created a 'crisis of voice' (Couldry, 2010:13). When we rely on market forces to arbitrate social and political relations, the notion of 'neoliberal democracy' is indeed "an oxymoron" (Couldry 2010: 47).

More appealing than market forces, or self-righteous claims by the media to be speak on behalf of Others, is the idea that the media should be guided by the speaking universal protonorms of human dignity, truth-telling, and non-maleficence (Christians & Nordenstreng 2004). It is argued that these norms provide a way out of the moral relativism that threaten to result from an overwhelming diversity of cultural values in a postmodern, globalised world. Of these principles, the notion of human dignity poses a particular challenge for the media, particularly in the South African context.

3. Human dignity and an ethics of listening

Although it is a value that has universal validity (Christians & Nordenstreng 2004: 21), the notion of dignity as an ethical concept for journalism can be problematic. Human dignity can form a cornerstone for struggles against oppression, as has been the case in the liberation struggle against apartheid (Koopman 2007). The emphasis on human dignity and development has also been used as a basis for the capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum (2000) and Amartya Sen (1999), where human dignity is defined as the fulfilment of a set of criteria for a decent human life and human flourishing. Human dignity can be seen as a central moral category in contemporary declarations such as the South African Bill of Rights and the United Nations Declaration of Universal Human Rights, and has been seen as resonating with the Christian view that God's people are called to "live toward the full and restored human dignity of all in a broken world moving toward the final consummation of God's mission to redeem the world" (Birch 2015:4,16). The emphasis on human dignity, argues Lapsley (2015:142), is "in continuity with the traditional emphasis in the Christian tradition on the central role of humanity within creation, on the *imago dei* as a core theological doctrine". The notions of dignity are central in the discourse of post-apartheid social movements like Abahlali baseMjondolo, who have been seen as reminders for the need of a contextual or people's theology

in South Africa (West 2015:83, 90). The enhancement of human dignity is also found in non-Western philosophies like Buddhism (May 2006:51) and Chinese philosophy (Zhang, 2007). From these perspectives, dignity as an ethical principle for the media can enhance citizen voices and contribute to the development of their capabilities.

However, human dignity can also be used to repress media freedom. The protection of a politician's dignity can become a spurious defence against the media's unearthing of corruption and wrongdoing, as in the case of the 'insult laws' in place in many African countries. Berger (2007:141) indicates how these laws regularly result in harassment of journalists in Africa.

But the value of human dignity is enshrined in the South African Constitution because of the country's history of systemic racism that fundamentally denied the dignity of the majority of the country's citizens. In the light of that history it is important to liberate the normative notion of 'human dignity' from its abuse by politicians. If the moral demands on a media claiming to work in the 'public interest' among conditions of dire poverty, social marginalisation and hopelessness are to be taken seriously, we cannot avoid thinking about human dignity in a more substantive sense.

It is against the background of human dignity as a protonorm for journalism, that I would like to explore the notion of an "ethics of listening" as a normative framework for the post-apartheid media. In the remainder of this article I will argue that 'listening' as an ethical value is appropriate for a new democracy where social polarisations continue to impact on media narratives and agendas, and in a society where continued economic inequalities provide certain parts of the citizenry with disproportionate power to make themselves heard in the public sphere.

To treat people with dignity primarily means taking their stories seriously. Couldry (2010: 1) sees the capacity to narrate one's life as fundamental to one's existence as a human being. But speaking is not enough – to treat people as humans means to let them know that their voice *matters* (Couldry 2010:1). To view people as dignified human beings, regardless of their social standing, means thinking about them not only as statistics with which to keep government accountable, or as voters that may sway the horse-race of party-politics. Treating all people with dignity means that they should not be viewed as means to the end of adversarial, watchdog-

type journalism, but as ends in themselves. This entails listening to their stories – their narratives about their everyday life, about their struggles but also their victories, their pain but also their pleasures. Couldry (2010:7) refers to ‘voice as value’, that is ‘people’s practice of giving an account, implicitly or explicitly, of the world within which they act’. Narrative is ‘a basic feature of human action’; ‘to deny value to another’s capacity for narrative – to deny her potential for voice – is to deny a basic dimension of human life’ (Couldry, 2010:7).

To view human life as sacred and human beings as having an inherent dignity means to look for the ways that our narratives are connected, interrelated and interdependent. Voice, Couldry (2010:7) contends, is socially grounded and therefore not the practice of isolated individuals. Couldry (2010:8) refers to the work of Alasdair Macintyre that sees the narrative of individual lives as part of an “interlocking set of narratives”. But these voices articulating the narratives of their lives depends on being heard: ‘Voice as a social process involves, from the start, both speaking *and* listening, that is, an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of the other’s narrative’ (Couldry 2010:9). The resonance of this interdependent view of speaking and listening with the underlying principle of *Ubuntu* is obvious: ‘I am because you are’, or, to rephrase, ‘you can tell your story because I am listening to it’. As Forster (2015:149) confirms from the perspective of Biblical ethics, conversation is at the heart of what it means to be human.

This ethics of care⁷ is one of commitment, of compassion, of immersion – values that are frowned upon in the liberal-individualist journalistic mantra of professionalism and detachment. An ethics of listening would in the first place not be concerned with the correct *procedures* to minimise harm, but more in the substantive outcome of restoring the dignity of the marginalised, discovering interconnections between people and enabling a real engagement across the segmentations of race and market. This would require a *pro-active intervention* by journalists into society, to try and

7 Although this article focuses on an ethics of listening, it is argued that it is closely related to an ethics of care (despite critics like Bickford drawing a sharper distinction between the two approaches). The references to an ethics of care should however not be taken to mean that these two approaches are identical, but merely that there are resonances between them, especially as concerns the emphasis on relationality.

change it to what it might become, rather than just mirroring it as it already is.

The ethics of listening is therefore not a form of ‘polite conversation’ that papers over cracks and differences in an attempt to reach easy but superficial consensus (Dreher, 2009: 450). In fact, Dreher (2009: 450) refers to ‘difficult listening’ – a way of enabling an inclusive politics that does not shy away from conflict and differences. This resonates with Forster’s (2015:150) point that conversation is central to ethical relationships, the place where the Self and the Other may meet, even if it means unlearning certain habits and learning a new vocabulary. Bickford (1996:15) however warns against a ‘false or managed consensus’. An ethics of listening would not amount to the bleeding heart sympathy for poverty that so often results in what Chouliriaki (2006) called the ‘spectatorship of suffering’ – a voyeuristic perspective on the poor or marginalised that deprives them of their own agency in order to forge the togetherness of privileged audiences. Instead, the listening imagined here can be seen to resonate with the kind of listening implicit in the Judaic prayer *Shema*, where the listener is expected to not only hear the words of God, but to listen “with a view toward doing” (Hardin 2014:2⁸).

This ethics of listening requires cultivating the imagination, a skill Martha Nussbaum (2010:10) says, is vital for democracy:

[T]he ability to imagine the experience of another – a capacity almost all human beings possess in some form – needs to be greatly enhanced and refined if we are to have any hope of sustaining decent institutions across the many divisions that any modern society contains.

To listen to someone else’s story – whether that is one told on the pages of a newspaper, the television screen, or in literature, including Biblical literature – is an ethical act of receptivity in which we acknowledge that we are not alone, that our story is connected to the stories of other humans, and because we are connected through the stories we narrate about ourselves, we can start developing emphatic relationships.

8 My thanks to Dr Tiana Bosman for pointing out this interpretation of the *Shema*.

Bickford (1996:13) agrees that democratic listening does not mean “mere toleration of another’s utterance”, but rather an effort to put oneself in the place of another, to ‘strain to hear’ what common purpose or common good may be shared among people across their differences. Such an ethic requires effort.

For journalism in a new democracy such as South Africa to serve more than an elite, for it to enable citizens to actively practice their citizenship through media, for it to treat all South Africans with dignity, it would have to learn to listen across the different lines that continue to keep South Africans apart – journalists would have to learn to listen to the stories of those on the other side of the railway line, the headline, the picket line, the barbed wire fence.

What would this listening mean for journalists in practice? It would mean listening attentively to the stories that people have to tell, especially those people who might otherwise not be heard because they find themselves too often in the shadows of the public sphere. By listening to their stories, how they narrate their lives, an ethics of listening would afford those people their human dignity.

The notion of ‘giving voice to the voiceless’ is a recurring one in media discourses, especially in the monitorial role (Christians et al. 2009), when media claim to hold powerful interests accountable to the public that cannot do so directly. Within the liberal understanding of democratic deliberation such ‘giving voice’ takes place within an open and free environment where different voices compete for legitimacy, and truth is seen to emerge from such contestation. Such robust contestation is however premised on the assumption that individual voices have free and equal access to the public sphere where deliberation takes place. Due to historical, social and economic reasons, this is not the case in South Africa with its high rate of inequality (nor, one could add, globally).

An alternative approach to ethical dialogue in democratic contexts is that of ‘listening’. Listening does not assume that everyone has equal access to the public sphere, nor that the media can ‘give voice’ to everyone. Instead, the assumption is that societies (and again one can extend this to the global context) are unequal, and that mutual mistrust exist between people and communities as a result of historical conflicts as well as social and economic

disparities. The challenge is to reach across these gaps and differences by imagining oneself in the place of another, and to listen to the other point of view even if one doesn't agree with it. 'Listening' as an ethical concept resonates with relational ethics where ethics 'begins with listening, not with telling' (Arnett, 2009: 28). If listening is seen in the context of care ethics, it can also be connected with the protornorm of human dignity. To listen, it can be argued, is to care for another, and to treat them with respect as human beings. If this is extended to the global realm, 'listening' would demand of the media to reach out across differences, to imagine oneself in the position of another (politically, culturally, socially, economically, geographically etc) and to narrow the gap between Oneself and that of Another.

At the very least it would require of 'professional' journalists to leave the comfort of their offices and walk the streets, spend time in communities, move out of their comfort zones – not as parachuted-in observers that describe what they see, but as listeners that allow Others to say what they experience.

In a recent interview, a senior journalist (personal communication, 2015)⁹ in Cape Town remarked on the coverage of ongoing community protests, and how the frustrations and disillusionment of many South Africans with the low yields of the democratic dispensation could be told in a way that would compel middle class readers of the article – the main target market – to pay attention and to feel compassion. The journalist concluded that the only way to do this was to tell stories in a vivid way that would bring home the everyday struggles that people go through. As an example the journalist recalled a reporter covering an investigation into toilet provision in the informal settlements in the township Khayelitsha on the Cape Flats. The reporter wanted to go beyond the official statistics of how many toilets were provided per capita, how they were serviced, complaints received etc. She wanted to show the everyday experience of people without this basic utility. How does one explain to a middle class reader the indignity of not having a flush toilet? The reporter then went to speak to a family living in

9 This interview formed part of a series of interviews for a large-scale research project. Due to a confidentiality agreement further details of the interview and the interviewee's identity may not be divulged.

a shack. They explained how they were one of the lucky families that had a portable toilet in their shack. But the family had to come to an agreement that when the father of the house went to the toilet, the daughters would cover their heads with a blanket so that they won't see him and thus grant him some privacy. But then he fell ill and spent much more time on the toilet, which meant that they had to keep their heads covered for hours on end – and miss their favourite soap opera on television. This might seem trivial, but the everyday struggles for dignity, meaning and diversion from the ugly realities of daily life in this story not only has a greater chance of eliciting empathy among readers than the reciting of endless statistics in 'watchdog' mode, the mere act of someone taking the time to listen to another person's story is in itself an act of compassion.

This is not to say that a media ethics revolving around the notion of listening would be uncritical, a "lapdog" instead of a "watchdog". It takes courage, not timidity, to respond to what the Other tell us. In her work on whiteness, Samantha Vice (2010:335) proposes that white South Africans adopt the virtues of 'humility and silence'. While this call might be problematic when it sees virtue necessarily in a disengagement from political debate, her argument for a virtuous silence that "would not be passive" (Vice 2010:335) is worth considering. The silence and listening vice proposes is one that provides the listener with the opportunity to reflect on their own positioning and assumptions, but does not paralyse them or exclude them from a conversation. Crucially, for a country such as South Africa where the public sphere is fragmented and mediated discussions are often solipsistic within existing, historically constituted groups, such a listening-in-dialogue will actively seek to cross borders:

And as Plato knew so well, self-knowledge is often reached in dialogue with others; you find your own voice and allow others to find theirs in sincere, truth-directed conversation. So silence should not rule out conversation, with those who are both familiar and, probably more importantly, unfamiliar to us (Vice 2010:336).

Vice (2010:336) quotes Paul Taylor about the kind of listening that constitutes an active participation in dialogue:

Silence, on this reading, is the complement to *the other's voice*; it signals one's willingness to receive the other's struggle to find words

both for his or her experiences and for the self that those experiences have conspired with the act of expression to create. Silence – is part of listening for a voice.

An active listening on the part of the media would enable a “shift from principle to story” (Christians 2010:180) in that it would see dialogue not in procedural terms as an end in itself, where principles are debated on a conceptual level, but in substantive terms as the space within which human beings can give meaning to protonorms such as human dignity, truth telling and non-maleficence as these take shape in their real, embodied, everyday lives. The dialogical ethics required from the post-apartheid South African media would have to extend beyond the procedural notion of the public sphere as a space for rational debate facilitated by a professional and self-regulated media. The proposed ethics of listening that seeks to use dialogue as a way of contributing to substantive ethical outcomes would be rooted in a framework of care and compassion.

An ethics of listening, rooted in the values of care and compassion, would see humans are always in relation to one another, existing interdependently within communities rather than as atomised, independent individuals (as viewed by liberal democratic approaches) or as collectives of individuals (the assumption underpinning utilitarianism).

4. What would this mean in practice?

In a country such as South Africa, with more than the average share of trauma, an ethics of listening may lead the media to enact their social responsibility in a way that goes beyond the enumeration of the statistics of poverty, the political debates around HIV/Aids or the horror stories of crime to good, contextual stories that open up possibilities for greater understanding and compassionate action. Sanders (2003:95) distinguishes between “pity”, associated with condescension, and compassion, which refers to the desire to relieve another’s suffering by supplying what they need. Compassion can be considered the emotion associated with an ethics of care that sees the media’s role as one of engagement rather than distance and detachment; a lack of compassion can be “at the heart of some of the more unsavoury journalistic practices” like ambush interviews and pack journalism (Sanders 2003:95). Pity, on the other hand, even when

sincere, can construct a kind of “spectatorship of suffering” (Chouliaraki 2006) that merely confronts audiences with images of distant hunger, disease and death without enabling them to do anything about it. Such simplistic reporting leads at best to a kind of “compassion fatigue” (Moeller 1999) and at worst at a kind of voyeurism which makes it acceptable and even predictable for audiences to consume images and narratives of a suffering Other. Audiences are then turned into morally ambivalent or neutral spectators, with no moral compulsion to imagine themselves in a relationship of care and responsibility towards an Other.

An ethics of care, one which actively listens and responds to the stories of fellow human beings, would be concerned primarily with how the media can build and heal, rather than protect and attack. Instead of distance we would see immersion, instead of the epistemology of rational deliberation we would see a move towards more ethnographic methodologies, instead of market-driven segmentation of audiences we would see the courage to move beyond the own group to actively listen to the narratives of Others:

Narratives are linguistic forms through which we argue, persuade, display convictions, and establish our identity. They contain in a nutshell the meaning of our theories and beliefs. We tell stories to one another about our values and concerns, and our aspirations (Christians 2010:181).

5. Conclusion

What does all of this mean for scholars of theology, and readers of the Bible and other foundational religious texts? I am not sure. But it might be that when we read texts, whether ancient or post-modern, that we are confronted by the challenge to imagine ourselves in the place of Others, that we listen to stories because we want to find out how to live, and that we tell our own stories in the hope that someone will care. Our challenge as readers of these texts is to respond in an ethical way so that we could hear, across centuries or across time zones, across cultures and across histories, the stories that will remind us of our own humanity. The ethical challenge is not so much one to speak, but to listen to the weeping of which the world has always been full.

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