

The Media And 11 March: The Construction of an 'Exceptional Case'

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- *An exceptional event is one that shakes a collective's foundations because of its gravity and importance and because of the marked impact it has on public opinion. It calls into question the definitions of the socially established reality and ushers in a period of transformation both in how we view the world and the values system that sustains it. In this article I will analyse the basic features of this type of event and the role the media plays in characterising it socially.*

A Very Contemporary Old Concept

At the beginning of the 1980s, following the kidnapping and subsequent murder of the Italian politician Aldo Moro at the hands of the Red Brigade, Giorgio Grossi established the notion of an 'exceptional case' to try to explain the role the media plays in situations of major political and social crises. Two decades on, the concept is still just as valid at the beginning of a new century that has seen the theories of the 'risk society' feature such chilling manifestations as 9/11 or, more recently, the siege at the Beslan school in the Russian state of North Ossetia. These events, as well as the Madrid bombings on 11 March 2004, which is even more important because of its proximity, are examples of the importance that conflict and events/rupture have in the contemporary world.

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In this article I will look at Grossi's basic arguments (1981, 1985a), adapting them to the current context and applying them to the events of 11 March. The 'exceptional case' theory continues to be the reference framework and starting point for analysing unanticipated and extraordinary phenomena, because it makes it possible to understand the essential mechanisms of their news configuration. The bases must be sought in phenomenological sociology, forged by Alfred Schütz (1974, 1977) and continued by Berger and Luckmann (1968, 1997), which sees reality as a product constructed from a number of different actions carried out by human beings. Actions by the media are particularly important because of its central position in the symbolic mediation of experiences and its socially recognised and legitimate role in shaping public reference points (Grossi, 1985a). This makes the media one of the authorities that most decisively influence the configuration of our perception of the world, as it supplies us with interpretations of events that occur, while offering a symbolic representation of them.

11 March: An Exceptional Case

11 March constitutes a truly 'exceptional case' because it was an event with an impact which, because of its gravity, size and the high level of rupture involved, affected all the areas of the social dynamic. In that respect, it shook the basis of the whole of society, calling into question reference points, meanings and socially shared values. It concerned issues such as institutional legitimation, social control, political struggle and common identity. In other words, it went beyond a simple deviation from the established norms to activate a whole series of processes that could involve changing the cognitive and regulatory frameworks on which

our view of the world is based. That is why it had such a major effect on public opinion, as people could see the social system being submitted to an upheaval of unexpected consequences.

The public and referential dimensions that an exceptional event like 11 March has on the public at large is principally due, as well as its obvious scope, to the structural centrality that both the media and political systems grant it. It involves a type of event that is mainly constructed from journalistic information that appears as the fundamental symbolic source allowing us to know our world. It acts as a reference point that helps us get our bearings, particularly at times of major upheavals, and which ensures we do not lose our connection with reality. Of course, it does not offer us an exact copy of what has happened, but rather a representation, a particular version that has been determined by diverse factors, including, in particular, journalistic routines and production practices.

The media, and particularly television, thus makes a type of reality that we could call the informative or media reality, which tends to substitute reality itself in the definition of events that we individuals cannot experience first-hand, at the place where they occurred. The production of meaning as configured by news organisations takes on this consideration because of the growth in experiences and 'packages' of reality that we citizens find impossible to define within the framework of our daily lives. Access to these areas is mostly provided by the symbolic mediation used by the media, as its nature allows it to overcome the specific 'here and now' and put a whole series of heterogeneous contents and meanings (many of which would otherwise be ignored) within our scope, at the disposition of the public.

The media is thus configured as an authority that specialises in constructing social reality. It uses standardised production practices to build a symbolic representation of the world around us. Despite its power, the meanings and significances prepared by the media are not the only ones present in the social sphere, as people can also configure their own subjective reality from their individual experiences, their contact with other people, their accumulated knowledge and even from previous exposure to the media. We each possess a number of images of the things that surround us that we use to compare with the

things we are provided with by the television, Internet, radio or press. From this comparison stems the final result of a process of ongoing and diverse interactions and negotiations, i.e., what is known as social reality.

How Does the Media Work? The Logic Behind the Construction of the Exceptional Case

But what exactly does the media do when it finds itself up against an 'exceptional case' like 11 March? The strong break that this type of event involves means that the ways in which the media defines and treats news are questioned and momentarily lose their validity. Faced with a shock and the most extreme type of atypical event, the traditional ways of preparing information, based on repetition and classification, are spurned. Without the protection involved with routines, the basic function of the media is to re-contextualise the event/rupture as quickly as possible. In other words, to make it compatible with the daily world of individuals, reducing the high level of complexity involved and making it simpler to internalise. We should not forget that an 'exceptional case' challenges the socially established reality and, to prevent it from cracking, it is necessary to properly reintegrate the new meanings. As Berger and Luckmann (1968: 89) said, any radical deviation from the institutional order appears as a digression from reality that must be re-contextualised in order to position and safeguard its political and cultural validity, thus preventing the socially accepted and collectively shared reference framework from deteriorating.

Re-contextualisation gives way to a double dynamic of transformation and conservation. On the one hand, new meanings that arise from the reintegration of the atypical event are disseminated, which introduces changes to the socially accumulated knowledge and ends up expanding its structure. This leads towards a transformation of the well-established definitions of the social reality, which ends up embracing more portions of human experience. However, at the same time, in mitigating the danger that any event/rupture involves, news makes it easier to uphold the institutional order and the general reference framework of our daily lives. In that sense, the media accomplishes the institutional task of helping maintain the stability of the social environment, reducing the possibility of it rupturing.

Having made this analysis, when faced with an event like 11 March, the media firstly witnesses the destruction of its work references, which have to adapt to an extraordinary situation, and secondly has to re-contextualise what has happened to make it understandable to us and compatible with the framework of our social experiences. It is thus forced to construct the reality symbolically, putting the meanings associated to a unique situation within the reach of the public through the form of information. To do this, it uses a specific logic based on a series of 'primary facts' and 'secondary facts'. Primary facts include the origin of the event, as this is the incident that made it 'atypical' and involves an initial characterisation. The terrorist attacks on the suburban trains of Madrid was the 'primary fact' of 11 March understood as an 'exceptional case'. As well as containing all the conditions typical of a rupture, there was another interesting aspect: the news effort involved in processing it. The news organisations had to call on all their production potential to tackle an unexpected event and try to cover all the angles of the story.

Over the following days, we saw a multiplication of 'secondary facts', which, although they were not 'exceptional', were registered within the same climate of opinion. The hypotheses over who was behind the attacks, the evolving number of victims, the police investigations and the political debate about how the crisis was being managed are some examples of these collateral facts that complemented the 'primary facts', introducing new data, nuances and details. These were facts that explained other facts and which, while vicarious, progressively replaced the original incident in terms of news treatment. Most of these facts were not generated sporadically or fortuitously, but were produced voluntarily.

The agent that plays the biggest role in shaping 'secondary facts' is the political system, which artificially prepares a number of events provided with meaning in order to recover control of the situation, determine new definitions of the reality and activate a self-legitimation process to preserve its role as an authority in which power has been invested. Because the media has a tendency to regularly favour the interpretative schemata of politics, and even more so in the event of processes of rupture that have to be re-contextualised immediately, these 'secondary facts' become news. Thus the political system accesses the symbolic

construction of the exceptional event.

The consequences of this dynamic are determined in two areas. The first is an over-representation of politics in news information. This activates self-referential logics (Mareletti, 1985:56) by which politicians use the news to establish a dialogue among themselves, making themselves the object and subject of the communication. Through news reports they launch appeals, articulate political evaluations and put into circulation diverse meanings that compete to influence the content of the media reality.

The second effect is related to the co-definition of the 'exceptional case'. The incorporation of the political system into the symbolic construction of this type of event makes the interaction between politicians and journalists a fundamental ingredient. Both politics and journalism, shot through by relationships of mutual dependency, come together in a shared dynamic of structuring the atypical reality. Negotiation is established as a paradigm of this process, awarding news information the condition of political arena. It is in this public space where journalists and politicians deploy multiple exchanges, both cooperative and competitive, which lead to the joint elaboration of the meanings and significances attributed to the political facts of an exceptional nature. The symbolic representation of this type of event thus appears as a negotiated production of reality.

The Features of the Exceptional Case

Together with the existence of a specifically constructed logic, marked by the articulation of a number of 'primary facts' and 'secondary facts', an exceptional event is distinguished by the concurrence of a number of characteristic features that could be summed up in the points I will look at in detail below.

Firstly, as I said before with regard to an 'exceptional case', there is the loss of validity of the journalistic routines and production practices that guide the construction of reality. Although this is momentary and recovery is associated with the appearance of the 'secondary facts', the contradiction between the media schemata of structuring pre-existing events and the new informational necessities arising from the appearance of an unexpected and exceptional event is clear. News organisations react by

giving increased attention to the extraordinary event, which leads to an over-abundance of information. The changes to television programming schedules, with special reports, extensive live crosses to the place where the events occurred and mono-issue programmes recorded during the period around 11 March, are a good example. This expansion of media coverage has consequences for the redundancy and reiteration of messages. The media machine thus leads us towards a saturation of exceptional elements in news content.

Secondly, and arising from the previous point, the media grants the 'exceptional case' the maximum degree of relevance in the treatment of news. The event takes on a cardinal position within the media space and monopolizes most of the attention. The major political importance and noticeable public impact that characterise it means it easily exceeds the journalistic selection processes in the strict sense, by entering the communication flow practically automatically. Conflict is thus reinforced as one of the principles that govern the laws of journalistic interest (Luhmann, 200:44). More than including or excluding it, the function of journalists lies in classifying the event in a news sense. In other words, when faced with an atypical event, the media focuses on its hierarchical structuring or prioritising within the news field. The multiplicity of meanings and actions associated with an unusual event must be reduced in order to be communicated efficiently, resizing its inherent complexity. This reduction can lead to a simplification of the reality, as the hierarchical structuring restricts the meanings in circulation to the detriment of the wealth of possibilities offered by the exceptional fact and results in a loss of the expressive quality of the news.

Thirdly, the sudden occurrence of this type of atypical event provokes great social interest. This leads to a rise in consumption levels and increased involvement on the part of the public. Faced with a considerable enlargement in media supply, the public turns to the media in droves. An analysis of audience figures for 11 March corroborates this. On the day of the Madrid bombings, eight of the ten most-watched programmes were news broadcasts. Of these, the one that stood out at the Spain-wide level was *Telediario 1* on Televisión Española (TVE), which captured 4,857,000 viewers, according to Sofres, 38% up on viewing figures from the previous day. Similar results were obtained by the

news/talk radio stations, with increases of 24.1% in the case of COPE and 16% for SER, which attracted 5,702,000 listeners, according to figures from the EGM (General Media Survey). In Catalonia, the most-watched television news programme was *Telenotícies Vespre* on TV3, which, with a rise of 46% in audience figures, was watched by 794,000 viewers. With regard to radio, Catalunya Ràdio attracted the most listeners, with 639,000 people tuning in. News programmes thus reinforced their position as an element that can guide people, who relied on them as one of the main ways to find out what had happened.

As I said earlier, as well as the rise in media consumption, an 'exceptional case' promotes collective involvement on the part of the public. The reaction to an event that shocks a community to its core favours the mobilisation of the whole of society. In that sense, the protest demonstrations against the 11 March attacks involved the participation of nearly 11.5 million people around Spain. The repercussion and effect that this type of event has with respect to public opinion is thus extremely strong and unusual, something which explains its importance in the symbolic construction of our view of the world.

This central location adds to the fragile situation in which the values system and regulatory schemata are immersed. This fourth feature of an 'exceptional case' means that a confrontation of diverse symbolic universes and meanings is produced that goes beyond the unique event to become involved with all the areas and aspects that make up the social reality. In this process, we can see a reclassification of the general reference framework in which our daily lives are established. This means that the atypical event takes the form of a symbolic conflict that embraces all the dimensions of the collective. We can therefore not avoid its treatment by the media, which produces an interpretation or reconstruction of the facts based on the articulation of a number of representations and images of a symbolic nature that affect both the cognitive and regulatory frameworks.

Finally, an 'exceptional case' is linked to a multiplication of political action. Although its origin lies outside politics, the political system redoubles its activity when this type of unusual event occurs. As I said earlier, the interaction between journalists and politicians, which lies at the heart of the process of constructing atypical events, is one of the distinctive elements of this type of event/rupture. Among

other advantages, politicians, in taking on the role of a primary source in news broadcasts, benefit from the possibility of propagating their definitions of reality in order to have them accepted as valid by the media and, ultimately, by the public.

Conclusions: The Weight of Political Strategies

One of the adages that appears most vehemently during the evolution of an 'exceptional case' is that which holds that the atypicalness of an event is proportional to its importance in controlling the political market (Grossi, 1985a: 76). In other words, by involving a high level of rupture, this type of event is configured as a vehicle of expression of political strategies, both in terms of strategies articulated by the media and strategies sustained by politicians. It is thus conceived more as a medium than a message, because the news organisations use it to try to impose their definitions of reality, establish or reclassify images and social values and promote or devalue particular political subjects in detriment or favour of others. Similarly, politicians aim to make the most of the extraordinary event to implement their different interpretations of the facts to meet their party goals. It is therefore important to understand an 'exceptional case' as an excellent opportunity for developing a pre-eminently strategic type of activity.

The political use of critical situations, deployed particularly by the media, establishes the predominance of assessment over explanation in the news discourse. The symbolic effort that this involves helps accomplish three basic goals on the part of the media. Firstly, it self-legitimises its own role and reinforces itself as a constructor of reality and provider of social meaning. Secondly, it exercises a political activity within the political market putting into practice its institutional and corporate interests and proposals. Finally, it makes it possible to influence both the political sphere and, particularly, overall public opinion.

By using political strategies, the media is no longer simply a conduit for the dissemination of information but becomes a relatively autonomous co-producer of political reality, as news organisations do not just broadcast news but decisively contribute towards defining it, conditioning it and even influencing the way it works. The media goes from

being a supplementary instrument to a functional infrastructure of political life that particularly influences its symbolic representation (Grossi, 1985a: 140). We can thus say that, when there is an 'exceptional case', the central role that communication has with regard to political activity intensifies.

The media is not just a spectator of an atypical event but actively takes part in its symbolic definition, together with the political system. News organisations, particularly television stations, affirm their position as fundamental variables in situations of rupture where, as I have made clear, they play an essential role in restructuring the perception of the political and social reality.

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