

The blurring lines between video games, cell phone images, reality TV and the real news

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

The most used button on the TV remote in our house is the “mute”. We press it every time the ads come on. Sometimes we are a bit slow to turn the sound back on when the images on the screen suggest the regular programming is back.

Such was the case recently when I noted some young women, clearly on their way somewhere exotic doing the usual airport comings and goings. I put it down to another trailer for the Amazing Race and went back to my crossword.

Then it became clear that it was not a promo but the news.

You will no doubt have guessed by now that it was a story about the three teenaged British girls who had left England and were headed for the desert, presumably to join ISIS. And because there was video that could be used in the broadcast, it was a leading story.

It seems that as long as the TV networks have something for us to watch while they talk, then that will be what determines what is newsworthy. As long as it is vaguely clear, it is used. Security camera footage, cell-phone images, You-Tube clips and stock images from file are dominating the news today.

And I am starting to think that the media’s obsession about putting an image in front of us while they inform us is now part of the problem. Terrorism today is all about the image. However reprehensible your cause, if you have lots of savvy and resources you can command the news and let the networks do your recruiting for you.

It is the same in war reporting. We see the same stock training videos of troops in combat gear, kicking down doors and doing war-like things with guns. Or we are shown computer-generated images – and sometimes, we are told, actual images from a long way away -- of buildings being blown up.

With so little actual footage from the deserts or Iraq and Syria, we are subjected, time and again, to the same images of triumphant ISIS fighters driving pick-up trucks and holding rifles aloft, or doing training exercises, many in smart, black uniforms. To some, this must seem glamorous, heroic even. If you spend your life watching video games that involve guns and action, the idea of being a part of the action must be quite appealing.

The other images we see are specifically designed to cast horror and instill fear in those who watch them and the media has consistently co-operated in this venture by repeating the images – even if they don't always show the grisly parts. Only with the most recent execution, where a young Arab boy was involved, did the media seem to be holding back. A few months ago that would have been front-page news everywhere.

While most of us will react only with disgust at what is happening in Iraq and Syria, clearly there are some who see this whole sorry business as some kind of payback for past and current wrongs, be they justified in our eyes or not.

Given how close-knit some of these societies are, a few well-placed stories of the evils done by the West to the Muslim world over the years could go a long way to ramping up the ill-feeling, if that is your plan.

And let's be honest, in their pursuit of control in the oil-rich desert 100 years ago, the colonial powers didn't exactly endear themselves to the locals. There is a lot of grievance to build upon. And Mr. Bush's contrived war in the early 2000s didn't help matters, either.

I remember in the 1970s how difficult it was for law-abiding Irish people in England when the IRA's terror campaign was at its height. It could get very tense. Again, there were many historic and recent grievances used to justify the killing. Only a few were responsible, but many were blamed.

We have many thousands of Canadians who happen to be of the Muslim faith who see all this current horror taking place in the name of their faith. How do they feel? And having their prime minister deliberately pick a fight with their faith to try to score points in an election is just wrong.

Shame on you, Mr. Harper.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)