

Emilie Voeller

Professor Clark

ENG 331

19 April 2018

Deeper Connections or Desensitization: Analyzing the Effect of News Media in “And of Clay
We Are Created”

Technology and the media are often thought of as being some of the greatest creations that have ever been accomplished by man. With new technologies, people can access almost anything at their fingertips, from knowing what friends are eating for lunch to news that is happening across the world. The ever-growing and ever-present news media is seen by many as a positive entity. Constant news coverage allows people to stay up-to-date with what is happening in their community, in their country, and all around the globe. When people are aware of what is going on in the world, they feel more connected to each other, even when separated by thousands of miles. This feeling of connectivity allows people to unite their common humanity and act when they see that others need help. However, with the constant exposure to “exciting” news and tragedies, people start to build up a resistance to the effects that news stories can have. When tragedy is constantly being broadcasted on all news stations, humans begin to become desensitized to tragedy, and while the news can allow people to unite their common humanity, it becomes just as easy to view what is going on in the news as just another “story.” In Isabel Allende’s short story “And of Clay Are We Created,” Allende highlights her skepticism of the media. Allende does recognize that there are positives to the presence of media in her story, however, through looking at the bystander effect, the question of ethics in the news media that

the story raises, and the transformation of Rolf Carlé, it is seen that the negative aspects of news media outweigh the benefits.

Throughout “And of Clay Are We Created,” the presence of the story of Rolf and Azucena on the news permits Eva Luna to partake in a kind of voyeurism that allows her to feel closer to the action. This voyeurism is not related to receiving gratification when witnessing a sexual encounter or object, but rather as Elizabeth Gough, a literary critic states in the *Journal of Modern Literature*, any kind of “intense, hidden or distant spying or gazing” (Gough 93). Though Eva Luna is not physically present, she is able to witness everything that happens between Rolf and Azucena through the television screens. Her gaze on the situation is so intense that she is mentally and emotionally connected to Rolf, noticing things in him that no other person would notice, “and I, glued to the screen like a fortune teller to her crystal ball, could tell that something fundamental had changed in him” (Allende 1741). With the constant presence of the television cameras and reporters, Eva Luna is always able to see Rolf and feel close to him even though he is many miles away.

Allende also shows a positive portrayal of the news media as it connects Eva Luna physically to the scene of the tragedy. The media presence makes it seem as though Eva Luna is physically present with Rolf and Azucena in the mud pit: “The screen reduced the disaster to a single plane and accentuated the tremendous distance that separated [her] from Rolf Carlé; nonetheless, [she] was there with him” (1738). Though Eva Luna is not physically near Rolf, their connection to each other and his situation being broadcasted on television allows her to visualize what Rolf sees and get an understanding of his experience as though she is there herself. Eva is also able to hear Rolf as well, and now not only is she able to watch him, but she can listen to his conversations with Azucena and align herself even closer with them.

The media connecting Eva Luna to the situation is just one specific connection that is able to be made among many. Due to the presence of the media at the scene of this tragedy, people all over the world are able to witness the terrible event and reach out to help if they are able, and many people did so: “Radio networks announced that their phones were jammed with calls from families offering shelter to orphaned children” (1738-9). When people see tragedy on screen or hear about it over the radio, it allows them to unite their suffering with the people involved and want to reach out and help. Without the presence of the media, the world would not be as immediately connected and there would be less opportunity to help those in need with as much immediacy that can occur now.

However, even though the media presents this tragedy and people are calling the radio stations to foster the children, there is still a lack of aid from both the people that are present at the scene and those who learn about the tragedy through the news. This phenomenon is referred to by psychologists as the bystander effect which is “a psychological phenomenon where persons are less likely to lend assistance in an emergency situation when other humans are present than when they are alone” (Myers 463). The more people that are present, the more likely individuals are to pass the responsibility of helping the victim off to other bystanders, and, because most people do this, the likelihood that someone will help the victim actually decreases as the amount of people present increases. Even though Rolf Carlé tries to help Azucena, many others just stand by and film the situation rather than try to help. Rolf does convince soldiers to help him, however, their efforts are fruitless, and they move on to help other victims. The rest of the reporters are more concerned with getting good footage as opposed to trying to do something else to help the young girl in need.

The bystander effect also impacts those who are not present at the scene of the disaster. With the mass outreach of the media and numerous cries for help, one would think that the resources needed would be able to be sent to the scene. This, however, is not the case. After Rolf begs for a water pump numerous times without success, it is Eva Luna who finally secures a pump to be sent. It, however, does not arrive in time. It was not the cry for help on the news that got the water pump, but rather Eva Luna calling numerous different people and finally reaching someone who could help (Allende 1738, 1742). People outside the scene see the tragedy and recognize that it is terrible but pass off the burden and assume that someone else will send help and resources.

Along with her allusion to the bystander effect, Allende also seems to be questioning the value and integrity of the media and the reporters at the scene of this tragedy. The reporters bring all their equipment, but none of that does any good for Azucena:

“In the meanwhile, more television and movie teams arrived with spools of cable, tapes, film, videos, precision lenses, recorders, sounds consoles, lights, reflecting screens, auxiliary motors, cartons of supplies, electricians, sound technicians, and cameramen... The improved technical facilities bore results, and National Television began receiving sharper pictures and clearer sounds.” (1739)

The reporters' goal is to ensure that their broadcasts have clearer pictures and better sound for their viewers, but in all their equipment and other staff members that were present, they had nothing to save Azucena. They were able to get all their “stuff” that was needed for the broadcasts, but no one could secure the pump that would have saved her life. What they ended up broadcasting with their clear pictures was the death of a young girl. Here Allende is making a

statement through her story about how while media can be good, it is also ineffective when trying to accomplish something that actually matters.

Through this story, Allende also brings up the question of ethics in regard to media and reporters. There were times throughout the story when the reporters were respectful, especially Rolf who left his camera and went closer to Azucena to try and save her, but there were other times that the reporters seem to take their jobs too far. In the beginning, when the reporters talk to Azucena the first time, she is still conscious and able to answer their questions: “she was conscious and could still be heard when a microphone was held out to her. Her tone was humble, as if apologizing for all the fuss” (1739). At the beginning of her time stuck in the mud pit, Azucena’s childlike innocence is shown as she answers the questions presented to her by the reporters and even apologizes for the worry and struggle she is causing. Her attitude towards her situation and the reporters changes throughout the story and, when the reporters come back to her asking the same questions that others had asked previously, she does not try to answer them. At this point, she appears less sympathetic to the cameras and reporters and is unapologetic for her suffering. The reporters are taking their jobs too far, after they got their first interviews with Azucena, they should allow her peace. Instead, they are ignoring an ethical code of conduct, and relentlessly filming this young girl’s tragedy.

The reporters again seem to have no ethical code when it comes to getting a good story and even film Azucena in her final moments of life. The last moments that this young girl has are caught on film: “But on the night of that third day, beneath the unblinking focus of quartz lamps and the lens of a hundred cameras, Azucena gave up, her eyes locked with those of the friend who had sustained her to the end” (1742). Three days of her life and suffering had been broadcasted to the world, and now in her final moments of life, the reporters still filmed her. A

child should have the right to die in peace rather than have her final moments be recorded and broadcasted to the world. This is just a further example of the reporters not caring about the child's life, but rather experiencing the tragedy passively through a camera and broadcasting anything they can to get media attention.

Azucena was transformed into "the symbol of the tragedy" and, instead of doing something to make her situation positive or giving her the peace she deserved, the reporters did what they needed to do to get a good shot to send back to their respective television stations or other places of employment (1735). They all viewed Azucena as another sad story that resulted from the tragedy and a work opportunity, instead of seeing her as a human being. Rolf, leaving his camera behind to help Azucena, is a comment from Allende showing that reporters need to find a balance between their compassionate, human side and their strictly business, do whatever it takes to get a good story side. In this situation, Rolf chose to act with his compassion and he provided Azucena love and peace in the final moments she had to be alive.

Many of the reporters that were present on the scene as well as other volunteers tried to help Rolf save Azucena, but after their initial efforts failed, they gave up trying and the reporters began to see this as just another day on the job, reporting the event, no matter what it may be. For both the reporters as well as the viewers, the media desensitizes humans to tragedy. The reporters are at the scene to do a job, but the viewers have a safe, removed distance from the tragedy that acts almost like a buffer, removing the tragedy from reality. The viewers do not even see everything that the reporters see as the "reporters selected scenes with most impact for the news report" (1738). The reporters have a direct influence over what the public will see of this tragedy and they will pick the footage that they know will do best with the public. This removes the public from the situation, highlighting both that they are not physically present as well as that

they have no control over what aspects of the tragedy they are shown, they have to accept the news as presented to them by the media.

This desensitization relates back to the bystander effect as well. When people are presented with a problem, they are already less-likely to act when other people are around, but when people are constantly presented with tragedy it becomes even easier to remain a bystander, especially when the issue is being presented on the television, the watcher can just turn off the story and ignore the issue. Even if the reporters think that by recording the story to present to the public to enlist sympathy and help, by standing by and recording the event rather than helping, they too are simply bystanders who have become desensitized to the impacts of tragedy.

One of the characters in the story that seems the most desensitized to tragedy was Rolf Carlé. Whenever he was on an assignment, he was able to put on a professional front and get the job done: “the lens of the camera had a strange effect on him; it was as if it transported him to a different time from which he could watch events without actually participating in them” (1736). When Rolf was behind the camera, he could capture anything, and because he is behind the camera rather than experiencing the event firsthand, he can remove himself from the situation. Rolf is a prime example of being desensitized from the effects of tragedy. He is often directly faced with tragedies, but he uses the camera as a buffer, so he does not have to truly experience them.

Rolf’s desensitization changed when he flew to the valley after the volcano erupted and met Azucena and had to face this tragedy as well as his own personal tragedy head-on. When Rolf saw Azucena he “threw down his knapsack and the rest of his equipment” to get closer to the girl (1737). Rolf leaving his camera and equipment behind was the signal of the beginning of his personal change that he would undergo throughout the story. When Rolf first goes into the

mud to try and save Azucena, Allende describes him as “the reporter:” “The reporter, on the other hand, was determined to snatch her from death” (1737). In this section, Rolf was still in the mindset of a reporter and was experiencing a tragedy firsthand for the first time in a while. After Rolf spent more time with Azucena without his camera and without him thinking about his job, instead he was focusing on saving the girl’s life, he was no longer described as “the reporter” but rather only by his name. When Rolf took a step away from the media and experienced interaction and involvement with this person at a deeper level than just an interview, he experienced tremendous personal growth which was expressed with the minute detail of what Allende chooses to have Eva Luna call him. This could not have happened if Rolf had his camera with him throughout his experience with Azucena.

When Rolf Carlé makes the transition from reporter to compassionate human and realizes the magnitude of the situation he is in, he is able to facilitate growth within himself: “He had completely forgotten the camera; he could not look at the girl through a lens any longer” (1739). Rolf finally separates himself from his camera and is able to connect with Azucena and, as a result, forms a substantial relationship with her. Rolf is present with Azucena experiencing the rain and the long night, he is trying to comfort her to try and reduce some of the pain she is experiencing, he tells her stories, and through all of these real connections, he opens up part of his past that he has previously chosen to block out of his mind and it becomes “impossible for Rolf to flee from himself any longer” (1740). Rolf’s job usually is high action, but in the moments where he is not trying to capture the action or tragedy of someone else’s life, he is forced to deal with the tragedy of his own life and “Carle remembers and begins to address his own youthful suffering, which he has repressed for many years” (Cengage 2).

When Rolf is disengaged from the media and from the safety of his camera, he is able to align his childhood suffering to the suffering Azucena is experiencing currently. For so long, Rolf has been able to hide himself and his traumatic childhood behind a camera and not deal with his experiences. Even in his relationship with Eva Luna, he has been able to repress his abusive father and dead, mentally handicapped sister. It is in the moments where he must confront tragedy and the little girl's experiences without a camera where he can come to terms with his own tragic childhood. Rolf connects Azucena with his sister, Katherina, and through doing everything he can to try to save Azucena, he attempts to make up for his past actions of abandoning his sister. This connection to Katherina is partially why it takes Rolf so long to accept Azucena's death, he wants to save this suffering child since he was not able to be there for his sister in her time of suffering.

Rolf comes to an understanding "that all his exploits as a reporter, the feats that had won him such recognition and fame, were merely an attempt to keep his most ancient fears at bay, a stratagem for taking refuge behind a lens to test whether reality was more tolerable from that perspective" (Allende 1740). Like Eva Luna's voyeurism, Rolf is taking a voyeuristic approach to his own life by trying to live it from behind a camera. He realizes that his successes as a reporter are shallow, and he comes to an understanding that living behind the barrier of the camera lens does not make one "reality" better than another. In fact, it is through removing the camera from his situation that allows him to have deep, meaningful moments with Azucena.

It is in these moments, without the camera present, when Rolf actually works through his past suffering and makes a meaningful connection with Azucena. Actually experiencing these things firsthand rather than from behind the lens of his camera is why this experience has such an immense, lasting impression on Rolf. Even Eva Luna, who seemed to be present throughout the

events only witnessed them through a television screen, this impartial removal from the situation leads her to focus more on Rolf's change after the event than being affected by the tragedy itself: "You are back with me, but you are not the same man. I often accompany you to the station, and we watch the videos of Azucena again; you study them... Or maybe you study them to see yourself as if in a mirror, naked" (1742). Eva Luna notices the change in Rolf but cannot pinpoint an exact reason as to when or why the shift in his character occurred. Rolf is watching the clips of the story over and over. When he is the one in charge of the stories, he presents a different image of himself; however, when he leaves his camera behind and is now part of the subject of the story, he is able to see himself in a new way. Rolf revealed his true self to Azucena, everything he has tried to cover up for so long came out when he was with her. When he was with Azucena, Rolf was revealing his true self in a way that he had never done before. As he is watching the tapes they are almost giving him a look into his true self, like a mirror image of his inside self, rather than the image he usually portrays to the world. Revealing himself in such a deep way is not something Rolf is used to doing, which is partially why he keeps watching the film clips repeatedly. He is able to see himself, without a camera, making a deep connection with another human, because he shares this intimate side of himself, this event with Azucena sticks with Rolf and impacts him greatly.

Isabel Allende highlights her skepticism of the news media in her short story "And of Clay Are We Created." Allende acknowledges that there are positives to the media in her story as it can expose people to events that they would otherwise have no access to and allow people to connect their sufferings with others and align their common humanity in the process as well. However, through looking at how the media influences the bystander effect, evaluating the question of ethics in the news media, or the lack thereof, and assessing the transformation Rolf

Carlé undergoes throughout the story, it is clear that Allende highlights the negative aspects of the news media and how these outweigh the positives. When people are constantly being exposed to tragedy through the news, they become desensitized and the tragic stories have less of an effect on both the viewers and those that are gathering the footage. It is only through truly experiencing human connection that peoples' lives can be significantly impacted.

Works Cited

Allende, Isabel. "And of Clay Are We Created." *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 3rd ed., vol. 2, W.W. Norton & Company, 2013, pp. 1735-42.

Cengage Learning, Gale. *A Study Guide for Isabel Allende's "And of Clay Are We Created."*

https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=iYipDAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT3&dq=isabel+allende+and+of+clay+are+we+created&ots=7H3gvk_EAd&sig=s_4g1vie1_V80ZeKtp6_LSBYSeA#v=onepage&q&f=false

Gough, Elizabeth. "Vision and Division: Voyeurism in the Works of Isabel Allende." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2004, pp. 93-120. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2005530145&site=ehost-live.

Myers, David. G. *Psychology*, 7th ed., Macmillan,

<https://books.google.com/books?id=b6PK48LqjwIC&pg=RA1-PA116&lpg=RA1-PA116&dq#v=onepage&q&f=false>