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MEDIA AS DRIVERS OF THE THERAPEUTIC TREND?

BARRY RICHARDS AND JOANNE BROWN

Abstract: Building upon their earlier analysis of therapeutic culture, the authors consider whether the increasing mediatisation of everyday life may be a source of and support for what they see as core elements to the therapeutic: emotional expressivity, reflexivity and concern for the other. Do some areas of contemporary media consumption increase our awareness of and tolerance for the anxieties and conflicts of the ordinary inner world, and how might we answer this question?

Theorists differ in their opinions as to whether a therapeutic trend in popular culture is positive or negative, but there is nevertheless agreement about the emergence of a therapeutic culture. In this paper the authors argue that the television series *Mad Men* dramatises the first signs of the therapeutic trend taking root in the 'affluent society', and they highlight the role of advertising in that process. They point to the wide and still growing popularity, across different broadcast genres, of narratives of interiority which might provide an audience space in which some autobiographical interpretive work can be done. The normalisation of psychic damage and repair amongst celebrities and public figures on the media stage may also contribute to this resource. While acknowledging that the mediatisation of everyday life does not always represent therapeutic values, or facilitate the development of them, the authors also ask whether the 'compressed' world of multi-media can offer the potential for increased contact with different parts of one's own and another's mind, without which increasing self-knowledge or improved capacities for relating would be hard to achieve.

Introduction

In this paper we will use psychoanalytic ideas to explore the relationship between media and the development of therapeutic culture. We will ask whether the contemporary mediascape facilitates contact between different parts of the self, and contributes to the project of self-reflection which is at the heart of both psychoanalysis and, in its most positive form, of therapeutic culture.

Following Rieff's (1966) *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, many social theorists are agreed that there is a psychologisation and emotionalisation of everyday life and an emerging therapeutic culture (Rose, 1990; Furedi, 2002; Phillips, 1995; Richards, 2007). As Furedi

explains, 'a culture becomes therapeutic when the form of thinking expands from informing the relationship between the individual and therapist to shaping public perceptions about a variety of issues' (2002: 22). Whereas, in 1959, Mills said that the sociological imagination was the 'intellectual common denominator of the times', it is now, according to many theorists, a therapeutic imagination which is the intellectual common denominator of the times, characterised by reflexive talk about feelings and our relational worlds. The contention is that therapeutic culture is one essential feature of late modernity (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Berman, 1983; Giddens, 1992; Lasch, 1984). To refer to a culture as therapeutic is to suggest that the social scripts, lenses and vocabularies through which people understand themselves and their lives are strongly inflected by the interior-oriented language of the therapeutic (with talk about feelings, attachments, self-esteem, anxiety, stress, well-being, security, trauma, loss, mourning, and so on).

This does not mean that a therapeutic trend is the only cultural trend that we are witnessing, but it is a significant one. Theorists differ in their opinions as to whether this is a positive or negative trend. Furedi and Rose, for example, view it with suspicion, seeing it as a means of managing subjectivity and behaviour in the same way that religious morals and codes might. A therapeutic culture can obfuscate the socio-political causes of distress and de-emphasise the socio-historical forces affecting our lives (histories of class, gender, race and ethnicity, for example).

It is this ahistorical, apolitical and asocial understanding of life that a specifically psychosocial paradigm attempts to address, but it is not the aim of this introductory paper to outline a 'psychosocial imagination' (Brown, 2006). The Media and the Inner World project is, however, psychosocial in orientation. It aims to bring societal institutions and processes into dialogue with the insights from psychoanalysis and the consulting room. This short psychosocial think piece aims to raise questions about the role of the media, as macro-level cultural and societal phenomena, in driving the psychological, therapeutic trend described above.

Evaluating therapeutic culture

At the end of the twentieth century, we wrote about what conception of Freud and of the psychoanalytic sensibility we might take forward into the new millennium (Brown and Richards, 1998). We discussed the distinction between an Enlightenment and post-

Enlightenment Freud, and argued for the importance of tempering a humanist understanding of the individual with elements of psychoanalysis which resonate with postmodern, post-Freudian and deconstructive psychoanalysis. We argued that a reconceptualised role for the ego as observational self might offer a link between modern and postmodern views of psychoanalysis. The self here is not the imperialist possessor of power and truth, but neither does it decry attempts at self-knowing and some measure of self-containment.

We discussed the dialectical nature of psychoanalysis, which can be seen in the juxtaposition of self-knowledge as one of its ideals with the notion that we are not masters in our own houses, because of the power of raw emotion and of the unconscious, latent forces at work in our lives. To quote Phillips (1988: xii), 'people are the animals who can make promises, but also the animals who can't help breaking them'. As Bollas (1992) says, it is an arresting moment when we realise that we have minds that can get us into trouble, make us suffer, abuse ourselves and others and produce nightmares. He refers to this as the 'semi-independent itness' of our minds, a dimension of existence which a therapeutic sensibility is observant of and attuned to. Developing an observational capacity is crucial if we want to protect ourselves or others from our jealousies, anger, lusts and disappointments. And this is the morality at the heart of psychoanalysis – increased insight and contact with our own psychic lives and with the human condition might lead to more tolerance of our contradictions, acceptance of what kind of 'animals' we are, and to increased capacities for concern.

In a previous article (Richards and Brown, 2002), we defined a psychoanalytically informed therapeutic sensibility as an ideal or discourse constituted by three factors. These are emotional expressivity, knowledge or thoughtfulness, and concern or compassion for the self and other. We argued that they can be loosely thought of as corresponding to the Freudian triptych of id, ego and super-ego, and to object relations psychoanalysis in which emotional expressivity and reflexivity are conjoined with a reparative impulse. What object relations psychoanalysis describes is an ideal type psychic constellation in which we develop an observational capacity, an ability to be a kind of participant observer of our own minds. This means that we can be beset by feelings, particular thoughts and relational dynamics, and simultaneously or retrospectively be observant of them. It is the acknowledgement in object relations psychoanalysis of conflict and destructiveness that brings in the element of concern or reparation. What we observe is our own participation in anger, jealousy, deceit, neglect

and so on, feelings and actions which can be self-damaging or damaging to others. The compassion that is described is not therefore one which turns away from ugliness and 'dispels the Freudian gloom' (see Richards, 1989), but is instead a reparative generosity born from a knowledge of and remorse about the damage we are capable of inflicting.

In 2002, we suggested that all three factors need to be present in order to define an event, phenomenon or culture as 'therapeutic'. That is, feeling without thoughtfulness might lead to sentimentality, emotional flooding or disinhibition (see Lunt and Stenner's [2005] discussion of whether highly emotionalised popular chat shows, like *Jeremy Kyle* [ITV, 2005-], are therapeutic). Conversely, reflexive talk about feelings without contact with them might look inauthentic, dissociated and alienating (see the media suspicion of Gordon Brown's smile which did not always look rooted in genuine pleasure, warmth or amusement). Expressivity or reflexivity without a reparative or concerned element for the self and other clearly lacks a vital ingredient of the therapeutic, because it is concern about real and imagined damage that drives the wish to understand more about it and to heal it.

This model of a therapeutic sensibility can be used to assess to what extent a film, a social movement, a political figure or institution embodies certain aspects of it. There are, of course, other ways in which the therapeutic might be defined and what we provided in 2002 were broad categories which can be developed or contested. Our aim was to try to provide one definition of the therapeutic so that we have some means to assess whether developments in radio, television, new social media, education, healthcare and so on are therapeutic. We said that any one of the three core elements (expressivity, knowledge and compassion) might conceivably be present as a single cultural trait, but that in combination they will strengthen and modulate each other.

The conception of the self as prey to different states of mind, impulse and anxiety was said by Freud to have disturbed the world's sleep when he introduced it (1900), but he did so at a time when we did not inhabit a mediascape which flooded people's everyday experience with dramatisations (sometimes complex ones) of contemporary predicaments, and provided the socio-cultural spaces in which identity issues and the anxieties about who we are might be worked through.

Narratives of interiority, spaces for reflection

For example, we can see the contradictory internal worlds and the troubled histories of many

protagonists in drama (examples from crime drama in the UK include *Inspector Morse* [ITV, 1987-96], the pathologists in *Silent Witness* [BBC1, 1996 -], Boyd of *Waking the Dead* [BBC1, 2000-11], *Rebus* [STV, 2000-07], *Wallander* [BBC1, 2008 -]). Soaps like *EastEnders* (BBC1, 1985 -) depict passion, depression, substance abuse, remorse, child sexual abuse and so on. There is an argument that such programmes are sensational rather than therapeutic in both intent and impact (see the recent public furore over the *EastEnders* narrative of cot death and baby snatching). Moreover, the soaps in particular have been co-opted into a celebrity culture which, although not intrinsically inimical to some reflexivity, has developed around television and sports 'stars' in a particularly frenetic and voyeuristic way. Still, whatever the producers' intentions and whatever collateral frenzy there might be, people nevertheless can use media content as resources with which to think about their own experiences of loss, desire, anxiety and guilt. In such ways, popular culture might add to the processes of reflexivity that the therapeutic embodies. This proposition needs to be explored empirically in order to look at particular audiences and different types of media. One of us has used historical data on British television viewing figures to explore the idea that a process of emotionalisation (narratives about feeling and relationships) in popular television is occurring (Richards, 2007). But more empirical work needs to be done in order to look at whether this is occurring in other genres and other countries, and with what effect. Moreover, following the above delineation of three core elements to a psychoanalytically informed therapeutic sensibility, we might note that a process of emotionalisation is not necessarily tied to thoughtfulness and compassion in its representations and effects.

The question of whether popular media are important forces in driving therapeutic culture does not sit comfortably with the spontaneous cultural orientation of the psychoanalytic community towards high literature, art, music, poetry as illustrations of this sensibility. Indeed, at the launch of the *MiW* seminar series, Brett Kahr (2009) warned against the natural inclination of psychoanalysis towards high culture and its estrangement from popular culture. Richards in 1994 also argued that 'for the majority this kind of (high) cultural orientation is not spontaneous, nor helpful in making sense of their biographical and day-to-day experience' (9).

Our speculative question is whether contemporary media enable us to reconcile our sensual needs, narcissistic longings, rivalry and omnipotence with our needs and capacities for restraint, sociality, morality and humility. In this sense, the media can be said to offer

people the opportunity for an introduction to themselves (in their complexity and contradictions), which is what Winnicott described psychoanalysis as doing (see Phillips, 1988: 11). Moreover, they might provide for moments of intersubjectivity and recognition, which Stern (1985) described as crucial to the child's sense of communion, rather than isolation. The consumption of a particular drama can include the feeling that someone has arrived in your subjective space and allowed you to give voice to that which might otherwise be subliminal and out of conscious awareness. As Phillips (1988) explains, Winnicott stressed the importance of therapists allowing patients to come to their own interpretations, and some types of media content may provide the social space in which some of this autobiographical, interpretive work can be done.

Of course there are limits to this argument. Psychoanalysis alerts us to the many defences and resistances against self-insight and thinking through what we feel and how we relate, and the opportunity to develop a trusting relationship in which this work can be done is a unique feature of the relational nature of psychoanalysis. We are aware that our comparison of psychoanalysis and the media breaks down when one considers that if a particular programme (or website, or piece of music) touches a raw nerve, we can always switch it off, and will not have this pointed out to us the following week. We are not claiming that the role of the media in a person's life can be compared to the role of a counsellor, therapist or analyst, but might it nevertheless have some therapeutic functions?

Normalising contradiction, damage and repair

Aside from narratives of interior complexity in television drama, another manifestation of therapeutic sensibility in the media is to be found in those cases where there is a fusion, in the image of an individual person, of contradictory psychic elements - for example, desire and restraint, or pleasure and authority. Referring to this as 'compression', Richards (2000) pointed to the way in which Princess Diana represented an array of libidinal values, such as glamour, wealth, hedonism, and anorexic neediness, along with more super-ego related values such as compassion, world citizenship and parental responsibility. She also represented for the public self-reflexive traits (as in her BBC interview with Martin Bashir [1985], and well publicised therapy with Susie Orbach). In contrast, over three decades earlier, Marilyn Monroe's meaning for the public was rooted in her sexuality and emotional hunger, relatively uninfluenced by any countervailing values. The cultural change illustrated

by the differences between these iconic images is in the development of a capacity to represent ourselves as people who can be serious and sensual, thoughtful and mindless, vulnerable and resilient, and moreover be able to contain (or at least aspire to contain) the anxiety that these contradictions might give rise to.

Brown (2010) has argued that, in the field of mental health, it is democratising and important to see and read accounts from 'wounded healers' about their experience of mental suffering. Without such accounts, the fantasy permeates that there is a world of stable adulthood and emotional maturity, untouched by doubt, contradiction and frailty. In this fantasy, the world is compartmentalised into the sane and insane and we do not see condensed images of struggle and recovery, or authority and collapse, in the one person. Being 'grown up' and 'mature' operates, she argues, as a silent powerful category by which people judge the successes and failures of their lives. Mental health or maturity is not, however, a state untouched by emotional, bodily, sexual and occupational uncertainty and doubt, and a therapeutic sensibility can reveal this. When the media represent celebrities, sportspeople, politicians, etc., who come out and tell of their own personal struggles behind the professional role that they also inhabit, they contribute in important ways to the therapeutic trend. Indeed, Richards (2000) argued that the measure of a therapeutic culture at a national level might be in the election as national leader of a 'damaged' person, one who had known great emotional difficulty but had developed through that, and who was able to represent both adversity and recovery. However, the simple fact of a damaged past does not achieve this therapeutic imagery, as the election of an ex-alcoholic as US President showed. In George W. Bush's case, there was perhaps a lack of a compelling narrative of demonstrable personal development, and, crucially, his disordered early adulthood was not closely woven into his public mediatised persona.

However, popular media presentations of damage and repair, and of internal conflict and struggle in well-known individuals create the potential for wide dissemination of a more tolerant or compassionate understanding of what constitutes 'normality'. With this come opportunities and incentives for other individuals to learn from, and perhaps to compare themselves reflexively with, the iconic examples.

In the field of politics, one section of the media may continue to obstruct this development, in the potential withdrawal of respect and confidence from someone who has gone public about particular frailties, and who may thus be wiped out as a credible political

figure. There are still today few countries where a Prime Minister's acknowledgement of needing sick leave for depression would have met the sympathetic response which Kjell Bondevik did in Norway in 1998. But the overall trend in politics, as in mental health policy, is towards the rhetoric of inclusiveness.

Why the media, including at times the more culturally-conservative media, have played a role in this normalisation of a damaged self is unclear. They may in part be responding to a gathering, if largely unspoken, demand from their readers and audiences for more psychological reality. Or they may simply be following instrumental rules which say that revelation, surprise, conflict and passion in any form are good for business. If their propagation of public figures as complex and conflicted beings is the result of a commercial strategy, it might still in some way, reflect a growing public appetite for knowing the 'truth' about people in more complex ways.

Mad Men and the psychological sell

Our third example of an area in which media content is supporting and reflecting, as well as perhaps exploiting, the therapeutic trend, is in the field of advertising. In the television series, *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007 -), set in Madison Avenue in the early 1960s, we see the first signs of the trend taking root in the 'affluent society'. The highly successful creative, Don Draper (Jon Hamm), is dismissive of specialist psychology, yet his success is based on his use of his intuitions about his own and others' needs and motives. His ex-secretary, Peggy Olson, is able to transform herself into a copy-writer by similarly drawing on her understanding of herself and others like her. Characters who are much less flexible in exploring their own emotional states and those of others are characterised as excluded, envious, and admiring of the 'messages from the underworld' (Bettelheim, 1983) that inspire Draper. Offering as much fine-grained social history and nuanced pathos as it does 'soap' drama, the series depicts (amongst many other things) the commercial utility of these understandings, in the context of a social world about to be transformed by the political and cultural forces unleashed in the 1960s. Some of the characters prefigure these changes; they are uncertain of their received identities, troublingly aware of their needs and fears, yet unable to confront and integrate disparate parts of themselves. Draper himself is a chaotic collection of selves, sheltering under a literally false identity. His wife and daughter do however enter the consulting room, with different outcomes, the daughter's experience perhaps pointing hopefully to the potential

benefits of good therapy.

Advertising of this period, though sometimes – when created by the likes of Draper – going astutely for an effective psychological soft spot, looks naive in any retrospective view. It had yet to learn the light, humorous ways of dealing with big issues that came with later generations of creatives, especially British ones. It was also mono-thematic, that is, the appeals it crafted for products were typically based on a single psychological message, aimed at a single dimension of the self of the consumer, whether that was a sense of duty, a wish for convenience, a fantasy of freedom, or whatever. In a research project which one of us was involved in (Richards, MacRury & Botterill, 2000), changes in the content of advertisements in the latter half of the twentieth century were tracked. There was evidence that during this period, advertisements became increasingly likely to incorporate multiple appeals, speaking to different parts of the self at once. The ability of consumers to hold in mind and act upon, for example, both 'heart' and 'head' was assumed or encouraged by such advertisements. Such 'hailing' of the consumer as a more complex (and sometimes conflicted) person is part of advertising's partial convergence with the therapeutic, the early signs of which are dramatised in *Mad Men*'s social realism. The basis of this convergence, though, lies more broadly in advertising's increasingly sophisticated and sensuous address to the emotions of the individual, in its presentation of states of lack, satisfaction and desire, and of questions about life and what we want from it. This continuous interrogation of the needs and motives of everyone exposed to advertising provides constant stimulus and raw material for processes of self-questioning and self-examination, however remote this may be from the intentions of advertisers.

Of course, this interrogation can also be very restrictive or persecutory, as declared by the abundant literature on the false needs, oppressive discourses and punishing ideals that the psychological sell entails. In *Mad Men*, Don Draper's reading of the emotional or psychosocial meaning of a product and the use of this in selling it, is met with dismay by one of his lover's bohemian friends, in whom we see represented the Marcusian position that advertising is nothing other than the selling of false needs and one-dimensionality. When Peggy Olson complains that a diet drink sold by a singing, smiling and clean-faced character is 'phoney', Draper reminds her that she is not an artist (her job is to solve problems in selling, not artistically represent life as it might be for women trying to lose weight). So, here, the fictional drama reminds us that there are limits to the argument that the media via

advertising are a driver of the therapeutic trend.

Another problem in simply stating that the media are a driver of the therapeutic trend concerns the place of sexuality in the media. The most pervasive and consistently powerful motive to be explored and used by advertising is of course sexuality. The sexualisation of everyday culture has come about in many ways, and we will not speculate here on what might be the fundamental reasons for it. We will, however, note that it stands in a complex relationship to the therapeutic. On the one hand, it can present a regressive alternative to the therapeutic, a universe of narcissistic excitement, sensual pleasure and perversity in which thoughtfulness and compassion can be marginalised. On the other hand, if we follow the Freudian suggestion (as seen by Foucault, 1976) that sexuality is at the deep centre of the self, then our culture's insistence that sexual imagery or discourse can be inserted, or may emerge, almost anywhere in our experience must serve to bring the depths of the self nearer the surface of social life – or rather, to bring that surface nearer those depths. In post-Freudian terms, the depths are seen as relational not instinctual, but that does not displace sexuality from a key role. It is difficult to avoid questions about one's own sexuality and its meaning when any ordinary day brings dozens of encounters with the explicitly sexual imagery which has colonised so much media space. The use of this imagery in advertising and for other promotional purposes is probably the most obvious form of this colonisation, though there are others. The consequence is a very wide disinhibition, which confronts us with sexuality at every turn and leaves diminishing space for the sexual selves of media consumers to remain unobserved and unremarked by their owners.

Media technology and the therapeutic

So far, our discussion has been oriented primarily towards media content. We will end this paper with some observations about changes in media technology and how these may also, conceivably, be adding to the possibilities for mediatisation to serve the therapeutic trend. Firstly, there is the commonplace fact of the omnipresence of today's media, which we have alluded to in noting the ubiquity of sexuality. It is becoming very difficult to see consuming the 'media' as a distinctive area or form of experience. What was once an activity bounded by space and time – reading a newspaper on public transport, listening to radio while driving, watching scheduled television at home – has been greatly diversified, and is now inserted into other activities and situations. Several socio-technological developments have underwritten

this change, such as the spread of broadband and wi-fi, the change of the mobile phone into a multi-media platform, and the spread of laptop and other smaller computers with increasingly rich media capacities. As well as these developments in the individual's access to media at all times and potentially (given network coverage) in all places, there have also been increases in the mediatisation of public space, as advertisements in particular have colonised more of that space and with more intense, increasingly moving-image content. We have argued that some media content is at least partly based on therapeutic values, and so it is reasonable to assume that the increased availability of this content, as a function of media ubiquity, might reinforce the therapeutic trend.

As well as this percolation of media consumption into nearly all social spaces, there has also – based on the same underlying technological developments – been an integration of media modalities into multi-media delivery. This has brought an integration of content, such that sensory domains previously separated are now frequently combined in a multi-sensory experience. 'The most basic trend in the modes of communication used in the new media is their advancing *integration*' (Van Dijk, 2006: 214). A webpage combines the modalities of all previous media – it presents text with sound (sound design, speech, music) and with visual elements (graphic design, image and moving image, whether animation or film). Moreover, every webpage is also a node in a practically infinite network of links. Insofar as consumers of old media had to limit their media intake to unimodal, stand-alone media content and possibly be more constrained by the patterns of thought and the associative pathways established for that modality, when faced with integrated multi-modal new media this can no longer apply. Rich multi-media content gives maximum stimulation to the mind's associative processes, and so invites the webpage reader or surfer to be more of a dreamer as well, in the psychoanalytic sense. However our speculative question is whether this dreamer is perhaps less disturbed by the web of complex humanity that he or she encounters while surfing than the equivalent person of fifty or so years ago would have been. Is the associative activity of the mind more accepted now, more likely to be tolerated, when discomfiting, and enjoyed where possible (e.g. in the work of an increasing number of stand-up comedians, as the audiences of Eddie Izzard and Paul Merton, amongst others, can testify)? Thirdly, there is the capacity of today's media to transcend the boundaries of time and space. This is often seen as one of the major features of the contemporary world. The social theorist, David Harvey (1991), described this 'compression' of time and space as central to postmodernity. What are

the psychological correlates of this phenomenon? Does this technology potentially lead to more psychological agility, tolerance, and curiosity, as almost the entire world is brought into our field of vision?

Postmodern permeability

We noted earlier the normalisation of complex and contradictory feelings, actions and characteristics in public figures, leaders and celebrities. The differentiation of public figures according to which part of, or force within, the mind they represented (e.g. conscience, lust, destructiveness) is much less rigid than before, such that in the image of a figure such as President Clinton there was a fusion of different psychic elements, which were compressed together into a variegated whole (authority, compassion, lust, deceit). We are asking whether this changing nature of celebrity and leader images expresses a more fundamental change in internal psychodynamics, one which we suggest is at the heart of the therapeutic trend. This is a change whereby internal psychic boundaries have become more permeable. Therapeutic self-observation and reflection require a tolerance of and contact with different parts of one's own and another's mind, without which increasing self-knowledge or improved capacities for relating would be hard to achieve. Our question here is whether the various trends we have described in media content and technology contribute to a (broadly defined) psychoanalytically informed therapeutic trend, in which we search for greater insight into and contact with the forces that shape our lives (internal and external). This is an empirical question and will vary from case to case.

Our aim has been to raise questions about whether the complex view of the person and of relationships that we find from a critical reading of psychoanalysis is one that we see represented in the popular media, and is also one that contemporary technological changes facilitate contact with. We could equally ask this question of the new social media and the 'network society' of which they are a part, but this was beyond our discussion here. The Media and the Inner World agenda presents an opportunity to pursue all these lines of inquiry into whether today's media are providing reflexive resources for the therapeutic self.

Barry Richards is Professor of Public Communication in the Media School at Bournemouth University.
Joanne Brown is Senior Lecturer in Mental Health in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Southampton.

Television Programmes Discussed

EastEnders (UK, BBC1, 1985 -).
Inspector Morse (UK, ITV, 1987-96).
Mad Men (US, Matthew Weiner, AMC, 2007 -).
Panorama: Martin Bashir interviews Diana, Princess of Wales (UK, BBC1, Tx.: 20 November 1995).
Rebus (UK, STV, 2000-07).
Silent Witness (UK, BBC1, 1996 -)
The Jeremy Kyle Show (UK, ITV, 2005 -)
Waking the Dead (UK, BBC1, 2000-11).
Wallander (UK, BBC1, 2008 -).

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