

VULTURE CULTURE

Social media – and mass media – fuel a horrific cycle of evil

PSYCHOPATHY. VOYEURISM. SADISM. *Schadenfreude*. Vicarious pleasure. Blood lust. You will find several terms to describe the human tendency to find a strange satisfaction, indeed fulfilment, in witnessing the pain and suffering of other people or creatures.

“If you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you”
– Friedrich Nietzsche

Modern psychology may have identified this mental disorder but our blood lust goes long back into our savage past. The Roman circus and the Greek hippodrome were built for high-risk chariot races and gladiator fights to the death. In recent history you had crowds watching the guillotines during the French Revolution, public executions in China and Saudi Arabia, and bull fights in Spain.

George Orwell wrote spellbindingly about our collective cruelty in ‘Shooting an Elephant’. After agonising over whether he, a sub-divisional police officer in Moulmein, should shoot a rogue elephant, he finally decided that Duty Called: “I shoved the cartridges into the magazine and lay down on the road to get a better aim. The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats. They were going to have their bit of fun after all.”

The latest is the 17-minute video of the February 15 massacre of 50 worshippers in two mosques in New Zealand, which was streamed live on Facebook and posted on YouTube and Twitter, presumably by the gunman, Australian Brenton Tarrant.

Social-media platforms tried to take down the video, but it was re-distributed by countless users. *The New York Times* headlined it ‘A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet’. The gunman had posted a 74-page manifesto before the shootings, and just before he entered the first mosque, he paused to endorse a meme – a piece of text or video that is rapidly shared across the Internet.



Modern psychology may have identified this mental disorder but our blood lust goes long back into our savage past.

“The attack was teased on Twitter, announced on the online message board 8chan and broadcast live on Facebook. The footage was then replayed endlessly on YouTube, Twitter and Reddit, as the platforms scrambled to take down the clips nearly as fast as new copies popped up to replace them,” the *Times* reported.

This is one side of modern horror. The other is the contagious power of mass killings. Round-the-clock media coverage seems to trigger copy-cat killings. The man who shot two journalists dead on live television in Virginia in August 2015 sent ABC

News a fax in which he said he admired the teenagers who shot dead 13 people at Columbine High School in Colorado in 1999. He also said the shootings of nine black churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2015, was what sent him “over the top”, an article in *Psychology Today* said. It cited a study titled ‘Media and Mass Homicides’ in the *Archives of Suicide Research* which studied seven mass killings in Australia, New Zealand and Britain between 1987 and 1996. It said that modelling may have occurred over a period as long as 10 years generating a ripple effect with other serious

violence.

As if on cue, nerves were set jangling three days after the Christchurch massacre when a Turkish immigrant opened fire on a tram in the Dutch city of Utrecht, killing three people. Clearly, we are gazing into the abyss. **BW**

The author is former Editor, Reuters Asia, Editor-in-Chief of The Hindustan Times and Editor of Business Today