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The Loss of Nuance



What has happened to subtlety? Where has the ability gone to see anything other than black and white? They seem to have disappeared, along with humour. Maybe they've all gone on a cruise and will return, refreshed and reinvigorated.

One cause of the all-or-nothing, left-right, right-wrong attitude that now permeates our media and our politics is the way we consume information: small, bite-sized chunks that allow no nuance. Thirty words do not leave room for any subtlety.

News about events in the world used to be accompanied by in-depth analysis in most newspapers and to some extent on radio and TV. There are now few newspapers that indulge in extensive analysis of events or give much background to them.

Another 'cause' of this lack of depth is the amount of print space and air time given to the inconsequential, including news, speculation, fictions and, yes, analysis of the lives of people who are considered to be celebrities. It makes sense to celebrate the achievements of people who have actually achieved something. Being 'beautiful' is in itself not an achievement.

The activities and the speculations about the private lives of so many people now unfortunately define much about our society and our place in it.

The language used in reportage also mitigates against nuance. Whether it is news of events that matter, or 'news' about sport, celebrities, stock markets or commerce, the language is often inflated or alarmist, or both. A 1% drop in the share index can be described as a 'plummet'; a missed goal in a football match can be broadcast as a 'catastrophe'. In contrast, the deaths of twenty civilians in a botched airstrike in the Middle East can be reported as 'unfortunate'.

There are words in our language that used to only ever be used as absolutes, such as 'unique'. The use of this word is changing and language does evolve, but I find it a shame. Because 'unique' is now used accompanied by a modifier such as 'almost' or 'quite'. When something is actually unique instead of merely rare or extremely rare, or unusual, the term 'absolutely unique' has to be used. This is like absolutely totally the case.

When we do need to have some strong, even alarmist language, the media seem incapable of stepping up, or unwilling to do so. This can be the case when reporting on widespread corruption (commercial or political) or environmental issues. Sometimes we need to hear or read inveterate language in order to take notice and be encouraged to do something.

Where nuance can really seem to be absent is in discussions about important issues such as violence against women, sex offences against, and other mistreatment of, children; migration and the treatment of refugees; and issues around terrorism and the typecasting of certain ethnic and religious groups.

Mind you, some behaviours are just wrong and should be the subject of strenuous criminal prosecution. However, behind the clear-cut criminality is a host of issues. For instance, in relation to violence against women, there is a myriad issues to be addressed, including the attitudes of non-violent men to those who abuse women, the role of early socialisation in childhood, etc. Bring these other issues up and a host of people who seem incapable of nuance, will howl you down as making excuses for bad behaviour – they cannot see that there is a difference between prosecuting the criminal and investigation into what may have caused the criminal to behave that way.

Similarly, if you want to discuss issues behind institutional or familial abuse of children or the role of the USA and its allies as being in part to blame for the rise of terrorism with its epicentre in the Middle East. Abuse, rape, terrorism – they are all acts that should be punished, and they are all behaviours we need to try and understand if we are to do anything to reduce their prevalence.

I am not saying that none of these discussions are happening, but that there seems to be a growing amount of howling down of those willing to start such discussions and those who join the debates. In a recent online discussion I was part of, there was the suggestion that a man who rapes a woman who has changed her mind about having sex with him, is not as bad as a man who attacks a woman in the street and rapes her. My argument is that both instances are rape and the men need to be charged and face a court for their actions. Whether the circumstances are different is a separate issue. “You shall not rape” is clear-cut. Yes, it may be more difficult for some men to take a deep breath in the face of a ‘yes’ changing to a ‘no’, but to proceed to forcibly have sex with a woman at that point is plainly still wrong and illegal.

While rapists and child abusers need to be dealt with, there needs to be room for discussions on how to prevent much of it taking place. In those discussions, nuance is essential.