

Wanda Montanelli

From  
**ZERO**

to  
**HERO**



*When Free Publicity  
Turns Criminals Into Heroes*



***Wanda Montanelli, From Zero to Hero***  
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WANDA MONTANELLI

## From Zero to Hero

*When free publicity turns criminals into heroes*

# **From zero to hero**

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*To those who believe all is not lost ...*

*To the communicators whose work it is to  
travel forevermore through unexplored areas*

The Werther effect due to media propaganda is a priceless gift to the criminal: that of violence against women, pseudoreligious massacres, suicide attacks and bullying.

*' [ ... ] such an effect also works for various actions, such as acts of violence or, on the contrary, acts of heroism. The prerequisite is that they are publicised and that the recipient is, or feels like they are, somebody similar to the protagonist of the narrative episode'.*

(Giorgio Nardone and Paul Watzlawick, *The Art of Change*)

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## Preface

I willingly agreed to write the preface to Ms Montanelli's book as the theme is so current, pertaining to strategies in human communication, investigated above all in the social repercussions of the Werther effect, in various, composite and emulative forms of suicide and homicide.

The conceit of the book puts particular emphasis on the possible deleterious effects of violent content transmitted via mass media. It is to be pointed out that, on this topic, the extensive research into the existence of a relation between violence "transmitted" and an increase in criminal behaviour, as a pathologically imitative factor of social proof, have come to rather conflicting conclusions, reflecting inconcurrent waves of thought to have developed in recent years regarding this issue.

The data, however, on which studies concur refers inherently to the impact of exposure to violent content on the young and the consequent aim of reducing it in programmes that may be viewed by a juvenile audience. To that end, the need to take precautions has emerged by the establishment of self-regulatory codes to regulate relations between minors and mass media.

As much has been made necessary, given the preponderance of results confirming a link exists between violence seen on the screen and consequent violent behaviour from viewers (Anderson S., "TV Violence and Viewer Aggression: A Cumulation of Study Results 1956–1976" in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 41, Issue 3, Autumn 1977, pp. 314–331).

The most recent research in that regard has concentrated on the possibility of identifying useful countermeasures to reduce the impact of media violence on viewers. Waddell *et al* (2019) have observed that media violence is often accompanied by cues to morally disengage, which allows viewers to reduce to a minimum the moral concerns that real-life violence tends to evoke (Waddell, Bailey and Davis, 2019). This evidence concurs with that revealed in previous research (e.g. Hartmann *et al*, 2014), which observes that violent content in the media is often associated with messages of moral disengagement that make the violence portrayed appear justified, necessary or without real consequences. Furthermore, Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak (2016) observe that feelings of pleasantness within viewers of

violent media content increases when messages associated with moral disengagement are present, minimising aggression (e.g., when violence is presented as a battle between good and evil) or where the characteristics of violent scenes (e.g., conveying a less realistic representation of blood) are minimised.

However, Waddell *et al* observe that the presentation of content and signals conducive to happiness, activating emotive reactions of wellbeing and altruism, before violent imagery diminishes the pleasant feeling in viewers in terms of the latter. In essence, this is about eliciting a prioritised activation of moral emotions. These observations are fundamental, proving impact management for the viewers of violent media content is possible, with its psychological and behavioural effects minimised. Another vital piece of data, however, is also the one for which the same media may be a vehicle of effective countermeasures and not only of the negative effects of the violence as shown.

The entire team at the *International Institute of Criminology and Forensic Psychopathology* in Rome, of which I am convenor, has collected countless testimonials from around the world regarding the combination of mass media with suicidal and homicidal behaviour with related statements to that effect.

Recalling David Phillips' research on the Werther effect in relation to the theme of suicide, the expository path leads the way to further concerns after his work on criminality and to conclusion this Californian sociologist reaches on the imitative character of well-publicised murders.

These are findings to which due attention must be paid, free from preconceived notions and judgments. Moreover, we consider that, in and of itself, it would already constitute "criminogenic behaviour" if — as researchers — we were to keep research of interest in manipulation and mass media to ourselves and to the detriment of public opinion. This includes Jerome Motto's work in the Seventies and more recent analyses on mass media and aggression (Clark C., 1994; Berry G. and Asamen J.K., 1992; Palermo G., 1995; Zanicchi A., 1994; De Fleur M. and Ball-Bokeak K., 1995). Also to be noted is the research conducted by Gentile, Berch, Choo, Khoo and Walsh (2017); Bushman, Gollwitzer and Cruz (2015);

Bushman, Huesmann and Whitaker (2009); Krahe (2013); Anderson *et al* (2010); Bushman and Huesmann (2006); Ferguson and Kilburn (2009) and Greitemeyer and Mügge (2014) related to the effects of media violence on aggression in adolescent minors.

To that same end, there are studies on the phenomenon of baby killers and serial killers alongside more advanced research by Fredly and Goldfarb into crime and publicity as well as Phillips and Bollen's into auto- and heteroaggression in terms of mass media, which expound the convinced and proven opinion that, due to a combination of individualised factors that have been well codified by now, a wide category of vulnerable and receptive individuals are victim to the fascination of emotions, experiences and feelings that mass media itself induces, therefore constituting real "paths of behaviour" to be mimicked.

However, in the context of this perennial debate, if the sight of aggression only entails a catharsis that has nothing to do with the manifestation of aggressive incidents or vice versa, the most up-to-date theory on the expansion of behavioural filters and of "brake mesh" comes into play, so to speak. These serve as inhibitors to separate what is permitted and what isn't, bringing to mind the intrapsychic dictum: "If other people are doing it, so can I".

Being a journalist and an attentive investigator of communication phenomena and strategy, the author has revealed, through her work, the aspect of the social costs of violence and the incongruence to be observed in managing mass media, when the *notitia criminis* may emerge as an offer of free publicity for homicide every time the news of such is conveyed emphatically. This is to the point that it almost seems to be a form of obsequious concession afforded to narcissism and the thirst for propaganda amongst certain members of the criminal fraternity.

The writer's observation also verifies the relation between the elevated publicity costs on offer to whomever should intend on using them for the promotion of an activity and precise parameters in the relation between the length of advert and the price to be paid, also in relation to the transmission timeslot and target audience. In so doing, she makes it clear that the careful measurement of "value for money" in contracts between the network and

the entrepreneur goes completely out the window during the phases of wanton, prolonged and attenuated disclosure of the crime.

As the author intended, the text gives credit to a new point of view on the merits and demerits of media disclosure, as well as the proven judgments of suggestibility, persuasion and manipulation of mass media, with arguments as to the social and/or principally economic costs of communication when it appears to be lavished in ways lacking profound reading into the message's intrinsic value.

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