The future of taboo

*On the growing insensitivity to television violence.*

Anthony Trollope once described his great novel *The Way We Live Now* (1875) as “an attack on the commercial profligacy of the age.” Trollope went on to criticize his novel for exaggerating the social and moral evils it portrays. Such exaggeration, he said in his *Autobiography* (1883), is a “fault which is to be attributed to almost all satires.” We wonder what Trollope would say were he with us today. Would he still think it an “exaggeration”? We suspect that almost all of our readers could provide a long list of examples, drawn from the way we live now, that would make the perfidy Trollope chronicled pale in comparison.

We are not thinking of anything dramatic or out of the ordinary. On the contrary, what we have in mind are the myriad little degradations and invitations to moral and aesthetic coarsening with which contemporary life surrounds us. An item that appeared on April 7 in the Marketplace section of *The Wall Street Journal* highlighted the sort of thing we have in mind. The story’s headline summed up the issue: “With Eyes on Cable, Networks Permit Racier Plots, Unprintable Dialogue.” Nothing new in that, you say: the fare presented on television has been getting cruder and more violent for years. The proliferation of cable channels, many of which routinely offer X-rated material, has only accelerated the process.
True enough. But it was somehow disconcerting to be reminded of how ordinary and taken-for-granted this process of degradation has become. Enthusiastically agreeing with the proposition that more graphic depictions of sex and violence equal bigger ratings, an executive from CBS explained that “we have to realize that some things are not as taboo as they used to be.” His counterpart from NBC concurred: “On issues of sexuality and violence, the public has gotten a bit more tolerant.” Yes, a bit. Which is why one is regularly treated to obscene language, nudity, and what are delicately referred to as “sexual situations” on network television, why one new medical drama premiers with a pregnant women getting stabbed in the stomach, why another includes an episode featuring a patient with a Golden Globe award stuck in his rectum. All this is offered to the public as greater “realism” when in fact it is simply greater cynicism and exploitation.

Of course, as the story in the Journal noted, “no matter how far the broadcast networks go, there are some producers who still feel stifled.” That comes with the territory. The logic of transgressive titillation is like a narcotic: the dosage must constantly be increased simply to achieve the same effect one managed yesterday. What is happening to network television, we believe, is symptomatic of what is happening to our culture as a whole. We are witnessing both the corruption and the blunting of the moral sense.

Some people take comfort in the thought that the ubiquity of degraded and degrading material on television and elsewhere inures us to its soul-deadening poison. But there is little consolation in that process. For if most of us form a protective carapace that keeps nastiness at a psychological distance—moral calluses that buffer us from assault—the cost of that inurement can be measured precisely in our growing insensibility. This insensitivity is reflected, for example, in our growing incapacity for outrage. The social critic Rochelle Gurstein put it well in her book The Repeal of Reticence (1996): “The price of too frequently and too regularly crossing the ever-shifting border between desire and taboo, curiosity and injunction, is desensitization: what was once shocking becomes commonplace and trivial, what was once obscene becomes banal and dull.” It is worth noting, however, that the fact that a taboo no longer inspires awe and instinctive obedience does not necessarily mean that the moral peril it warns against has vanished, any more than the fact that we have become cozy with obscenity means that obscenity has ceased to be obscene. Doubtless the CBS executive was correct when he observed that “some things are not as taboo as they used to be.” The question remains whether that change should be cause for rejoicing or lamentation.