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COMPASSION FATIGUE

HOW THE MEDIA SELL DISEASE, FAMINE, WAR AND DEATH

SUSAN D. MOELLER

Routledge
New York and London

INTRODUCTION: RIDING WITH THE FOUR HORSEMEN

> The leaders of the new world disorder are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: famine, war, death and pestilence.
>
> —John Omicinski,
> "'Superpower' Disappearing from Lexicon,"
> Gannett News Service, July 30, 1994

> While we debate how to improve our health care system, build the information superhighway and protect the spotted owl, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—War, Disease, Famine and Death—gallop . . . leaving behind scenes of unspeakable horror which occasionally burst onto our TV screens or momentarily claim our attention.
>
> —J. R. Bullington,
> "No Easy Solutions to End Suffering,"
> *The Virginian-Pilot*, September 4, 1994

"The Four Horsemen are up and away, with the press corps stumbling along behind," charged activist Germaine Greer, after a series of debacles in 1994, ranging from ethnic slaughter in Rwanda and Bosnia, famine in the Horn of Africa and an outbreak of flesh-eating bacteria in Britain. "At breakfast and at dinner, we can sharpen our own appetites with a plentiful dose of the pornography of war, genocide, destitution and disease."[1]

Sometimes, like in 1994, it seems as if all that the media cover are those regions of the world trampled by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. At times it seems as if the media careen from one trauma to another, in a breathless tour of poverty, disease and death. The troubles blur. Crises become one crisis.

Why do the media cover the world in the way they do? We stagger to follow their lead. Is our balance off? Or is theirs?

If the operating principle of the news business is to educate the public, why we, the public, collapse into a compassion fatigue stupor? Are we too dull to :p up with the lessons? Or are the lessons themselves dulling our interest?

mpassion fatigue is the unacknowledged cause of much of the failure of inter- ional reporting today. It is at the base of many of the complaints about the pub- s short attention span, the media's peripatetic journalism, the public's boredom h international news, the media's preoccupation with crisis coverage.

What does compassion fatigue do? It acts as a prior restraint on the media. itors and producers don't assign stories and correspondents don't cover events it they believe will not appeal to their readers and viewers.

Compassion fatigue abets Americans' self-interest. If conventional wisdom 's that Americans are only interested in their own backyard, the media will pri- tize stories where American political, cultural or commercial connections are dent.

Compassion fatigue reinforces simplistic, formulaic coverage. If images of rving babies worked in the past to capture attention for a complex crisis of war, ugees and famine, then starving babies will headline the next difficult crisis.

Compassion fatigue ratchets up the criteria for stories that get coverage. To estall the I've-seen-it-before syndrome, journalists reject events that aren't ore dramatic or more lethal than their predecessors. Or, through a choice of nguage and images, the newest event is represented as being more extreme or adly or risky than a similar past situation.

Compassion fatigue tempts journalists to find ever more sensational tidbits in ories to retain the attention of their audience.

Compassion fatigue encourages the media to move on to other stories ice the range of possibilities of coverage have been exhausted so that boredom esn't set in. Events have a certain amount of time in the limelight, then, even the situation has not been resolved, the media marches on. Further news is e-empted. No new news is bad news.

ompassion fatigue is not an unavoidable consequence of covering the news. It however, an unavoidable consequence of the way the news is now covered. he chapters that follow identify the ruts into which the media have fallen in eir coverage of international crises. Through these studies, the media's repeti- ve chronologies, sensationalized language and imagery and Americanized etaphors and references are compared and exposed. Through these studies e inevitability of compassion fatigue is made apparent.

Sixty years ago, in the fall of 1938, Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain traveled to Munich and together with the leaders of France and Italy signed a pact of appeasement with German Führer Adolf Hitler. Chamberlain returned to England and announced "peace with honour" and "peace for our time." The dozens of photographers covering the Munich Conference and Chamberlain's return captured pictures of the prime minister, the quintessential Englishman, standing thin and tall, smiling slightly, with a furled umbrella on his arm. The world recalled those images when less than six months later Hitler's forces swallowed Czechoslovakia, and less than a year later when the German army marched into Poland and began World War II.

To this day heads of state do not carry furled umbrellas.

For years I thought I was the only one who remembered the world around me through images. Ask me about the piano lessons of my childhood and I am more likely to recall the crocus-strewn lawn outside the studio where I took my lessons than any piece of music that I so painfully memorized. Ask me about the years I spent swimming competitively and I am more likely to remember the elderly man stricken with polio who watched my team practice than the hours of repetitive laps that I swam.

As I remember the events of my life, so too do I remember the history of the larger world. I remember the unusual and the extraordinary, not the quotidian and familiar. "Important" global events, with negligible exceptions, have taken place outside my ability to witness them. So I have experienced those happenings in the same fashion as most people—I read about them in the paper or I watched them take place on television. Like most Americans my age and older I can tell you where I was when John F. Kennedy was shot, and I clearly remember sitting in front of the television that weekend for the funeral. Certain scenes fascinated me: I engraved in my mind the images of the boots placed backward in the horse's stirrups, the black veil which hid but didn't hide the grieving Jackie Kennedy's expression, the solemnity of the two children as they watched their father's cortege. Years later, when I studied the assassination, I was shocked to realize that Caroline Kennedy was my age—I had so successfully frozen my image of her at age 6 at her father's funeral.

It was only after college, while working as a graphic designer and then later as a photographer, that I began to realize I was not the only one who organized the world according to images. I began to appreciate the power of images and the near-absolute power of the right image. But it wasn't until I returned to graduate school and then began to teach in universities that I began to systematically investigate the media's ability, and even authority, to categorize the world by images.

Now I frequently travel around the country, giving lectures about how the nerican news media cover world affairs. In the course of my talks I refer to sev-ıl of the major incidents, disasters and wars of the last 30 years. And I have ınd that whether I am speaking in San Diego or in Boston my audience has a mmon recollection of these events—a recollection consisting not of personal, sthand memories but of memories strained from the media's coverage.

In some respects my audiences have a homogeneous method of gathering e news: People from California and Massachusetts alike tune in to the network :ws, read the national newsweeklies and receive wire service accounts in their ily papers. That homogeneity helps to account for the similarity of images :ople recall of international affairs. To a great extent the audiences I have lked to hold the same images of major world events. They might interpret ose images differently from one another, but to a surprising degree the original ıages are identical—they are the dramatic ones, the ones depicting violence, e ones prompting emotion. Through a mental inventory of these images it :comes evident that the public doesn't remember and the media rarely fix on e everyday affairs of other countries. Their meat and potatoes are the moments crisis: the fear of Ebola, the pathos of Ethiopia, the shock of Rabin's assassina-ɔn, the horror of death camps again in Europe. Such images have become ıternational news. Such images are what we, the American people, know of the st of the world.

Is crisis coverage really "image"-driven? What is the meaning and im-ɔrtance of our categorization of crises by images—by narrative images, photo-aphic images, video images? Why, despite the haunting nature of many of ıese images, do we seem to care less and less about the world around us?

I wrote this book to answer these questions.

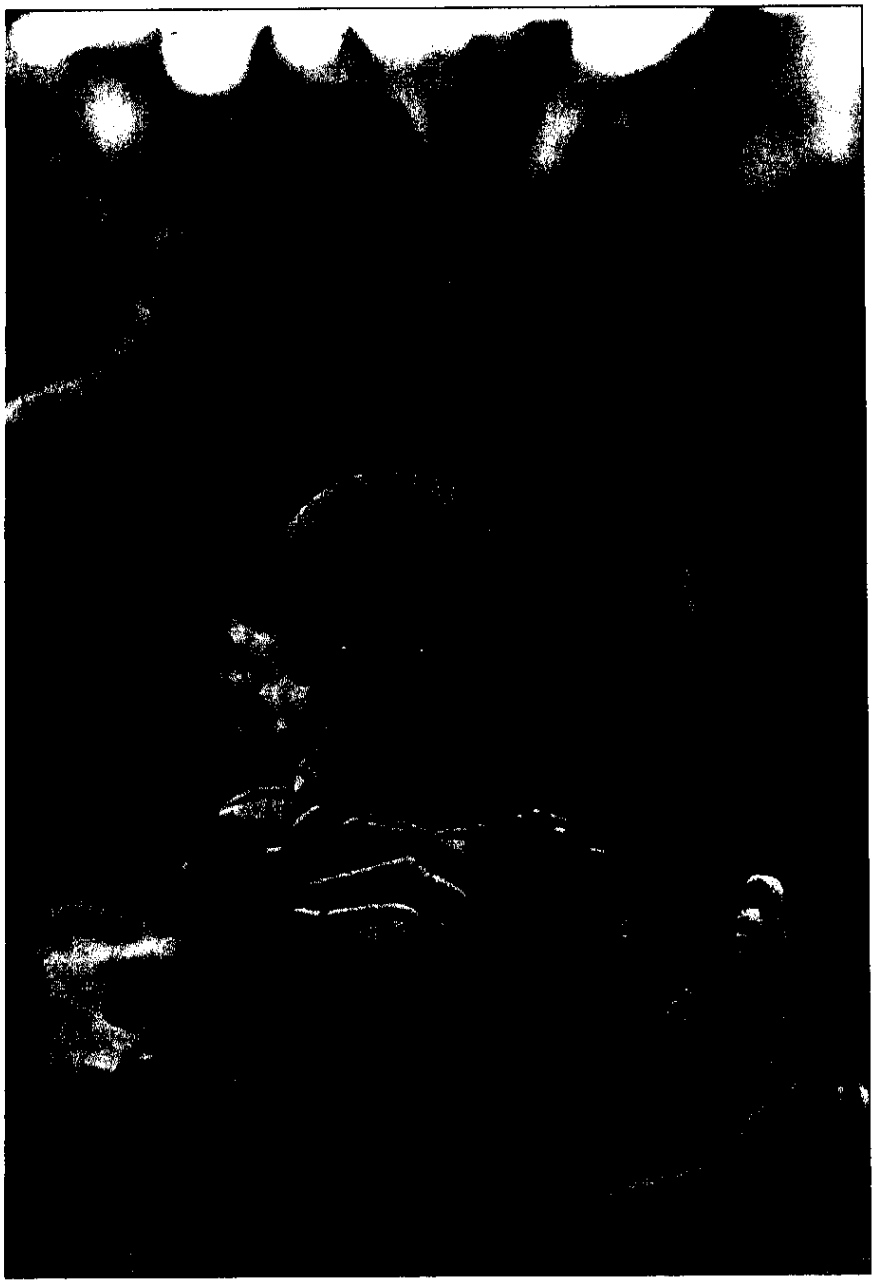
his work analyzes four sets of case studies, organized around the crises repre-ɛnted by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—pestilence, famine, death/ ssassination and war/genocide. These "Four Horsemen" chapters are the inves-gative backbone of this work. I spent a long, careful and even painful time lecting which crises should be included.

First, I tried to analyze recent case studies. Most are drawn from the 1990s—lthough some crises do date back into the 1980s. But further than that I did not o. Since 1980, changes in computer and satellite technologies, mergers and cquisitions among the media and the creation of institutions such as CNN and *JSA Today* have made it difficult, if not impossible, to extrapolate meaningful omparisons and conclusions across a longer period of time.

Second, I tried to choose those case studies that would illuminate certain key questions about the media's coverage of different regions of the world. Do the media cover crises in Europe in the same way as crises in Asia or Africa, for instance? I tried to select parallel troubles within the time frame I had set myself, in order to better gauge the validity of my theories. I was curious to determine, for example, whether all famines which take place in the developing world receive the same kind of attention. I was also interested to discover whether the assassination of Israel's head of state, for instance, received the same amount and style of coverage as the assassination of the head of state of Egypt—or of India and Pakistan for that matter. (My selection of parallel events, however, has led to one glaring omission among my list of case studies. I look at no crisis that occurred in the Western Hemisphere. And while I believe my conclusions hold across time and space, other scholars might well want to test my arguments by analyzing the media's coverage of crises in the Americas.)

In all cases I was especially motivated to investigate exactly how the media covered these particular events. Typically we, as media consumers, are so fixated on what the media are telling us that we don't stop to inquire how and why they are saying what they say and showing what they show. The method and manner of the media's coverage are effectively invisible. The meaning of the media's coverage of crises is rarely examined, but its import is incalculable—hence the imperativeness of studying and scrutinizing it.

At times in this work, I refer to the media as if they were a single entity. Of course, they are not. In my research for this book I have focused primarily on the U.S.-based media (a distinction that is increasingly hard to make, as news-sharing agreements, cooperatives and mergers make such definitions less meaningful). I have looked at CNN and the three major television networks: ABC, CBS and NBC; the three major newsweeklies: *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News & World Report*; the wire services: Associated Press and United Press International and, to a lesser extent, Reuters; and most of those major newspapers which support substantial foreign bureaus: *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The Miami Herald*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*. At times there is a uniformity of coverage among the television networks, the magazines and the newspapers. On other occasions the demands of the different kinds of media, as well as the different news managements, mandate extremely different coverage—in both style and content. How different that coverage is, is a major question addressed in the following chapters.



PETER TURNLEY

he Road to Hell," *Newsweek*, 21 September 1992
loral imperatives may soon take precedence: Starving orphan in the village of Wajid."

CHAPTER ONE

COMPASSION FATIGUE

1991 was a bad year. Disasters occurred all over the globe: Earthquakes in Soviet Georgia, Iran and Costa Rica killed hundreds and left tens of thousands homeless; a cholera epidemic in Peru killed more than a thousand and infected another 145,000; a cyclone in Bangladesh killed 138,000 and destroyed a million and a half homes; war in Iraq turned two million Kurds into refugees from Saddam Hussein and killed tens of thousands as they fled over the mountains; and famine and civil war in Africa killed hundreds of thousands and left 27 million at risk.

By early May, spokespeople for international organizations and the relief agencies had run out of hyperboles. "We have had an unprecedented spate of disasters," said Philip Johnston, president of CARE. "We're dealing with 15 of them at the moment." "The needs are overwhelming," said Al Panico, director of international relief for the American Red Cross. James Grant, executive director of UNICEF, said, "These are really the most severe set of problems one can remember coming at one time since the end of World War II." And Richard Walden, president of Operation USA, called the flare-up of global crises "biblical in proportion."[1]

The international organizations and the relief agencies were forced to practice institutional triage. The Red Cross workers who had experience with earthquakes were tied up aiding Kurdish refugees. Crates of medical supplies, especially intravenous solutions, had been shipped to fight the cholera in Peru, and so were unavailable to send to the cyclone victims in Bangladesh. Blankets and weatherproofing materials needed in Bangladesh had already gone to help the Kurds fleeing Iraq. And food, flashlights, water-purification tablets and water-storage containers were scattered too thinly between famine-stricken regions in Africa and earthquake zones in Central America, the Middle East and Central Asia. Tom Drahman, CARE's manager for Asia, said, "People that have been doing this for a long time are hard-pressed to recall a time in history

'here things have been so dramatic. It seems there is a disaster, not only of the 'eek, but of the day. It has to stretch (our) finite resources."[2]

Like emergency-room triage, triage of emergencies does not necessarily ıean that the sickest case gets the first and most help. Sometimes the sickest ase is the most hopeless case, and receives little more than a Band-Aid of are—just enough so the hemorrhaging is not embarrassing. In the spring of 991, the short-term calamities eclipsed the longer-term and ultimately more eadly disasters of famine and war. Americans viewed the damages caused by ıe cyclone and earthquakes as one-shot problems with specific solutions. And ıey felt guilty about the Kurdish refugee situation, remorseful that the United tates hadn't come to the aid of the rebellion. As a *New York Times* editorial put : "The plight of the Kurds has priority, since their exodus directly resulted from n American-led war against Iraq."[3] So the refugees and the cyclone and earthuake victims received an outpouring of attention and support. But the starving ı Africa, in numbers far greater than the victims of the earthquakes, cyclone, holera and Persian Gulf War combined, received relatively little political or ıedia attention until late in the summer of the following year.

With not "enough money, manpower or sympathy to go around," wrote *lewsweek*, fears for the displaced Kurds and concern for the fate of Bangladesh submerged an even deeper dilemma: the plight of sub–Saharan Africa . . . in 'hat Save the Children, a relief agency, calls, 'the worst famine in Africa in liv- ıg memory.'" "People worldwide must have the feeling of 'African famine gain?'" said Dr. Tatsuo Hayashi of the Japan International Volunteer Center. Donors are tired of repetitious events, and Sudan and Ethiopia are repetitious," ıid a CARE official in Nairobi. "Every time there's a famine in Africa . . . you an always count on somebody asking, 'Hey didn't they just do that last year?'"[4]

1991 was different than the halcyon years of the mid-1980s when African ımine relief was in vogue. In the eighties, Americans were able to focus on one ıternational catastrophe. A BBC videotape of skeletal Ethiopian children dying s the camera rolled aired on NBC in late October 1984 and galvanized public ⁄mpathy. The entertainment industry came onboard en masse with the global ookup of the Band Aid and Live Aid concerts. And the song "We Are the Vorld," recorded in 1985 by stars such as Michael Jackson, Harry Belafonte, Ste- ie Wonder and Bruce Springsteen, made famine relief the year's cause célèbre.

Six years later, news of African famine evoked a "been there, done that" atti- ıde. "For the most part," said *Newsweek* in May 1991, the famine in Africa "has ot captured the attention of the world press. Journalists already visited this 'agedy, during the sub-Saharan famine from 1984 to 1985 that took more than a ıillion lives. Rock stars threw benefit concerts to help raise almost $300 million in relief aid. That the problem has returned full force might seem a slap in the face of philanthropy."[5]

"Traditional donors, battered by so many appeals, are weary of pouring money into crises that never seem to go away," said reporter Elaine Sciolino in *The New York Times* that same month. "The result," she added, "is a discouragingly contagious compassion fatigue."[6]

It all started with an advertising campaign. We have all been cued by that famous series of ads by Save the Children. You can help this child or you can turn the page. The first time a reader sees the advertisement he is arrested by guilt. He may come close to actually sending money to the organization. The second time the reader sees the ad he may linger over the photograph, read the short paragraphs of copy and only then turn the page. The third time the reader sees the ad he typically turns the page without hesitation. The fourth time the reader sees the ad he may pause again over the photo and text, not to wallow in guilt, but to acknowledge with cynicism how the advertisement is crafted to manipulate readers like him—even if it is in a "good" cause. As the *Chicago Tribune*'s 1998 series investigating four international charities bluntly stated, "Child sponsorship is one of the most powerful and seductive philanthropic devices ever conceived."[7]

Most media consumers eventually get to the point where they turn the page. Because most of us do pass the advertisement by, its curse is on our heads. "Either you help or you turn away," stated one ad. "Whether she lives or dies, depends on what you do next." Turning away kills *this* child. We are responsible. "Because without your help, death will be this child's only relief."[8] In turning away we become culpable.

But we can't respond to every appeal. And so we've come to believe that we don't care. If we turn the page originally because we don't want to respond to what is in actuality a fund-raising appeal, although in the guise of a direct humanitarian plea, it becomes routine to thumb past the pages of news images showing wide-eyed children in distress.

We've got compassion fatigue, we say, as if we have involuntarily contracted some kind of disease that we're stuck with no matter what we might do.

But it's not just the tactics of the advocacy industry which are at fault in our succumbing to this affliction. After all, how often do we see one of their ads, anyway? . . . unless it's Christmastime and we're opening all our unsolicited mail.

It's the media that are at fault. How they typically cover crises helps us to feel overstimulated and bored all at once. Conventional wisdom says Americans have a short attention span. A parent would not accept that pronouncement on

:hild; she would step in to try to teach patience and the rewards of stick-to-veness. But the media are not parents. In this case they are more like the ighborhood kid who is the bad influence on the block. Is your attention span ort? Well then, let the media give you even more staccato bursts of news, ped and wired to feed your addiction. It is not that there's not good, comprensive, responsible reporting out there. There is. "Sometimes," said the late ı Yuenger, former foreign editor with the *Chicago Tribune*, "you put the news and people just aren't going to read it and you have to say the hell with it."[9] t that type of coverage is expensive as well as space- and time-consuming. It ely shows enough bang for the buck. So only a few elite media outlets empha-e such coverage, and even they frequently lapse into quick once-over report-; "We give you the world," yes, but in 15-second news briefs.

The print and broadcast media are part of the entertainment industry—an lustry that knows how to capture and hold the attention of its audience. "The ıre bizarre the story," admitted UPI foreign editor Bob Martin, "the more it's ng to get played."[10] With but a few exceptions, the media pay their way ough selling advertising, not selling the news. So the operating principle ınd much of the news business is to appeal to an audience—especially a ge audience—with attractive demographics for advertisers. Those relatively ' news outlets that consider international news to be of even remote interest heir target audiences try to make the world accessible. The point in covering ernational affairs is to make the world fascinating—or at least acceptably conient: "News you can use." "When we do the readership surveys, foreign news ays scores high," said Robert Kaiser, former managing editor of *The Washing-Post*. "People say they're interested and appreciate it, and I know they're lying I don't mind. It's fine. But I think it's an opportunity for people to claim to be ıewhat better citizens than they are."[11]

But in reality, they're bored. When problems in the news can't be easily or ckly solved—famine in Somalia, war in Bosnia, mass murder of the Kurds—ntion wanders off to the next news fashion. "What's hardest," said Yuenger, o sustain interest in a story like Bosnia, which a lot of people just don't want ear about." The media are alert to the first signs in their audience of the comsion fatigue "signal," that sign that the short attention span of the public is "If we've just been in Africa for three months," said CBS News foreign editor n Alter, "and somebody says, 'You think that's bad? You should see what's n in Niger,' well, it's going to be hard for me to go back. Everybody's Africa'd for the moment." As Milan Kundera wrote in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, "The bloody massacre in Bangladesh quickly covered over the memory ıe Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the assassination of Allende drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the war in the Sinai Desert made people forget Allende, the Cambodian massacre made people forget Sinai and so on and so forth, until ultimately everyone lets everything be forgotten."[12]

The causes of compassion fatigue are multiple. Sometimes there are just too many catastrophes happening at once. "I think it was the editor Harold Evans," said Bill Small, former president of NBC News and UPI, "who noted that a single copy of the [London] *Sunday Times* covers more happenings than an Englishman just a few hundred years ago could be expected to be exposed to in his entire lifetime."[13] In 1991, for instance, it was hard not to be overwhelmed by the plethora of disasters.

So compassion fatigue may simply work to pre-empt attention of "competing" events. Americans seem to have an appetite for only one crisis at a time. The phenomenon is so well-known that even political cartoonists make jokes about it, such as the frame drawn by Jeff Danziger of a newsroom with one old hack saying to someone on the phone: "Tajikistan? Sorry, we've already got an ethnic war story," and another old warhorse saying on another phone: "Sudan? Sorry we've already got a famine story."[14]

Even during "slower" disaster seasons, there is always a long laundry list of countries and peoples in upheaval. Many and perhaps most of the problems are not of the quick-fix variety—the send-in-the-blankets-and-vaccination-supplies-and-all-will-be-well emergencies. Most global problems are entrenched and long-lasting, rarely yielding to easy solutions available to individuals or even NGO and governmental authorities. "The same theme just dulls the psyche. For the reader, for the reporter writing it, for the editor reading it," said Bernard Gwertzman, former foreign editor at *The New York Times*.[15]

Tom Kent, international editor at the Associated Press, noted the same problem in covering ongoing crises. "Basically, in our coverage we cover things until there's not much new to say. And then we back off daily coverage and come back a week or a month later, but not day-to-day." He could tell, he said, when the sameness of the situation was drugging an audience into somnolence.

> We can certainly get a sense for the degree that people care about a story in the public. For example, when Bosnia started, people were calling up all the time for addresses of relief organizations and how we can help and all that. We did lists, and then requests dropped off. And in the first part of the Somalia story we heard "How can we help?" "How can we get money to these people?" We sent out the lists, then those calls dropped off. Either the people who wanted to contribute had all the information they needed, or there just wasn't

> anybody else who was interested. In Rwanda, we got practically no inquiries about how to help, although our stories certainly suggested there's as much misery in Rwanda as anywhere else.[16]

Sometimes to Americans, international problems just seem too permanent to yield to resolution. Sometimes even when problems flare out into crisis—by which point it is too late for the patch-'em-up response—the public is justified in believing that outside intervention will do little good . . . so what's the use in caring?

It's difficult for the media and their audience to sustain concern about individual crises over a period of months and maybe even years. Other more decisive—and short-term—events intervene, usurping attention, and meanwhile, little seems to change in the original scenario. There is a reciprocal circularity in the treatment of low-intensity crises: the droning "same-as-it-ever-was" coverage in the media causes the public to lose interest, and the media's perception that their audience has lost interest causes them to downscale their coverage, which causes the public to believe that the crisis is either over or is a lesser emergency and so on and so on.

Another, especially pernicious form of compassion fatigue can set in when a crisis seems too remote, not sufficiently connected to Americans' lives. Unless Americans are involved, unless a crisis comes close to home—either literally or figuratively—unless compelling images are available, preferably on TV, crises don't get attention, either from the media or their audience. Some of the public may turn the television off when they see sad reports from around the world, but unless the news is covered by the media, no one has an opportunity to decide whether to watch or not. "Thanks to the news media," noted *Newsweek*, "the face of grieving Kurdish refugees replaced the beaming smiles of victorious GIs." Publicity, *Newsweek* argued, "galvanized the public and forced the president's hand." In just two weeks, the Bush administration sent $188 million in relief to the Kurds.[17] It's a bit like that tree falling in the middle of the forest. If it falls and no one hears, it's like it never happened. The tree may lie on the forest floor for years, finally to rot away, without anyone ever realizing it once stood tall.

If the public doesn't know, or knowing can't relate in some explicit way to an event or issue, then it's off the radar. And that is the most devastating effect of compassion fatigue: no attention, no interest, no story. The lack of coverage of starvation in Africa in the spring of 1991, for instance—even though the famine was potentially more severe than the one in the mid-1980s—meant that there was no understanding of the crisis, no surge in donations and no public pressure on governments or international organizations to do something. Africa was not a

"headline event." Public response, humanitarian agencies believe, is in direct correlation to the publicity an event receives; the donor community depends on the media to spotlight the world's disasters. But the problem with famines, for example, is that they just aren't considered newsworthy until the dying begins. Before the massive die-off, relief agencies searched, said Joel Charney from Oxfam America in early May 1991, "to find a way to dramatize the situation in the Horn of Africa to the point where the media will begin to pay attention."[18]

Some crises are reflexively covered in the media. The media, print and broadcast alike, enthusiastically report on natural disasters, for example. These once-a-year or even once-in-a-lifetime events are in the "Wow! What a story!" category. When NBC anchor Tom Brokaw learned that one of the Yellowstone forest fires was near to an NBC correspondent who was about to do a live report near Old Faithful geyser, he exclaimed off-camera to the correspondent, "Holy shit!" The blood-pumping, adrenaline-high excitement is the reason many journalists are in the profession.[19] Crises are the stuff of myth and movies; they send a journalist's heart racing—and they also send everyone to the TV or newspaper to find out what is happening.

But much of journalism is repetitious—or at least seems that way. Turn on the news and you see crime stories, scandals, budget reports and even full-blown crises that all sound alike. Ironically, even though the uncertain outcome of a catastrophe is what makes it so compelling—both to report on and to consume as news—once the parameters of a news story have been established, the coverage lapses into formula. Mythic elements—the fearless doctor, the unwitting victim—will be emphasized, but they will fall into a pattern. Myths, after all, are stories. Some are heroic, some are tragic, most are predictable.

Formulaic coverage of similar types of crises make us feel that we really *have* seen this story before. We've seen the same pictures, heard about the same victims, heroes and villains, read the same morality play. Even the chronology of events is repeated: A potential crisis is on the horizon, the crisis erupts, the good guys rush in to save the victims but the villains remain to threaten the denouement. Only the unresolved ending makes the crisis narrative different from a Disney script where the protagonists live happily ever after. The dashing French doctors and American Marines rescued the starving brown child-victims in Somalia, for example, but the evil warlords stole away the chance for peace and prosperity. "Especially in America, we like to think of things in terms of good guys and bad guys," said Malcolm Browne, former foreign correspondent for AP, ABC and *The New York Times*. "If one of the partners in a conflict is one that most people can identify with as a good guy, then you've got a situation in which it's possi-

ble to root for the home team. That's what a lot of news is about. We love to see everything in terms of black and white, right and wrong, truths versus lies."[20]

By power of suggestion, the media so fix a conception in our minds that we cannot imagine the one thing without the other. "We do mislead," said Browne. "We have to use symbolism. Symbolism is a useful psychological tool, but it can be terribly misused. It can be misleading. It can lead to great cruelty and injustice, but all of those things are components of entertainment."[21] Once a story commands the attention of the media—or once the media deems a story worthy of attention—reporting styles, use of sources, choice of language and metaphor, selection of images and even the chronology of coverage all follow a similar agenda.

Other distortions occur. Sensationalized treatment of crises makes us feel that only the most extreme situations merit attention (although the media still self-censors the worst of the stories and images from crises—such as the most graphic pictures of those Kurds killed by Iraqi chemical weapons in Halabja or the photos of trophy bits of flesh and body parts flaunted by Somalis allied with Mohammed Farah Aidid). Dire portraits are painted through relentless images and emotional language. A crisis is represented as posing a grave risk, not only to humanity at large, but to Americans specifically. Unless a disease appears to be out of a Stephen King horror movie—unless it devours your body like the flesh-eating strep bacteria, consumes your brain like mad cow disease, or turns your insides to bloody slush like Ebola—it's hardly worth mentioning in print or on air.

It takes more and more dramatic coverage to elicit the same level of sympathy as the last catastrophe. "Can shocking pictures of suffering, which elicited so much charity in 1984, save those at risk in Africa and the Subcontinent this time?" asked *Newsweek* about the famine in 1991. "Images are stopgap measures, at best; and their repetition breeds indifference."[22] What is strong today may be weak tomorrow. Journalists want their coverage of crises to be a "page-turner," but frequently the public's response is to just "turn the page." Voilà. Compassion fatigue.

The Americanization of crises also plays into this proclivity. Americans are terribly preoccupied with themselves. The Americanization of events makes the public feel that the world subscribes, and must subscribe, to American cultural icons—and if it doesn't or can't it is not worth the bother, because clearly the natives are unworthy or the issue or event is. Media consumers are tied to a tether of cultural images. This is a fact well-known yet rarely acknowledged. Peoples in other countries know that when they use Western icons to help define their struggles the West pays greater attention. So the student democracy movement in Tiananmen Square made sure to carry their Statue of Liberty in front of the cameras and protesters outside an Indonesian courtroom sang the

civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome" while facing the microphones. Would our interest in those events have been as great without those signifiers? We draw historical parallels and make cultural connections between our world and that of the "other." The lone man defying the Chinese authorities by standing in front of the line of tanks was for us another Patrick Henry shouting, "Give me liberty or give me death." We take for granted the placards quoting Thomas Jefferson and Martin Luther King, Jr., which are written in English—but are carried by citizens of China or Croatia or Chechnya.

And when the natives of other countries haven't drawn our parallels for us, the American media suggests similarities. "I'm big on comparisons," said Karen Elliot House, president of Dow Jones International, the parent company of *The Wall Street Journal*. "I think most people want to know are we better or worse than Poland and why." The American filter, the notion of relevance to the United States, is very important. Since our knowledge about the lands outside our borders is minimal, even the abbreviated version of events which makes it into the news has to be translated for us. "Remember all these countries in Eastern Europe have been lost to American consciousness for 50 years," said *Wall Street Journal* former foreign correspondent Walter Mossberg. "In order to get people to understand why they should care about this, you do have to resort to historical analogies."[23]

Political scientists Richard Neustadt and Ernest May noted, in their book *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, that in "serious" situations decision makers refer to past events "in the form of analogy with someone speaking of the current situation as like some other." "The success of the Bush policy in equating Bosnia, in the public's mind, with Vietnam," commented Johanna Neuman, former foreign editor for *USA Today*, led to Clinton's "ambivalence" about involvement. "In the face of this political judgment not to intervene," Neuman said, "television pictures tugged at the public's heartstrings, but only briefly after each episode of violence. There was a half-life to public reaction, as talk about the marketplace massacre was soon replaced in television studios by analysis of the Nancy Kerrigan–Tonya Harding skating scandal."[24] The Kundera theorem of only one crisis at a time held, speeded by the use of historical precedent prompting Americans to an immediate political position—in this case a disinclination to get involved—and a disinclination to learn more.

Journalists, like the rest of us, see the world through the lens of their own culture. They, like we, can't much help it—but they could try harder to explain the world in its own terms. "Why do we have to constantly describe things in terms of American television shows?" criticized the late Karsten Prager, former managing editor of *Time International*. "Who gives a damn about the reference to Barney?"

Former *U.S. News* foreign editor John Walcott also admitted being wary of analogies, although using them himself on occasion. "I wrote one into a story a couple of weeks ago," he said in mid-1994, "where I was saying that Nelson Mandela was being called upon to be both George Washington and Abraham Lincoln to his own country. But that was merely a sort of tool for bringing home to Americans the enormity of his task and also something of his personality—because he has elements of both—to make you more familiar."[25] In this light, the assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin becomes the martyred Lincoln, the ill-fated Gandhi family becomes the ill-fated Kennedy clan and the debacle in Bosnia becomes either a quagmire like Vietnam—as President Bush suggested—a test of appeasement like Munich or a holocaust like the Nazis' Final Solution.

Of course, there is a peril for those journalists who use analogies to spark readers' and viewers' understanding of an event within the space of a sentence or two—beyond the danger of grossly oversimplifying the event. The journalists have to be fairly confident that their audience is familiar with the analogy—which is why, typically, only the most common references are used. As AP's Tom Kent put it, "I'm surprised that many readers know what Munich is. Somebody asked me the other day if we should write a story comparing the siege of Gorazde to Dien Bien Phu. Well, by the time you get through how they're not the same, you've already lost 1200 words." Historical analogies, said Kent, "are dangerous. I would much rather coach someone to say 'Bosnia is Munich' than to say it ourselves."[26]

The premium on news gathering is to select such details from an event as can give a reader a sense of identity with the topic. "Don't drive the reader away with great long gobs of dutiful background," said Yuenger. "Slip it into a story in a way that's natural and doesn't make the reader's head hurt." "Done right," Bill Small added, "it can be a tool to set the stage for important opinion-making. In television, without the space [that newspapers have], it is the only way to provide background." It is easier, faster and more provocative to weave those details together toward an end of creating arresting, if familiar images than of creating a complex and esoteric account. It is easier, faster and more provocative to say that Rabin is a martyr like Abraham Lincoln than to explain the intricacies of Rabin's history and the relationship of his government to Israeli society and the Palestinian peace process. "By reducing news to images in that way," said former foreign correspondent Malcolm Browne, "most of its important content and practically all of its thought is eliminated. And so news is no longer a tool for viewers and readers to reach important opinions about, it's a manipulative kind of operation."[27]

So, of course, we fall victim to compassion fatigue.

Crisis coverage is déjà vu all over again.

THE PRACTICE OF JOURNALISM AND COMPASSION FATIGUE

In mid-January 1991, during the first night of Operation Desert Storm against Iraq, millions tuned in to CNN as its reporters gave live accounts of the bombing of Baghdad. Said writer Peter Coffee, "The truth behind such catch phrases as 'small world' and 'global village' has rarely been as clearly shown."

But in the early morning hours that Thursday, one reporter's comments revealed how even cutting-edge satellite technology is limited by the human element. "I wish I could tell you what was happening in the other directions," the reporter said, as he described for the CNN audience the scene outside his window. "I wish we could find an extension cord for this phone."[28]

The audience listened to the technological miracle of live reporting from a hostile combat zone, but could only hear what the reporter said while tied to his tether of a phone cord. High technology has made the world smaller, but it has not made journalists omniscient.

We, the consumers of the American media, are also tied to the end of a too-short cord. Our cord is the media itself. What we know about the world is circumscribed by what the media are able to tell us—and choose to tell us—about the world. And their omissions, wrote *New York Times* columnist Max Frankel, have broad ramifications. "A shallow understanding of the world will damage the nation's sense of itself, its commerce and its standard of living and may blind it to even greater threats."[29]

Compassion fatigue ensures such a shallow understanding.

"Reporters love the word 'crisis,'" said Bernard Gwertzman, now editor of *The Times* on the web. But what makes a crisis? "I don't have a definition," Gwertzman said, "some things feel like a crisis and others don't."[30]

Stories traditionally are published or fronted or aired depending on the answers to a range of questions. *Timeliness*: Did the event just happen? *Proximity*: How close is the event, physically and psychologically? *Prominence*: How many people have some knowledge or interest in the subject? *Significance*: How many people will (potentially) be affected by the event? *Controversy*: Is there conflict or drama? *Novelty*: Is the event unusual? *Currency*: Is the event part of an ongoing issue? If not, should people know? *Emotional appeal*: Is there humor, sadness or a thrill? And when the medium is television, a final question looms: How good are the pictures?

How are those questions applied to international events? News values are not universal; they are culturally, politically and ideologically determined. According

to a 1996 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Americans pay close attention only to those news stories of "natural or man-made disasters and stories about wars and terrorism involving the United States or its citizens." The media, said one veteran foreign correspondent, is only interested in "earthquakes and revolution."[31]

A 1995 Pew study outlined the media's coverage of international affairs as the following:

1. 40 percent of international news stories have conflict or its "conditions" as "the direct driving event."
2. "Foreign events and disasters usually must be more dramatic and violent to compete successfully against national news."
3. One-third of all international stories are "essentially about the United States in the world, rather than about the world."
4. Certain regions and topics are under-reported: Africa and South Asia, Australia and the Pacific Islands, and agriculture, demographics and education.[32]

Many studies have also noted that events occurring in the United States' neighbors are also underreported. "It was Scotty Reston who once wrote," recalled Bill Small, "that Americans will do anything for Latin America except read about it." "The United States," said Gwertzman, "is traditionally isolationist, more than most countries. It doesn't take much to persuade our people that foreign affairs is a very secondary kind of story. Americans say 'Who cares?' It's a kind of know-nothingism, but it can be pretty powerful." Attempts to broaden the news menu—even slightly—have not met with success. For its 75th anniversary issue, *Time* magazine compiled a list of its ten worst-selling covers since 1980. They included: "Anguish Over Bosnia" (May 17, 1993), "Benjamin Netanyahu" (June 10, 1996), "Boris Yeltsin" (March 29, 1993) and "Somalia: Restoring Hope" (December 21, 1992). Only two foreign stories made the covers of *Time*'s best sellers of all time—the death of Princess Diana and the start of the Persian Gulf War. What foreign news sells, these statistics suggest, is dramatic moments, not thoughtful analysis. "For example," said the *Miami Herald*'s director of international operations, Mark Seibel, "the quintessential foreign *Miami Herald* story was the bombing of the Jewish center in Buenos Aires. Now, that plays to all our audiences. You've got a terrorist attack, the Jewish center, involving Latin America. You can't ask for a better story."[33]

Disasters, together with U.S. war and terrorism stories, are Americans' favorite news items.[34] "Armageddon is intrinsically entertaining," observed former foreign correspondent Malcolm Browne. "The book of Revelation is one of the most popular biblical ones." Violence—a "big bang"—trumps almost all other kinds of news. A CBS producer who covered the war in Lebanon in the early 1980s observed, "You've got a TV audience that's used to war movies. Real explosions have to look almost as good. There's almost a boredom factor." If the news isn't up to Hollywood caliber, indifference can steal in. Without snazzy production values, a war sparks no interest.[35]

It's not that the media—even editors and producers—typically lack imagination or initiative. But they do have a finite amount of money to spend on covering the news. For example, the three leading video news agencies (APTV, part of the Associated Press, Worldwide Television News, and the video division of Reuters) bitterly contest their market share, as the news organizations that use them are economizing by cutting back on the services they use. To boost their dominance, each of the agencies strives for the most dramatic pictures, with the result, said Mathias Eick, an African correspondent for Worldwide Television News, that "It is left to the people on the ground to decide what is worth the risk and what is not. I leave it to your imagination what happens if you say to your boss that an assignment's too risky, and your competitor gets the picture."[36] Of 23 Associated Press journalists killed on the job since 1876, six have died in the last five years—four of them photographers. The recent trends of crisis coverage and cost consciousness have meant that journalists—who are increasingly freelancers, with little institutional support—are having to put themselves in increasingly risky situations to get the images of violence that are compelling enough to shoulder the stories onto air or into print.

Not every story seemingly worthy of coverage will make the media's news budgets. For TV, it costs about two or three thousand dollars for a ten-minute satellite feed—double that if a network is sending pictures for both the morning and evening news. "Budgets make a difference," said ABC's Ted Koppel. "It would be nice to pretend that news organizations cover all major crises wherever they happen, whenever they happen, but we don't. We have only so many reporters, producers, camerapeople, only so much money to spend. Every new disaster that strikes is covered, not just on the basis of the story's importance but also on the basis of allocating resources."[37] "We do nothing that costs less than $10,000 when we move somewhere," said CBS's Allen Alter. "You just see the dollars flying out the window, and then when you need to go to a place like Iraq or Sarajevo, they say, 'Time's up, no more money.' So what do you do? It's a lot of prioritizing by me and other managers about is it worth it."

"The costs are very much a factor in the economy of the '90s, much more so than they were in the early '80s," continued Alter. "I think people in the news business, in the networks, in newspapers everywhere, . . . ten or so years ago—

before money- and belt-tightening and us and the other networks being taken over by real businessmen—used to say, 'Go do it, I don't care what it costs as long as it looks good.' And now it's: 'What does it cost? And I'll tell you if it's worthwhile, see how much I want to spend on that.'"[38]

In the spring of 1991, for example, news organizations were suffering from having spent so much money on covering the war in the Gulf. A conflict in which Americans are engaged absorbs all the dollars, time and space allotted for international affairs. "If there was a civil war in Chad and 50,000 troops got in there tomorrow," said Alter, "you can bet that tomorrow Chad would be on the front page and everybody would know a lot about Chad. And in Somalia, a country that had no running water and no electricity, we built the equivalent of three television stations there in a few days and everybody was transmitting live pictures from Mogadishu."[39] It's not the major stories that suffer in coverage, it's the midlevel crises that receive less attention because of all the money flowing to the one top item. As a result, the American public gets a less well-rounded portrait of international affairs.

Money is essential. Without the financial resources, there's no story. "We're very, very conscientious about how much stories cost," said ABC foreign editor (and former comptroller) Chuck Lustig. "We get daily rundowns about how much we spent today and how much we will spend tomorrow. We're very insistent on people, when doing story proposals, doing budgets. And the other thing is when we go places and do stories, we try to do more than one story while we're there—costbreaks." Still, many argue that the built-in waste and excesses at the networks rival that of the U.S. government. "Hell," said former CBS vice president Peter Herford, "they even exceed it."[40]

When deciding where or whether to go cover a story, location is another factor. How do the media choose which crises to cover? Crises are covered for political, strategic, commercial and historical considerations. But even when foreign editors think that there is news that needs to be covered, where it comes from makes a difference. "Somehow in the competitive marketplace for space within the paper," said Simon Li, foreign editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, "somebody sets the bar pretty high for stories from South America. Now maybe if we had a more brilliant reporter there, more stories would get in. But pragmatically, there doesn't seem to be that craving for stories from there. Try that in Israel—there'd be no question."[41] Yet newspapers do a better job than television at representing global diversity. Brookings Institution public policy expert Stephen Hess conducted a study of the media between 1989 and 1991 and discovered that newspapers reported from 144 countries (out of a possible 191 countries), and television reported from 79. Television's relentless focus on the Middle East

(5 percent of the world's population, 3 percent of its GDP, but 35 percent of the foreign dateline stories) helped skew the coverage away from other regions. Hess found that when he assessed the media's coverage in terms of population, it "grossly underrepresents Asia . . . and somewhat underrepresents Africa." Coverage of the Americas, he found, was relatively proportional and the Middle East and Europe were overrepresented. When he analyzed the coverage against the wealth of nations, "western Europe and Asia are underrepresented, eastern Europe and the Americas are in balance and Africa and the Middle East are overrepresented."[42]

Adding CNN to the picture changes it somewhat. Hess discovered in his study of television news in the last six months of 1992 that "CNN reported from almost twice as many countries (forty-one, as opposed to twenty-six on ABC, CBS, and NBC combined)." But he noted that "they covered the same subjects in about the same way."[43]

There are several tongue-in-cheek equations floating around that purport to formalize the business of deciding what crisis to cover. At the *Boston Globe*, "it was a figure of about 2.43 and divide the number of bodies from the miles to the Boston Common. I can't remember if it was the numerator or the denominator, but if it was over 2.43 it was a page-one story," joked former foreign correspondent Tom Palmer. You also had to put the GNP of the country into that formula. "For instance, if it's Japan, that cuts the mileage in half."[44] More simply, said Ted Koppel, "The closer to home that a crisis strikes, the more likely it is to get attention."

Location. Location. Location. "It's not so much the event as where it's happening," said the *Journal*'s diplomatic correspondent Robert Greenberger.[45] "I swear to you," said his colleague, Walt Mossberg, "this applies to all the newspapers, some more, some less. Is it a place Americans know about? Travel to? Have relatives in? Have business in? Is the military going there? You're not going to get on page one with something about Bangladesh nearly as much as you do with something about some country where your readers have some kind of connection."[46]

In the crisis-prone year of 1991, with little left in the till and with the cutting of television news division budgets, Koppel said, the networks, especially, couldn't afford to cover all the disasters that occurred far from home. So they chose chauvinistically. The media don't necessarily cover crises "on the basis of how many people are involved," said Koppel. The allocation of resources is decided on grounds other than the sheer number of those at risk. "It becomes a question of American involvement," said Koppel. "I would argue the reason we're focusing on [the Kurds] is that there are still a lot of Americans involved over there." National security interests and the direct involvement of Americans trump the numbers. "That's not only a political or economic reality, it's a human

one. We tend to care most about those closest to us, most like us. We care about those with whom we identify.

"One little girl trapped at the bottom of a Texas well had the entire nation holding its breath," he said at the start of a *Nightline* program. "The plight of Kurdish refugees in Iraq has at least engaged our interest. But millions starving in Africa, as many as 25 thousand drowned in Bangladesh, over 1,000 killed by cholera in Peru barely get our attention. Why?"[47]

Columnist Barbara Ehrenreich, of *Time* magazine, answered Koppel bluntly on the same show with a new factor. Race matters. "If there were a couple of million blond, blue-eyed people facing starvation somewhere, I think the media coverage would be so intense we'd know their names by this time. We'd see them as individuals." The *Chicago Tribune* led a 1990 article about Americans' lack of interest in foreign coverage with this anecdote: "At a gathering of Third World visitors here [in Washington, D.C.] recently, an African stood to ask a question of columnist James J. Kilpatrick. 'Why is it that American journalists don't care about my country?' the African asked. 'What country do you come from, sir?' Kilpatrick responded. 'Uganda,' the man answered. 'Why the hell should I care about Uganda?' said Kilpatrick, as diplomats around the room wheezed and struggled to catch their breaths."

"Unless Americans are involved in the story," the article continued, "the level of interest among many readers and most editors ranges from pale to pallid." But, the article concluded, "Their interest perks up a bit if there are pictures of some major calamity, bloody pictures. . . . Any foreign story without blood or Americans or both has a tough time."[48]

It is difficult to find news in the media about sub–Saharan Africa, for example, unless the United States is involved or something horrific has happened. It isn't called the "Dark Continent" for nothing. The newsroom truism goes: "One dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans." "There is a certain arbitrary number game we play," admitted Gwertzman from *The New York Times*. "How many have to get killed before it's news?"[49]

Much of the developing world used to have a better time of it, during the Cold War, when it could be viewed as part of the Communist–Free World chessboard. The Cold War turned even obscure international news into events in the national interest. Journalists covered the proxy wars that raged, ignited in part by the inherent instability of newly postcolonialist nations and fueled and sustained by the geopolitical objectives of the Americans and the Soviets. But now, in the absence of the communist bogeyman, how does the media relate national interest to events in remote locations? "Frequently," said Michael Getler, former

deputy managing editor at *The Post*, " that's done through the human factor."[51] Tom Kent from AP told of his experience with two similar Africa stories:

> We made a real commitment to the story of a huge ethnic killing in Burundi, but, due to distances, we could not get the kind of color in the writing and graphics that we got out of Rwanda. Tens of thousands of people were killed in Burundi, as they were in Rwanda. But in Rwanda we were able to get people to the scene and write it really well, and we got tons of play. In Burundi we got very little play. So the question is: Do Americans care about Africans getting killed? And the answer is: Depends on how you write it. . . . Have you ever picked up the *New Yorker*—an old *New Yorker*—and found a page and a half about how ball bearings are made, which you'd never read, but it's so well done that you're reading it? That's what we have to do with foreign news.[51]

In an absolute sense, coverage of the world has suffered since the fall of the Soviet Union. Arms control stories, for example, don't have the resonance they did during the Cold War and neither do stories about conflicts in the former "proxy" states of the United States and the U.S.S.R. Except for the "reflexive" kind of stories, the no-brainers that scream to be covered, the developing world is now largely ignored. "One of the things that I regret is that there are vast regions of the earth that we don't cover better," said Yuenger in 1994. "I should have devoted more time and energy to Third World thematic stories, and I'm trying to, I just haven't done that very well."[52]

In the post–Cold War era, journalists are now covering the news from an American perspective—not a U.S. versus Soviet perspective, although that perspective is more a function of what the home office is looking for than what the people in the field are finding. "That's part of the tension between the foreign correspondents and the editors and Washington staffs back here," said *The Wall Street Journal*'s Walt Mossberg, "because the foreign correspondents obviously tend to see more of the perspective of the country they're in and less of a narrow American perspective." Carroll Bogert, foreign correspondent (and former acting–foreign editor) at *Newsweek*, agreed that what was covered "has to do with the predilections of the editors in New York." How the decisions are made about what to cover is "a fairly flukey thing, I think," she said. "There was one editor who just for a long time had a thing about Yugoslavia. You know, it's a lot of messy ethnic things, and the editor felt Americans didn't know or care about Bosnia. And some editors find China tedious. Other times I think it's just quirks

of fate. Media watchers and others often see conspiracy, but it's not something that's deliciously complex. We just want to get the story out. There's a lot that's just accidental blundering and happenstance."[53]

Henry Grunwald, the former editor-in-chief of *Time* magazine and a former U.S. ambassador to Austria, wrote in the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs* that in the aftermath of the Cold War's certainties, the media is "searching for a different organizing principle—North-South tensions, religion versus secularism, nationalism versus internationalism." "To the extent that it can be done at all," he said, "it will take all the skills of reporting, writing and reasoning, plus a few tricks of the trade usually described under the heading of 'human interest.' That often means an appeal to terror and pity, the stuff of tragedy (and sensationalism)." Or what Yuenger called a "rich, red raw meat" kind of writing.[54]

"I think the entire profession is leaning toward the bring-it-down-to-the-man-in-the-street level, to the human level," said Juan Tamayo, former foreign editor at *The Miami Herald*. "We're heading into a period in which foreign reporting, which used to inform and educate, is now being asked to entertain," he continued. "How can we change our product to attract or keep our readers? And the answer is, give them entertaining stuff. Let's not bog them down with all this heavy crap, let's entertain them. We're not giving our readers news anymore. We're not giving them something to chew on. It's light. It's fluffy. It's crap."[55]

To fend off readers' compassion fatigue, sensationalism, formulaic coverage and references to American cultural icons often predominate over thoughtful, less reflexive reporting. As journalist Christopher Hitchens wrote in *Vanity Fair*, nearly all reporting on Africa is a pastiche of Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. "Until recently," observed African historian Roland Oliver, "there were at least the Cold War and the struggle against apartheid to provide some ongoing themes of continent-wide dimensions. Now, it seems that . . . we are presented only with civil war, famine and AIDS, with the same or similar pictures used over and over again. It is not that the scenes depicted are untrue. It is that they represent such a small part of the truth."[56]

Multiple academic studies have borne out this statement, observing that coverage of the South, especially the developing world, is even more likely to be sensational in nature than coverage of Northern and Western events. The image of Africa as "primitive" and "tribal," for example, persists in words and images—we can't seem to shake the mythic Africa, made famous by Stanley and Livingstone, Teddy Roosevelt and Edgar Rice Burroughs. Coverage of Africa still runs heavily to such topics as travel safaris and animals—*National Geographic*–style—or war, epidemics and famine.[57] Stories either emphasize the exotic or the crises. To check this, think of Rwanda. Recall how many stories

appeared on Rwanda before the recent genocide that didn't mention Dian Fossey's gorillas.

Too much harping on the same set of images, too much strident coverage with insufficient background and context, exhaust the public. "With Bosnia, I think," said Karen Elliot House of *The Wall Street Journal*, "I find *The Post* and *The Times* coverage extremely difficult to read. All of them to me are like reading chapter one over and over, or they're like opening a book in chapter 13. You don't know what came before and you don't know what comes next, you just know that it's like a movie stuck, or a record stuck. It just doesn't advance."[58]

And stories on television are worse—typically episodic and dramatic, giving the "who-what-where-when," but not the "how" or "why" of a foreign story. This is not only bad journalism, it's bad entertainment. As Franklin Roosevelt, the master player of the American psyche, observed, "Individual psychology cannot, because of human weakness, be attuned for long periods of time to a constant repetition of the highest note in the scale."[59] Undifferentiated mayhem leads to emotional overload.

But in fairness, this style of coverage is not always an active choice—it can be the result of the logistics of covering global news. Many problems of coverage stem from faults inherent in the news-gathering process. For example, lack of language training makes journalists dependent on translators and other intermediaries. As a rule, American correspondents do not speak the local languages of Africa and Asia—and even of much of Europe. And in some regions, their primary sources for leads—the local media—are often either unreliable or nonexistent. As a result, the correspondents become overly dependent both on government or other official sources for information, learning only the one side—the official spin—and on the pictures of the news events, which often depict seemingly self-explanatory violence.

Lack of a sufficient number of correspondents to adequately cover a region also hampers coverage. "TV has a smaller newsgathering staff overseas than the wire services (though both tend to rely heavily on stringers and news exchanges with foreign news organizations)," noted Bill Small. Partly, added former TV and wire service reporter Malcolm Browne, that is because the function of the television networks "is not so much to gather the news as to package it. The big TV news money goes for production, satellite communications, anchor salaries, transportation and hotel costs for the supporting crews and much more. . . . The TV correspondents themselves sometimes feel lost in the crowd."[60]

As news budgets tighten and bureaus abroad are shut down—especially in network television—foreign correspondents are forced to cover more and more

territory.[61] The "news net," the pattern of locations where full-time foreign correspondents are posted, often precludes—or at least makes difficult—the gathering of stories from regions and countries outside that net. "Today," wrote columnist Max Frankel, in late 1994, "each network pretends to 'cover' the world with seven or eight full-time correspondents; none of them breathe the air of South America and few ever tour Asia or Africa. For filler, they buy footage from foreign networks and part-timers. To be sure, when American troops are sent abroad and when the President sojourns at a colorful (or comfortable) foreign summit, the great anchors—Jennings, Rather and Brokaw—can be found reading the nightly news from a distant beach or rooftop. But their customarily swift return pronounces even those foreign stories instantly dead."[62]

"Are newspapers any better?" Frankel asked.

"Not many," he answered. "*USA Today*, which proclaims itself a model for the future, normally devotes more space to the United States weather map than to all foreign news." In 1994, *The New York Times* had around three dozen full-time correspondents abroad, the *Los Angeles Times* had almost that many, *The Washington Post* fielded two dozen as did *The Wall Street Journal* (not counting 60 or so on the staff of its European and Asian editions). *The Christian Science Monitor* and the *Chicago Tribune* each kept about a dozen reporters overseas. But add all these numbers together, noted Frankel, and the result is that "America's picture of the planet is painted by a total of only 400 American correspondents, including those from news magazines and wire services, plus a few hundred foreign nationals assisting them."[63]

As a result, no longer residents of all the countries they cover, journalists become parachutists jetting madly to regional crises, jumping into situations cold. This manner of covering the world is nothing new, it's just becoming more common in more places. Transportation and communication technology have made parachute journalism feasible now for television as well as print reporters—as long as a journalist is able to put in 18-hour days, reporting in one time zone while feeding stories to New York on another. "Technology has ruined the life of the foreign correspondent," bemoaned NBC reporter Richard Valeriani. Journalists can now spend more time getting to and from stories than actually backgrounding and covering them. The classic tale is told by Ken Auletta in his book about the three major networks: "Bill Stout of CBS was in Saigon and was urgently dispatched to Sydney, Australia, where the executive producer in New York wanted him immediately. 'Jesus, you know how far Sydney is from Saigon?' said Stout. 'It's an inch and a half on my map,' shouted back the producer."[64]

Parachutists are generalists, "trained in crisis, not countries," said former foreign editor Johanna Neuman, who should know. "They live for the anecdote that captures a sense of place." "Nobody hits the ground running like television reporters," said Steven Hess. "These people are brilliant for 72 hours. But tune in a week later and you realize how thin their understanding of the story is." This "fireman's" ability to fast-focus on an erupting crisis has abetted journalists' tendencies to lapse into formula, sensationalism and Americanized coverage. As foreign correspondents are chosen less for being regional experts than for being good writers and a quick study, the images they bring back—especially for television—are increasingly generic.[65]

The "generic" effect is accelerated when parachute TV journalism degenerates further into "voice-over" journalism. Cutbacks in the networks' budgets means that reporters are increasingly turning into packagers, narrating from New York or London over someone else's videotape. And when the tape comes, not from a foreign correspondent with the network but from a video wire service, former NBC executive Tom Wolzien said, "Nobody has the foggiest idea who made it or whether the pictures were staged." The correspondent doing the voice-over often has little background on the story and little personal knowledge of the situation. CBS correspondent Martha Teichner described her distress about doing voice-overs: "I was asked to do Somalia for the weekend news and I've never been to Somalia and I'm thinking, Oh my god, what am I gonna do? I get every bit of research I can find, but even if I'm correct and accurate, I'm superficial. And I don't want to be superficial."[66]

Photographer Susan Meiselas noted the same tendency in print journalism. Newspapers and magazines, she said, "would just as soon use a stock picture as send someone out to do any real reporting."[67] As a result, the marriage between a reporter's piece and the accompanying still images can be strained at best.

A third limitation to adequate reporting stems from a lack of access to an area—through government prohibitions or failures in transportation. The media are often handicapped by official restrictions on movement and coverage. "We can't get into Saudi Arabia on any active basis," said CBS's Allen Alter. "We try all the time, when there's any kind of military crisis in the Gulf, and the Saudis say ask the Pentagon, and the Pentagon says you have to ask the Saudis, and we never get anywhere, and soon the event is over. We can't get into Syria, except for Damascus, and they control it. You can't get into Iraq, except when they want to let you in."[68]

In Cambodia under Pol Pot, in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion, in South Africa during apartheid, in Israeli-occupied Gaza during the Intifada, in Sudan, in Tibet, in southeastern Turkey, visas into a country or access to a specific region are often denied to journalists. A study by media analyst William Adams, for example, found that "during the height of the worst massacre in

modern times, the networks' evening news coverage of Cambodia averaged only ten minutes a year. The carnage was virtually ignored until it was far too late to arouse world attention."[69] The Pol Pot regime refused to allow Western journalists to enter the country. The story could still have been reported from the outside using the testimony of those who had escaped the killing fields, but journalists were skeptical of the extraordinary reports from those few refugees who had fled across the border to Thailand. Journalists wanted either to see the conditions with their own eyes or to source the story with a "dispassionate" Western observer—such as a worker with a humanitarian agency. Barring those two possibilities, the story didn't get told.

The hostility of governments or rebel groups as well as problems of transportation and communication can make remote reporting a necessity. The genocidal fighting in Rwanda, for example, was more often covered from the more convenient refugee camps in friendly territories than from the war-torn country itself. But even when there's little danger, airline schedules and routings in certain parts of the world, such as Africa, are so minimal that it is often faster to travel from one neighboring capital city to another by way of Paris or London or Frankfurt. And once a journalist is ensconced in a country, it can often take days or weeks to travel around getting the story, occasionally out of touch with the home office during that time. Because news gathering for each story can take so long, other stories are consequently missed. Media critics Sanford Ungar and David Gergen told of the instance when a *Washington Post* reporter missed covering two attempted coups in African countries as a result of two weeks of incommunicado traveling with the Ethiopian rebel forces in Tigre.[70] As a result of such incidents, editors and producers are reluctant to agree to the time commitment necessary to cover events on the ground in remote locations. The consequence is that even major stories are covered at a distance, such as the reporting on famines and disasters in Africa from the European offices of aid or U.N. organizations.

The tyranny of numbers or money or geography or access may keep certain disasters effectively invisible. Relatively few people at risk of dying or dying in out-of-the-way locations where Americans have little or no security or business interests, or dying where journalists can't get visas or have to put their lives at risk may doom a disaster to obscurity. "If the story is a famine in the Sudan," said the late Lee Lescaze, former foreign editor at *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Post*, "I make the same callous decision that other people do, that who cares about the Sudan? It's not high on anyone's priority and it's an incredibly nasty place. You probably don't rush there. If it's that dangerous, it's not worth it. On the other hand, going to Sarajevo, that's worth it. You can get wounded or killed in Sarajevo, but at least it's a 'who's trying to kill you?' not some drunken guy floundering down the street."[71]

The most insidious of the reasons for minimalist reporting is the constant restriction of time and space. The world cannot really be covered in the 21 or 22 minutes of news broadcast in the networks' evening programs or in the hundred-odd pages of the newsweeklies or even in the thick wad of newsprint of the Sunday *New York Times*. Given newshole constraints, the stories most likely to disappear from news programs and newspapers are continuing international stories. "Ultimately, we're in the business of triage," admitted John Walcott when he was at *U.S. News*. "That's what I do, is triage, and so do my counterparts everywhere else."[72]

The finiteness of time and space in all three mediums—television, newspapers and newsmagazines—is exacerbated by the media's proclivity to feature domestic news, especially of an "entertaining" nature. The trend is especially prominent at the networks' flagship programs: ABC *World News Tonight*, CBS *Evening News* and NBC *Nightly News*, witness the fact that all three have had features with such names as "American Agenda," "Eye on America" and "The American Dream." According to *The Tyndall Report* which monitors the networks' news programming, in 1989, ABC, CBS and NBC collectively devoted 4,032 minutes to stories from correspondents posted at foreign bureaus. By 1995, that figure had declined to 1,991. ABC went from 1,397 to 784, CBS from 1,454 to 740 and NBC had the largest percentage drop, from 1,181 to 467. The *Report*'s content analysis of the three programs showed where the lost minutes were going. In 1995, for example, the Big Three spent 1,592 minutes on the O.J. Simpson murder trial, 418 minutes on the Oklahoma City bombing and 318 minutes on the war in Bosnia.[73]

By its nature, television is an instrument of simplicity. In a typical length story of a minute 20 seconds, a correspondent has at most 150 words to speak, or about a third to a half of a typewritten page. Even a story at double that length cannot provide much context or background. Television is essentially a headline service. The late Dick Salant, president of CBS News, measured Walter Cronkite's copy and discovered it added up to two columns of *The New York Times*. "Even my most cleverly written monologues never told more than half the story," admitted Malcolm Browne about his reporting for ABC from Vietnam. "And despite their factual accuracy, they didn't convey the sense and feel of reality; at root, they always smelled of greasepaint."[74]

It's not only that broadcast news stories are of necessity short, it's that news—especially international news—is often simplified by television's packaging of it. For example, there are "tell" stories, described by Allen Alter as "when the anchor tells it without pictures—when he's just doing ten seconds without pictures. 'In