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What is This?
Taking global crises in the news seriously: Notes from the dark side of globalization

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Abstract
From climate change to the war on terror, from financial meltdowns to forced migrations, from pandemics to world poverty and from humanitarian disasters to the denial of human rights, these and other global crises represent the dark side of our global age. They are spawned by it. When represented within today’s world news ecology such ‘global crises’ can also shape processes of globalization – deepening our sense of globality and, possibly, contributing to what Ulrich Beck’s discerns as a ‘cosmopolitan outlook’ (Beck, 2006). With too few exceptions, however, researchers have yet to theorize and examine today’s endemic, interpenetrating and proliferating global crises or their complex dependencies on the world’s news media and emergent forms of global journalism. This article elaborates on these claims and sets out the case for taking global crises seriously, both ontologically and epistemologically, and how they can variously become enacted within the complex flows and formations of global news.

Keywords
global crises, global journalism, globality, globalization, world news ecology

Introduction
Global crises are increasingly in the news. The recent world recession prompted by the collapse of the US sub-prime housing market and financial meltdown of major banking systems; new global pandemics – most recently Swine flu (H1N1) and, before that, Avian flu (H5N1) and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome); the emergence of transnational, ‘networked’, terrorism and its bigger deadly twin – the so-called global
‘war on terror’; the world food crisis that led to rioting in scores of cities around the world in 2008 exacerbating the plight of the 3 billion poor and hungry subsisting on two dollars or less a day; environmental despoliation and threats to biodiversity and, of course, climate change. These are just some of the global crises that have figured in the world’s news media across recent years.\(^1\)

Though crises and catastrophes with world-wide impacts are not of course historically unprecedented (consider, for example, the Wall Street crash of 1929, the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, World Wars I and II, the post-war nuclear arms race and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962), proliferating crises across recent decades are increasingly recognized as ‘global’ in origins and outcomes – and variously reported in such terms within the news media. It is here, in the world’s formations and flows of news, that diverse crises have variously become signalled, symbolized and spectacularized (or rendered silent), and for many of us this is where they are first encountered and become ‘known’. This speaks to an increasingly globalized world and also to the central position of the news media in the public constitution of global crises (Shaw, 1996) – in their processes of wider signification, cultural intensification and political mobilization and engagement.

Global crises are crises whose origins and outcomes cannot for the most part be confined inside the borders of particular nation states; rather, they are endemic to, enmeshed within, and potentially encompassing of today’s late-modern, capitalistic, world – a de-territorializing world that has become increasingly interconnected, interdependent and in flux, that is to say, globalized. Their impacts and tumultuous effects register through and beyond the porous borders of nation states and for the most part require cooperative responses from civil societies and systems of governance that are no less transnational in scope. They have yet to receive the concerted study and reflection that they require from scholars and researchers working in the fields of media, communications and journalism studies. Often eclipsed within general theorizing about globalization or inadvertently stripped of their global nature when approached through a research prism of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Beck, 2009), global crises in the news have yet to be taken seriously – both ontologically and epistemologically. Ontologically, as the disastrous and potentially catastrophic consequences of a globalized world, which, in their materiality and unfolding political responses can further extend and deepen processes of globalization (and growing sense of globality); but also epistemologically as the social constructions within media and knowledge that define and infuse meaning (and often fears) into the threats and challenges now emanating from the contemporary world (dis)order.

Notwithstanding current interest in and debates about the possible emergence of ‘global civil society’ (Kaldor, 2003; Keane, 2003), the ‘global public sphere’ (Castells, 2008; Frazer, 2007) or indeed the rise of ‘global journalism’ (de Beer and Merrill, 2004; Reese, 2001, 2008), scholars and students of media and journalism have yet, it seems, to concertededly examine how proliferating and interpenetrating global crises are now elaborated and enacted within the complex flows and formations of journalism around the globe and, importantly, with what further globalizing impacts. This article elaborates on these claims with the aim of helping to pave the way for a more concerted and comparative approach to the study of global crisis in the news, situated in a globalizing context.

It argues that researchers in the field of media and journalism, and more widely, need to begin to take global crises seriously, granting them increased theoretical recognition
in their thinking about processes of globalization and attending empirically to their complex articulations within and through today’s world news ecology. The challenges facing researchers today are not only how to conceptualize, theorize and empirically examine different global crises in the world of journalism, but also to think through how news reporting of global crises can enter into their constitution and thereby extend and/or intensify processes of global enmeshment and a growing sense of globality. Only then may we be able to better evaluate the news media’s possible contribution to the ‘cosmopolitan vision’ and ‘enforced enlightenment’ that Ulrich Beck discerns – like Michelangelo’s angels in marble – within the global interdependency crises of world risk society (Beck, 2006, 2009).

Beyond ‘crises’, ‘complex emergencies’ and ‘catastrophism’

Global crises can be conceived as: endemic, constantly emergent or even enduring critical events and threats that emanate from within today’s global (dis)order and that range across and interpenetrate within different realms of global interdependency. They constitute material and discursive sites for actions and responses that extend, exacerbate or intensify processes of global interconnection and, potentially, can deepen awareness of today’s globality. In today’s mediated and mediatized world their elaboration and enactment within the flows and formations of the world news ecology shapes their constitution and can also variously influence their subsequent course and conduct. Approached in these terms, global crises are far more than periodic, albeit geographically extensive, interruptions of social order; they are defining features of a ‘negatively globalized planet’ where all the most fundamental problems have become ‘globally originated and globally invigorated’ (Bauman, 2007: 25–26). Today’s global crises are also more multifarious and potentially encompassing than the inter-state rivalries examined in traditional international relations perspectives, and so too can they exhibit more complexity and exert more autonomy than traditional sociological conceptions of crisis whether construed in organic or revolutionary terms (Bottomore and Nisbet, 1979). Their global reach, interpenetrating complexity and truly catastrophic nature give rise, justifiably, to a new post-religious discourse of impending apocalyptic collapse, whether conceived, for example, in terms of the ‘global integral accident’ (Virilio, 2007) or ‘living in the end times’ (Žižek, 2010).

In earlier sociological, less globally encompassing, formulations the conceptualization of ‘crisis’ has either tended to marginalize and/or underestimate the active definitional, performative and cultural sense-making processes involved in their epistemological constitution – given their perceived basis deep within social reality; or, in social constructionist accounts, their preceding ontology is bracketed or even denied when emphasizing processes of discursive definition and elaboration, and cultural framing in language, discourse and media. Both these general theoretical orientations to crisis, however, prove deficient when simply extrapolated to the field of contemporary global crises. The former in that it: (1) reduces crises to the epiphenomena of latent and/or determining forces and therefore fails to pursue how crises can themselves become critical drivers in the furtherance of globalizing processes and global awareness; and (2) marginalizes how global crises become publicly constituted in and through communication flows and media. The latter, in that its preoccupation with processes of social
construction in language, discourse and media inevitably: (1) displaces from view the complex global interdependencies and enmeshments that precipitate proliferating global crisis in a globalizing world; and (2) under-recognizes how catastrophic global threats and disasters (both actual and potential) demand globally informed theorization that cannot be derived solely from a critical reading of the frames, narratives and discourses located in their media representation. The study of global crises and their constitution within the news requires, as discussed below, that questions of ontology and epistemology are now brought closer together and investigated in their mutual interpenetration.

It is helpful perhaps to distinguish global crises from ‘complex emergencies’, a concept that at first blush may appear to overlap with at least some global crises today. Coined in the post-Cold War period with its increased opportunity for humanitarian (and military) intervention in conflict-generated humanitarian disasters, the notion of complex emergencies represented an advance on the politically evacuated concept of ‘humanitarian emergency’. Here humanitarian crises that are linked with large-scale violent conflict – ‘civil war, ethnic cleansing and genocide’, became distinguishable from natural disasters or ‘disasters caused primarily by drought, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tidal waves or some other force of nature’ (Keen, 2008: 1), thereby pointing to some of the complex social and political relations involved. But, as we can detect in such statements, the definition and conceptualization of ‘complex emergency’ remains largely globally innocent.

Large-scale conflicts, for example, are rarely self-contained and self-sufficient but embroiled in changing global contexts, relations and interests. Today the latter impinge well beyond the conflict zone or even the surrounding region, and can inform the violence targeting civilians in ‘new wars’ and the ‘unending war’ that surrounds failed and failing states (Calhoun, 2004; Dillon and Reid, 2000; Duffield, 2001, 2007; Kaldor, 2006; Žižek, 2010). Famine and environmental forces are also frequently used to advance war aims, and the distinctions between inter-state wars and intra-state conflicts, as well as between political conflicts and natural disasters, now frequently bleed into each other. In these globally enmeshed ways, then, the conceptualization of ‘complex emergencies’ reads as out of global touch. The recent dramatic increase in so-called ‘natural disasters’ (Oxfam, 2007, 2009a) further points to the consequences of globally ‘socialized nature’ (Giddens, 1990), with anthropogenic climate change alongside other globalizing forces now contributing to ‘manufactured uncertainty’ (Beck, 1992) and ‘manufactured (in)security’ (Beck, 2009) around the globe. Water and food shortages, energy competition, forced migrations, exacerbated tribal conflicts, state human rights violations, as well as the global insecurity of transnational terrorism, global militarization and the ‘marginalization of the majority world’ (Abbott et al., 2006; Duffield, 2007; Kaldor, 2007) all globally exceed the regional and geo-political circumscriptions presumed by ‘complex emergencies’.

To focus on global crises should not therefore be simply dismissed as catastrophist thinking. It is to take proliferating, interpenetrating world crises situated in global context seriously. As Ulrich Beck observes, he has no desire to become the ‘Hieronymus Bosch of sociology’ but sets out ‘to develop the existing theory and sociology of risk’ in respect of global interdependency crises of environment, economy and terror (Beck, 2009: 19–20). Paul Virilio, theorist of the ‘global accident’, is equally clear: ‘Far from urging some “millenarian catastrophism” there is no question here of making a tragedy
out of an accident with the aim of scaring the hordes as the mass media so often do, but only finally of taking accidents seriously’ (Virilio, 2007: 11–12). Cleverly inverting Aristotle’s original notion of the accident as something outside of the essential characteristics of the substance, Virilio anticipates the ‘integral accident’ as the global threats and disasters prefigured in ‘Progress’ and which ‘is in danger of becoming, tomorrow or the day after, our sole habitat’ (Virilio, 2007: 11). Though we may want to question Virilio’s reductionist view of the media’s more complex articulations with global crises and publics, evidence for the ‘global accident’ (2007), Beck’s ‘global interdependency crises’ (2009), Bauman’s ‘globally originated and globally invigorated’ meta-problems (2007) and Žižek’s ‘living in the end times’ (2010) is now not difficult to find.

It is evidenced, for example, in the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports (IPCC, 2007) and the Global Humanitarian Forum’s calculations of 300 million people affected by climate change including 300,000 deaths each year (GHF, 2009); the United Nations’ analysis of the systemic failures of the global financial system and its devastating impact on the UN’s millennium goals (UN, 2009); Oxfam’s documentation of the alarming rise of weather-borne disasters (Oxfam, 2007); the World Health Organization’s documentation of the threat of global pandemics (WHO, 2007); and Amnesty International’s latest world audit of human rights abuses and their inter-linkage with these and other forms of world crises (Amnesty International, 2009). And yet, global crises feature unevenly at best within and across influential meta-narratives of globalization theory – arguably their natural theoretical home. If we are to grant global crises increased theoretical centrality within processes of globalization as well as in respect of processes of journalist mediation this needs to be revisited, and revised – this is discussed next.

From globalization to global crises

Key debates within the field of globalization theory have tended to polarize between those theorists who emphasize either multiple or mono-causalities, cultural homogeneity or heterogeneity, Western universalism or particularism, late modernity or post-modernity, and the global or the local (Appadurai, 1996; Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 1989; Held, 2004; Held and McGrew, 2003; Ritzer, 2007; Robertson, 1992; Urry, 2003; Waters, 2001). But most, at best, selectively or partially theorize the emergence of proliferating global crises in processes of globalization, and most ignore how these can become globally extended and enacted in and through contemporary news flows and with what further globalizing impacts (see e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2000; Harvey, 1989, 2003; Held and McGrew, 2003).

Influentially, of course, Anthony Giddens defined globalization as the ‘intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa’ (Giddens, 1990: 64) – a promising departure for the exploration of global crises. He also posited the ‘global intensity and extensity of risks’ as defining consequences of modernity including ‘nuclear war, ecological calamity, uncontainable population explosion, the collapse of global exchange, and other potential global catastrophes’ (Giddens, 1990: 125; 1994, 2002, 2005). But, disappointingly, he didn’t go on to develop these ideas in respect of processes of global crisis communication and mediation, preferring to observe more
generally how the news helps to sustain a distinctive phenomenology of modernity and its growing sense of ontological (in)security (Giddens, 1990: 137–144; for a critique see Tomlinson, 1994). John Urry’s thesis of ‘global complexity’ (Urry, 2003) also argues in a not dissimilar vein that ‘emergent systems of information and communication are the bases for increased reflexivity’ (2003: 139), but comments in passing only that, ‘collective global disasters are the key to the forming of such cosmopolitan global fluids’ or the capacity to live simultaneously in both the global and the local, the distant and the proximate, the universal and the particular (2003: 135; see also Albrow, 1996: 4).

It is the social theorist Ulrich Beck above all who puts global crises at the very core of his theoretical elaborations on the global age: ‘in a world of global crises and dangers produced by civilization’, he says, ‘the old differentiations between internal and external, national and international, us and them, lose their validity and a new cosmopolitan realism becomes essential to survival’ (Beck, 2006: 14). His fundamental theoretical position is stated as follows:

Some time in the not-too-distant past a qualitative transformation in the perception of social order took place. The latter was no longer perceived primarily in terms of conflict over the production and distribution of ‘goods’; rather it is the production and distribution of ‘bads’ that contradict the steering role claimed by the established institutions of the nation-state … The truly epoch-making difference consists in the expansion of culturally produced, interdependent insecurities and dangers, and the resulting dominance of the public perception of risk as staged by the mass media. (Beck, 2006: 22)

Beck’s recent emphasis on staging in world risk society (Beck, 2009) follows on from this central theoretical preoccupation with ‘risk’ (1992, 2000), which he defines as those human-made, incalculable, uninsurable threats and potential catastrophes that are anticipated but which often remain invisible and therefore dependent on how they become defined and contested in ‘knowledge’ and, importantly, therefore on how they are dramatized and visualized in the media. This positions not only global crises but also media centre stage, and offers one of the most theoretically ambitious and encompassing accounts of global crises to-date – with two caveats.

Beck’s central preoccupation with ‘risk’ as ‘social constructions and definitions’ (Beck, 2009: 30), like Giddens’ earlier emphasis on ‘low probability, high consequence risks’ (Giddens, 1990: 133), and also Virilio’s ‘immense expectation’ of the ‘Great Accident’ (Virilio, 2007: 38), has the effect of theoretically fixating on the ‘anticipated catastrophes’ of world society – whether unintended (economy, environment) or deliberate (terror). As he states, ‘The specific ontology of risk finds expression in the overcoming of the difference between reality and representation, where the key factor is the anticipation of the becoming real’ (Beck, 2009: 197–198). This approach forces us to address the discursive constructions of ‘risks’, premised on possible future catastrophes, but in consequence tends to theoretically eclipse the materiality of unfolding catastrophes and permanent emergencies in the world that now, in the destructive present, cast an indelible stain of inequality and inhumanity across the globe. For vast swathes of the world’s population they are not so much ‘living under the volcano’ of risk society (Beck, 1992) as desperately seeking to escape the daily flows of molten lava that decimate everyday lives and stunt life chances (differentially) around the globe. In other words,
global crises and catastrophes extant in the world today – endemic poverty, unending wars, climate change, environmental devastation, forced migration, HIV/AIDS – cannot adequately be addressed through an exclusive theoretical prism of risk and the anticipated catastrophes of world risk society.

Beck’s more recent work productively grants significance to the media in staging public perceptions of risk in the context of economic, terrorist and ecological interdependency crises (Beck, 2009), but his theoretical sweep rarely engages more directly with the mechanisms, determinants and dynamics of the contemporary media or exactly how and why they elaborate some global crises, and not others, with differing degrees of salience and sensationalism – or silence (Cottle, 1998, 2006; Hawkins, 2008). His faith in the media’s capacity to contribute to processes of ‘enforced enlightenment’, ‘globalized emotions’ and the dawning of a ‘cosmopolitan vision’ borne in part by mediated global crises or ‘cosmopolitan moments’ (Beck, 2006, 2009), are all suggestive, plausible even, but for the most part await systematic and comparative research of different global crises and their staging in the news media. So how central are global crises in the thinking and research horizons of journalism and media and communication studies?

Media and journalism studies: coming of global age?

The overarching research paradigms in international communications and global media studies have yet to position global crises more centrally and theoretically within their respective research horizons (Cottle, 2009a: 26–42). In the field of international communications, critical studies in political economy, for example, generally approach questions of ‘the global’ through a theoretical prism of geo-political dominance, transnational media corporations and market determinations. But to what extent political economy is able to theorize and explain how different global crises become reported through time, across different platforms, and with what further globalizing impacts and enmeshments, has yet to find concerted and systematic research.

In global media studies, research has sought to pursue questions of identity and citizenship in terms of transnational cultural flows, networks and the possible emergence of a ‘global public sphere’. Such ideas encourage us to consider to what extent and how global crises reporting may embed notions of global citizenship, cosmopolitanism and politics of cultural response (see Hannerz, 2004; Lull, 2007; Volkmer, 2002). Again, however, with few exceptions, scholars and researchers have rarely sought to operationalize such ideas in detailed and comparative empirical investigation of different global crises. The point here, then, is that these broad theoretical orientations, though both focused in respect of ‘globalization’ (whether conceived ideologically and economically in terms of Western hegemony, the expansionary logic of capitalism and processes of cultural commoditization, or in terms of the spatial-temporal reconfiguration of late modernity by world-wide communications, networks and cultural flows), have yet to recognize global crises more theoretically as critical drivers in ongoing processes of globalization and globality or examine their different and consequential media enactments unfolding over time.

Studies of global journalism and related professional practices, for their part, occupy a middle-space between these two overarching frameworks (e.g. de Beer and Merrill,
Drawing on sociological and ethnographic approaches to news organization and production practices and sensitized to the influence of new communication technologies and global delivery systems, theoretical and conceptual frameworks forged in the context of national journalism – gatekeeping, agenda-setting, elite indexing, news values, journalist ethnocentrism and so on – here become rehearsed and globally extended. But they have yet to engage with global crises and their news reporting through a more thoroughly globalized outlook.

A few scholars have gone further, problematizing the increasingly anachronistic distinctions between ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ news and entertaining the idea of the ‘global journalist’ and ‘global newsroom’ (Cohen et al., 1996; Hamilton and Jenner, 2004; Reese, 2001, 2008). But too often the term ‘global journalism’ simply serves as a catchall description or as a reference for the comparative discussion of different national media systems and associated national journalisms. Exceptionally, in this context, Peter Berglez (2008) points the way for a more thoroughly global and methodologically instructive approach for the analysis of global crisis reporting.

Global journalism, reasons Berglez, cannot simply be assumed to be news coverage with extensive geographical or global scope. ‘It is one thing to rapidly report news from all parts of the world (the CNN approach), he observes, ‘but it is something else entirely to journalistically explain and understand the world as a single place (the global outlook), and it is therefore not possible to say that CNN international is, in all cases, more global in its outlook than a national newspaper’ (2008: 248). The global outlook or epistemology of global journalism (often a matter of degree rather than an absolute category) is fundamentally about the extent to which journalism situates and explains news events in terms of their global interconnections, boundarylessness and mobility. Global journalism ‘is the form of journalism needed in times of globalization’ (2008: 855). Here sensitizing concepts of ‘global space’, ‘global powers’ and ‘global identities’ can all help in the analysis of how news stories become variously defined and configured in relation to the local, regional, national, foreign, international, transnational and global, and with what discursive consequences. How the ‘global’ features within and through news reports, and those pertaining to global crises particularly, demands concerted, comparative examination – and Berglez’s work helps point the way.

We also know, however, that the national outlook remains stubbornly implicated in news reporting of ‘the global’, whether through processes of story selection and salience or editorial frames and story inflections (Cohen et al., 1996; Clausen, 2003; Lee et al., 2005), and this orientation to the national is not confined to national news media alone.

**Beyond methodological nationalism?**

Methodological nationalism, the presumption that equates society with the nation state and which sees national societies as the conceptual and explanatory ‘containers’ of all that is of interest (Beck, 2006, 2009), continues to structure much of the work conducted within the fields of journalism and media and communication studies. Researchers continue to train their analytical sights on national media systems and nationally framed representations of crises and conflicts, even when these same crises are best understood and theorized in global context and in connection to the wider flows and formations of
today’s world news ecology. This is not an argument, then, for simply more comparative national research studies, but for the necessity to take both ‘global crises’ and the possibility of an emergent journalist ‘global outlook’ (Berglez, 2008) seriously – conceptually, theoretically, methodologically. Important studies of ‘race’ and migration, the global war on terror, climate change and ecology, pandemics or world recession, for example, all frequently become focused in relation to particular national contexts and national media, but few have sought to track and theorize these and other mediated global phenomena beyond the borders of particular nation states, and with reference to the wider flows, formations and interpenetrations of globalizing communications.

There are, of course, practical difficulties inhibiting the development of such a transnational and global methodology and, as we have heard, overarching theoretical traditions have yet to grant global crises increased centrality in their thinking about processes of media and globalization, even when focusing on global communication flows and world news formations. There is no denying, however, the seemingly stubborn national outlook that continues to orient much of the news media. This everyday banal nationalism (Billig, 1995), observed time and again across different areas of conflict and disaster reporting (Cottle, 2006, 2009a), assumes an ingrained and seemingly naturalized horizon for most national media outlets. So, for example, the rise of extreme weather events (floods, hurricanes, droughts, forest fires) around the world, though in aggregate a reliable index of the worsening effects of climate change (Oxfam, 2007), is globally dissimulated when reported through a national lens of ‘home’ disasters and focused in respect of the tragedy and trauma of local victims and/or the heroism of national emergency services. When disasters elsewhere are reported as ‘foreign’ news, so here too ‘our’ nationals are invariably sought out and typically represented as victims or saviours (Cottle and Nolan, 2007). And when major disasters are publicly defined as international humanitarian emergencies, so the ‘national’ invariably structures news and associated appeals through a binary of self-congratulating national benefactor and thankful, national supplicant.

In such instances, the critical antennae of media and journalism researchers need to become globally sensitized and critically attuned. We need to work harder in recovering those representational displacements and dissimulations, both spatial and temporal, that distance preceding global conditions and global interconnections – whether in respect of (un)natural disasters, pandemics, the war on terror or the latest tumultuous financial meltdown. The point here, then, is that if news media are structurally positioned and representationally oriented to the ‘national’, researchers will need to critically engage with these representations as well as their national circuits of production and consumption. But they also need to do so by stepping outside of an implicit methodological nationalism that delimits their critical gaze to the parameters of national definition set by the news media and their principal sources. How discourses of the transnational and global sometimes surface in and through national news now also warrants close examination (see Robertson 2010, Olausson 2011). This is not, then, following Beck, simply a question of either/or, of national or transnational, but both/and, of national and transnational (Beck, 2006: 62), of how global crises become recognized, represented and responded to in and through both old and new forms of news mediation and wider news ecology.

Some institutions, some issues, clearly, are more self-evidently global or transnational in nature or scope. But here too it seems there is a silence in the research field, with too few studies of journalism and international governance, journalism and international
law, journalism and the United Nations, journalism and human rights, journalism and forced migrations, journalism and ecology, journalism and poverty, journalism and energy, journalism and food and water insecurity, journalism and pandemics, journalism and humanitarian disasters—all theoretically conceived and methodologically approached transnationally and globally. While most of the above have received little, if any, research effort in such terms, others are confined to national case studies with their analytical sights focused exclusively on national media systems and representations. Some work in the field of media and communication scholarship today nonetheless proves highly relevant for a more concerted exploration of global crises and their enactment in the world of journalism; considered next.

From ‘global outlook’ to ‘global crisis enactments’

To study global crises in the news requires more than theorizing and analyzing how they become represented in the news and to what extent global interconnections and interdependencies become elaborated or cohere into a ‘global outlook’ or, alternatively, become ideologically distanced and dissimulated. If global crises both instantiate and contribute to processes of globalization, how the news media variously enter into their public elaboration and enactment can also variously extend, deepen and intensify their ramifications worldwide. Here questions of news staging and definition, of global news epistemology, interpenetrate within their ontology.

This is more than a renewed claim for a ‘CNN effect’, with its assertions of causality thought to run from scenes of human suffering to public outrage and foreign policy responses (Gilboa, 2005; Robinson, 2005). And it is also more than a generalized default position disposed to regard crises through a lens of globally extended moral panic, exaggerating threats, sensationalizing fears and serving hegemonic power and corporate projects world-wide. Virilio’s generalizing speculations, for example, on the synchronization of collective emotions and administration of fears through the ‘filmic acceleration’ and ‘televisual crush’ of disasters and cataclysms (Virilio, 2007: 26–27) simply will not do. It cannot do justice to the complexities and contingencies of how global crisis reporting now variously enters into the world of different crises. Three examples help make the point.

Sheldon Ungar’s work on the global bird flu pandemic documents how news media modulated their responses through, first, a stage of sounding the alarm amidst fearful claims-making, second a stage characterized by continuing threat but also incorporating messages of authority reassurance before, finally, third, resolving into a hot crisis and containment stage where efforts to undo the most fearful elements of the earlier reporting now came to the fore (Ungar, 2008). Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin also theorize a more complex media modulation in respect of discourses of terror (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2007). Here a crisis in media, they argue, generates simultaneously both media amplification and attempts to contain representations of threat. And recent work focused on the latest global financial crisis by Paula Chakravartty and John Downing also elicits the temporal articulation of media involvement in the unfolding crisis (Chakravartty and Downing, 2010). This discerns, for example, how the global financial meltdown was preceded in the media by a prevailing and de-politicized view
of homo economicus but was followed in the crisis aftermath by a mediated re-politicization of the financial sector. And digital communication systems, the authors argue, played an integral role in the informational telescoping of time in the global finance-scape throughout, both contributing to the crisis and evacuating the possibility for social and political reflexivity in respect of instantaneous, amoral, transactions (Chakravartty and Downing, 2010).

Generalizing claims, such as Virilio’s, then, can too quickly freeze ‘the political’ under a catchall rhetoric of fear and end up by essentializing not only media and publics but also global crises and media. The opportunity to explore and theorize the complex articulations between different crises as they unfold culturally and politically in today’s complex news ecology and in relation to political apparatuses and wider publics thereby becomes squandered. If the media’s contribution to global crises can be found to be more complex and politically contingent than the thesis of a direct amplification of fears in the service of hegemonic interests suggests, so too does the positioning of the news media’s contribution to global crises in terms of an increasing communications push toward a cosmopolitan outlook prove no less generalizing and empirically insecure. Martin Shaw’s earlier study of media performance in the first Gulf War helps to address some of the complexities and contingencies involved, both in respect of media-state and media-public interactions (Shaw, 1996).

One of the few serious attempts to theorize the constitutive role of media in global crises to date, Shaw’s study documents how the same Western media that largely supported the operation of state power in its reporting of the Iraq invasion, later moved to criticize those same governments and political leaders for allowing the humanitarian crisis that overtook the Kurds fleeing Saddam Hussein’s forces in the aftermath of the invasion. Evidently, media roles and performance are neither universally oriented to hegemonic state interests when confronting humanitarian catastrophe, nor humanitarian compassion in times of state prosecuted conflict and war. A number of studies further help to theorize this more variegated and dynamic relationship between national governments and mainstream news media, including Bennett’s indexing model (Bennett, 1990; Bennett et al., 2007), Hallin’s model of media spheres of consensus, legitimate controversy and deviance (1994), Wolfsfeld’s political contest model (1997) and Entman’s cascading model of media state relations (2004) as well as Robinson’s foreign-policy media-interaction model (Robinson, 2001). Such models prove instructive but they have yet to extend their geopolitical compass and concertedly examine and theorize the influence of today’s world news ecology and communication networks on different global crisis situations, or how these condition, inter alia, national and international state (re)actions, the actions of new social movements and transnational protests, or regional and transnational tiers of governance.

Recent studies of mediated disasters and spectacles of suffering help to move beyond generalizing assertions about the power of mediated events to sustain feelings of international solidarity and/or a cosmopolitan outlook (Beck, 2006). Notable here are those studies that have analytically dissected the complex layers of ‘compassion’ involved in processes of audience reception and begun to chart how actual audiences respond to mediated disasters occurring in different parts of the world (Höijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2008; Robertson, 2010). Cosmopolitan sentiments and feelings of compassion, it seems,
are far more than an index of news reports of disasters or simply a reflex to images of suffering. Responses involve meaningful negotiations between socially situated, culturally gendered and politically oriented readers/viewers and the established forms and professionally inscribed relational appeals of different news texts.

Lilie Chouliaraki’s work on the latter, for example, incisively dissects how different regimes of pity, encoded as ‘emergency’, ‘adventure’ and ‘ecstatic’ news, variously invite, or distance, an ethics of care and implied injunction to act (Chouliaraki, 2006). A study of the global visibility of suffering in transnational, satellite news further argues that the symbolic power of transnational broadcasting resides in its capacity to manage the visibility of suffering and that this largely reproduces the moral deficiencies of global inequality (Chouliaraki, 2008). Her analysis nonetheless also concludes that under some conditions, some satellite news stories ‘may be able to produce a sense of moral agency that transcends the West, thereby constituting cosmopolitan communities of emotion and action’ (Chouliaraki, 2008: 346). In such ways, a global outlook variously becomes encoded within established and emergent ways of telling and visualizing news of suffering.

This scholarly work on the shifting dynamics of media–state relations in times of conflict, and complexities of news responses and audience reception to distant suffering, clearly, has enormous import for a more concerted approach to the study of global crises and their media constitution. It also signals how news media can sometimes adopt a more championing or advocacy role in respect of different crises as well as becoming a conduit for the play of surrounding discourses and power in others. News media on occasion, then, are demonstrably doing more than representing a global outlook; they are performatively enacting it. Today’s complex of communication networks and world news ecology both facilitates and conditions these enactments of global crises and does so in at least three analytically distinguishable modalities of crisis reporting (Cottle, 2009a, 2009b).

First, the unprecedented global surveillance capacity of modern media systems and networks now enables ordinary citizens to both capture and communicate as well as bear witness to scenes of human suffering and atrocity from around the world. This has become profoundly implicated in wider, globalizing, discourses of human rights and struggles for citizenship and democracy. The global surveillance of inhumane acts communicated through news networks can fuel calls for humanitarian intervention backed up by military force (‘military humanism’) (Weiss, 2007) and legitimized in the UN’s doctrine of R2P (‘responsibility to protect’) (Evans, 2008). And new forms of global surveillance and their news mediation can also enter into the conduct of warfare through, for example, the transfer of risks to enemy combatants and civilians (‘collateral damage’) via high altitude bombing (following the vulnerability of elected leaders to an influx of images of military and human carnage fed directly into the national political arena) (Shaw, 2005; Tumber and Webster, 2006).

The recent increase in the lethal targeting of journalists and humanitarian workers prepared to report war atrocities may also, in part, be related to the increased surveillance capacity of the news media (Barnett and Weiss, 2008; CPJ, 2008). And, in a world of globalized media surveillance and internationally prosecuted human rights abuses (Ignatieff, 1998; Kaldor, 2007), the absence of news cameras in different conflict zones may even contribute to atrocities because the world’s news media aren’t there to witness it (Cottle, 2009a: 109–126; see also Serra, 2000). In such ways news surveillance profoundly enters
into and conditions processes of global crisis recognition and response. Today’s world news ecology, plugged into the internet and plied by citizen journalists (Allan, 2006), facilitates the new ‘civilian surge’ (Gowing, 2009), and new social media (Castells, 2009) further extend and deepen the historically unprecedented capacity for global surveillance. To what extent and how exactly this reconfigures relations of communication power in particular conflicts and crises (Allan and Thorsen, 2009; Castells, 2009; Thompson, 1995), and contributes possibly to a new moral imagination (Chouliaraki, 2010), demands detailed empirical explorations.

Second, global crises can also be enacted as global focusing events when infused by incoming international and transnational communication flows. In major disasters, for example, contending views and voices from around the world as well as local and national, can now turn a local or national disaster into a national political crisis or even, sometimes, a global opportunity to raise and pursue international political agendas – whether it be the United Nation’s castigation of the continuing denial of human rights in Burma following Hurricane Nargis in 2008, UN General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon’s world-publicized appeal for ‘global solidarity’ in the wake of the ‘global disaster’ of the Pakistan floods in 2010, or the cloud of nuclear mistrust that spread around the world following the meltdown at Fukushima in 2011. When the news media give vent to the voices of victims and others who charge authorities with incompetence, or when political leaders fail to perform with sufficient contrition on the news stage, disasters can also sometimes turn into political scandals and/or political opportunities for challenge and change.

Following Hurricane Katrina, for example, studies documented the profusion of views and sometimes dissenting voices in the news media – from the local to the global (Allan, 2006: 157–160; Durham, 2008; Robinson, 2009; Tierney et al., 2006). Noteworthy here were examples of world opinion voiced in the world’s press and re-circulated via the global internet platform, BBC World. Differing political views and projects from around the world interpreted and often castigated President George Bush and the United State’s woefully inadequate relief response to this home-grown disaster (Cottle, 2009a: 60–70) – and notwithstanding the national agenda-setting capability of the US elite press (Bennett et al., 2007). By such communication means, the disaster of Katrina became not only a national ‘focusing event’ (Tierney et al., 2006) but a ‘global focusing event’ that variously spotlighted systemic US racism and governmental incompetence; the failure of the Bush administration to sign up to the Kyoto accords; and the US’s culpability as one of the world’s leading contributors to climate change and, probably, increasing (un)natural disasters – including Katrina.

Third, a further general modality of global crisis enactment, also sustained by today’s global news networks and communication flows, periodically propels some global crises forward into the global public eye while culturally intensifying them as media-performed global spectacles. Following the release of the IPCC reports in 2007, for example, much of the Western mainstream news media recognized, albeit belatedly and contrary to a powerful lobby of climate change sceptics, the reality of global warming, and set about visualizing and dramatizing its dangers and current impacts (Cottle, 2009a: 71–91). They did so in crafted and sometimes powerful and affecting forms of journalism, visualizing the impacts of climate change on both environments and communities around the world (Lester and Cottle, 2009; Nash, 2007). In such culturally resonate ways, the impinging realities of
climate change, hitherto largely invisible or contained in the expert discourses of science and politics, became symbolized, visualized and dramatized and, for a political moment at least, turned into a high-profile, ‘knowable’ and, potentially, actionable global crisis.

None of this is to suggest that any particular crisis will only register as a global crisis in and through one or other of these general modalities of global surveillance, discursive contention or mediatized spectacle. Global crises, when reported in the news, can become infused by all three, sometimes simultaneously or when narrativized across time. These analytical distinctions nonetheless serve to draw attention to how today’s global communication flows and news networks infuse modalities of global news reporting and how each can also implicitly challenge authorities and others who would wish to contain news flows inside their own national borders or confine them to preferred news agendas (Gowing, 2009; McNair, 2006). In these and other ways, today’s news media and wider news ecology are not simply communicating or conveying crises or even, sometimes, representing a global outlook. They are variously entering into their course and conduct, furthering processes of globalization and contributing to a sense of globality. The complexities and contingencies of these global crisis enactments, however, have barely begun to be recognized and theorized in terms of comparative, sustained investigations. The disparate studies referenced above have much to contribute to this necessary project.

Conclusion

Taking global crises and global journalism seriously is not a situation of one size fits all. Different crises and their complex articulations with and interpenetrations by the fast-changing world of journalism demand detailed, comparative and sustained empirical study – and careful theorization. We need to concertedly pursue how flows and formations of news within a globalized world variously and complexly enter into the constitution of crises, shaping them from the outside in, and inside out, and conditioning their unfolding trajectory. Given the proliferating nature of global crises in the world today, their complex enmeshment and contingent dynamics and, also, their interpenetrating nature, we cannot presume a simple global crisis trajectory, much less news-mediated teleology. But the news media nonetheless powerfully enter into different global crises today and they can do so, as we have heard, in different, changing and consequential ways. We cannot presume, nonetheless, that forms of global crisis reporting will necessarily sustain a ‘global public sphere’ or instantiate ‘global civil society’.

As Nancy Frazer (2007) eloquently reminds us, transnational manifestations of public opinion and political will, as yet, have no formal citizenship status or comparable means of influencing corresponding levels of governance. The easy presumption of an existing global public sphere thus falls short both in terms of normative legitimacy and political efficacy – two defining characteristics of original public sphere theory. Even so, we should not under-estimate the potential influence of today’s nascent global civil society or transnational movements for global change (Cottle and Lester, 2010), nor the cognitive and cultural support they may sustain from news-mediated reports of global crises. How different global crises become elaborated and engaged through the world’s media formations and communication flows – including, centrally, its evolving world news
ecology – may yet play a powerful role in Ulrich Beck’s discerned processes of ‘enforced enlightenment’, and even, on occasion, in the development of a ‘cosmopolitan vision’ (Beck, 2006, 2009). When reported in and through the world’s news media, global crises become not simply the expressions of a negatively inflected planet but, potentially, critical drivers intervening within today’s globality. They warrant increased theoretical recognition and concerted research by today’s media and journalism scholars.

Note

1. Inter-state political rivalries and the world’s current political ‘trouble-spots’ are also often construed as ‘global crises’, especially when threatening to escalate into regional conflicts and/or embroiling multiple state powers. Indeed, it is such international political crises that have been taken to exemplify ‘global crises’ in the field of international relations in the past. But global crises today, as discussed, are not delimited to or always best conceptualized in such terms (see e.g. Abbott et al., 2006; Amnesty International, 2009; Boyd-Barrett, 2005; Energy Watch Group, 2007; Glenn and Gordon, 2007; Held 2004; Held et al., 2010; IISS, 2007; Lomborg, 2009; Lull 2007; Nohrstedt, 2010; Oxfam, 2009a, 2009b; Seitz, 2008; Shaw, 1996; UN, 2009; UNEP, 2007; WHO, 2007).

References


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