

9

Selling the lottery to earn salvation: Journalism practice, risk and humanitarian communication

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Regarding the need of an effective humanitarian communication that can politically assist mobilisation and public engagement, many scholarly works have focused upon the ability of the news media to create regimes of pity in order to mobilise the public towards humanitarian causes.¹ Some authors have gone further to say that audiences are passive and uninterested, sometimes the media have to stand in for them, and agitate on their behalf.² The key argument of those who advocate for these regimes is that they enable empathy and solidarity by means of emotions.

However, pity has been subject to criticism by some authors.³ Philosophers of a Nietzschean strand, for example, believe that pity is in fact a corrosive emotion, deeply inculcated in our culture by Judaism and Christianity and more recently shared by socialist ideologies.⁴ In their view, pity is not a proper way to promote others' wellbeing, in as much as it diminishes the other person's potential for self-reliance. To a certain extent, we tend to agree with this stance as in our view these regimes of pity tend to obviate, all too often, the power relations between those who suffer and the spectators.⁵

In this context, charity events promoted as 'media events' have become spectacles in themselves (e.g. concerts such as Live Aid, in 1985), and although they may serve the public good in the short term – i.e. by raising funds for a particular campaign – in the long term they actually contribute to further detachment from moral concerns.⁶ Moreover, such events contribute to shape what philosopher Guy Debord called the 'spectacle society'; this to the point that victims of suffering become themselves objects of entertainment.⁷ To put it bluntly, these charity actions give 'black' children in Africa their fifteen minutes of fame while reassuring once again the quasi-messianic role of the 'white man's burden' in the international system by means of international aid.⁸

What is needed instead, as we argue here, is a type of news coverage that creates a specific type of political solidarity. One which makes individuals at both sides of the screens see each other as equals and as having the same rights and which does not reproduce the same type of power relations that have been prevalent until now

in most news narratives and humanitarian campaigns. In order to achieve this, journalism practice requires to set aside the sense of power and certainty that articulates in its news narratives and adopt instead a view of 'shared risk' in which people embrace equally concerns about a common future, therefore calling into play the principle of average utility.⁹ Our thesis is that by doing this, 'risk' could be journalistically narrativised as a more rational process in our daily lives rather than just be assumed in terms of irrational 'fear'. One which advances a shared view of society that is equally empathetic to challenges such as poverty and environment.

To us this is possible because the notion of societal risk tends to create the type of collective uncertainty that brings about political action in ways that pity regimes do not. In other words, individuals who do not know what their position in society might be in the future are more willing to undertake the type of actions that will address the underlining collective issues that affect our society. In relation to this, Pierre Rosanvallon has pointed out that in times of uncertainty 'we all become equals'.¹⁰ By this he suggests that individuals are more willing to subordinate their individual aims and aspirations, and make sacrifices, if they perceive that what it is in play could also affect them both as an individual and as a community.¹¹

This is not only a theoretical assumption. In fact, some audience research has showed that in news beats such as the environment, the notion of collective risk is able to trigger political action amongst larger segments of society than other issues of public concern.¹² This because the notion of risk is closely linked to vulnerability and therefore if articulated properly it conveys a real possibility that could affect anyone as an individual regardless of their current social status. In those cases, as this body of research indicates, there is a greater chance that people might be willing to engage and sacrifice individual prerogatives, go against individual interests and support collective responses towards reducing the risks posed to them.

In order to explain how this notion of risk could be incorporated into journalism practice, we need however to first explain the link between collective risk and individual action in the context of social vulnerability. In this sense, the late philosopher John Rawls pointed out that when the parties are deprived of all knowledge of their personal characteristics and social and historical circumstances, their conception of justice becomes one that advances their interests in establishing better conditions for all. Rawls contends that the most rational choice for the parties in the original position are two principles of justice: The first principle guarantees the equal basic rights and liberties needed to secure the fundamental interests of free and equal citizens and to pursue a wide range of conceptions of the good. The second principle provides fair equality of opportunities and it secures for all a guaranteed minimum of all-purpose means. In other words, according to this principle if 'I', as an individual, ignore the situation I will be in danger in the near future. Consequently, 'I' am more inclined to opt for a more redistributive social welfare policy because it could be the case that 'I' will need to make use of it at some point in the face of the uncertainty around my own circumstances.

It is by no means absolutely clear, however, how we should understand 'equality of opportunities' in this context, and what policies can ensure it. At some basic level, 'equality of opportunities' implies equality in terms of the law, something that was widely debated amongst different factions during the French Revolution.¹³ Indeed, liberal doctrines, such as those embedded in the constitution of the United States and which have been so influential in shaping modern journalism, frequently proclaim 'all men are created equal'. In that tradition what this means is that no citizen shall be above the law, and that every citizen must get the same legal treatment.

Yet, there is no philosophical agreement as to what comes next. Egalitarians of a stronger bent believe that equality before the law is not just enough. Communists, for example, believe that, as long as there is no equality of outcomes, society will be unjust.¹⁴ In this view, everyone shall end the race, so to speak, without winners or losers. Other voices, however, prefer an intermediate approach. For them, equality of outcome is not desirable, for the simple fact that it is not fair. According to this tradition, some people do make a greater effort than others, and thus, do deserve more. They argue that equality of outcomes takes away motivation and incentives for further production, and thus, will end up hindering the total utility measure. It is precisely for this reason that Rawls did not endorse socialism or communism. Such systems of wealth distribution, end up affecting negatively even the least well-off in society. There must be winners and losers; otherwise, no one will have incentives to keep running according to Rawls.¹⁵

Nevertheless, those moderated philosophers who reject equality of outcomes, would nevertheless uphold some form of wealth redistribution in order to ensure equality of opportunities. For them, the race was not fair from the start. Some runners had initially greater obstacles than others. And thus, in order to make it truly fair, these philosophers believe that some sort of wealth redistribution is necessary, in order to correct the initial disadvantages of the least well-off. For them, the institution of inheritance, for example, invites a lot of reflection about its fairness. Do inheritors deserve what they get? Is it not an additional, undeserved advantage that erodes equality of opportunity? And yet, other philosophers believe that even if, indeed, there are plenty of injustices in the world, there is not much that we can do about it, because interventions would imply a great violation of individual rights. Nozick, an example of this school of thought and who extensively debated with Rawls about these matters, challenged this point of view.¹⁶ He invited us to think about the injustice in the face of millions of people with defective kidneys, something they could not foresee or plan for. Does that warrant some sort of forced kidney redistribution in order to ensure a stronger equality of opportunities? Others, such as Sowell, reinforced this critique by arguing that the nation state can attempt to correct some social injustices, but it must renounce its attempts to pursue cosmic justice.¹⁷

This particular debate, we find, is crucial in addressing the transformations and changes that are taking place in the realm of humanitarian communication.

Particularly because they help explain the current tensions between journalistic narratives that emphasise palliative measures and more radical narratives around structural change, which in many ways reflect these debates. While journalism covering suffering normatively advocates for assistance and equal opportunities it nevertheless also tends to suggest that cosmic justice is unviable. That issues such as corruption, lack of institutional framework and 'civilised' political engagement in these societies are not only the root causes of the problems they face but also endemic to them. These philosophical debates also underpin another very important tension between those who see journalism as a neutral player that presents the facts to the public so they can make their own mind and those who see journalism advocating for certain causes. This is of course a false dichotomy as in both cases the ultimate goal of journalists is to achieve social justice despite normative claims of neutrality.¹⁸ This tension is also present between journalists advocating for equality of outcomes and those advocating for equality of opportunities. In the context of humanitarian communication there should be no doubt; journalism is normatively committed to helping those who suffer. The weight of each of these tensions is however not equal and some are far more influential than others in shaping the news. All this in addition to, as we will discuss later, important tensions between journalism and humanitarian communication as social practices.

Overall, the dominant journalism narrativisation of humanitarian crisis is one that is currently interlocked with a rationale which assumes that if it exposes tragedy, then individuals would be more willing to donate as it sees pity as conducive to empathy and solidarity.¹⁹ After all, it appeals to the moral and ethical understanding that those who suffer will be assisted by those who are better off because pity will make them 'feel' a moral responsibility to do so. Hence, it is expected that in light of suffering, people will engage and act towards their fellow citizens as soon as this suffering is exposed on their screens.²⁰

However, it is far from clear if, in fact, the exposure to deep suffering does indeed lead to greater moral concern for the wellbeing of others or triggers political action.²¹ Furthermore, the problem is that this approach assumes that these values are universally shared, something that is also far from certain. This approach also has the problem that it assumes that journalists are intentionally seeking to promote this type of empathetic link between audiences and those suffering as part of their deontological practice, which again is not certain in all cases. Hence, we are left with a theoretical explanatory framework of why and how journalists narrativise suffering, which is mostly based on assumptions around normative claims and ethical aspirations that are far from universal.

Moving forward

However, our aim in this chapter is not to explain motivation and agency of the current journalism narrativisation of suffering, which in fact has been diligently

and comprehensively discussed by a series of authors.²² Instead, we want to articulate an alternative to it, in ways in which journalism could realistically, within its deontological constraints, contribute to addressing the structural problems that cause this suffering in the first place. Our thesis here is that by changing the terms of this narrativisation, journalists could still inform their publics in ways that it would make it more clear to them what that suffering means and how it links to them as individuals.

At the centre of this proposal we argue for the need to incorporate the notion of risk. By this we mean that it is possible and desirable for journalists to link the notion of the principle of average utility exposed by Rawls, given that the 'the veil of ignorance' would insure impartiality of the audiences' judgement towards those in need, making them more willing to participate and engage with collective responses. Indeed, we believe that if journalism that covers human tragedy can articulate their stories within a framework that somehow manages to bring about uncertainty in the perspective of their audiences it could achieve a far more effective type of empathy; one that can be better placed to mobilise towards solidarity. Consequently, journalism, as a professional body, could then contest not only the utilitarian ethics that currently dominates humanitarian news but also overcome the restrictions imposed by the normative claims that it is there just to inform about tragedy.

Yet, in order to advance a new type of humanitarian narrative, journalists will need to re-interpret their contractual relation with society. This means revisiting the social arrangements in which they are allowed to operate semi-protected by society in exchange for performing the duty of keeping the democratic citizenship well informed in an 'objective' and 'balanced' manner. Hence, the question remains: How can journalists incorporate the notions of risk in their stories so as to foster public engagement and solidarity? Answering this question is made more difficult by the imperatives imposed by traditional news values such as that of objectivity/neutrality/detachment and by other elements related to the process of news production such as the structure that journalists commonly use to articulate news stories. The possible answer is further complicated by the emergence of a new technological landscape that in itself poses important challenges. Conversely, if we are able to provide a sound answer to this question, one that can translate into political action within the journalism profession, then we could help solve one of the key problems facing both journalists and activists working in the humanitarian field.

The problem is that Western journalism deontology relies heavily on the strand of ethical thought that promotes the idea that ethics does not need any measure of empathy. Journalism deontological ethicists advance the claim that moral action is to be performed on account of duty, regardless of how we feel about it. Accordingly, it is claimed, it is our imperative to help others in need, irrespective of whether or not we feel other people's sufferings. Furthermore, if we are motivated to help others, not on account of duty, but rather, because we feel their own pain, we would be acting immorally. This approach, traditionally associated with Immanuel Kant

(1724–1804), is frequently viewed as too restrictive but nevertheless closely linked to journalism practice and normative claims.²³ Indeed, as journalism ethics go, the presentation of factual evidence and data to the public should be sufficient to allow them to make a rational decision. This decision is expectedly one that should underpin solidarity given the fact that it is assumed that audiences would feel a moral duty to act, irrespective of whether they feel the pain of others or not.

What type of risk?

Generally speaking, the reporting of risk and vulnerability in the context of humanitarian crises remains an area that is largely under-researched. This is so, despite calls from scholars such as Simon Cottle who in 1998 pointed out the need to embrace in media studies the notion of the ‘risk society’.²⁴ Moreover, the notion of risk within globalisation has been duly noted by authors such as Beck, Peter Bernstein, Niklas Luhmann and Rifkin, amongst others.²⁵ According to Anthony Giddens, our society is increasingly preoccupied with the future, something that pushes to the centre stage the notion of risk.²⁶ Historically speaking, the notion of risk derives from the uncertainties that modernity has created. It is overall different from how we, as a society, viewed risk in the past when risk was accepted and even embraced as an unavoidable part of life.²⁷ The arrival of modernity has instead co-opted risk into the sphere of fear and today, far from accepting the odds of destiny (to paraphrase Sophocles), we now seem to live under the threat of uncertainty.

In this sense, the advent of the ‘market society’, which Karl Polanyi refers to, marked a fundamental change in the mentality of humankind towards risk.²⁸ For Niklas Luhmann, the rationalisation of ‘risk’ in terms of the market had an important effect on the way it is defined by society.²⁹ This meant that over the following years, a utilitarian notion of risk took over; one which equated to fear and that became prevalent. In our times we see and narrativise risk as a pervasive threat. Yet, and despite this narrativisation, risk needs to be valued and understood in different ways. Rawls, for example, recommends a safety net and a welfare state that may support the least well-off, by making the rational calculation that, if we did not know what our position will be (i.e. if we were under the veil of ignorance), we would avert risk.³⁰ In such a manner, we would ensure that the least well-off would be properly attended.³¹ The core element of this view around risk is that it introduces the notion of ‘prudential social morality’. Certainly, the idea of mutually beneficial co-operation underpins the Rawlsian original position on ‘justice fairness’, one that is supported by the tradition of humans coming together, collectively, to face risk.³²

This contrasts sharply with what professional journalism does in regards to the coverage of distant suffering as it tends to individualise the responses to risk, particularly in relation to suffering. The narrativisation of suffering is in fact characterised by ‘assistencialism’, that is ‘individuals extending the hand to other individuals’ in the context of voluntary and charity efforts. Because of this, most news stories gravitate

around 'intervention' from the helping hand of the West, which invariably comes to the rescue of those in need. However, the root causes of suffering are rarely discussed in these reports, which keep recycling prevalent explanatory frameworks about why these people suffer.³³

Foreign intervention in the face of distant suffering is central in the journalistic narrativisation of suffering because it is mostly presented as an event that seems only to affect those in developing countries. Journalistic advocacy then concentrates upon the need to guarantee that palliatives – i.e. donations and foreign aid – are in place to assist the individuals, while efforts are made to reduce 'compassion fatigue' by increasing the tone and dramatic features when reporting suffering and emphasising the theatricality in the style.³⁴ In this way, journalists covering famine, natural disasters or war try to create a link between the 'distant' suffering that happens to 'others' and those at home watching the news. Risk, in these terms, is a notion that remains detached and abstract to those in the West.

However, in the past few years the political context has been changing. Massive waves of migration, the financial crisis of 2008 and the increasing terrorist threats in the West have suddenly brought risk home. Indeed, journalism faces a new and unprecedented context in which traditional explanatory frameworks and narratives are becoming unviable. The transformation of humanitarian communication, which Lilie Chouliaraki refers to, is setting new and more demanding parameters for reporters, who now need to question more critically structural reasons for that suffering and go beyond the comfort zone offered by the neutrality of charity work and aid.³⁵

Re-narrativising suffering

The transformation of humanitarian communication is in fact creating important tensions within journalism practice. On the one hand, we find that traditional normative claims of balance and detachment when reporting the suffering of others are increasingly tested by the ever-closer links between journalists, corporations, NGOs and governments in the face of news production deficits and the increasing role of public relations.³⁶ On the other, we find that the depoliticisation and fragmentation of audiences and dislocation of the news media landscape is pushing the ability of journalists to connect with their audiences to the extremes. In both cases, these tensions create a situation in which traditional narratives towards suffering seemed exhausted or are quickly undermined.

Take for example the news coverage of famines and how it mostly remains anchored in reporting of these events within the regimes of pity. In these cases, the ability of the news media to mobilise the publics has become limited and ineffective. The 'compassion fatigue' which Moeller speaks about is a situational variable, rather than a personality trait in which contemporary media coverage contributes decisively to exhaust people's engagement with social problems.³⁷ In other words,

people get saturated and feel disempowered hence feel the need to detach themselves from the issues being reported. This is particularly aggravated by the recurrent coverage of issues that seem to be never resolved. Then the charity sectors, multi-lateral agencies and the media fall into the trap of intensifying the coverage both in terms of frequency and dramatic exposure with the hope that this would re-engage the audience. This, of course, rarely happens and it rather ends up exhausting even more the audiences, who then seem to completely disengage from international humanitarian issues.

To overcome these tensions journalism ought to redefine its approach to humanitarian news. In our view, this will require incorporating the notion of risk. To do so, journalists will need to make sure that what they report relates to the individuals at the other side of the screens. This relationship needs to be based upon creating awareness around shared risk by asking key questions about how the distant suffering affects all. However, is it really realistic to expect that people in the global North understand, assume and feel risk in the same manner as people in the global South? After all, those living in the North live in conditions that make it very unlikely that they will ever have to confront the same type of humanitarian risks as those in the South, and chances are they never will.

To advance the discussion let us refer first to what we know about people's attitudes towards probability and the key questions posed by the average utility principle by asking some basic questions: Am I likely to need humanitarian assistance? Is tragedy likely to happen to me as an individual? And how likely is it to happen to me? To explore this, let us invert the situation from negative risk (that is the risk of losing) to positive risk (ergo the probability of winning). In relation to this, research on lottery consumption confirms that heavy players are found to have less income and to fantasise more than light players. These heavy lottery players are also more prone to risk-taking.³⁸ So, those who have less tend to take more risks with their disposable income while those who have higher incomes tend to be more risk-averse (at least in relation to the probability of winning). Another important finding in this body of research is the phenomenon of 'anticipatory regret', that is those who buy the lottery because they would find it intolerable to discover their regular numbers had been drawn when they had not purchased a ticket. That is, people who play the lottery are not inclined to take the risk of missing out on winning.³⁹

We refer to the lottery case as it perfectly exemplifies our argument, that despite having a low probability, people nevertheless are convinced by media campaigns and advertising to buy the lottery because 'it could be you' (although some also buy it for charity reasons). This, to us, provides a window of opportunity to explore the narrativisation of risk within humanitarian communication and particularly in relation to journalism covering suffering. Indeed, if media campaigns and advertisement are able to convince people to buy the lottery despite minimum probability of winning, why can't we do the same in relation to convincing people to invest in the same way their disposable income in the face of 'losing' in a possible humanitarian crisis?

The first challenge we would face would be to take the journalistic narrative to a meta-geographic level. Reporters covering in Africa, Asia and Latin America tend to create common codes when reporting events such as the economy or national elections. So political parties are narrativised as being on the 'left' or on the 'right' while a variety of economic systems tend to be amalgamated into free-market or state-run. This allows the audiences to understand those aspects of those societies in similar terms to their own and draw, for example, conclusions to their own realities. Consequently, by reading the coverage of places such as Zimbabwe and Venezuela (with their economies crumbling), readers are left with the risk-awareness that voting for pro-state-run economy parties could do the same to their own societies. This, however, does not happen in the case of humanitarian disasters where very few common codes between audiences and events are created, therefore limiting any bridges that could create similar patterns of risk-awareness. Instead, what we find is news coverage that overemphasises geographical distance.

This spatial detachment is key in limiting the ability of audiences to see and feel the proximity of humanitarian risk, which is why journalistic narratives tend to focus on individuals who are connected. Hence, a US news media outlet reporting a hurricane in Bangladesh will highlight if there were any US citizens killed or injured, a UK outlet reporting a tsunami in Samoa would do the same, and so on. However, proximity in the news media is already in many occasions a meta-geographical criterion in the selection and narrativisation of news. This is because the risk-awareness links – epitomised in the notion 'that could happen to me' – are also established in relation to dimension, cultural background, historical links, amongst other elements. This has been the case of several humanitarian crises in relation not only to the amount of coverage provided but also in relation to its distinctive nature.⁴⁰ To be sure, humanitarian crises triggered by natural disasters in countries such as New Zealand tend to receive more news coverage than others in places such as Pakistan despite the magnitude and death toll of the latter being greater.

The second challenge is that risk-awareness can become a discursive mechanism to further detach the audience from those who suffer by fostering fear and individualistic responses to the perceived threat. If people perceive human tragedies as a threat, then the danger is that they could entrench themselves in political isolationism as a way of protecting themselves. This also is one of the biggest rebuttals to the viability of the 'regimes of pity' as a communication strategy as it is exemplified by the case of public attitudes towards homeless people in big metropolises. Only a few people feel the 'compassion' to give money to the beggar while most pass by indifferently or cross to the other side of the road to avoid that person altogether because of the fear of crime.⁴¹

To illustrate this further, it is worth reminding ourselves that if recent waves of Syrian migrants into Europe initially met with sympathy and empathy, the continual flux of those groups entering the continent and the links that public discourses established between them and issues such as terrorism and rape – widely exploited

by right-wing populist politicians and media – have created a climate of fear. Indeed, a major Ipsos MORI survey across twenty-two countries worldwide provides an insight into attitudes to immigration and the refugee crisis. This study highlights that six in ten people across these countries are concerned about terrorists pretending to be refugees, while four in ten want to close borders entirely.⁴² The danger that risk-awareness becomes moral panic and its use for political scaremongering is in fact one of the most difficult challenges for the proposed narrativisation of risk.

The third challenge to the narrativisation of risk is presented by the established values in journalism cultures which demand objective truth based on the presentation of balanced views, corroborated facts and unbiased interpretation of the events.⁴³ In order for journalists to be accepted as part of a legitimate community they have to be seen to comply with these demands. This is what Maras calls procedural objectivity.⁴⁴ This in itself does not hinder the possibility to narrativise risk, as it would still be possible to do so in the terms of balanced and unbiased information. The problem arises from the concept of ‘truth’ itself, which in journalism philosophy is assumed in terms of unbiased interpretation of facts.⁴⁵ This goes against the principle of truth in humanitarian communication which is one defined instead by social justice. To explain this succinctly: how can individuals committed in principle not to do advocacy do advocacy? After all, part of the deal of humanitarian communication is to engage and mobilise the audiences in order to address the suffering of others (achieve justice). However, this means in practice convincing the public of the merits of the ideas and principles related to solidarity, which in Western society remain the building stones of Christian propaganda. In contrast, contemporary journalism, developed as a by-product of the Enlightenment project normatively embraces an epistemology that attempts to make a clear distinction between a public rational sphere dominated by reason (built upon science and objective facts) and a private sphere, which contain emotions, faith and opinion. This means presenting facts to the public and then, supposedly, allowing each individual to make their own mind (the dilemma between collective and individual interpretations is also a result of journalism being a collateral outcome of the Enlightenment project).

This makes journalism incompatible with humanitarian communication aims as the ‘means’ of each one seem to be at odds. Journalism has tried to resolve this by embracing the regimes of pity as it allows the presentation of suffering as a fact in a detached and subordinated manner; where the international donors have the power to save those who suffer but no legal, financial or political responsibility except a moral one to do so. This moral solidarity, as we discussed earlier in this chapter, is predicated upon the values of empathy and pity, which happen to be – in our view – incompatible. One can only feel empathy for those who we see as equals. Pity, on the other hand, is felt for those who we see as beneath us, to put it metaphorically; it is a patronising approach. Moreover, while pity allows you to offer sympathy and charity, empathy creates a political responsibility. This is why the notion of the average utility risk is so powerful, because it immediately makes us see the others as equals.

Conclusion: overcoming the challenges

The first priority of journalism is therefore to reconcile its own normative demands for scientific procedures in seeking truth with the implicit demands of humanitarian communication for advocacy. The second is to create a connection between the presentation of humanitarian crises and the need for collective responses within the parameters mentioned above. In both cases journalists can learn from what has happened with the news coverage of environmental news and in particular in relation to the way the reporting of the global warming threat has evolved in the past few years. The lessons from this particular news beat shows that it is possible to narrativise risk without creating moral panic while retaining the key rational elements that risk offers that make people change patterns of behaviour.

Indeed, once it became clear that global warming effects would be 'inevitable' and 'generalised' then it became narrativised in a way that pushed for collective action. After all, if sea levels rise and freak weather becomes more common, this will affect all, not only a few. Today, despite isolated examples amongst pro-climate-change-denier news media outlets such as Fox News in the United States and the *Daily Telegraph* in the UK, most news media outlets and journalists approach and present global warming as a collective risk that will affect all. This is not to paint a rosy picture of environmental news coverage. On the contrary, journalists covering humanitarian crisis can learn even more from the mistakes made in the news beat of environment.

To be sure, media reports of environmental science often give equal weight to opposing viewpoints, making science appear more controversial than it actually is, therefore influencing risk and uncertainty perceptions.⁴⁶ By complying with the notion of supposed bias journalists in fact provide a distorted view of reality. Moreover, in recent years there has been a consensus that has been galvanised towards a news agenda that recognises collective response and global risks in the environmental news beat. This despite constant and robust attempts by corporation and government lobbies to bring these responses into the individualistic and utilitarian realm by presenting environmental risks as an 'individual choice'. Instead of succumbing to this pressure, in recent years a big and very influential segment of the news media is now above and beyond these lobby attempts and environmental risk is now a key mobiliser for collective responses in the news narratives.

Can journalism do the same in relation to humanitarian crises? The answer is yes. We argue that by linking humanitarian risk with 'poverty risk' it is possible to galvanise this type of consensus around risk. This is because 'poverty risk' – that is the danger of one becoming destitute – tends to influence public opinion in similar ways as climate change does.⁴⁷ If news coverage of humanitarian crises can highlight that these events occur because of destitution as a result of inequality, then there is a greater chance that people will feel the need to engage in terms of collective responses to humanitarian crises.

However, the question remains as how to bring the Rawlsian principle into journalistic narratives. In this sense, the job of journalists reporting humanitarian crisis may not be so much to present images of suffering people, not even to persuade audiences that those tragedies happen, but rather, to expose audiences to the ‘possibility’ that they might happen to those looking at the screens. This chapter does not intend to resolve the practicalities that will derivate from trying to achieve the above. However, any effort to introduce risk and conciliate journalism and humanitarian communication will require that journalists rethink what they conceive as ‘truth’ and embrace this in their daily practice. This means that they will need to overcome the limitations inherited from the Enlightenment project with regards to both ethical conceptualisation and practical elements.⁴⁸ This is, for us, the future task for scholars and practitioners.

Notes

- 1 L. Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. G. D. Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); L. Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 1999).
- 2 J. Seaton, *Carnage and the Media: The Making and Breaking of News about Violence* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 286.
- 3 L. Chouliaraki, ‘Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a Politics of Pity,’ *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13:2 (2010), p. 107.
- 4 W. A. Kauffman, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- 5 J. Lugo-Ocando, *Blaming the Victim: How Global Journalism Fails Those in Poverty* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), p. 172.
- 6 D. Dayan and E. Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
- 7 G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994 [1967]).
- 8 W. Easterly, *The White Man’s Burden: Why the West’s Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (London: Penguin, 2006).
- 9 J. A. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971). It is important to underline that average utility as a concept is not universally accepted by philosophers, and philosophical reflections about it may lead to some paradoxes. If our moral objective is to increase average utility at all costs, then it would be quite easy to simply reduce population size (not necessarily through coercive methods, such as in China’s one-child policy, but simply through more persuasive birth controls). In this case, we would have a smaller population, with a higher mean measure of happiness. This would imply that a country with 100 people and an average utility of 100 units is more desirable than a country with 1,000,000 people, and an average utility of 99 units. This is counter-intuitive, and it calls into doubt that average utility is in fact the right criterion. Furthermore, Derek Parfit has outlined an analysis that leads to the conclusion that, indeed, average utility

cannot be the right criterion. Suppose a country has a population of 100 people, with an average measure of 100 happiness units. If, to that country, we add a population with a lower average utility (but still, with lives worth living), would it make the situation better or worse? It would seem to make it better, as the original population is not affected, and the happiness units are increased. But, by doing this, average utility is decreased. If we keep on doing this procedure many times, we would reach a situation in which population size has increased, average utility has decreased, and we would believe this is in fact more desirable. In this case, a country (such as Bangladesh) with a huge population and lower living standards may actually be more desirable (provided all lives are worth living) than a country with very high standards (such as Norway) but with a smaller population. Parfit admits this conclusion is repugnant, but he is unclear about how it can be avoided, if at all. There really is no consensus about what the best ethical criterion is for the distribution of utility. See D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

- 10 P. Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- 11 This may have a biological basis. Most contemporary biologists give little weight to 'group selection' (i.e. altruism gives the group an advantage, and thus, it is selected for). In current discussions, genes for altruism are assumed either to be mediated by reciprocity (we help those whom we expect to reciprocate) or kin selection (we help those who share a portion of our genes, i.e. relatives). However, some biologists, such as Wilson, offer considerable arguments in favour of group selection as the basis for altruism. See D. S. Wilson, *Does Altruism Exist? Cultures, Genes, and the Welfare of Others* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016). If he is right, then we may be biologically conditioned to make sacrifices for the good of the group, regardless of kin proximity or expectation of reciprocity.
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- 19 This may even have a basis in Aristotle's theories on catharsis in ancient Greek drama: when we watch tragedies on the stage, we are emotionally moved to act. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. M. Heath (New York: Penguin, 1997).
- 20 There is some neurological evidence that may support this claim. So-called 'mirror neurons' activate feelings of empathy when we observe others' suffering. See C. Keysers, *The Empathic Brain: How the Discovery of Mirror Neurons Changes Our Understanding of Human Nature* (Bonn: Social Brain Press, 2011).

- 21 For the former, see B. Höijer, 'The Discourse of Global Compassion: The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering', *Media, Culture and Society*, 26:4 (2004), pp. 513–31; J. Petley, 'War Without Death: Responses to Distant Suffering', *Journal for Crime, Conflict and the Media*, 1:1 (2003), pp. 72–85; I. B. Seu, "'Doing Denial": Audience Reaction to Human Rights Appeals', *Discourse and Society*, 21:4 (2010), pp. 438–57. For the latter, see P. Robinson, *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); M. Shaw, *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises: Representing Distant Violence* (London: Continuum International/Pinter Publishers, 1996).
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- 28 K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002 [1944]).
- 29 Luhmann, *Risk*, p. 177.
- 30 Rawls, *Theory of Justice*.
- 31 This despite critics who believe that too much reliance on that safety net can hinder the common good. See J. Harsanyi, 'Can the Maximin Principle Serve as a Basis for Morality? A Critique of John Rawls's Theory', *The American Political Science Review*, 69:2 (1975), pp. 594–606. In that case, we would be rational not to desire too much protection for the least well off in society as to encourage them to work.
- 32 A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Penguin, 2009).
- 33 There is also a case to be made about the more perverse interests of the narrativisation of suffering. Ever since the end of the Cold War, and especially after the humanitarian crisis of Rwanda, national sovereignties have been weakened, and a growing international consensus, promoted by the United Nations, is tilting towards concepts such as 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P). According to this view, there may be legitimate military interventions in order to stop humanitarian crisis. See A. J. Bellamy, *Responsibility to Protect* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009). This rationale was used most notoriously in Kosovo, and more recently, Libya. However, there are critics who believe that this is nothing more than a refashioning of old colonialist interventions, dressed in a humanitarian costume. Under this view, the narrativisation of suffering is in fact a media strategy to serve imperial purposes. See P. Cunliffe, *Critical Perspectives on the Responsibility to Protect: Interrogating Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

- 34 Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*.
- 35 Chouliaraki, 'Post-Humanitarianism.'
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- 45 Martinisi and Lugo-Ocando, 'Overcoming the Objectivity of the Senses', p. 453.
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