

## **Banal journalism or a crash between agency and professional norms? Considerations around mainstream journalism covering dramatic events**

**Ullamaija Kivikuru\***

\* University of Helsinki, Finland

### **Abstract**

Using some recent examples as a starting point, this paper discusses catastrophe reporting. The claim is that catastrophe reporting reveals some sore points in journalistic professionalism as a whole. The theoretical frames are sought from research on "agency". According to this approach, distances can be overcome through a purely personal effort. The agency component potentially invites the spectators to feel and act for the sufferers. In order to do that, journalistic professionals are compelled to use new tools in news reporting: emotions and sources, which qualify via experience and suffering rather than rationality and observation. The basic question here is whether the journalistic profession itself, with its fixed and stereotyped norms and practices, has driven the profession into a delicate situation. Natural, participatory contact with the people-on-the-street is regulated by professional rules. Accordingly, the profession tends to express itself with clumsy, even vulgar and artificial terms; professional ethics cannot follow the new trend.

**Keywords:** catastrophe reporting, journalistic professionalism, agency

### **Introduction**

In recent years, catastrophe reporting has grown fast on a global level. Reporting on disasters—sometimes taking place on one's own backyard, sometimes on the other side of the globe, in both cases reaching international audiences—has become one of the major forms, via everyday newsroom routines, of dividing people into "us" and "them". Together with the expanded use of the web and with the so-called 24/7 phenomenon, requiring continuous updating in journalism, these facts have challenged media practices and journalistic ethics.

For the past 200 years, the major role given for the media in the promotion of democracy has been that the media have enabled an expansion of receivers' life world, reaching to information and knowledge beyond the frames of one's personal life. Today, we are practically forced to know about phenomena far away from our personal sphere. Updating one's knowledge about such issues is considered as belonging to a proper citizen's role; in the era of globalisation, alertness about global crises is a dimension of citizenship. The situation is challenging, because there are new types of crisis today: not only political conflicts, poverty, natural disasters, and humanitarian emergencies; but also problems caused by new wars (e.g., "global war on terrorism"), the arms race, immigration, pandemics, human rights violations, and global economic crises

(Cottle, 2009). Thanks to new technology, the transnational media system produces enormous volumes of texts about such phenomena at a very high speed.

### **Approaches to news drama**

This paper attempts to elaborate on crisis reporting, partly more generally, and partly based on a few examples. The theoretical frames for the following considerations are sought from research on media ethics and *agency* (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006; Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Pantti, 2009). Affectionate discourse, as well as reports on active and personalized sufferers are said to be able to create solidarity and loyalty in people living far away. The coverage of disasters usually opens with an account of the horrific aspects of the event, to be followed by discourses of grief, suffering, and finally a discourse of empathy.

According to this approach, territorial and cultural distances can be overcome through a purely personal, or perhaps rather a personal-professional effort. The agency component invites the spectators to feel and act for the distant sufferers who are presented in the media accounts as active. What is needed is a reinterpretation of the ideal of objectivity; since, directly or indirectly, agency journalism is usually forced to take sides for the sufferer.

One could perhaps claim that the agency approach offers a “piecemeal” solution. With changing the style of reporting and adding emotions to it, there would be a change in attitudes at the receiving end. Elaborations on agency have caused discussion mainly due to the fact that conventional quality journalism has obviously been quite reserved in the use of emotions as an expressive tool. What is perhaps even more decisive is the fact that agency still positions the receiver as a receiver, not a partner in the exercise. Agency journalism is by no means a form of citizens’ journalism; nonetheless, it attempts to alert and affect the common person. In a way, one could view it as an effort to develop participation via the presentation of the event.

James Lull (2007) seems to think, that today we all, including the common person, are in a far better position to participate in a *global dialogue* than ever before. According to Lull, we are able to develop understanding across a variety of global divides; we enhance cultural connectivity; and we have an unprecedented access to different cultural forms. We are in the position to develop temporal and spatial flexibility and an expanded range of personal communication options. The cultural connectivity is able to bring about new types of divisions into “us” and “them”.

Lull’s positive view has also encouraged counter-argumentation. Is there perhaps a danger of *compassion fatigue*? As Simon Cottle states (Cottle, 2009), the media tend to have preoccupations with crisis coverage— simplistic and sensationalizing. While the public’s attention span has become shortened; the

public becomes easily bored and selective with international news. Birgitta Höijer (2007) discussed *ideal victims*—women, children, the elderly—and different forms of compassion (“tender-hearted”, “shame-filled”, “blame-filled”, “powerlessness-filled”). According to Keith Tester (1992), *the image of the other becomes commonplace* and incapable of attracting thoughtful glance. A testimony of more ambiguous reflections also involves such global clashes as the alarm around Mohammed caricatures (Eide, Kunelius & Phillips, 2008).

Somewhat more comprehensive, *re-considerations on media ethics* have suggested (e.g., Couldry, 2006) that because the old “division of labour” in democratic societies between media producers and media consumers is now partly open to be challenged, a broader concept of ethics is needed in media-saturated societies. An inclusive framework of media ethics could address ethical concerns about anyone in or affected by the media process. Naturally, media consumption does not carry the same ethical responsibilities as professional media production; but according to Nick Couldry and others, in limited ways, production and consumption are becoming part of the same continuum of experiencing media.

As such, there is nothing new in these considerations. War is a classic theme of crisis reporting, and the same “laws”, which are implemented in war and conflict reporting, are used in other forms of crisis journalism as well. In the ideological model of war, three actors have traditionally been located: constructions of the Self, the Enemy, and the Victim. The identity of the Victim may range from abstract notions—for example, world peace—to more concrete notions such as a people, a minority, or another nation. In some cases, the Self becomes equal to the Victim, for example when the Self is attacked by the Enemy. The Self and the Enemy are juxtaposed and encircled by the dichotomies that structure their identities, in an intimate relationship with the Victim. The model also includes positions of Supporters and Passive Allies, plus Bystanders who have no direct affiliations to the conflict of the warring parties. (Carpentier, 2007:3-7)

In Carpentier’s ideological model of war, all the good qualities are attached to the Self, and via it, to the Victim; while the evil, the unjust, the irrational, and the barbaric are qualities that characterise the Enemy. The idea of this paper is to try to merge the above-mentioned approaches describing a crisis and to ask whether the positions of the Self, the Enemy, the Victim, the Supporters, Allies, and Bystanders can be detected in general crisis reporting, especially when proximity or ethnic aspects are involved. Today, the global news apparatus evolves faster and faster and accordingly, crisis reporting has become highly standardized. On the other hand, as previously discussed, news reporting today emphasizes affections and emotions. These two aspects, the demands for rapidity and for affections, appear as contradictory in the journalistic praxis, but can they be packaged somehow?

Roland Robertson's (1995) concept of *glocalisation* is well known—an aim to theorise the local conceptualisations of the global. But a perhaps better sitting concept for explaining journalistic practices is Arjun Appadurai's (1995) *translocalisation*. Translocalisation is viewed as the mirror for glocalisation's image. In it, the local is the starting point of departure, adding the global as a second component. At the level of journalistic discourse, the translocalisation of the discipline refers to the ways that always-specific, contextualised and situated information and practices can transcend local boundaries and enter into intellectual interactions without losing their contextual affinities and situatedness. Translocation can be assessed as a refined form of agency thinking.

It is common in democracies to find widely shared expectations that at least public service broadcasting will be fair to those who represent the opposite side or the Other. Such an approach necessitates an interpretation of the liberal tradition, because PSB companies tend to have a very specific relation to the state; they enjoy several privileges denied to other media. As Guy Starkey (2007: 23-26) states, this easily leads to *"bedign paternalism"*. Essentially, what this means is that all rules and recommendations in journalism should be respected. Recently, Guy Berger (2009) discussed the paradoxes of *"hyperlocalism"* enabled by the Internet and advocated by many communication researchers. According to Berger, the mantra of being hyperlocal is chanted only by some First World media, both offline and online. The rest of the world is not experiencing much change, since the media in these countries are still operating from a subordinate cultural and linguistic position.

In sum, there are markedly contradictory elements, which could be studied in catastrophe reporting. On the one hand, agency thinking, defined very broadly, encourages journalism to bring distant events and processes close by adding to the reporting such culturally bound, but still "universal" elements that people all around the world can attach themselves to: emotion, participation, and loyalty. On the other hand, researchers such as Guy Berger and Guy Starkey warn about the illusion of value-free "hyperlocation" of the rich societies in the world—others cannot afford the illusion. The overcoming of it would require structural changes.

### **A channel for discussing shock**

The Boxing Day 2004 tsunami caused the biggest peacetime emergency aid operation ever, but the news coverage was perhaps even more remarkable: huge by volume and simultaneously, interestingly, in its selfishness (e.g., Kivikuru, 2006; Rahkonen, 2005). Finnish media were concerned about the Finns in Thailand, Swedish media about Swedes in Thailand, etc., but this was while the greatest catastrophe hit Indonesia. The news reporting on the remote region was predominantly interested in what happened to the

reporting country's own citizens vacationing in the region. After a few weeks, more focus was put on the catastrophe-ridden regions *per se*.

Nordic receivers were not satisfied. On the political level, they felt that the welfare society and its media did not meet the demands set by its citizens; it has been said that the Social Democrats in Sweden lost the following elections partly due to the behaviour of the cabinet and the media, which focussed on the doings of the cabinet. In Finland, the consequences were not as dramatic; but large groups of them dove into the online world and they did so for some time, feeling that websites offering a possibility to discuss the disaster better fulfilled their needs.

Catastrophe reporting belongs to the core of journalism. However, it appeared as if the media had somehow lost the touch with their receivers in Finland. Those who had met the catastrophe personally—by being there or by losing a relative or friend—felt that the media were not understanding enough; and they escaped for a while to discussion sites on the web. Those receivers, who met the tsunami only as a huge news event, without any personal relationship, were notably bored after a month and roughly 18,000 news dispatches. They felt that the coverage was disproportionate.

In 2007, a school massacre—the first of its type in Finland—took place in a small community near Helsinki. The reporting was both dramatic and dramatized. The police acted slowly, and an army of capital city journalists rushed to get their scoops thus bypassing the slow official information. They interviewed and took pictures of teenage school kids, and they published very intimate details on the web versions of their media.

In a counter-attack by shocked schoolmates, teachers, and parents, a complaint was filed to the Prime Minister's office; not so much about what was published in the conventional media, but about the journalists' behaviour in the field and the first reports in the web versions of the conventional media. The national media council found itself in a difficult situation; because, according to its rules, only the outcome, the final product, of journalistic process should be judged. Here, in fact, a preparatory phase, the news gathering process was at stake. No official condemnation was announced; but vivid discussions about media ethics took place in newsrooms and at the Journalist Union seminars.

In 2008, another school massacre took place, this time far away from the Helsinki region. Due to both the distance and the experiences based on the previous massacre, the journalistic behaviour was different. It focused on the shooter alone, leaving the victims outside. The newsrooms were cautious with the material placed on the web, publishing fairly balanced, reserved reports in both the basic medium and on the web. This time, the victims, and especially the families of those shot by the killer, accused the media of inhuman coverage, focusing on the shooter and forgetting the victims.

The public reaction was, all in all, shocked; but it was milder than with the first case. The public debate turned fast to more general issues such as regulations concerning weapon licenses. However, education specialists especially wondered why the media focused so strongly on the shooter, thus most obviously fulfilling his wishes of global attention and an arena opened up for his thoughts upon the weaknesses of mankind. Furthermore, the behaviour of journalists—this time, as foreign journalists pretended to be priests or policemen while trying to catch interviewees—gathered complaints. In the second school shooting, the international press arrived on the scene much faster than on the first occasion.

In one respect, the coverage of both school shootings had a similar profile. They focused strongly on the shooter. According to the studies carried out on the two dramas (Raittila *et al.*, 2008; Raittila *et al.*, 2009; Hakala, 2009), the shooter was an actor in more than half of the total of actors in the reports during the first week after the event (Jokela N= 460; Kauhajoki N= 465). The shooters were driven into a “They” or “Enemy” position in slightly different, but still consistent manners (Table 1).

In both cases, the media thus showed the shooter as an exceptional personality, but criticism was also directed to the society that did not recognise the mental problems of these persons and even “legitimized” their normalness by granting them a gun carrying licence. The society was accused of being too passive. On the other hand, both school shooting cases also showed how fast a modern media apparatus operates. In both cases, the event disappeared from the news pages after five days.

*Table 1: Gunmen descriptions in Jokela and Kauhajoki (according to Raittila et al., 2009)*

	<i>Jokela</i>	<i>Kauhajoki</i>
General image of the shooter	Strange, withdrawn, intelligent, admired school killers, mental problems	Ordinary, inconspicuous, led a double life on the web, average student, mental problems
Relationship with friends	Loner, victim of bullying and discrimination	Victim of bullying, had friends nonetheless
Family	Socially active, greenish ideology	Lower middle class, complicated family relations
Internet content used in journalism	Plentiful, worldview, strongly ideological	Shooting, misanthropic, no clear ideology

An indication of simple practical elements was the fact that in the case of Jokela—the shooting scene located near Helsinki—the parents of the shooter received far more attention than in the case of Kauhajoki. Journalists did not stay long enough in northern Finland to grasp a proper picture of the family relations. The divorced and re-married parents were mentioned, but that was all. In the case of Jokela, the parents' concern about the son's problems was described as genuine; but the parents' greenish and artistic tendencies were accentuated, thus indicating between the lines that they did not belong to "us", either.

In the case of Jokela, the victims—the schoolmates and teachers at the school—received exclusively positive coverage. The media tried to catch all the tears and the haphazard comments by the 15-17-year-old schoolmates. This was exactly the reason for the complaints. In the case of Kauhajoki, this layer was totally missing, again partly due to practical reasons. The situation was already "over", when journalists from the capital city regions reached the place. Schoolmates had disappeared from the scene and when contacted in their living quarters, these young adults simply declined to give any comments. They remained loyal allies to the victims by their own will, and so did the police who protected the two students who were injured and rushed to hospitals in cities far away. The media did a first year after attempt to "find" them. Although their escape from the shooting scene was a dramatic event, and as such, a temptation for the journalists, they were not willing to cooperate.

The coverage of these shootings—especially the first one—indicated a shock for the media as well. The type of crisis was well known and routinely covered as such; but its location was the shocker on this one, and that was that this kind of an event could also happen in Finland. Accordingly, the coverage was large; but it was also distinctly vulgar. The positions made by the media were quite banal. The shooters were defined as outsiders, while the coverage of the victims was exclusively positive. The main question marks were directed to the society, which was described as a bystander: why didn't it react earlier and more effectively? The right to stand as a bystander in this particular case was challenged. Furthermore, the Finnish media made it very clear that although school shootings were a rare case in Finland, abroad they were a routine matter. Accordingly, Finland still was a comparably secure society.

### **Mediascape: new elements, old power positions**

Definitions of globalisation are multiple and often contradictory, but one aspect is clear: we know today—we are in fact forced to know, directly or indirectly—much more about phenomena in faraway parts of the world than ever before. It also seems that when a new type of crisis or catastrophe emerges, the media system stands helpless for a while, although a crisis is a classic target for journalism. Today, the majority of news reports are "planned" in such a manner that they are known well in advance. A crisis requires

immediate action and accordingly, the definition of the event or process thus tends to become cruder than in the case of a topic with fewer emergency elements.

At the initial stage, the scenery, the frame and the proportions of the main actors are not quite clear. However, the system also has to produce enormous volumes of text at a high speed. The standard solution is the news format: the difficult and disturbing “new” issue is packaged in the best established and most fixed journalistic format, thus making the production of the text smoother for the journalistic apparatus. This was the case in the reporting on the tsunami and both of the school shootings. In principle, such a disjuncture could enable totally new approaches to be developed, but the speed of reporting today does not allow such deepening of journalism. Instead, the media system leans on the most established and fixed journalistic form, the news genre. Emotions do not fit naturally to the news genre with its neutral reporting style.

Today, the global news flow is more complex than some 20-25 years ago. The mainstream floats as before: the huge international news and picture agencies, above all *Reuters*, *AFP*, and *AP*, command the selection and distribution of the news flow that floats faster than ever before. The large international news factories of today are able to also produce background material, comparisons and opinions. Their archives are large and case histories sent out in a minute. Accordingly, a major crisis, such as a school shooting, can be displaced as a piece of news with a full background history about previous school shootings.

Simon Cottle (2009) states that alternative and contra information now has a chance to be heard and notified. Thus, a major local event can also be framed with alternative elements from abroad. Cottle has described the “global news ecology” in an elaborate and interesting figure (Figure 1). However, one could draw misleading conclusions based on the graph. In it, the alternative and contra media, in fact, seem to get more space than the big agencies. The alternative channels do exist, but they are only activated occasionally. The search for alternative information requires a catalyst, a special interest in the issue concerned.

Parallel to the expanding global crisis and catastrophe journalism, more and more evidence can be collected about the media frequently changing their views on issues of ethnicity, immigration, and emigration (e.g., van Dijk, 1993; Horsti, 2005; Hulten, 2006; Haavisto & Kivikuru, 2007). They are growing in significance especially in Europe. To put it bluntly, in these particular theme areas, the media seem to operate as agents of power and discrimination rather than multiculturalism and empathy. Immigrants seem to be changing easily from a Victim position to an Enemy position, and the media deliberately want to take a Bystander’s role. Such an outsider’s position is part of classic journalism; nonetheless it has lost its role as a professional ideal, but in this kind of delicate issue, journalism willingly seems to retreat to the old position.



The example of the Mohammed caricatures shows that even the media are able to create a crisis. It is a well-known fact that the media can be used by those in power for incitement to racism and ethnic cleansing, most recently in the Balkans (e.g., Roudametof, 2001) and in Rwanda (e.g., Destexhe, 1995; Hatzfeld, 2008). However, the caricature case was both initiated and spread by the media, while in the case of the Balkans and Rwanda, the media were used as tools for an ideology developed outside the sphere of the media.

Figure 1: News ecology (Cottle, 2007:18)

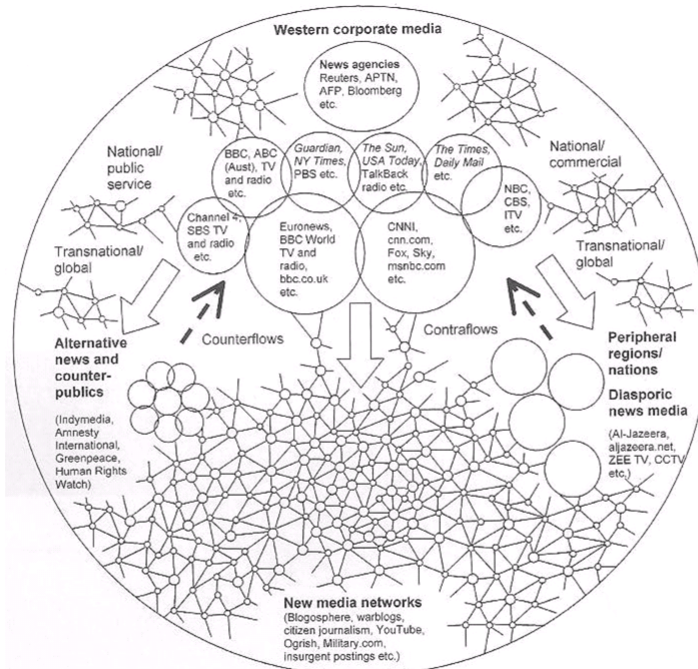


Figure 1.1 Global news ecology

Assured of a large audience thanks to regular programmes of popular music, the programmes in Kibyarwanda broadcast unceasing messages of hate, such as ‘the grave is only half full. Who will help us to fill it?’ Christened ‘the radio that kills’ by its opponents, it was the basic instrument of propaganda for the Hutu extremists, and the militias rallied in support of its slogans. (Destexhe, 1995: 30)

Knowing the multiplicity of the present global and regional information feeds, all these cases are threatening examples. The multiplicity of channels might also more easily open the gates for hate, racism, and ethnic cleansing. One is tempted to think, as Lull thinks, that the multitude of information channels does not automatically ensure more international understanding and dialogue.

In general, the old power structures in global news transmission seem to continue roughly as they have done during the past 30-35 years. The picture is more diffuse, and there is some space for occasional "dissidents", but the global structures are in the hands of the big international news organs, all initiating from the Western hemisphere. They are able to give *the first definition* to various international crises, and knowing the demands for speed in the apparatus, the first definition of various faraway crises prevails even when more information is subsequently collected. *Reuters, AFP, AP* and a few other international news organs still decide what crisis news is and what the proportions of the crisis are on the public agenda. Compared with the situation in the 1970s, the international news organs are undoubtedly more open to crises in other cultural spheres, but the explanations for the causes and the effects are still predominantly formulated in their sphere of origin. In the cases of the two Finnish school shootings, foreign journalists appeared more aggressive than the locals—the same argument has been presented by many colleagues from developing countries. On a foreign ground, because the power structures are not their own, journalists easily get bold and arrogant. The genre is also decisive. For example, Eugenia Siapera (2007:148-167) states that the social/cultural communicative formats of Islam do get space in online discussions, blogs, online poems, prose and pictures, articles on Muslim life and dating/marriage sites—but not in news transmission, which is still strongly event oriented.

### **Banal journalism and the chase for the culprit**

The 2004 tsunami remains perhaps as the best global example so far, but there are also other cases of catastrophe reporting, which indicate that it is justified to talk about *banal journalism*—a relative to Michael Billig's (1995) *banal nationalism*—that Prasun Sonwalkar (2005) introduced. According to him, mainstream journalism is predicated on the key issue of "us" and "them"; it cannot live without such binary positions. Banal journalism is hegemonic: it caters to the "us" and presents one view as *the* worldview of the entire society. There also seems to be a clear relationship between journalistic professionalism, prevailing socio-cultural ethos, and the newsroom praxis that strengthens it (rush, "publish and forget", cynicism, selection of "safe" authorities). In catastrophe reporting, binaries are frequently openly banal: first definitions are formed in a rush, repeated innumerable times, professionalism gets carried away, and thus provides space

for stereotypes. The Self and the Enemy are easily recognized in such crisis texts, which try to muffle discussion.

In their study about the accident of the tanker Exxon Valdez, Patrick Daley and Dan O'Neill (1991) showed that the reporting followed a clear-cut scheme. First, the event was presented as a catastrophe without boundaries, the worst ever oil spill on the Alaskan coast. The role given to the ordinary person was that of a target or eye witness—"How do you think about the accident?" The following phase was that of a crime narrative. A guilty individual, a culprit, was under search. In the case of Exxon Valdez, that phase was short, because the drinking habits of the captain were easily detected. The following phase was an environment narrative, journalism challenging environment bureaucracy about slowing down attempts to save the milieu. The role of the common man or the Victim was, in fact, given to birds swimming in oil. Pictures of them were spread all over the world. Only a small local paper, *Tundra Times*, offered different survival narratives. Although the accident turned out to be smaller than expected, local fishermen had lost their means of making a living. The fish in their waters had died. On the sphere of international journalism, birds swimming in oil sold better than Alaskan fishermen who had lost their source of livelihood.

From the point of the view of this paper, two aspects are more interesting than the details of the tanker accident. First, Daley and O'Neill give evidence to the fact that the catastrophe coverage tends to be quite "packaged", standardized, mainly no doubt due to the fact that the reporting was strongly time-bound. The situation did not allow much time for style, polishing, or reflection. Second, catastrophe reporting tends to be highly dramatized and thus it appears natural that stereotyped divisions into "good" and "bad" actors on the scene are constructed. Frequently, such stereotypes are ethnicity based. In the case of Exxon Valdez, the ethnicity aspect did not emerge very strongly, although the mental landscapes of the locals and the rest of the world appeared far apart. The ethnicity aspect became much stronger in the culprit chase of the Estonia accident (e.g., Raittila, 1996; Nordström, 1996): Swedes and Finns, both as passengers or sailors, were described as good and competent, while the Estonians were continuously presented as suspect or incompetent.

In the case of Exxon Valdez, the crisis-reporting model could easily be detected; but it was also way out of balance. The Self was extensive and diffuse, comprising the whole world population losing environmental values. The Enemy was one single person, the drunken captain, and the Victims were the birds mucked up by oil, not the local people who lost their livelihood. In fact, the Alaskans were presented rather as passive Allies than as part of the Self. The picture was simplified, personalised, and apolitical, the "We" was large and the "Other" actually comprised two components, the captain and the oil spill. The blame was assigned to a person, the drunken captain and the oil that spoiled the ocean and the coast. It could be claimed that the crisis was described as man fighting nature, and the Enemy as representing nature.

The distance had a significant role in the journalistic model used by the media outside Alaska. An agency component, compassion, was brought into the picture by birds swimming in oil; but fishermen losing their livelihood did not instigate similar agency components. Here one could perhaps state that journalistic clichés, such as the fancy to animals, had taken over. Animals are easier to handle than an insignificant occupational group that has lost its way of life. The problem was “naturalised” and stripped of its socio-political components. It is perhaps justified to say that the true components of the catastrophe were weakened by an overdose of wild animals.

### **Framing national interest**

Hun Shik Kim and Seow Ting Lee (2008) first discuss several airplane accidents in which two nations or two national airplane companies were involved and then they continue to focus more precisely on the Korean Air 801 crash in Guam in 1997 and the reporting on it in South Korean and American media. The authors wanted to analyse a crash in which no ideological interests were directly involved, as with many others where differences in reporting could be explained by ideological controversies originating in the Cold War. However, the findings indicated surprising uniformity in the coverage. On the one hand, the American media unanimously emphasized the cause of the crash as a broken navigation device plus a Korean pilot's error based on this technical limitation; some paternalist Big Brother attitudes were also recognised. On the other hand, the South Korean media admitted that they paid attention to national interest and presented viewpoints contradicting what the US media had published:

There was a quiet consensus among us [KBS reporters] that we should report the cause of the accident in a different way. We also thought of our national interest [...] What we could do was collect available data to support our theory. (Kim & Lee, 2008:95)

The conclusion by the two authors is that journalists on both sides actively created distinct frames and selected their sources accordingly. One frame, given the name of the *culpability frame*, explained the crash with a storytelling tool. The frame emphasised the drama and the conflict *per se*, presenting the issue with dichotomous black-and-white terms. The most important question was the same as in the Exxon Valdez case: “Who is to blame?” This frame was predominantly chosen by American media. The crash, involving a foreign airliner and low American casualties, provided little motivation for American journalists to pursue news sources outside the official channels, but drama was brought into the stories via established journalistic tools.

The other frame, favoured by South Korean media, was named as the *national interest frame*. The tragedy hit South Korea the hardest, because out of the 254 dead, only 13 were non-Koreans. The frame assigned

the blame of the tragedy to non-Korean factors at the Guam airport, to the US media, to the weather, and to the official accident investigation, which was labelled as being biased toward American explanations. The American media's interpretations were challenged. The question of blame was there, but as the authors state, the South Korean media relied on what Gamson (1988) has described as *transhistorically generalised frames*, based on knowledge of previous air disasters. The authors call the Korean journalists' behaviour reactive, "journalists as audience". Because the journalists perceived the forms of frame used by the US media, the first definition was rejected. They were consciously initiating an opposing or conflicting viewpoint and the event lived considerably longer in South Korean media.

Although no distinctly ideological differences could be detected, the two "fronts" were formed in the media. The behaviour of the US media indicated that, because very few Americans were involved, the whole issue was not in the interest of the American public. On the other hand, several Korean journalists felt that they had to calm down the home front by emphasising a more general slant.

In this case, when the crisis model is applied to the US media behaviour, the Self emerged as a detached Ally, the Victim—the Koreans meeting the casualties—was far away, and the Enemy was easily recognized in the technical problems and the pilot's behaviour. It seemed to be in the American national interest to indicate to the nation that the crash was not relevant for the US. In the Korean frame, the Enemy remained diffuse, the Self and the Victim were in fact merged. Between the lines, Americans received qualities, which linked them with the Enemy. The Korean national interest was to comfort and to take distance from the Enemy, not to accept the blame.

It is interesting that national interests can also be found in cases lacking open ideological controversies. The mainstream media in a particular country can operate quite unanimously, without any outside pressure, not to talk about any form of censorship. The surprise in the case was the construction of the distinct fronts. As such, the conclusion was not a surprise. Professionalism drives journalists to search for the Enemy and the Victim from a particular direction, and the sources are chosen accordingly. It is important to give a clear-cut picture of the situation in relationship to "us", and them—the Enemy—is indicated as precisely as possible—as in the American case—or diffusely as was done in the Korean media. In the Korean case, the We was the Korean nation and the Other included both the Enemy and passive Allies, such as the Americans. In the American case, We included Americans only, and the rest of the actors in the exercise belonged to the Other. Again, it can also be stated that the distance had its role in the journalistic outcome. The proximity was decisive—it was not easy to create agency on the basis of official reports as in the US media case, but that was not the meaning, either. The distance was used rather as an indication of lack of agency.

**Citizen versus state**

The research on tsunami reporting in Sweden and Finland (e.g., Kivikuru, 2006; Rahkonen, 2005; Kivikuru & Nord, 2009) mainly focused on how well or poorly the media operated as advocates of so-called ordinary people's information needs in the catastrophe. The media did not succeed well in this respect. For a short while, the media lost the game about the public arena for the web. Quite interestingly, according to Finnish research, many members of the public treated the media as part of the public system, which they felt had operated poorly in the catastrophe. The state and the media were thus equated, and they were on the "other side", i.e., on the side of the official society.

A secondary analysis of the data brings up other aspects. The research seems to indicate that the traditionally strong link between the Nordic welfare state and its citizens was at stake during the first weeks after the tsunami in both countries, and the media arena in fact gave space for citizens' attitudes of distrust and frustration. It was felt that the state was not responsive enough. Although the crisis took different forms in the two countries, and in Sweden the state of emergency continued longer than in Finland, in both countries, the government and authorities failed in transforming routine public administration practices in a truly urgent and unexpected situation. Additionally, in both countries, the state started the practical operations, but wanted to publish only such information that was credible. The public information mechanism seemed to be constructed in such a way that no direct contacts between the state and the citizens were possible. The media were required as a mediator. Despite fine policy statements, public information formed a one-way channel, top/down. There was no space for debate and/or questions presented by the citizens. The critics were disappointed about the fact that the state machinery was unable to exercise transparency in this process.

The role of the media was quite diffuse: The volume of reporting was enormous, the media gave considerable space for citizens as actors, and they gave space for emotions as well. Simultaneously though, their main sources were official, because public organizations ran the show. The emotions and frustrations were perhaps "too" individualized. Instead of getting organized for a struggle, individuals jumped to Internet discussions sites to find other individuals who were in the same boat. Most of them did not participate in discussions; they just visited the sites to see what was going on. In fact, their behaviour did not differ much from ordinary mass media reception. Nevertheless, the option for participation was available, and this was enough, even if it was not exercised.

Later several representatives of the media have claimed that journalism was highly critical about how things were run after the tsunami; however, content analyses tell a different story. The proportion of consistently critical media texts was modest. The media mainly followed a news agenda, taking sides with one actor or the other, giving space for citizen voices because their cry was loud. The whole story was over

in 4-5 weeks and the tsunami catastrophe was subsequently wiped from the public arena. Some public information policy practices were changed because of the criticism expressed, and that was all. In December 2005, one year after the catastrophe, the tsunami returned to the media agenda as an anniversary theme.

Although the catastrophe was huge, the battle did not last long. In the stories published a year later, the main focus was, for the first time, on the countries which were worst hit by the catastrophe. One could almost interpret the media behaviour as an expression of shame. The Nordic media had noticed that the real victims of the catastrophe had not received enough attention on their agenda. Citizens directly linked with the catastrophe, via their relatives and friends getting lost or injured, seemed to overrate the significance of the event. The tsunami remained as news, and as a piece of outdated news, it disappeared from the agenda, and the majority of the population appeared satisfied with the operations of the state and the coverage of the media.

Although it is not very clear, Carpentier's model of crisis reporting can be found in tsunami journalism. The tsunami was a catastrophe of which the media systems in the North were not prepared. The event was far away, but it carried high relevance at home. There was a linkage via the local people vacationing in the area. The linkage was not political as such, but politics were brought into the picture quite consistently. More general notions of distrust and dissatisfaction found a channel for expression via the tsunami. An additional element in the instability of reporting was brought into the picture by the web, which in those days was still a fairly new channel of information distribution. It was probably due to these sources of instability that, at least in Finland, the overwhelmingly most popular journalistic genre in tsunami reporting was the genre of news. The journalistic system relied on the most industrialized and formatted genre in order to bring stability in the process.

Although the catastrophe took place far away, the drama, in fact, was highly home-spun. The Self and the Victim were equalized—the Victim was the Finnish/Swedish people suffering not only from the tsunami; but also from negligence by its own leadership, the state. In fact, the tsunami was not the real Enemy. The state represented the Enemy. One could even claim that the surge, in fact, functioned only as a supportive Ally for the Enemy, which was the state neglecting its citizens. "We" was large and very local, the Nordic nation, and the Other was living in the same hemisphere. No doubt the reasoning partly reflected the more general debate about the weakening of the Nordic welfare state.

The references from Finnish media to the Swedish and vice versa were interesting: it could be interpreted that the two Nordic nations felt themselves as being in the same boat; but, simultaneously, there was some rivalry involved in the reporting—the Swedish government being faster at the preparatory stage, and Finnish authorities "winning" the rescue operation. This rivalry was transferred to the reporting published

around the issue. The Nordic “We” operated, but it had its nuances as well. The “We” was in fact divided into “We” who had personally lost something and the “Other We”, who looked at the issue as outsiders, and got slightly bored with the large-scale news reporting about the tsunami, even when it was still the number-one item on the news agenda.

### **Media as source of comfort**

The coverage of the first school massacre in Finland could be described as expressing a shock, but also indicating some similar elements as the reporting on the tsunami: the reporting was emotional, and especially the online reports of the conventional media showed that the power relations in the newsrooms were chaotic. A high-speed race for news had a new arena. For the first time, online reporting took over, and even large, well-established media, in their web versions, published close-up pictures of crying youth, intimate details about the shooter and the proceedings at the school, etc. However, the journalistic praxis did not find new forms. The value above all others was the rapidity of transmission. The alternatives available in web based communication were not used. The connection with citizens was taken care of by inviting amateur photos and video clips from the site of the drama.

Although the journalistic profession officially defended its members in the case of Jokela, behind the doors, very critical discussions were held. When the massacre in Kauhajoki took place, the shadow of Jokela was present all the time (Raittila *et al.*, 2009: 11-48). The reporting was cautious and reserved, youngsters were not interviewed, and instead of expanding details, serious discussions in the media about the government’s role, about shooting permits, about school health services, and about school tormentors started immediately after the massacre. Furthermore, the division of work between the conventional media and their web versions was far more conservative than in the case of Jokela. There was no longer competition for juicy details between the web versions, and the most important facts were reserved for the “base” medium.

The constructions of the Self, the Enemy, and the Victim were different. In Jokela, the residents of the community were presented as the Victims, while the rest of the population received the role of the Self, totally astonished and shocked. In Jokela, the construction of the Enemy focused entirely on the shooter; a discussion about the society’s role started considerably later. It could be said that the media tried to convince the Self, and as the Self’s Bystander, the state, about the haphazardness of the event. But the media themselves, partly due to the chaotic power relations inside the newsrooms, were in a state of shock. The publication, in the web versions, of vulgar intimate pictures and video clips by ordinary citizens indicates this aspect perhaps even better than the emotional reports on crying youth.



The general public was thus invited to participate in the reporting; they were invited to develop agency. The Evil, the Other, was limited to the youngster who did the shootings, and extremely detailed reports on his online life were published. He was presented as a murderer, as a hero—in references to online hate groups of like-minded—and as a victim, a target of othering at school. The Self and the Victim comforted each other on the public arena, thus forming a joint “Us”. Community building was strong, based on details and emotions. The state, which hardly existed on the public arena, formed a joint “us” during the first week. However, ordinary people were only invited to participate as observers, as scattered and confused individuals who could not understand that such a thing could happen in Finland.

In the case of Kauhajoki, the situation was different. The first reports started with “Why again?” thinking. The shooter was again given much media attention; but he was not the lone Enemy. Representatives of the poorly functioning welfare state were also challenged: the state had not developed control and sanctioning mechanisms, which could protect citizens from deviant behaviour. However, compared with the accusations presented in the case of the tsunami, the style was far more reflective and reserved. In a way, the Self and the Enemy were glued together into a question “What is wrong in our society?” Interestingly, the Victim was almost invisible. No doubt, the avoidance of personalized and emotional reporting was deliberate; but as indicated in researcher interviews, the mainstream reports were interpreted as giving support to the police and rescue activity, forgetting, to a large extent, the sorrow of the friends and relatives of the dead, as well as the frustrations of the students who escaped the danger. In a way, it could be said that the Self was found as a Bystander for both the Enemy and the Victim.

In short, the sphere of “Us” was large, but also diffuse in this case. “We” were part of both the Enemy and the Victim. The picture of the shooter remained the same; but the cadres of the Enemy were extended to the society, the state, and the citizenry who were constructed as Supporters to the Enemy. The distinct role of othering was directed toward foreign media. The Finnish media criticized them, their behaviour while collecting field information as well as their reporting that, according to Finnish colleagues, indicated no understanding for the situation, often labelling the Finnish society with unfavourable attributes. In an interesting way, the media in a peripheral country let the already forgotten national inferiority complex emerge on the public agenda again. The agency element was reserved for the local component, local people, and local society. Although the society was criticized, a strong community feeling was advocated, which was quite unlike the situation after the tsunami.

### Space for agency?

At least in the above examples, Sonwalkar's banal journalism with its distinct binary positions seems to be very common in catastrophe coverage. Divisions into "us" and "them" appear as a standard procedure among journalists, and obviously, it is accepted by the public as well. A crisis revitalizes the question about the culprit, the person, or the system responsible for the tragedy. Carpentier's ideological model of war journalism also seems to fit into any form of crisis. It elaborates the picture of the situation. With the constructions of the Self, the Enemy, the Victim and the silent Supporters or Bystanders, journalism is able to develop the crisis into a drama with clear-cut positions taken by the actors. Sometimes the Self integrates with the Victim, sometimes with the Enemy—very rarely the latter; but, for example, in the case of the school massacres, that kind of element can be traced.

Although it is rarely discussed openly, an interesting dimension is the element of power found, in one form or the other, in all the cases that were discussed. Power positions and politics determined the construction of victims and enemies. In a sense, this is a truism—naturally power positions have a say in crises. We tend to assume that such crises as natural catastrophes fall outside the realm of power politics. They do not. This does not mean that journalism would describe crisis situations in an absurd or arbitrary manner; but complex social structures and policies are simplified, stereotyped, and brought in even such events as airplane crashes, tsunamis, and mass murders.

First, an indication of this is *the volume* of coverage an event receives. *The Carma Report* (2006) even claims that Western self-interest is the pre-condition for significant coverage of a humanitarian crisis. The researchers analysed eight disasters in the media of nine Western countries, and there appeared to be no link between the scale of a disaster and media interest in the story. Of all the studied disasters, hurricanes Stanley and Katrina suffered the least deaths. Katrina also had one of the lower population displacement rates. But Katrina received far more attention in the global media than any other humanitarian disaster studied. The tsunami became the second, and the disaster receiving extremely little attention was Darfur.

Journalism *frames* crisis events with delicate social interpretations, selecting some elements and leaving some others aside. Further, in crisis journalism, all decisions are carried out quickly, and the *first definition* of a crisis is often based on very limited evidence. However, the first definition has a tendency to last a long time. The case of Exxon Valdez is probably the best example of a long-lasting first definition. It was nature, fish, and birds that suffered. The forever-changed life of the local fishermen did not touch the string.

An important element in crisis reporting is *visual journalism*. This is because, in an internationally understandable language, it frames and stereotypes crisis and conflict events. In visual journalism, even in standard reporting, the existence of/or the lack of agency becomes obvious. News pictures tend to

strengthen such cultural stereotypes as mother-and-child intimacy or old people being feeble and fragile. But visual agency has also an ethnic dimension. A case study analysed news pictures of two parallel processes in the early 1990s, namely the conflict in the Balkans and the massacre in Rwanda. Without exception, the white inhabitants of Sarajevo were presented as active and determined, cooking, caring for their children, or running away from the troubled areas, while pictures from Rwanda—very few compared with the Sarajevo case—presented people in the refugee camps as either fighting each other like animals for bread and sacks of maize, or lying dead in piles. (Leskelä, 1996)

Although it is clear today that standard crisis journalism includes far more descriptions of emotions and personal suffering than before, in several of the above examples, it is complicated to integrate Chouliaraki's agency thinking into crisis journalism. Chouliaraki claims that if a distant Victim is described as an active and personalized sufferer, that kind of journalism is able to create solidarity among people far away. In the case of the tsunami, the notion of agency was definitely there, but the basic reason for the Finns and Swedes feeling such strong solidarity for the distant suffering in Thailand was the fact that the sufferers were their countrymen, not representatives of distant societies. So, mental proximity was also the key element in that distant crisis.

Chouliaraki's basic claim definitely holds: the public no doubt feels sympathy and solidarity with active sufferers; such elements would bring the event closer. One could even say that here we again deal with a truism. Personal suffering and "natural"—rational and/or emotional—behaviour by the sufferer are qualities that journalism has frequently used for the past 100-150 years, for example in war and conflict journalism. In wars, "we" are described to behave as people should, while "they", the other side, emerge as irrational, unjust, and barbaric. The problem is a hen-and-egg question. Activity and personalization are usually linked with some kind of mental proximity. Journalism describing a new crisis or catastrophe is able to build on that basis. There must be a link, an identification pole that journalism reinforces and constructs in its presentations.

In agency thinking, the point of departure is that suffering as such can operate as an identification pole. In the same way as with love and hate, people all over the world can identify themselves with suffering. On a very general level, this is definitely true and proved, for example, by global success stories in the film, television and music industries. Genuine "basic" sentiments sell well among audiences all over the world. However, the picture is more complicated. Receivers who feel strongly for the stories presented by the media usually search for an array of other familiar elements than the "pure" feelings from the individual story. As contradictory as it might sound, the media text should be simultaneously accessible and authentic (Brusila, 2001). A key to the culture must be offered besides the suffering. Suffering, as such, is not enough to instigate empathy.

Another aspect of agency is offered by Barry Richards (2007: 172-194) who stresses that bringing emotions and fear into journalism gives the media and the forces behind them a possibility toward political marketing and governance. He suggests emotional education be given to the citizens in order to avoid overreactions, and in fact to enable the undressing of the dimensions of agency.

Mark Deuze (2007: 84-91) refers to Maurizio Lazzarato's suggestion of the dialectic between the forms of life and the values they produce. Deuze elaborates on the role of the professional in today's media industries: agency and choice are extremely important for individuals facing a vast array of influences, pressures, pleasures, and constraints. Are the attitudes and choices simply a product of socialization into the existing order of things, or can their goals, ideas, and actions be considered to be more or less independent of the way things work in existing companies and organizations? According to Deuze, over time, people in newsrooms tend to commit to patterned behaviours, thereby "routinising the unexpected", a phenomenon which Gaye Tuchman (1973) already discussed. This idea fits poorly with the current dogma of flexible production and a globally emerging convergence culture—but there is a rich variety of research indicating that the work in creative industries still is recursive and has a tendency to produce routines.

Does all this kill the chance for genuine agency in standard crisis journalism? This researcher holds that it does. Large audience media use standard supplies of material via the big news collectors. The contra and alternative feeds of news transmission are available and no doubt considered in clear-cut political conflicts. In the "new" crises, this connection is not so clear. One could claim that the professional praxis works against genuine agency. As long as the news machine has the obligation to produce as much as possible as fast as possible, there hardly is space for it. In fact, it seems to be so that if the global crisis happens in one's own backyard, there seems to be a tendency to report on it in the same standardized way that the international news agencies cover global crises far away.

Indications of increased banal agency are already with us: in vulgar details of suffering, crying and hungry children, and dramatic contradictions of wealth and poverty. They already came with the picture journalism in the 1970s: Life Aid was organized on the basis of pictures of starving Ethiopian children. But, as research has later revealed, that agency hit the third Ethiopian hunger—the two previous ones did not fit the global news agenda filled with East-West summits and international sports events. Further, Life Aid did not last long. It has been followed by a succession of other dramatic events, which have received "first aid" via spontaneous movements fighting for a better world. (Harrison & Palmer, 1986) In the Internet age, this kind of movement can emerge and die very fast, like crash news. There is a danger of "crash agency" packages of solidarity that come and go.

Somehow Chantal Mouffe's (2005) radical democracy sounds more sustainable. Radical democracy means conceptualizing and realizing equality and liberty. It does not entail the dogmatic assertion of a set of fixed

criteria. It is a reflective process in which democracy is understood as unfinished and continuously re-thinking itself. Uncertainty, questioning. But, again, how well does it fit in the present journalistic practices? So much and so little has in fact happened in the mediascape in the era of Web 2.0.

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