

# Media and compassion after digital war: Why digital media haven't transformed responses to human suffering in contemporary conflict

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## Abstract

*There is a persistent belief in the power of media images to transform the events they depict. Yet despite the instant availability of billions of images of human suffering and death in the continuous and connective digital glare of social media, the catastrophes of contemporary wars, such as in Syria and Yemen, unfold relentlessly. There are repeated expressions of surprise by some in the West when the dissemination of images of suffering and wars, particularly in mainstream news media, does not translate into a de-escalation of conflict.*

*In this article I consider today's loosening of the often presumed relationship between media representation, knowledge and response under the conditions of "digital war". This is the digital disruption of the relationship between warfare and society in which all sides participate in the uploading and sharing of information on, and images and videos of, conflict.*

*Is it the case that the capacity of images of human injury and death to bring about change, and the expectation that they would stir practical intervention in wars, is and has been exaggerated? Even if we are moved or shocked upon being confronted by such images, does this translate into some form of action, individual or otherwise? In this article I contend that the saturation of information and images of human suffering and death in contemporary warfare has not ushered in a new era of "compassion fatigue". Rather, algorithmically charged outrage is a proxy for effects. It is easy to misconstrue the velocity of linking and liking and sharing as some kind of mass action or mass movement.*

*Humanitarian catastrophes slowly unfold in an age of continuous and connective digital glare, and yet they are unseen. If the imploded battlefield of digital war affording the most proximate and persistent view of human suffering and death in history cannot ultimately mobilize radically effective forms of public response, it is difficult to imagine what will.*

**Keywords:** digital war, social media, images, human suffering, compassion, humanitarian crises, Syria, Yemen.



## The inescapable untruth

Changes in our lens on the world – what is seen or not seen, how and for how long, through the transforming media environment of a given era – have shaped our capacity to be moved, to respond in some way, when confronted with human suffering as a result of conflict. There is also a history of experiences and assumptions as to the impact of the specific medium of representation on a given spectator or audience. This includes the photograph (and earlier public lantern

slide lectures) being used to mobilize humanitarian action since the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> But this history, I argue here, has been upended in the digital era, with the transformation in the relationship between war, media, perception and public response.

In this article, I set out the nature, consequences and paradoxes of this transformation and ask if some of the traditional and established concepts and ideas are up to the task of rendering it intelligible. This transformation notably includes a radical shift in the emergence of a new mass public that is able to express views and opinions in an immediate time frame—to participate and to provide feedback—and in ways that were unthinkable only two decades ago. But also intertwined with this shift is the development of a new kind of war—digital war—which is fought through and on the same media platforms and devices that have enabled mass public participation. Human suffering in conflicts is mostly unfolding in a continuous and connective digital glare which one might think would deliver a new era of humanitarianism, and yet which seems instead to have diminished the prospects of any kind of usable compassion.

The singular photograph was once acclaimed as a reliable output of a medium used for stirring the collective conscience, for radicalizing the crowd, for compelling action. This is not to say that there was a golden (twentieth-century) age of image effects. Rather, there is more like a false memory of the relationship between media images, knowledge and action, driven primarily through photojournalism. The persistent belief in the power of images does not fit with today's digital world—more specifically, debates about compassion, media images and the related prospects for intervention to stop so-called “distant” human suffering,<sup>2</sup> caused predominantly by humanitarian crises, fail to grasp the nature and scale of the transformation ushered in by digital war.

I define “digital war” as the ways in which multimedia smartphones, messaging apps and social media platforms have disrupted the relationship between warfare and society, creating a global, although uneven, participative

1 See Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, “‘A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child’: Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective”, *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 97, No. 900, 2015. In her article for this issue of the *Review*, entitled “The Camera and the Red Cross: ‘Lamentable Pictures’ and Conflict Photography Bring into Focus an International Movement, 1855–1865”, Sonya de Laat explores the role of combat photography in three major conflicts of the mid-nineteenth century “in expanding a shared vision of who constitutes humanity, and who is worth caring for”.

2 By “distant” I mean a predominantly Occidental and privileged position of safety from, and limited fear of, warfare. This idea of “distant suffering” has been associated with a “white saviour complex” narrative of humanitarian action, whereby the “West” goes in to help “distant” and “non-Western” parts of the world. This is also embedded in a history of the development of assumptions about the role of late twentieth-century media in war. But perceptions and meanings of “distance” are also transformed through digital war, a shift that I set out in this paper. For an influential work on this term, see Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, trans. Graham Burchell, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999. See also Lilie Chouliaraki's idea of the “post-humanitarian” style of communication in a “dominant Western culture where the de-emotionalization of the suffering of distant others goes hand in hand with the over-emotionalization of our safe everyday life”: Lilie Chouliaraki, “Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication Beyond a Politics of Pity”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2010, p. 122.

arena in which it is decreasingly clear who is fighting, who is commentating, and who is experiencing the effects of war. This is taking place through a new siege of attention as militaries, civilians, journalists, NGOs, States and militias all upload and circulate images and video from sites of conflict, often in real time, producing an intensely competitive panoply of participation in and perspectives on war.

An astonishing consequence of digital war, in particular for anyone who ever had faith in the idea that images can really end conflict, is its production of the most proximate and persistent view of human suffering and death in history. The plethora of content on digital and social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and others) produces an overwhelming presence not only of unfolding war, but also of all the horrors of previously forgotten or mislaid wars, as a new archive of human suffering is suddenly made available.

The battlefield has taken on an open-access dimension, crowded with the claims, opinions and outrage of anyone who can post, link, like or share on social media. This has produced a seething mass of information, disinformation, misinformation and speculation about unfolding events, uploaded by a connected multitude. Digital war, then, is information war that weakens the distinction between combatants and civilians, with publics increasingly entangled in the digital sharing of information and images about conflict.

This live-streaming and sharing of battle then builds an incredible record, a searchable archive, of information and images of war on an unparalleled scale. A simple YouTube search for “Syrian war”, for instance, brings up a seemingly infinite number of videos, where even the first ten hits range from being uploaded in the last few weeks to as long ago as several years, some with viewing figures in the millions.<sup>3</sup> Search results yield a seemingly unlimited mix of images and video of the mainstream remediated, the official, unofficial and authorized, the conventional and the transgressive, all awaiting their algorithmic return in an emergent, patchwork, living archive and history of war. This living archive is in constant flux – videos are continually being re-edited, renamed and reposted, by the various actors pushing their version or experience of this war. Meanwhile, the supreme gatekeeper of YouTube is accused of removing or deleting videos that do not conform to its terms of service, but which potentially document war crimes.<sup>4</sup> In this war of and on social media archives, there is a “radicalization of memory”.<sup>5</sup>

3 Included in the range of this three-week- to seven-year-old spread of the top 10 search results (searching from a UK ISP on 29 January 2021) were a mix of mainstream media coverage and professional, amateur and unverifiable organizations supporting a particular side or group in the war. For example, a video with 2.3 million views entitled “Heavy Clashes during the Battle for Al-Ramouseh Aleppo | Syria War 2014” was uploaded by the “WarClashes” channel on 20 April 2014. The description reads, in part: “Heavy clashes erupted as various brigades attacked Al-Ramouseh district in Aleppo. The fighters managed to capture the district from the Syrian Army after fierce clashes went on for a couple days”. See: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iwh49HgfYME&t=10s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iwh49HgfYME&t=10s) (all internet references were accessed in January 2021).

4 See, for instance, the work of the Syrian Archive group, available at: <https://syrianarchive.org>.

5 Andrew Hoskins, “The Radicalisation of Memory: Monuments and Memorials in a Post-Trust Era”, Keynote Talk, “Moving Monuments” Conference, Manchester Centre for Public History and Heritage, Manchester Metropolitan University, 20 April 2018.

For the purposes of my argument here, digital and social media afford a new experience of the in/visibility of war, where acts and images capturing those acts seem to be out there in the open. Yet, this seemingly transparent news of events is illusory. What is seen and not seen is dictated by the most effective wagers of information warfare and their methods of attention-hacking, exploiting the algorithms of content hosts and owners. Through posting and liking content, automated trolls give the impression of genuine popularity, tripping the algorithm of social media and video platforms to push content into the feeds of real people, who in turn repost it and propel it into a much wider media ecology. Thus, the non-human and the human work in consort to create an alternative reality – in essence, an in/visible digital war.<sup>6</sup>

In this article I explore the consequences of the emergence of digital war for the nature of, and assumptions about, the relationship between knowledge about war, compassion and the capacity for action, in the face of representations of distant human suffering. My principal point of reference for a paradigmatic shift in the relationship between war, media and the capacity for comprehension and engagement is the late twentieth-century “broadcast era”. This is the era in which ideas about the relationship between representation, knowledge and response cohered – namely, a pervasive and persistent belief in the power of media and particularly television images to transform the events they depict. What follows from this assumption is that when images of human suffering no longer seemed to do the work that was expected of them, this was explicable by an over-familiarity with such images, breeding so-called “compassion fatigue”.<sup>7</sup> I argue that this notion of compassion fatigue, as a way of considering today’s response or lack of response to images of distant human suffering, does not translate into today’s digital media ecology.

The shift I am describing stems from the nature and frequency of media representations of suffering. During the broadcast era, images of humanitarian crises and conflicts were largely shared by a select group of mainstream journalists, editors, and channel and newspaper owners. In effect, this was a mostly contained or closed system of communication, with actors having largely monopolistic roles in the production, publication and broadcast of images and footage of war. Furthermore, for several decades, media studies and other disciplines sought to work out exactly what “the audience” understood from “the text” that had been “produced” for them.

6 Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins, *Radical War: Data, Attention and Control in the 21st Century*, forthcoming.

7 Compassion fatigue refers to the idea that on being too frequently confronted with, for example, a news image of a child emaciated through starvation or maimed by urban shelling, the “distant” “spectator” not living through humanitarian crises will not be sufficiently moved or outraged to challenge the policy-makers or donate to the aid organizations that might intervene in order to limit or stop the suffering and deaths of civilians under attack. See Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, Routledge, New York, 1999. For an influential critique of Moeller’s work, see David Campbell, “The Myth of Compassion Fatigue”, in Liam Kennedy and Caitlin Patrick (eds.), *The Violence of the Image: Photography and International Conflict*, Routledge, London, 2020.

With digital technologies and social media, however, anyone is potentially an information producer and sharer. Thus, as Merrin makes clear, the very nature of how audiences engage with media content has changed:

[E]ven when watching broadcast content on a digital device the user is not the traditional audience: their status is not defined by their consumption but by the active relationships of communication and control producing and maintaining their activities and the electronic signals and records these create.<sup>8</sup>

Here, then, the traditional idea of “media production” is reversed. At one point in the history of broadcasting, audiences were seen as the end point of a linear, reductive notion, of the flow of communication of news and information about war and its consequences. Today, users are not just on the receiving end of news and images, with limited or no opportunity for feedback or for making their opinions public. Rather, they are participants in an ongoing and connected network, actively partaking in the production and distribution of media content

This may all initially sound democratizing amidst the benevolent language of “social” media, in which users “share” content, that peaked with the heralding of the 2011 Arab Spring. But although the advent of digital war has challenged the mainstream media and other elite actors in their capacity to shape what war looks like, they now compete with new forms of surveillance and control employed by the corporations that own and manage the platforms through which users produce what today is understood as war, and with all those who can exploit people’s increasing dependency on such platforms and services for news and information.

Nonetheless, the very idea of user-generated content (UGC), of not only being a participant but feeling like a participant, and of being active in the capacity to express—record, produce, publish, share, like, post, edit, caption, retweet—media content about war and human suffering, affords a sense of personal connection, action and control. Are these forms of expression, then, new outlets for, and indeed amplifiers of, individual and public outrage and compassion on a new and unprecedented scale? Or rather, when images of suffering are acclaimed for “going viral”, is it the case that the knowledge of this contagion functions to blunt as much as to inspire compassion? Are certain forms of digital “participation” substitutes for, rather than drivers of, action, when the work of outrage is seen as done?

Another view that I dissect in this article is that instead, digital war has created a new era of “compassion fatigue”. A common explanation for an inability to feel is that familiarity with images of suffering inevitably desensitizes us and leaches meaning out of what is before us. Viewers are supposedly slowly dulled and numbed into jaded indifference by the sheer scale and persistence of the suffering of innocents on repeat, looped into social media platforms and news cycles that offer only war without end. The compassion fatigue theory posits that

8 William Merrin, “Fight for the Users! Media Studies in the 21st Century”, *Media Education Research Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2015, p. 61.

if audiences turn away, then so does the news, for it is a business ultimately driven by clicks and subscriptions.

Yet, this popular view of overburdened attention blunting the potential mobilization of a response is misconstrued. The very idea of compassion fatigue as it applies to war and media<sup>9</sup> is underpinned by a misguided, persistent presumption that images have substantive effects *and* that there was a critical mass of those who really cared in the first place. In this paper, I probe the nature of the investment in this idea by policy-makers, journalists and academics. Specifically, I question whether the compassion fatigue hypothesis removes any impetus for relief or humanitarian support to be undertaken in a public or even urgent manner.

For instance, almost a decade of footage, images and feeds<sup>10</sup> of the suffering and deaths of civilians in Syria has seemingly been hiding in plain sight across global mainstream and social media, with no effective prompting of any coherent or effective collective expression of outrage. If perceived inaction over Syria's protracted war is not a classic case of compassion fatigue, then what explains the relationship between media representations of suffering, knowledge and response in the digital era?

My answer to this question is the basis for what follows in this article. I argue that this belief in the relationship between representation, knowledge and response has for years fed into an unrealistic image of media effects<sup>11</sup> and, relatedly, the role and potential of humanitarianism. This gap between belief and reality has significantly widened with recent transformations in the nature of and relationships between war and media, that I am here calling digital war. This includes the way in which digital media and technologies have disrupted war and society so that the very audiences that all actors (militaries, governments, NGOs) have traditionally attempted to reach via media are now part of the same communications fabric.

From the above, there are two key and related observations in terms of the individual confronted with images of human suffering in today's digital media ecology. The first is that digital war is inescapable. While human suffering in other parts of the world afflicted with humanitarian crises has often seemed like a distant concept to the so-called Occident,<sup>12</sup> in our current digital age, this figurative and geographic "distance" is collapsed by the personal proximity of social media.

9 See S. D. Moeller, above note 7, for her influential work in this context.

10 One acclaimed example is the photograph taken in 2019 by the journalist Bashar al-Sheikh. See "Syrian Air Strike Sisters Photo: Behind the Image that Shocked the World", *BBC News*, 1 August 2019, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-49186145/syria-air-strike-sisters-photo-behind-the-image-that-shocked-the-world](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-49186145/syria-air-strike-sisters-photo-behind-the-image-that-shocked-the-world).

11 There is a long history of "direct" media effects research in media studies – this is the idea that exposure to or consumption of mass media shapes individuals' behaviour. David Gauntlett offers a useful critique of this work in arguing that "if, after over 60 years of a considerable amount of research effort, direct effects of media upon behaviour have not been clearly identified, then we should conclude that they are simply *not there to be found*". David Gauntlett, "Ten Things Wrong with the Media 'Effects' model", 2006, available at: <https://davidgauntlett.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Ten-Things-Wrong-2006-version.pdf>.

12 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978.

Digital media not only afford a potentially continuous view of human suffering, but also offer unprecedented opportunities for individuals to like, share and comment on a tsunami of disturbing images. In digital war, which has for years delivered untrammelled images of the horrors of civilian suffering (for example, in the wars in Syria and Yemen), it is no longer possible to say “I did not know”.

The second observation is that we are living through an astonishing collapse in trust in the mainstream news media. Informational production and distribution has suddenly undergone a very public crisis of legitimacy, with a recognition of the difficulty of dividing truth from opinion and doubts raised over who has the right to lay claim to an audience or to truth.<sup>13</sup> In these circumstances, when looking at or sharing messages, images, humanitarian campaigns and so on, and in assessing their truthfulness, it becomes easier to conclude that “I cannot know”. The voracity, provenance and reliability of media content seem so difficult to ever pin down in this environment. This is, then, an incredible challenge for those attempting to convey information about human suffering in order to elicit intervention, some kind of help. This includes humanitarian organizations, charities and other NGOs, which are often ultimately reliant on the unique power of the still image, in whatever medium, to persuade the individual to donate.

These two aspects are paradoxically brought to bear on the moral sensibility of the participant in digital war, who is unable to deny knowledge of the world’s atrocities unfolding in multiple and simultaneous news feeds, and yet finds it difficult to trust any one of them. Both of these aspects, being aware and being uncertain, follow from the fact that in the circumstances of digital war, our attention is under siege.

In sum, can compassion for suffering during humanitarian crises amidst the effects of digital war be translated into action? To answer this question requires acknowledgement of the paradigmatic shift in the relationship between media, knowledge and action. This is caught up in the paradox of the impossibility of being able to claim ignorance of human suffering in the face of seemingly unlimited information and images, against the difficulty of having certainty about the provenance of any of the same information and images.

Digital war is thriving in what is popularly known as today’s “post-truth” society, where any given news about the world can be quickly and conveniently mired in a sea of alternative opinions, conspiracies, fakes and fact-checking. For instance, the Oxford Dictionary defines “post-truth” as “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.<sup>14</sup> Although news has always been made up of a mosaic of facts, opinion, conjecture and speculation, the difference today is that there is a brazen quality to misinformation in that it is hiding in plain sight, having become an immovable part of everyone’s information diet.

13 Catherine Happer, Andrew Hoskins and William Merrin, “Weaponizing Reality: An Introduction to Trump’s War on the Media”, in C. Happer, A. Hoskins and W. Merrin (eds), *Trump’s Media War*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2018, pp. 7–8.

14 See: <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.



Rather than “post-truth”, the term “post-trust”<sup>15</sup> seems more appropriate to characterize a seismic fall of trust in what was once seen as a reliable mainstream news media, in that it called the attention of the “Occident” to humanitarian crises and unknown human suffering in “other” parts of the world. Rather, there is a new kind of in/visibility to war and its consequences through our digital practices. Our ability to snap, post, record, edit, like, link, forward and chat serves as a stand-in for trust, in that we feel active and liberated in engaging and shaping the media which we inhabit. This is “part of an epochal shift in how we gather and share information, in a movement to a ‘me-dia’ world in which individuals increasingly create their own, personal ecology of technologies, platforms, media, content, information, opinions, experiences and knowledge”.<sup>16</sup> One consequence of our digital immersion in an ocean of media content, then, is not some kind of revelation but rather a closing down – and, some argue, a polarization.<sup>17</sup>

Considering these shifts, I set out in what follows some of the trends in, and the challenges of, attention, perception, compassion and war for all message shapers. To this end, I firstly expand on the historical context of the critical shift from the broadcast era to digital media ecologies that underpins my argument of revolutionary rather than evolutionary change. I then offer two case studies as lenses to explore these ideas further: the still unfolding wars in Syria and Yemen. I focus on these examples of human suffering because they exemplify a new cycle of image–expectation–inaction under conditions of digital war. Namely, there is a persistent belief that knowledge of this suffering through the unlimited supply of images and information should or will shape some kind of political and/or humanitarian intervention. Yet the suffering and death continues in the face of the expectation that the images and information about that suffering should or must be having an effect on the behaviour of the Occident. I conclude my exploration of this model by highlighting the paradox that the apparent publicness, “open access” and unlimited supply of images of human suffering in humanitarian crises is actually closing off the momentum for intervention – in essence, a reversal of the very idea of “media effects”.

## From the broadcast era to digital media ecologies

Saturation coverage in the broadcast era was influentially associated with a belief in a kind of shared, collective experience<sup>18</sup> that was unavoidably part of what it was to consume news media (if only given the lack of alternatives). This afforded a sense

15 Catherine Happer and Andrew Hoskins, “Hacking the Archive: Media, Memory, and History in the Post-Trust Era”, in Michael Moss and David Thomas (eds), *Post Truth Archives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, forthcoming.

16 C. Happer, A. Hoskins and W. Merrin, above note 13, pp. 14–15.

17 Tarek Abdelzaher *et al.*, “The Paradox of Information Access: Growing Isolation in the Age of Sharing”, 2020, available at: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2004.01967.pdf>.

18 Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992.

that the “whole world was watching”,<sup>19</sup> which shaped a belief in a powerful connected and collective conscience, an audience that could somehow feel or respond or act in consort. This sense of the power of media effects in the global yet contained media ecology of the late twentieth century has oddly continued to underpin assumptions about the visual force of the watching of catastrophes in the twenty-first century.

There is also a long history of the circulation of images depicting suffering during humanitarian crises, including with the aim to elicit sympathy and ultimately action. It wasn't until the broadcast era of the twentieth century, however, that there was a cemented belief, mainly across the Western hemisphere, in the power of the Western mainstream media (WMM)<sup>20</sup> to make an impact on events.

Late twentieth-century mainstream journalism thrived owing to its dominance in the representational order of the day, in which there was little opportunity to challenge what or how media content was produced and distributed. This was particularly the case with regard to the cultural hold enjoyed by television, a medium which has traditionally been referenced most by those advancing the idea of direct media effects and the existence of compassion fatigue. This elite representational order was sustained through what can now be seen as a scarcity of images of war and their control by mainstream media in terms of what was accessible to most global audiences – but today this order has been broken or at least displaced.<sup>21</sup>

This dominance of the late twentieth-century WMM hit a new peak with the satellite news coverage of the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>22</sup> This included the heralding of the so-called “CNN effect”.<sup>23</sup> The news network's extended real-time coverage of the 1991 Gulf War established its reputation for being the principal and often exclusive provider of what was at the time a new kind of compelling global public

19 To borrow from Todd Gitlin's classic text: see Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, and London, 1980.

20 Hereafter, I use “WMM” to refer to the Western news media in order to signify that historically there has been a concentration of news and other media ownership and/or production in rich Western countries (some also use the term “global North”). This includes, for example, the BBC, CNN, News Corp, Reuters and the picture agencies. This focus is pertinent to my key delineation of news cultures between the late twentieth-century “broadcast era” and today's digital media ecology. An important consideration is that the WMM were utterly defining of what “Western war” was (see Martin Shaw, *The Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and Its Crisis in Iraq*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005). This includes CNN being mutually synonymous with the 1991 Gulf War, but importantly, this relationship between the WMM and warfare also influenced a significant trajectory of thought in the analysis of war and media from the early 1990s (see below). In the digital media ecology, the WMM remains influential but competes with (as well as being incorporated by) the US-based so-called “tech giants” of Facebook, Twitter, Google and Apple, dominating how news and information is produced, seen or not seen.

21 See C. Happer, A. Hoskins and W. Merrin, above note 13, pp. 3–22. See also the refreshingly honest reflections of Jeff Jarvis over the past few years in his *BuzzMachine* blog, available at: <https://buzzmachine.com>.

22 Andrew Hoskins, *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq*, Continuum, London, 2004.

23 Steven Livingston, *Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention*, Research Paper R-18, Joan Shorenstein Barone Centre on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1997.

visual perspective on events unfolding across the multiple geopolitical fronts of this war.

At the time, there was a sense that TV news held a new real-time power to shape events as they occurred.<sup>24</sup> For example, on 17 January 1991, the day after the first Coalition bombing of Baghdad, the then Israeli deputy foreign minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated:

What we are facing now is political communication. As we speak it may be that in a bunker in Baghdad, they listen to us. In fact, I'll delete the "may be" – I'm sure they listen to us. They are listening to us in Moscow, in Washington and everywhere else. So that the impact of what is seen and said on television is an integral part of the – of the war effort on both sides... television is no longer a spectator.

You know, in physics – in subatomic physics – there's something called the Heisenburg Principle, which basically says that if you observe a phenomenon you actually change it. Well, now we have the Heisenburg Principle of politics: If you observe a phenomenon with television instantaneously you modify it.<sup>25</sup>

The significance of the perception of the global real-time power of this shift should not be underestimated. The media depiction of the 1991 Gulf War spawned a whole new subfield in the study of the relationship between war and media. This included the defining empirical study, written in the same decade by the highly respected journalist Nik Gowing, on the impact of real-time news reporting of conflicts and humanitarian crises on political influencers.<sup>26</sup> Gowing concluded that only in exceptional circumstances did real-time reporting change the policy of presidents and governments, although it more often affected their rhetoric.<sup>27</sup> Despite this work, a belief in the CNN effect and in media effects more widely has persisted into the digital era. This is evident in my core argument here of the persistent expression of surprise in this century at the lack of intervention in the face of WMM reporting of suffering caused by humanitarian crises.

Before the CNN effect took hold of the Western conscience, a harrowing BBC video by the Kenyan cameraman Mohammed Amin and the UK journalist Michael Buerk was released.<sup>28</sup> Covering the famine in Ethiopia, which killed over

24 See, for example, McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 1994

25 *Larry King Live*, CNN, 17 January 1991, cited in Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, *Television and Terror: Conflicting Times and the Crisis of News Discourse*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2007, pp. 38–39. See also Deirdre Boden and Andrew Hoskins, "Time, Space and Television", paper presented at the 2nd Theory, Culture & Society Conference, "Culture and Identity: City, Nation, World", Berlin, 11 August 1995.

26 Nik Gowing, *Real-Time Television Coverage of Armed Conflicts and Diplomatic Crises: Does it Pressure or Distort Foreign Policy Decisions?*, Working Paper 94-1, Joan Shorenstein Barone Centre on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1994.

27 See A. Hoskins and B. O'Loughlin, above note 25.

28 The original report was first broadcast on BBC1 on 23 October 1984.

a million people, the report reached international audiences in October 1984. It propelled the view that images of suffering during humanitarian crises could mobilize mass public philanthropy in the advanced industrial world, on a scale that seemed to match that of the crisis. The coverage depicted starving people arriving at feeding stations in the north of the country and reached unprecedented audiences for the pre-satellite news era.

This footage was seen by almost a third of the adult population in the UK and was rebroadcasted by hundreds of stations around the world, including the NBC evening news in the United States.<sup>29</sup> The film is credited with kick-starting the Live Aid phenomenon<sup>30</sup> and an outpouring of vast institutional and public sums in aid, including an immediate £1.8 million emergency EEC donation within two days of its first airing on the BBC1 lunchtime, 6pm and 9pm news bulletins.<sup>31</sup> Unlike today, when we are continuously digitally connected, in the 1980s it was unusual for a news story to go viral. This exceptional story bucked the constraints of the media ecology of the time.

The video was also exceptional in its simplicity. Drought was a key part of the televisual and UK government explanation for the famine, but a key cause of the famine was a civil war between Mengistu Haile Mariam's Ethiopian regime and Tigrayan and Eritrean insurgents. Both sides were using food supply chains and humanitarian assistance as weapons. What became known as the "Great Famine" of 1983–85 was exacerbated through conflict, with "clear evidence" that the Derg (the ruling military junta in Ethiopia at the time) had employed food as a weapon of war.<sup>32</sup> But these complexities of war, which required messy and protracted solutions, were overridden by the belief in the images of humanitarian crisis delivering a successful campaign to raise funding for humanitarian efforts. Ultimately, it was the simplicity of the drought as the principal cause of the famine and the suffering, and the apparently rapid solution of providing humanitarian assistance, that was an easy sell to those who donated funds, rather than a focus on the intractable complexities of the civil war.

The broadcasts of the famine in Ethiopia became an incredibly powerful template for understanding the influence of the WMM on public consciousness. They were not only depicting disturbing images, but were also set in a developing country that was previously not receiving much coverage in the WMM – in this case, the coverage ran for over six minutes on BBC news programmes.<sup>33</sup> Notably, this coverage took place at a time when there was a real scarcity of images, particularly of human suffering. News bulletins in the mid-1980s had primetime but nonetheless very limited slots in the television schedule: no matter what

29 Suzanne Franks, *Reporting Disasters: Famine, Aid, Politics and the Media*, C. Hurst & Co., London, 2013, p. 1.

30 A. Hoskins and B. O'Loughlin, above note 25, p. 131.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

32 Edmond J. Keller, "Drought, War, and the Politics of Famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 4, 1992, p. 623.

33 S. Franks, above note 29.

happened in the world, audiences had a limited and predetermined amount of time during which they could watch the news.<sup>34</sup>

After the Ethiopia coverage and its success in raising funds for humanitarian relief efforts, “foreign relief NGOs grew at an unprecedented rate and their relationship with the media was radically and permanently altered”.<sup>35</sup> It is this belief in the relationship between media image, knowledge and the expectation of action that has dulled audience and, relatedly, political responses to wars and catastrophes in “other” parts of the world ever since. There is a belief upon being confronted with images of human suffering of sufficient severity or scale that somehow, somebody is responding or intervening. This is notwithstanding a feeling of helplessness when confronted with a scenario in which an individual thinks that their own response or action will not make any difference.

Rather than there being an accumulative effect of compassion fatigue, there is a belief in the power of the visual image, amplified in the late twentieth-century by news media, audiences, policy-makers and NGOs, which seems to persist in the face of any evidence to the contrary.<sup>36</sup> For some, the result is a kind of collusion between audience and image, so that mass media coverage in itself is enough to reassure the viewer that something will be done. This could also be characterized as a form of shared denial. This is the view of Roger Silverstone, who, drawing on the work of Stan Cohen, states:

Just as families can deny the presence of an alcoholic member, because it would be too painful to acknowledge, so too can societies deny the presence of problems and traumas that they would otherwise have to confront. Media images enable a collusive illusion that the appearance of the other in crisis on the screen is sufficient for us to believe that we are fully engaged with him or her in that crisis.<sup>37</sup>

We are thus prone to presuming that the more catastrophic and the more widely mediated the image, the greater the likelihood that somebody somewhere is acting upon that knowledge.

This process has intensified in the digital era with the image being carried by new kinds of what I call “networked contagion”. This is the potential of any image to be shared and seen almost instantaneously by billions of social media users across multiple platforms, ultimately without any global force (i.e., law or moderation system) to stop it, no matter the nature of its content, real or fake, benign or terrorizing.

At the same time, there is increasing surprise and alarm from those who realize that the images of humanitarian crises that they are confronted with and surrounded by are having little palpable effect. Thus, a new polarized or

34 It was not until the 1991 Gulf War, seven years later, that the 24-hour news cycle would take hold.

35 S. Franks, above note 29, pp. 2–3.

36 See also W. J. T. Mitchell, “There Are No Visual Media”, *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2005.

37 Roger Silverstone, *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 131.

paradoxical state emerges. While one camp of people believes that others have already taken action because these images are widely circulated across digital media, there is a second camp that cannot understand why people have not taken action, having been exposed to the same images. Both positions are still driven by the flawed expectation that images should or must have substantive effects.

Following this, a new vision (and a new history) of visual images is needed to break the contemporary stasis of a dislocated (i.e., from a different era) expectation of what seeing – and sharing – the visual image means in the digital era. Indeed, there is much important work (notably inspired by Harun Farocki<sup>38</sup>) which claims that images are “operational”, in that they “are produced by machines to be seen by other machines, rather than the corporeal, embodied eye”.<sup>39</sup> Somewhere in between there is the algorithmically influenced vision whereby what is seen and not seen of war and its consequences is determined by the images and stories that any individual has clicked on before. The counter to the idea of networked contagion of the freely contagious image on today’s social media platforms is the echo chamber or “filter bubble”<sup>40</sup> – this is the human at the centre of their own “me-dia” ecology (see above).

Whether people have agency over what they see or not, the sheer scale and accessibility of media on armed conflict today is such that compassion is difficult to focus. This is not just a matter of fatigue as a result of being overloaded with social media and media images of the catastrophe, but a new, continuous state of a shared, nagging complicity in being indifferent to all of that which is always just a few clicks away.

## The digital sub-consciousness

A pivotal difference between the coverage of twentieth-century humanitarian crises and those of the twenty-first century is that now the incomprehensibility of the suffering and scale of war is matched by a new incomprehensibility of the scale and connectivity of information, images and commentary on war. For example, the enormity of the Syrian war, with hundreds of thousands of civilians killed and injured and millions displaced, is made synchronous with digital media. The broadcast era appeared to at least afford the Occident a collective vision of the world, a mono-global version of events so typified by the satellite television coverage of the 1991 Gulf War.<sup>41</sup> In contrast, the digital era shatters the ability of any one side to monopolize media. When suffering is live-streamed by all sides, the battlefield *is* the digital media ecology.

38 Harun Farocki, “Phantom Images”, *Public*, No. 29, 2004.

39 Trevor Paglen and Anthony Downey, “Algorithmic Anxieties: Trevor Paglen in Conversation with Anthony Downey”, *Digital War*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2020, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-020-00001-2>.

40 Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble*, Penguin Books, London, 2012.

41 A. Hoskins, above note 22.

While audiences usually feel overwhelmed and incapacitated by new communication mediums,<sup>42</sup> this is particularly the case now because of the Internet's rapid evolution and unprecedented scale of expansion. As Bratton succinctly puts it, social media "boasts human history's single most prolific consolidation of images".<sup>43</sup> This includes the consolidation of images depicting war and human suffering.

It is nonetheless striking to consider that, from a pre-digital era perspective, the idea of an instantly available and unlimited supply of images of civilians suffering from displacement, starvation, violence and death because of war and other humanitarian crises would have appeared to be potentially the greatest communications asset at the disposal of humanitarian organizations. Relatedly, in a broadcast era news environment, where in countries such as the UK, there were two television news bulletins on two channels per weekday evening, the very idea of rolling 24-hour news would have appeared to have offered a new panacea for knowing the world out there. And this is also why rolling news coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, as I have detailed above, was so defining. These differences highlight the fallacy of the connection presumed in the relationship between knowledge and action, which underpins ideas about representations of suffering in humanitarian crises and their ability to propel people into action.

There has been an important shift from how the mass audience of the twentieth century relied on mainstream news media to mitigate a widespread ignorance of the plight of "distant others", to today's continuous digital sub-consciousness with regard to the world's unfolding atrocities, only ever a few clicks away. The digital sub-consciousness is a kind of partial awareness and a pushing to one side of the horrors of civilian suffering amidst the ephemeral but persistent flow of images in content feeds, which ultimately creates the state of not being able to say "I did not know".

In what I have called today's "post-scarcity"<sup>44</sup> culture of access to and availability of images and content capturing humanitarian crises, the soup of media content brings forth new limitations. There is too much content potentially available at a touch, a tap, a flick, a swipe or a spoken command, so that individuals are continually reminded of their ignoring of the world out there. As Luciano Floridi argues, "we are witnessing a substantial erosion of the *right to ignore*".<sup>45</sup> Floridi continues:

42 See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1964.

43 Benjamin H. Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2015, p. 127.

44 I use the term "post-scarcity" to indicate the abundance, pervasiveness and accessibility of communication networks, nodes and digital media content in this century compared with the "scarcity" culture of media content in the late twentieth century. See Andrew Hoskins, "7/7 and Connective Memory: Interactional Trajectories of Remembering in Post-Scarcity Culture", *Memory Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2011; Andrew Hoskins and John Tulloch, *Risk and Hyperconnectivity: Media and Memories of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016.

45 Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 42.

The more any bit of information is just an easy click away, the less we shall be forgiven for not checking it. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are making humanity increasingly responsible, morally speaking, for the way the world is, will be, and should be.<sup>46</sup>

The “we” that Floridi refers to here includes the principal producers of the news media, who are also confounded by their increasing impotence.

A key aspect of digital war, as I have set out, is participation in uploading and sharing of images and videos of humanitarian crises and conflicts. This is how new “architectures of participation”<sup>47</sup> offered by Web 2.0 platforms and connected and mobile media devices enable a wide range of actors (militaries, States, journalists, NGOs, citizens, victims) to have their say. At the same time, the apparently liberating and limitless uploading and sharing of the horrors of conflicts and humanitarian crises across digital worlds results in a false analysis of public responses. Specifically, using social media engagements, such as likes and shares, as barometers for action against some of the negative impact of and suffering caused by conflicts and humanitarian crises is misleading. The ease of participation in digital outrage lends itself to the notion that it has some form of critical mass, or that the digital response is an all-of-society action. Participatory outrage, the seemingly lively *act* of sharing in the horror, revulsion or compassion, through retweeting or liking or commenting on the image of the suffering other, paradoxically blunts the rage – the work of making a stand is seen as done.

In the broadcast era, individual opinions on and responses to events had very limited avenues for direct expression in the mass media of the day. To a large extent, the views of audiences were only ever marginally present in any given media ecology, effectively represented and managed by the gatekeepers of the WMM. Public opinion, as such, was a manifestation of those who owned and edited the print and broadcast media. Today, by contrast, wars are fought in an imploded battlespace in which millions of images and videos are uploaded from the field and are subject to instant global comment, sharing, linking and liking. Social media platforms have facilitated a new regime of quantification from which popularity, horror or outrage can be instantly and continuously read, and whose visibility is built into the architecture and is essential to the very character of a given platform or app.

One photograph which attracted just such attention, along with claims as to the power of its contagion and spread to shape political policy and action, was that of the toddler Alan Kurdi.<sup>48</sup> The body of the 3-year-old from Kobane was found washed up on a Turkish beach in September 2015, as his family fled war-torn Syria.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

47 Tim O’Reilly, “The Architecture of Participation”, June 2004, available at: <https://perma.cc/M7TH-EVBN?type=image>.

48 See, for example, “100 Photos: Alan Kurdi”, *Time*, available at: <http://100photos.time.com/photos/nilufur-demir-alan-kurdi>.



Media coverage of the refugee crisis tended to downplay the impacts of European policy and, in particular, the risk that criminalizing irregular migration forces people into ever more unsafe means of attempting to reach their destination country. This fact was mostly overlooked in the reporting of the story of those attempting to escape war and the refugee crisis being seen to engulf much of Europe.

For the purposes of this article, it is important to note that this image became instantly iconic as it seized the world's front pages, the outrage of social media and at least the momentary rhetoric of Europe's politicians. Public sympathy appeared to translate into public empathy, with a spike in donations to refugee aid charities.<sup>49</sup> The *Independent* ran a story with the headline "Aylan [*sic*] Kurdi Images Were Seen by '20 Million People in 12 Hours'", which cited Claire Wardle, co-author of a report on the impact of the image:

The photo of Aylan [*sic*] Kurdi galvanised the public in a way that hours of broadcasts and thousands of column inches wasn't able to do. It has created a frame through which subsequent coverage has been positioned and compared.<sup>50</sup>

This claim begs the question: what difference did the "galvanised" public make in diminishing the actual causes of Alan Kurdi's death?

There are echoes here of Nik Gowing's aforementioned conclusions as to real-time television news reporting's effects on language rather than policy decisions and outcomes in the 1990s. The actual report to which the *Independent* story refers is an academic study that explores the nature and impact of social media circulation of images of Alan Kurdi, but which also tracks the story in mainstream media and offers a variety of perspectives on its impact.<sup>51</sup> This "rapid research response" report is motivated to comprehend the incredible mediatized outcry over the image of the dead Syrian boy, but its conclusions as to any systematic or substantive effects on policy decisions, and on the war that gave rise to the European refugee crisis of 2015, are at best ambivalent. For instance, Anne Burns, one of the contributors to the report, states that

political figures joined in with the wider discussion about the Kurdi photograph, as not to do so appeared politically unacceptable, but ... their responses were framed in relation to the public outcry, rather than an accurate reflection of their own shift in attitudes.<sup>52</sup>

49 Jamie Merrill, "Refugee Aid Charities See Surge in Donations after Image of Drowned Syrian Toddler Aylan Kurdi moves the nation", *The Independent*, 3 September 2015, available at: [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/refugee-aid-charities-see-surge-in-donations-after-image-of-drowned-syrian-toddler-aylan-kurdi-moves-10484953.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/refugee-aid-charities-see-surge-in-donations-after-image-of-drowned-syrian-toddler-aylan-kurdi-moves-10484953.html).

50 Adam Withnall, "Aylan Kurdi Images Were Seen by '20 Million People in 12 Hours'", *The Independent*, 15 December 2015, available at: [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-aylan-kurdi-images-were-seen-by-20-million-people-in-12-hours-new-study-suggests-a6774181.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-aylan-kurdi-images-were-seen-by-20-million-people-in-12-hours-new-study-suggests-a6774181.html). Note that Alan Kurdi was incorrectly referred to as "Aylan" in some early reporting on the incident.

51 Farida Vis and Olga Gorjunova (eds), *The Iconic Image on Social Media: A Rapid Research Response to the Death of Aylan Kurdi*, Visual Social Media Lab, University of Sheffield, 2015, available at: <https://tinyurl.com/1r9cqlbm>.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

The outrage here, then, is a containment of, rather than a conduit for, effects. Again, the ghost of Gowing's conclusions on the real-time effects of 1990s television news hovers over claims to the power of the digital visual image today. The Kurdi image and its effects are an important case, because they are viewed as an exemplar of the power of visual and social as well as mainstream media to at least appear to make a difference.

## The Syrian war and the fractaling of attention

I now turn to consider in more detail the case of the Syrian war as exemplifying the conundrum at the heart of my thesis of compassion after digital war: namely, that the mass availability of images of the suffering and the dead in Syria (over the years from the initial protests in the country in March 2011) should have—through public pressure on policy-makers or in support of action—led to military intervention to end the mass suffering but failed to do so, and that this perceived failure of images to provoke such a change was persistently met with expressions of surprise.

Rather, the very existence of the flux of images gives the impression that much of contemporary war and its consequences appears to happen in the open, and is seemingly so thoroughly and continuously mediated that it will also catch the attention of those with the capacity to intervene. The image–expectation–inaction cycle, then, appears ever inflationary.

What might be a principal WMM measure or “news value” of the catastrophe of this ongoing war, namely the numbers of civilian and combatant deaths, was not exactly hidden. For example, in 2016, the then UN Special Envoy stated that around 400,000 people had lost their lives in the conflict. There has not been a more recent statement from an apolitical actor on the death toll.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, more than half of the entire Syrian population has been displaced since 2011, with 5.6 million registered refugees.<sup>54</sup> As of October 2020, there are approximately 6.7 million displaced people in Syria.<sup>55</sup> The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that (as of December 2020) 11.06 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance,<sup>56</sup> and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 4.65 million are in acute need.<sup>57</sup>

The WMM reporting of civilian casualties of the Syrian war was often based upon figures provided by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human

53 UN, “Note to Correspondents: Transcript of Press Stakeout by United Nations Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. Staffan de Mistura”, Geneva, 22 April 2016, available at: [www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2016-04-22/note-correspondents-transcript-press-stakeout-united](http://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2016-04-22/note-correspondents-transcript-press-stakeout-united).

54 See the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Operational Portal, available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>.

55 UNHCR, “Syria”, fact sheet, October 2020, available at: [www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/12/Factsheet-Syria-October-2020-003.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/12/Factsheet-Syria-October-2020-003.pdf).

56 OCHA, *Humanitarian Response Plan: Syrian Arab Republic*, December 2020, p. 7, available at: [www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2020\\_syria\\_humanitarian\\_response\\_plan.pdf](http://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/2020_syria_humanitarian_response_plan.pdf).

57 UNHCR, above note 55.

Rights (UN Human Rights). However, a sign that both the sheer scale and the complexities of the war had overwhelmed the sense-making mechanisms of the West was that the UN, when providing its last estimate of the death toll in 2016 (relying in part on 2014 data), “said that it was virtually impossible to verify how many had died” as the conflict intensified.<sup>58</sup> But even when numbers of deaths were clearly quantified and there was ample digital evidence, as with the emergence of a digital archive of images that were smuggled out of Syria cataloguing ill-treatment and execution on a mass scale, there was not a major outcry or a pause in the deepening of the civil war.

Indeed, all of this barely seemed to register on the WMM conscience. For instance, Fred Ritchin, writing in the same month as the release of the Caesar images,<sup>59</sup> asked:

[S]houldn't the existence of 55,000 photographs by the Syrian military police documenting the deaths of some 11,000 detainees who had been executed, and in many cases tortured, still provoke widespread condemnation, particularly in a conflict that is ongoing where millions are still at risk?<sup>60</sup>

The answer, Ritchin suggested, lies in a fraying of a “social contract” around the production and circulation of documentary photographs which was based upon “the willingness of the viewer to accept the photograph’s reality as well as its invitation to a response”.<sup>61</sup> Habituation to mass horror by publics and by governments is also part of Ritchin’s explanation, and relatedly, part of digital overload, in that “we are now also aware that in the United States alone we regularly take more than 55,000 photographs every 15 seconds”.<sup>62</sup>

This idea of the volume or scale of the medium being related to the human capacity to process and comprehend its meaning is influential. There is long-standing work which claims that responses to being confronted with representations of suffering or death are shaped by the scale of the catastrophe. For example, Robert J. Lifton coined the phrase “psychic numbing” in the aftermath of the atomic bombings in Japan, Hiroshima and Nagasaki to describe how survivors (known as *hibakusha*) had to turn off their feelings in order to function, amidst the human wreckage left by the bombs.<sup>63</sup>

58 Megan Specia, “How Syria’s Death Toll is Lost in the Fog of War”, *New York Times*, 13 April 2018, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-death-toll.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/syria-death-toll.html). The statement was made by the then Special Envoy: see UN, above note 53.

59 The Caesar images are a collection of 55,000 photographs alleging to show proof of torture or ill-treatment by Syrian government forces. See Garance le Caisne, “They Were Torturing to Kill’: Inside Syria’s Death Machine”, *The Guardian*, 1 October 2015, available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/they-were-torturing-to-kill-inside-syrias-death-machine-caesar](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/they-were-torturing-to-kill-inside-syrias-death-machine-caesar).

60 Fred Ritchin, “Syrian Torture Archive: When Photographs of Atrocities Don’t Shock”, *Time*, 28 January 2014, available at: <http://time.com/3426427/syrian-torture-archive-when-photographs-of-atrocities-dont-shock/>.

61 *Ibid.*

62 *Ibid.*

63 Robert J. Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 1991. See also Paul Slovic, “Psychic Numbing and Genocide”, *Judgement and Decision Making*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2007.

Furthermore, a digital archive of atrocity, no matter how vast, has a weightlessness, an ephemerality, that the physical photograph does not have. The horrors of the Syrian war are well-documented in images. Archives of photographs documenting torture by State forces are readily available to the public, and non-State armed groups, including the so-called Islamic State, have released graphic videos of, among other things, the execution of prisoners and hostages.

The idea of the existence of 55,000 photographs of tortured and executed Syrian detainees, then, does not offer much hope for attaining any kind of singular focus. For example, the psychologist Paul Slovic said of the Caesar images:

We find in our studies that attention begins to get dispersed at two objects. You can't focus as hard and draw as much information from two things you're looking at, as from one. So, what about 55,000? It breaks the system. Our simple system of senses and feelings can't handle it.<sup>64</sup>

With the flux of images of digital war, is it then possible to arrest their movement and mass, to fix the gaze as though we were returned to a pre-digital scarcity culture, before attention was shattered? To make the 55,000 images meaningful required attending to the resistances of both the ephemerality or intangibility of the digital archive, and its scale. To this end, fifteen UN member States sponsored a graphic exhibition, entitled "Caesar Photos: Inside Syrian Authorities' Prisons", of thirty of the photographs, which was shown at the UN headquarters in New York for ten days in March 2015.<sup>65</sup> Enlarged photos were displayed on easels stacked next to each other in a long line down a room at the UN, along with their printed captions. Most mainstream news reporting gave the numbers and told the story of the abuse and the archive, but it largely sanitized the images by blacking out any graphic bodily injury on the page or screen, or by showing the exhibition hall with the photos blurred in the background or at a distance that placed the gruesome details of the injuries out of clear view.<sup>66</sup> The images were accompanied in the exhibition with a sign that read: "WARNING. The following images are disturbing."

Instead of showing the full horror of the Syrian photographs, many news outlets showed the horror as reflected in the expression of a woman viewing the exhibits, in a photograph by Lucas Jackson for Reuters.<sup>67</sup> The unidentified woman holds a scarf over her nose and mouth, clenching her right fist, as though

64 Paul Slovic, telephone interview with author, 12 April 2018, on file with author.

65 See Raya Jalabi, "Images of Syrian Torture on Display at UN: 'It Is Imperative We Do Not Look Away'", *The Guardian*, 11 March 2015, available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/11/images-syrian-torture-shock-new-yorkers-united-nations](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/11/images-syrian-torture-shock-new-yorkers-united-nations).

66 See, for example, Stav Ziv, "A Plea for Action: Gruesome Photos Smuggled From Syria on Display at U. N.", *Newsweek*, 13 March 2015, available at: [www.newsweek.com/plea-action-gruesome-photos-smuggled-syria-display-un-313766](http://www.newsweek.com/plea-action-gruesome-photos-smuggled-syria-display-un-313766); R. Jalabi, above note 65.

67 See Ian Black, "Syrian Regime Document Trove Shows Evidence of 'Industrial Scale' Killing of Detainees", *The Guardian*, 21 January 2014, available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/20/evidence-industrial-scale-killing-syria-war-crimes](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/20/evidence-industrial-scale-killing-syria-war-crimes).

trying to contain in her grasp the shock of what befalls her eyes.<sup>68</sup> This image draws our attention away from the story and onto one object, translating the unimaginable scale of suffering into a single human shape. In Slovic's terms (see above), the photograph transforms the digital abstraction of 55,000 images of 11,000 brutally executed people into something more intelligible; these are the "fallen images" which have been resurrected in the one. Has the digital splintering of attention thus been arrested, as though the viewer has been returned to the gaze more typical of an earlier media ecology? That is to say, would this be a less distracted gaze which was afforded time to hold and to dwell?

Jackson's photograph and its use here offer insight into Susan Sontag's view of the relationship between the potential for an image or images' mobilization of opposition to war and "the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel".<sup>69</sup> The moment at which the viewer is confronted with the image, the moment of looking, the moment of shock, is captured and thus extended. At the same time, the photograph offers an ideal, standing in for a moral multitude, all looking on and seeing or expecting their own revulsion in the same moment. There is comfort in the belief in this ideal of a shared recognition of what inhumanity looks like. In this way, the new mediator of shock both shows and hides. The photograph of the shocked response disturbs anew and yet offers relief from our having to see that which provokes the response. It does arrest the attention implosion of the digitally captured scale of the 55,000 images, but its mainstream appeal (it was widely used across the WMM) is achieved through a sanitizing displacement of confrontation with the images themselves.

There was, however, a notable exception to the WMM's limited publication, if not sanitization, of these images. In January 2014, the *New York Times* ran an article on the Syrian archive with four photographs at the very top of the page, depicting parts of emaciated bodies with arrows pointing to wounds including ulcerations and "tramline injuries" (linear bruises said to be consistent with being beaten with a rod).<sup>70</sup> Perhaps this forensic and partial depiction of the bodies is less disturbing to the reader than if the photographs on display at the UN, and others in the archive, had been reproduced in full.

My point is that, despite all of this, the Syrian war rolled on.

Viewers and readers continue to be confronted with a constant glut of information on the unimaginable scale of the human suffering in Syria. Those charged with raising awareness of the consequences of war—governmental, humanitarian and mainstream media organizations—all attempt to distil the numbers and the sources into an intelligible and ultimately digestible form. Yet,

68 *Ibid.*

69 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2003, p. 122.

70 See Ben Hubbard and David D. Kirkpatrick, "Photo Archive Is Said to Show Widespread Torture in Syria", *New York Times*, 21 January 2014, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/world/middleeast/photo-archive-is-said-to-show-widespread-torture-in-syria.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/22/world/middleeast/photo-archive-is-said-to-show-widespread-torture-in-syria.html).

the very knowledge of the limitless online supply of images and claims of seemingly limitless catastrophe shapes a new kind of digital stasis of response.<sup>71</sup>

This stasis is particularly marked in the premediation of suffering, the persistent unheard warnings of impending disaster that are a characteristic of twenty-first-century conflict. I now turn to further address this idea in relation to both Syria and the famine in Yemen, as cases of human suffering in the era of digital war.

## The premediation of catastrophe

My consideration of the Yemeni war is that it could be seen as a classic case of suffering caused by a humanitarian crisis, which has elicited repeated expressions of surprise by some in the West when its images of suffering do not translate into their anticipated effects. In particular, it is notable for the persistent scale of the suffering of its civilian population, as warned about and reported over several years.

Like Syria, Yemen is the scene of an ongoing conflict involving both States and non-State armed groups.<sup>72</sup> A UN Human Rights report in August 2018 suggested that “individuals in the Government of Yemen and the coalition, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates”, may have committed war crimes.<sup>73</sup> The war in/over Yemen has been described by some media as “the worst humanitarian crisis in the world”,<sup>74</sup> with consequences including the “worst famine in 100 years”.<sup>75</sup> For instance, in October 2020, 325,000 children under the age of 5 were treated for acute malnutrition,<sup>76</sup> and in June 2020 it was estimated that 2 million children under the age of 5 were malnourished.<sup>77</sup>

Yemen has in common with Syria the persistent predictions of its deepening catastrophes of human suffering, and the surprise on the part of a

71 Some six years later, the name “Caesar” was attached to the US National Defense Authorization Act of 2020, in the form of the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, although this Act was not about intervening to change material conditions on the ground, but the pursuit of human rights abuses. The Act commits the US president to “submit[ting] to the appropriate congressional committees a list of foreign persons that the President determines are knowingly responsible for or complicit in serious human rights abuses committed against citizens of Syria or their family members, regardless of whether such abuses occurred in Syria”. See: <https://tinyurl.com/35xq6eqj>.

72 “The Crisis in Yemen: What You Need to Know”, *New York Times*, 21 April 2015, available at: [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/26/world/middleeast/yemen-crisis-explained.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/26/world/middleeast/yemen-crisis-explained.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article&region=Footer).

73 UN Human Rights, *Situation of Human rights in Yemen, Including Violations and Abuses since September 2014: Report of the Group of Eminent International and Regional Experts as submitted to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, UN Doc A/HRC/42/17, 9 August 2019, paras 97(b)–(c).

74 Robert F. Worth, “How the War in Yemen Became a Bloody Stalemate—and the Worst Humanitarian Crisis in the World”, *New York Times*, 31 October 2018, available at: [www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/31/magazine/yemen-war-saudi-arabia.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/31/magazine/yemen-war-saudi-arabia.html).

75 “Yemen Could Be ‘Worst Famine in 100 Years’”, *BBC News*, 14 October 2018, available at: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-45857729](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-45857729).

76 UNICEF, *Yemen Country Office Humanitarian Situation Report*, October 2020, available at: [www.unicef.org/media/89831/file/Yemen-Humanitarian-SitRep-31-October-2020.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/89831/file/Yemen-Humanitarian-SitRep-31-October-2020.pdf).

77 UNICEF, *Yemen Five Years On: Children, Conflict and COVID-19*, June 2020, available at: [www.unicef.org/yemen/media/4281/file/Yemen%20five%20years%20on\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/yemen/media/4281/file/Yemen%20five%20years%20on_REPORT.pdf).

number of informed commentators over what they see as a lack of visible and coordinated humanitarian relief. For example, on 19 August 2015, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that “the number of food insecure people in Yemen is now close to 13 million, including 6 million who are severely food insecure and in urgent need of external assistance—that is one in five of the country’s population”.<sup>78</sup> On the same day, UN Humanitarian Affairs Coordinator Stephen O’Brien called the scale of human suffering in Yemen “nearly incomprehensible ...[;] a shocking four out of five Yemenis require humanitarian assistance and nearly 1.5 million people are internally displaced”.<sup>79</sup> Twenty million Yemeni people (two thirds of the population) are now considered food insecure, including 10 million that are acutely food insecure.<sup>80</sup> Some 24.1 million people now require humanitarian assistance (closer to five in six), and 3.65 million have been displaced.<sup>81</sup>

Outrage at impotence in the face of news of suffering and death has become part of a new culture of catastrophe, a new norm of confusion at global indifference to the inhumane. “We can no longer just stand by while children are dying in war zones”,<sup>82</sup> declares an article from the former UK prime minister, Gordon Brown, in November 2018. “The unspeakable suffering in Yemen has barely elicited more than collective sighs on the global stage”,<sup>83</sup> complains another headline in June 2018. Yemen-based journalist Peter Salisbury, in an essay reflecting on events at the end of 2018, concludes: “As the country slips into unimaginable, desperate hunger, it’s important to understand that what is happening was utterly, tragically predictable. The people who should have known knew. They just had other priorities.”<sup>84</sup>

Meanwhile, there has been a persistent expression of disbelief at the failure of the parties to the Syrian conflict to agree to a pause in the fighting in order to allow for substantive humanitarian relief. For instance, in a blistering indictment in October 2016, Stephen O’Brien called the failure of the UN Security Council to stop the bombing of eastern Aleppo “our generation’s shame”.<sup>85</sup>

78 WFP, “WFP Warns of Food Crisis in Yemen Amid Challenges in Reaching People and Shortage Of Funding”, 19 August 2015, available at: [www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-head-warns-growing-food-crisis-yemen-amid-challenges-reaching-people-and-short](http://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/wfp-head-warns-growing-food-crisis-yemen-amid-challenges-reaching-people-and-short).

79 Karin Zeitvogel, “Compassion Fatigue Sets In as Yemen Spirals Out of Control”, *Washington Diplomat*, 30 September 2015, available at: <https://washdiplomat.com/compassion-fatigue-sets-in-as-yemen-spirals-out-of-control/>.

80 WFP, “Yemen”, available at: [www.wfp.org/countries/yemen](http://www.wfp.org/countries/yemen).

81 OCHA, “Yemen Situation Report”, available at: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/yemen>.

82 Gordon Brown, “We Can No Longer Just Stand By While Children Are Dying in War Zones”, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2018, available at: [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/02/children-dying-war-zones-targeted-impunity](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/02/children-dying-war-zones-targeted-impunity).

83 Kamal Al-Solaylee, “The Unspeakable Suffering in Yemen Has Barely Elicited More Than Collective Sighs on the Global Stage”, *Globe and Mail*, 22 June 2018, available at: [www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-unspeakable-suffering-in-yemen-has-barely-elicited-more-than/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-unspeakable-suffering-in-yemen-has-barely-elicited-more-than/).

84 Peter Salisbury, “Yemen’s Looming Famine Has Been a Long Time Coming”, *Washington Post*, 5 December 2018, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/12/05/yemens-looming-famine-has-been-a-long-time-coming/?utm\\_term=.6929460263d2](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/12/05/yemens-looming-famine-has-been-a-long-time-coming/?utm_term=.6929460263d2).

85 UN Security Council, *The Situation in the Middle East*, UN Doc S/PV.7795, 26 October 2016, p. 6.

Some commentators have employed images of past catastrophes to try to render the siege of Aleppo intelligible through historic comparison. One *New York Times* headline simply read: “Berlin, 1945; Grozny, 2000; Aleppo, 2016”.<sup>86</sup> Drone video of the devastation of Aleppo, embedded in the online article, is compared with the state of Berlin at the end of the Second World War, and also the Chechen capital after its siege and assault by Russian forces at the turn of this century.

Implicit in this reporting is the idea that lessons continue to be unlearned but also that the “industrial nature of murder”, once seen, no longer has the same impact. This is particularly the case with regard to its inexorable unfolding across multiple intractable or seemingly permanent conflicts: “Today we are assaulted online, on television and in newspapers with big, senseless numbers: At least 140 killed in the Saudi-led bombing of a funeral in Yemen; hundreds slain by car bombs in Baghdad; thousands upon thousands slaughtered in Aleppo.”<sup>87</sup> Although characterizations of this century’s conflicts as uniquely “permanent” or “perpetual” are overdone,<sup>88</sup> the media “assault” of catastrophe, in the digital media ecology, blunts rather than harnesses outrage.

Thus in Syria, a cycle of image–expectation–inaction became increasingly acute, with a succession of key media exposures around which many assumed would coalesce some kind of international momentum for intervention. These included the thorough arresting of the world’s attention through the image of Alan Kurdi’s body in September 2015, and the image of the dazed, bloodied and dust-covered 5-year-old Omran Daqneesh sat in an ambulance, after being injured in a military strike in Aleppo in August 2016.<sup>89</sup>

To go further, there is not only an assumption that there should be a response to the publication and circulation of images and video of suffering and death, and especially of children; in addition, saturation coverage is mistaken for effects. Digital contagion is particularly seductive in terms of equating to some kind of effect, such as the fact that images of Alan Kurdi were seen on social media by “20 million people in 12 hours” (see above). The reality, however, is that the situation on the ground is not really dented by this kind of media exposure. For instance, despite the supposed impact of the Alan Kurdi image, a total of 13,622 people died or disappeared attempting to cross the Mediterranean from 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2020.<sup>90</sup>

In sum, then, the famine and the killing of children and other civilians in Yemen and in Syria are stories that were foretold, predicted and premediated. Both of these crises were in the public eye and warned of for years, and yet this

86 Michael Kimmelman, “Berlin, 1945; Grozny, 2000; Aleppo, 2016”, *New York Times*, 14 October 2016, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2016/10/15/world/middleeast/aleppo-destruction-drone-video.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/15/world/middleeast/aleppo-destruction-drone-video.html).

87 *Ibid.*

88 Andrew Hoskins, “About the Project: Forgetting War”, available at: <https://archivesofwar.gla.ac.uk/forgetting-war/about-the-project/>.

89 Elle Hunt, “Boy in the Ambulance: Shocking Image Emerges of Syrian Child Pulled from Aleppo Rubble”, *The Guardian*, 18 August 2016, available at: [www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/18/boy-in-the-ambulance-image-emerges-syrian-child-aleppo-rubble](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/18/boy-in-the-ambulance-image-emerges-syrian-child-aleppo-rubble).

90 See the Missing Migrants website, available at: <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>.



visibility in the digital era did not, in itself, translate to meaningful, visible action or response. What then sustains the fundamental disjuncture between this persistent mediation of catastrophe in terms of images and scale, and the belief that these should or do have a substantive impact on those suffering or dying?

## Digital cover

As I set out above, there is something of a historical shift from the broadcast era to today's digital distorting of the value of exposure. Two of the defining parameters of this debate are, firstly, sensitivity – what should be shown or hidden for fear of upsetting or turning away audiences in a hugely competitive market in which both the value and the price of news have tumbled – and, secondly, digital overload and distraction – there are simply too many images and too many intractable humanitarian catastrophes competing for our attention.

Ariella Azoulay, for instance, argues that complaints over the role of news media in sanitizing views of conflict and suffering, yet at the same time overloading our attention with too many images, reveal a prevalent “phantasmic model” that is founded upon unrealistic expectations of both images and spectators. In this model, “the much sought-after object of vision is a sort of pure object that makes it possible to see war with utter clarity”.<sup>91</sup> The other side of this equation is “the passion for a pure spectator who will encounter the image, be appalled by what is revealed, and successfully change the world through her active response to it”.<sup>92</sup>

David Rieff points to where he thinks this expectation of the pure image and the pure spectator might come from:

It was the conceit of journalists ... that if people back home could only be told and shown what was actually happening in Sarajevo, if they had to see on their television screens images of what a child who has just been hit by a soft-nosed bullet or a jagged splinter of shrapnel really looks like ... then they would want their governments to do something.<sup>93</sup>

Furthermore, Rieff, in an interview with me, asked: “Are we right to talk in terms of images of wars which people don't really care about? The real reason the images don't work is because people don't care about those wars to begin with and nothing is going to talk them into it.”<sup>94</sup> And, as Susie Linfield puts it: “For most of history most people have known little, and cared less, about the suffering of those who are unknown or alien.”<sup>95</sup>

Thus, it is a mistake to equate the now astonishing availability of digital images and video of suffering with accessibility, knowledge, understanding or

91 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, New York, 2008, p. 191.

92 *Ibid.*

93 David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West*, Simon & Schuster, London, 1996, p. 216.

94 David Rieff, interview with author, Glasgow, 6 March 2018.

95 Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2010, p. 46.

capacity for response. Rather, as I have stated, the volume and apparent availability of images and video affords the impression that much of human and distant suffering is seen by all, including notably those with the power to intervene.

When sixty-eight medical facilities in Syria are bombed between April and December 2019, there must surely be some reflection on the relationship between the instant availability of billions of images of human suffering and death in the continuous and connective digital glare of social media, and their effect on global actors charged with the preservation of civilian life.<sup>96</sup> It is easy to conclude that any such relationship does not in fact exist and is born from an unrealistic or mythical expectation of some kind of functional journalism.

As information pours through the imploded battlefield, in which individuals are targets, and billions of participants upload their versions of events via Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp, the truth of war is pixelated to oblivion. The granularity of the view of proximity to events paradoxically renders them out of focus. At the same time, despite the apparent curation by the many for the many, and the peer-to-peer connectivity ideal of uninhibited access and the digital culture of sharing, the fundamentals of what is seen and not seen are actually more opaque than those of the ideology of twentieth-century media. The monoliths of Google (which owns YouTube) and Facebook (which owns Instagram and WhatsApp) manage what is seen and not seen through their platform rules, design and algorithms. Yet these organizations have been shown to be shaky guardians of the proliferation and connectivity of content that they have enabled. The very same algorithmic basis of their control of information feeds is exploited by the insurgents of digital war, who hack attention in order to spread misinformation and undermine trust in media more generally.

Two of the principal dimensions of the life of information in the digital media ecology, pervasiveness and connectivity, destabilize traditional modes of watching – the idea of being a spectator long associated with the medium of television. Although some will argue that television – and even television news – defies reports of its demise, this misses the point that we are awash with new visual forms and means of manipulation of content which swamp the traditional, more regulated avenue of broadcast television.

Meanwhile, the displayed virality of social media affords a sense of feeling active, of participation in a swarm-like momentum gathering around an image and behind a cause. This, though, is weightless media: echoing the demand that “something must be done”, paradoxically absorbing the response in and by the same digital crowd. The collective are too easily convinced, carried by the velocity of the media that immerses them. This I call a “sharing without sharing”,<sup>97</sup> in that individuals feel active in their digital practices of posting, linking, liking, snapping, recording, swiping, scrolling and forwarding media content, but this

96 Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations, “Humanitarian Catastrophe in Maarat Al Nouman, Syria; At Least 38 Dead, Hundreds Injured”, press release, 20 December 2019, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-catastrophe-maarat-al-nouman-syria-least-38-dead-hundreds>.

97 Andrew Hoskins, “The Restless Past: An Introduction to Digital Memory and Media”, in A. Hoskins (ed.), *Digital Memory Studies: Media Pasts in Transition*, Routledge, New York, 2018, p. 2.

action paradoxically functions to disconnect them from that which is passed on or passed over. The work of compassion is not really a collective endeavour, but is fractalized as the presumption of engagement with the content is reduced to the convenience of social media likes or shares. It is this false measure of presence, of virality, that helps to abrogate any kind of responsibility for what is seen.

In sum, there never was a golden age of compassion; rather, the height of the broadcast era afforded the impression of a direct relationship between images, a collective will, and effects on the events portrayed in the images. Today, algorithmically charged outrage is a proxy for effects. It is easy to misconstrue the velocity of linking and liking and “sharing without sharing” as some kind of mass action or mass movement, but in reality, the outrage society oddly numbs itself.

The transition from spectators (part of what was formerly known as the audience) to information-doers of a digital multitude has occurred at the expense of, rather than to the advance of, collective influence. The wars in Syria and Yemen are just two catastrophes that have slowly unfolded in an age of continuous and connective digital glare. If these imploded battlefields of digital war, affording the most proximate and persistent view of human suffering and death in history, cannot ultimately mobilize global action, then it is difficult to imagine what will.