The Myth of Compassion Fatigue

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The dream of photojournalism and the cultural anxiety of images

The dream of photojournalism is that when a crisis is pictured the image will have an effect on its audience leading to action. In Philippe Wojazer’s photograph of President Sarkozy at the Rwandan genocide memorial we see the relationship desired by this dream, albeit after the event. The President gazes at the memorial’s photographic mural depicting refugees, and, the caption tells us, he was moved to write in the visitors’ book, “in the name of the people of France, I pay my respects to the victims of the genocide against the Tutsis.”

Sarkozy’s encounter with the Rwandan genocide photo came during a state visit in which he remarked that France and the international community had failed to act during the genocide because they suffered a “kind of blindness.”¹ Given the extensive television coverage and photographic reportage of the event this was an extraordinary choice of words. But it does point
to the fact that, despite the dream of photojournalism, we do not have much knowledge about the relationship between the photograph and the viewer, about what makes who react and how.

A decade ago Stanley Cohen noted, “we know nothing worthwhile about the cumulative effect of media imagery,” and little has happened in the meantime to meaningfully alter that conclusion with regard to photojournalism. ² Jacques Rancière has sharpened the point in his essay on “the intolerable image”:

The classic use of the intolerable image traced a straight line from the intolerable spectacle to awareness of the reality it was expressing: and from that to the desire to act in order to change it. But this link between representation, knowledge and action was sheer presupposition.³

This line of argument is in contradistinction to the belief that there are “photos that changed the world.”⁴ But, as Rancière notes, the dominant mood of our time revolves around “a general suspicion about the political capacity of any image,” and this suspicion is generated in part by “the disappointed belief in a straight line [visualised in the Sarkozy photography] from perception, affection, comprehension and action”.⁵

There is much to be done before we understand the work that images produced by photojournalism do. Research to give us some worthwhile knowledge about the cumulative effect of photographs is in its early stages. Before we can construct a meaningful account that traces possible links between visual representation, knowledge and action, we need to dispense with some conventional wisdoms that purport to explain how photographs work. The purpose of this essay is to undertake some of the excavation necessary to clear the way for that construction. Among the largest of the obstacles to be removed is the ‘compassion fatigue’ thesis.

One of the commonest claims relating to the alleged impact of photographs of atrocity, violence and war is that they induce ‘compassion fatigue’ in the public at large. This claim often starts with an assertion about our media saturated world, and is part of the general suspicion about the capacity of images Rancière noted. At its heart is the notion that, far from changing the world, photographs work repetitively, numbing our emotional capacity and thereby diminishing the possibility of an effective response to international crises. Expressions of this belief can be found in a wide range of disparate contexts, and numerous writers and photographers attest to the
ubiquity of this view. John Taylor notes the popularity of the claim that photography is analgesic, Carolyn Dean remarks that the belief is commonplace in both Europe and the United States, and Susie Linfield describes the thesis as “a contemporary truism, indeed a contemporary cliche” such that “to dispute this idea is akin to repudiating evolution or joining the flat-earth society.”

Whenever there is a crisis, the claim of compassion fatigue is never far behind. The earliest usage of the term dates from 1968, and stems from a report by the Lutheran World Federation about appeals launched during the Biafra crisis. Consider the 2010 earthquake in Haiti that killed more than 200,000 people and devastated the country. Media coverage was swift, extensive and intense. The focus on victims trapped in rubble or suffering as a result was, as in Ron Haviv’s photograph, up close and personal. The charitable response was vast and global. Yet alongside the coverage and the response were frequent iterations of the worry about compassion fatigue setting in.
While anxiety about the alleged impact of extensive media coverage is commonplace in the digital era, it has a long history. Indeed, the very same anxiety can be found in much earlier contexts. Speaking in 1964, the famous photographer Dorothea Lange noted:

It takes a lot to get full attention to a picture these days, because we are bombarded by pictures every waking hour, in on form or another, and transitory images seen, unconsciously, in passing, from the corner of our eyes, flashing at us, and this business where we look at bad images- impure. I don't know why the eye doesn't get calloused as your knees get calloused or your fingers get calloused, the eye can't get...\(^{10}\)

Even earlier, a writer in Weimar Germany argued:

Today the eye of modern man is daily, hourly overfed with images. In nearly every newspaper he opens, in every magazine, in every book—pictures, pictures, and more pictures...This kaleidoscope of changing visual impressions spins so rapidly that almost nothing is retained in memory. Each new pictures drives away the previous one...The result—in spite of the hunger for new visual impressions—is a dulling of the senses. To put it bluntly: the more modern man is given to see, the less he experiences in seeing. He sees much too much to still be able to see consciously and intensively.\(^{11}\)

The fact that this same cultural anxiety about visual overload leading to desensitisation can be regarded as novel in 1932, then 1964, and again now, despite major transformations in the information economy over the last eighty years, suggests these concerns are something other than simple descriptions of the times. Indeed, claims of “information overload” have an even longer history. Having located similar worries as far back as 1565, Vaughan Bell concluded:

Worries about information overload are as old as information itself, with each generation reimagining the dangerous impacts of technology on mind and brain. From a historical perspective, what strikes home is not the evolution of these social concerns, but their similarity from one century to the next, to the point where they arrive anew with little having changed except the label.\(^{12}\)
Another label that signifies anxiety about the relationship between imagery and its social impact is “pornography.” Emergencies, such as the Haiti earthquake, are speedily affiliated with worries about whether the press can publish graphic images without descending into the realms of “disaster porn.”\textsuperscript{13} As Dean makes clear, pornography as an account of cultural degradation has its own long history, but its use has intensified since 1960 so that it now functions as “an allegory of empathy’s erosion.”\textsuperscript{14}

Dean calls “pornography” a promiscuous term, and when we consider the wide range of conditions it attaches itself to, the pun is more than justified. As a signifier of responses to bodily suffering, pornography has come to mean the violation of dignity, taking things out of context, exploitation, objectification, putting misery and horror on display, the encouragement of voyeurism, the construction of desire, unacceptable sexuality, moral and political perversion, and a fair number more. Furthermore, this litany of possible conditions named by “pornography” is replete with contradictory relations between the elements. Excesses mark some of the conditions while others involve shortages. Critics, Dean argues, are also confused about whether “pornography” is the cause or effect of these conditions.

The upshot is that as a term with a complex history, a licentious character and an uncertain mode of operation, “pornography” fails to offer an argument for understanding the work images do. It is at one and the same time too broad and too empty, applied to so much yet explaining so little. As a result, Dean concludes that “pornography” is “an alibi for a relationship between cause and effect that is never anywhere named or explained” and which “functions primarily as an aesthetic or moral judgement that \textit{precludes} an investigation of traumatic response and arguably \textit{diverts} us from the more explicitly posed question: how to forge a critical use of empathy?”\textsuperscript{15}

The repeated and indiscriminate use of “pornography” substitutes for evidence in arguments about the alleged exhaustion of empathy. It has become part of a fable that asserts we fail to recognise our ethical obligations towards others, and have become habituated to suffering, because of a claimed glut of pictures. It is, then, related to the idea of compassion fatigue in so far as both terms signify alleged obstacles to empathy. But they differ in that “pornography” is said to corrupt because of an affective excess - a voyeuristic desire that compels people to look - whereas compassion fatigue is an affective lack, the condition which allegedly promotes an aversion to
seeing. Nonetheless, I will argue, the compassion fatigue thesis, like the repeated invocation of “pornography,” is an allegory that serves as an alibi for other issues and prevents their investigation.

This essay will contest the compassion fatigue thesis in its own terms in order to clear the way for later developing a more robust account of how images impact upon people. It proceeds by first looking at the emergence of ‘compassion fatigue’ as a concept, what it involves, and how it relates to imagery. What is notable at the outset is the way compassion fatigue means one thing in the context of health care and social work, and the reverse in relation to the media and politics. Susan Sontag is the writer which drove much of the popularity of this thesis in relation to photography, and the essay will unpack her arguments in On Photography, exploring their logic and supporting evidence (or lack thereof) before discussing how she retracted much of them in Regarding the Pain of Others.

Sontag’s reversal has had little impact on the ubiquity of the compassion fatigue thesis, and that is in large part a result of arguments like those found in Susan Moeller’s book Compassion Fatigue. The third section of this essay dissects Moeller’s claims to reveal how in her hand ‘compassion fatigue’ is an empty signifier that becomes attached to a range of often contradictory explanations. The limits of Moeller’s text are exposed in the fourth section of the essay, which reviews all the available evidence of which I am aware relating to the relations between photographs, compassion and charitable responses. The essay concludes with some reflections on the reframing of the problem of how photographs work given the preceding deconstruction of the compassion fatigue thesis.

The claim of compassion fatigue: Sontag’s epiphany and its reversal

According to the Oxford English Dictionary - in draft additions added as recently as 2002 - compassion fatigue is an American term meaning “apathy or indifference towards the suffering of others or to charitable causes acting on their behalf, typically attributed to numbingly frequent appeals for assistance, esp. donations; (hence) a diminishing public response to frequent charitable appeals.” The OED definition makes clear the causal relations, effects and evidence assumed by the idea of compassion fatigue. The cause (in something of a tautology) is the
'numbingly frequent appeals’ of charities acting on behalf of suffering others. The effect is apathy and/or indifference, and the evidence of this effect is the ‘diminishing public response’ to the appeals. This framework is similar to the elements of what Cohen calls the “populist psychology thesis” of compassion fatigue: claims about information overload, normalisation, and desensitisation. Importantly, although the compassion fatigue thesis offers a generalisation about media, culture and society, it is in fact structurally individualistic, with the question of how a single person’s desire to respond to the suffering of others can be engaged at its heart.

What is paradoxical about the idea of compassion fatigue, and what is not evident in the *OED* definition, is how it relates to the same concept within health care and social work. From perhaps the 1980s and certainly the 1990s, compassion fatigue was understood as “Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder,” and diagnosed in people either suffering directly from trauma or individuals working closely with people suffering trauma. In this context, although it concerned a set of negative impacts on those affected - such as reduced pleasure and increased feelings of hopelessness - it derived from the problem that “caring too much can hurt.” In other words, compassion fatigue was prompted by an excess of compassion rather than a lack of compassion. As the Compassion Fatigue Awareness Project states, when caregivers, who have a strong identification with those suffering, fail to practice “self-care” they can be prone to destructive behaviours. Other than the occasional inclusion of journalists in conflict zones amongst the “trauma workers” who might be affected, the connection between this understanding of compassion fatigue and the use of the concept in general media critiques is not clear.

The link between photography and compassion fatigue comes about because of the role images have played in the charitable appeals and associated media coverage of suffering others. Susan Sontag is the most noted proponent of the idea that the photography of suffering has done much to numb the audience and help produce apathy and/or indifference. In *On Photography* she famously asserts “in these last decades, ‘concerned’ photography had done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it.” In conjunction with the much quoted statement that “images anesthetize,” Sontag provided the rhetorical force to launch and sustain the idea of photography’s responsibility for compassion fatigue.
It is worth undertaking a closer examination of Sontag’s reasoning in order to understand what the concept of compassion fatigue assumes. Sontag claims that familiarity with images is what determines the emotions people summon in response to photographs of suffering:

Don McCullin’s photographs of emaciated Biafrans in the early 1970s [sic] had less impact for some people than Werner Bischhof’s photographs of Indian famine victims in the early 1950s because those images had become banal, and the photographs of Tuareg families dying of starvation in the sub-Sahara that appeared in magazines everywhere in 1973 must have seemed to many like an unbearable replay of a now familiar atrocity exhibition.20

There is no supporting evidence for the vague claims that McCullin’s photographs “had less impact for some people” or that the images of dying Tuareg “must have seemed to many like an unbearable replay...”. While it would be wrong to insist on social scientific protocols for an interpretive essay, the insubstantial foundations on which this idea of repetition and familiarity leading to a failure of response has been built are revealed in these sentences. Sontag’s analysis was written between 1973 and 1977, and the grounds for this argument seem even weaker when we consider that no more than seven years later the world was moved to the largest charitable event ever by both still and moving pictures of mass famine in Ethiopia.

So where does Sontag’s conviction that “the shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings” comes from?21 Because she maintains that photographs of atrocity jolt viewers only because they offer them something novel, her conviction is founded on the “negative epiphany” arrived at in a “first encounter” with horrific pictures:

For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen - in photographs or in real life - ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I fully understood what they were about.22

Encountering photographs of the Nazi’s concentration camps for the first time is surely something that many of us can recall. However, a personal epiphany seems a weak basis on which
to make absolute and universal claims about the power of photography, not least because each of us will experience our epiphanies on a timescale at variance with Sontag’s. What is repetitive for her will be novel for others. Who is to say that the millions moved to charitable action by Live Aid in 1984 were or were not familiar with either Bischof’s or McCullin’s famine photographs?

Although Sontag’s articulation of the relationship between photography and compassion fatigue from the 1970s has been pivotal to the concept’s enduring power, thirty years later, in Regarding the Pain of Others, Sontag heavily qualified and largely retracted her earlier claims:

As much as they create sympathy, I wrote [in On Photography], photographs shrivel sympathy. Is this true? I thought it was when I wrote it. I’m not so sure now. What is the evidence that photographs have a diminishing impact, that our culture of spectatorship neutralizes the moral force of photographs of atrocities?

Not everything posited in On Photography is abandoned in Regarding the Pain of Others. Sontag still operates in terms of assumptions about the scope and scale of our “incessant exposure to images, and overexposure to a handful of images seen again and again.”23 Equally, she persists with the proposition that “as one can become habituated to horror in real life, one can become habituated to the horror of certain images.” What changes is the fact that this condition is no longer a given: “there are cases where repeated exposure to what shocks, saddens, appalls does not use up a full-hearted response. Habituation is not automatic, for images...obey different rules than real life.”24

Sontag’s increased attentiveness to contingency carries over into an appreciation of the different motivations of individuals and the different capacities of images. People, she writes, “can turn off not just because a steady diet of images of violence has made them indifferent but because they are afraid.”25 Pictures of the atrocious, she concedes, “can answer to several different needs. To steel oneself against weakness. To make oneself more numb. to acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible.”26 But in her clearest reversal, Sontag concludes “harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock.”27
The persistence of compassion fatigue: Moeller’s empty signifier

If Susan Sontag was the contemporary originator of the idea of compassion fatigue with regard to photography, then Susan Moeller is its contemporary populariser. Her book Compassion Fatigue is on the surface the most extensive discussion of the concept available. Published in 1999 it could not take account of the changes in Sontag’s argument discussed above, but those changes have not curtailed the impact of Moeller’s analysis. The problem with Moeller’s argument is that it encompasses so many different factors the idea of compassion fatigue functions as an empty signifier for a vast range of media-related concerns.

The unfocused yet assumption-laden nature of Moeller’s argument is clear from the opening of her book:

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

We can note that the mainstream media is understood principally in terms of education and that the (American) public is considered to be in a “a compassion fatigue stupor.” But it is the questions that map the binary contradiction which besets Moeller’s text - is compassion fatigue a condition of the population that effects the media, or is compassion fatigue a condition of the media that effects the population? As we proceed through Moeller’s discussion this uncertainty is rife and unresolved, such that compassion fatigue is variously, and confusingly, understood as both cause that acts on the media and an effect that results from the media’s actions. Or, as Moeller states, “compassion fatigue is a result of inaction and itself causes inaction.”

When Moeller understands compassion fatigue as a cause, its power is said to be vast:

Compassion fatigue is the unacknowledged cause of much of the failure of international reporting today. It is at the base of many of the complaints about the public’s short attention span, the media’s peripatetic journalism, the public’s boredom with international news, the media’s preoccupation with crisis coverage.
What does compassion fatigue do? *It acts as a prior restraint* on the media. Editors and producers don’t assign stories and correspondents don’t cover events that they believe will not appeal to their readers and viewers."}31

Compassion fatigue *abets* Americans’ self-interest...Compassion fatigue *reinforces* simplistic, formulaic coverage...Compassion fatigue *ratchets up* the criteria for stories that get coverage...Compassion fatigue *tempts* journalists to find ever more sensational tidbits in stories to retain the attention of their audience...Compassion fatigue *encourages* the media to move on to other stories once the range of possibilities of coverage have been exhausted so that boredom doesn’t set in."}32

...the most devastating effect of compassion fatigue: no attention, no interest, no story."}33

Compassion fatigue *ensures* such a shallow understanding."}34

In more ways than the metaphorical, compassion fatigue has become *an insidious plague* in society."}35

Culminating with the representation of compassion fatigue in socio-medical terms as a plague - a metaphor of illness that Sontag would likely have objected to - Moeller regularly casts compassion fatigue as an actant that causes, founds, restrains, abets, encourages, ratchets, ensures and tempts."}36

However, Moeller equally regards compassion fatigue as an effect, as something caused by something else:

Compassion fatigue is not an unavoidable consequence of covering the news. It is, however, *an unavoidable consequence* of the way the news is now covered."}37

It’s *the media that are at fault*. How they typically covers crises helps us to feel overstimulated and bored all at once."}38

*Causes of compassion fatigue are multiple*. Too many catastrophes at once, and coverage that is too repetitious."}39
...much of the media looks alike. The same news, the same pictures. What is the inevitable result much of the time? Compassion fatigue.\textsuperscript{40}

Compassion fatigue is not the inevitable consequence of similar events or lingering events. It a consequence of rote journalism and looking-over-your-shoulder reporting. It is a consequence of sensationalism, formulaic coverage and perfunctory reference to American cultural icons.\textsuperscript{41}

But perhaps if the coverage of crises was not so formulaic or sensationalized or Americanized we wouldn’t lapse so readily into a compassion fatigue stupor.\textsuperscript{42}

In these moments, Moeller regards compassion fatigue not as a thing that acts, but the condition which results from action elsewhere: it is the unavoidable, inevitable consequence the public lapses into as a result of someone or something else’s fault.

The many and varied ways in which Moeller articulates the idea of compassion fatigue and the causal relations associated with it demonstrate that the term is an empty signifier - it has no agreed meaning and lacks stable referents, instead functioning something like a cultural meme around which a host of concerns and criticisms swirl. This can be demonstrated further by considering those few moments in which Moeller offers some substantive evidence for her multiple positions.

The information in Moeller’s book is derived from interviews with, or quotes from, important figures in America’s mainstream press speaking about the intersection of politics, media and international events. Small anecdotes - such as the case of the Newsweek issue with a Luc Delahaye photo of an injured Bosnian child on the cover being one of the poorest selling weeks of all time - bear the weight of general arguments.\textsuperscript{43} There are also limited references to newspaper stories on compassion fatigue, which offer up interviews from both citizens and sources like Neil Postman, who was quoted in a 1991 New York Times story proclaiming;

the sheer abundance of images of suffering will tend to make people turn away...People respond when a little girl falls down a well. But if 70,000 people in Bangladesh are killed, of course people will say, 'Isn't that terrible' but I think the capacity for feeling is if not deadened, at least drugged.\textsuperscript{44}
The best way to consider the supports for Moeller’s argument is to examine her discussion of the US coverage and response to the Rwanda genocide. As with other chapters, the thorough analysis of the crisis in Rwanda is linked to a media critique via the occasional remarks of broadcasters, print journalists and editors, and buttressed by the odd quote from members of the public.45 Citizens are cited for their complaints about the publication of graphic pictures from photographers like Gilles Peress, Tom Stoddart and others, while reporters remark on the challenges of covering a story as large as the mass killings in 1994.

Moeller’s central point is that when a nation fails to act decisively in the face of incontrovertible evidence of genocide despite extensive media coverage it is evidence of compassion fatigue either on the part of media or the public or both. But part of her own narrative shows the problematic nature of compassion fatigue as a concept for the dynamics she wishes to examine.
Using a *Boston Globe* report on the charitable response to Rwanda, Moeller makes much of the fact that during the weeks of the mass killings Oxfam America received no more than the normal number of phone calls from people offering donations. Her conclusion is that “the images of the genocide spurred few to donate money.” However, after the killing ended and Rwanda became a refugee crisis, with hundreds of thousands fleeing to Goma and suffering from cholera as a result, Oxfam received more than 1,000 calls in 24 hours with people willing to donate vast sums of money. According to the *Boston Globe* reporter,

all attribute the sudden interest to news coverage of the cholera epidemic that in the past four days has killed 7,000 Rwandans who have fled to refugee camps in Zaire. The link is so direct, they say, that phone calls peak immediately after graphic reports of dying Rwandan refugees are broadcast on news reports...Many callers are crying on the phone. Some ask if they can adopt orphaned children, others want to fly to Rwanda to volunteer.

It is curious, to say the least, that an outpouring of compassion is mobilised as evidence for an argument about the pervasiveness of compassion fatigue. Furthermore, this report on the rise of compassion came just six weeks after the views in another American newspaper report are cited by Moeller as evidence for the claim that “the symptoms of compassion fatigue are getting worse”:

‘It wasn’t too long ago,’ wrote Richard O’Mara in *The Baltimore Sun*, ‘that the face of an African child, frightened and hungry, could draw out the sympathies of people in the richer countries and, more importantly, stimulate a reflex towards rescue. That face became emblematic of the 1980s. But with all symbols it soon list its human dimension, its link to the actual flesh-and-blood child. Now that face stirs few people. The child has fallen victim, this time to a syndrome described as “compassion fatigue”.’

Considering these points together demonstrates Moeller’s rampant lack of clarity about what is or is not compassion fatigue. The compassionate response towards Rwandan refugees is taken as evidence of the absence of caring during the genocide. For Moeller, photography is indicted in the process: she contends that “in the case of Rwanda, clearly, the famine images [sic] touched people. The genocide pictures did not.” Then, compassion fatigue is said to be getting
worse and this is supported by an opinion which declares that the face of the child in distress no longer stirs people, when just six weeks later the graphic accounts of dying Rwandans are cited as the principal reason behind the massive jump in charitable giving for those refugees.

The fact that ‘compassion fatigue’ can be mobilised as a concept when a surge in charitable compassion is being discussed demonstrates how empty it is as a signifier. Nonetheless, Moeller identifies something important with her general if unfocused concerns concerning the Rwanda case. While compassion was not diminished, let alone exhausted, in the cases she considers, it is certainly differential. That is, while compassion as a reservoir of public empathy remains in plentiful supply, it is clearly directed towards some issues and not others at some times and not others.

What Moeller has seized upon is the way in which humanitarian emergencies solicit both public and policy responses more readily than political crises. Moeller works hard to indict either the media or the public or imagery (or some combination of the three) as culpable for a response that was clearly inadequate to the Rwandan genocide when it was underway. That the international response to the Rwandan genocide was, to put it mildly, insufficient, is by now well documented - as the Sarkozy photograph in the introduction reminds us. In the case of the United States government, the lack of action was the continuation of a century’s avoidance and indifference to some of humanity’s greatest crimes. Moeller is thus undoubtedly correct to argue that “one difficulty in moving Americans toward engagement is that they consider few political themes or few international conflicts compelling enough to galvanize a concerted response.” However, the “Americans” who are most responsible in this formulation are the successive administrations and policy makers who have regularly declined to support international action on the grounds of the United States’ national interest.

This is not to deny that the media and the public also bear some responsibility for America’s repeated failure to act, but it is clear that when the political leadership frames international crises in ways that lessen the chance for a timely and robust response, this provides others with a powerful lead that further diminishes the likelihood of a timely and robust response. We saw this in the context of the Bosnian War, when both American and European leaders represented the conflict as a civil war leading to humanitarian emergency rather than a political concern. And we have seen it in the context of the violence in Darfur, where a humanitarian
script trumped the genocide narrative, and then only after a United Nations official declared that it was “the world’s worst humanitarian crisis” which differed from the genocide in Rwanda only in
terms of the numbers affected.54

Moeller’s critique of American public and policy attitudes towards international crises is
persuasive in many respects, but it is not a critique that benefits from being conducted in terms of
‘compassion fatigue’. Indeed, the overriding problem with Moeller’s approach is the way
‘compassion fatigue’ becomes the alibi for a range of issues which, while related at some levels,
demand specific investigations. In addition to the political critique, Moeller wants to argue that
compassion fatigue is responsible for “much of the failure of international reporting today,” “the
media’s peripatetic journalism,” and “the media’s preoccupation with crisis coverage.” Moeller is
correct that there are many areas of concern when it comes to international journalism, but
‘compassion fatigue’ as a general concept offers little purchase on problems that include
everything from news narratives and television scheduling to the political economy of
broadcasting, not least because the ecology of international news has been radically transformed
in the decade since her argument was published.55

Finally, on top of the political and media critiques, Moeller deploys compassion fatigue as
both a description and explanation of the public’s allegedly “short attention span” and “boredom
with international news.”56 Here, too, there are many questions to raise. We could point to the way
these claims necessarily invoke a past golden age in which attention spans were supposedly long
and nobody was bored. Or we could argue that these commonly repeated assumptions about
audience behaviour are contradicted by Pew Research Centre evidence which shows that “people
are spending more time with news than ever before.”57 Either way, these thoughts require us to
ask: what, actually, is the evidence for the existence of compassion fatigue, where that term refers
to popular desensitisation?

What is the evidence for or against the compassion fatigue thesis?

There are very few studies that have analysed audience consumption of and reaction to
news in terms of claims about compassion fatigue. The first and best known is a 1996 paper by
Kinnick, Krugman and Cameron which used a telephone survey of 316 Atlanta residents to
measure attitudes towards AIDS, homelessness, violent crime and child abuse and the media coverage of these issues. The authors found considerable variation between individuals, argued responses were issue dependent and observed that there was no such thing as a totally fatigued individual. They did conclude that there was a compassion fatigue phenomenon but that it was a situational variable rather than a personality trait. Equally, they did note that the mass media played a primary role through both negative coverage and content that allowed avoidance, and that respondents readily blamed the media for their personal desensitisation and avoidance strategies.

However, Kinnick, Krugman and Cameron qualified the media’s role by pointing out how prior dispositions intersected with media coverage: “results of the study suggest that for those who are initially disinterested or biased against victims of a social problem, pervasive media coverage likely serves to entrench negative feelings towards victims and foster desensitization.”

And, in a statement that reduced the primacy of the media’s role, the authors concluded that “level of media consumption...does not appear to be as influential in the development of compassion fatigue as individual tolerances for exposure to disturbing media content and perceptions of the victims’ ‘deservingness’ of compassion.”

In pointing towards the disposition and state of individuals as causal factors in how they directed and expressed compassion, Kinnick, Krugman and Cameron provide a link to how social psychology claims to offer an account of how some people secure empathy from an audience. In the relevant literature much of this debate is conducted in terms of the “identifiable victim effect,” which, through its emphasis on how people continue to respond to appeals (part of the OED definition), stands in contradiinction to any claims about the contemporary prevalence of compassion fatigue.

Stemming from the work of Thomas Schelling in the 1960s, the identifiable victim effect describes the way “people react differently toward identifiable victims than to statistical victims who have not yet been identified.” It recalls the quote attributed to Joseph Stalin that “one death is a tragedy; one million is a statistic” as well as the statement from Mother Theresa that “if I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.” These claims seem to be based on the psychological intuition that an identifiable victim is ipso facto a more powerful emotional stimulus than a statistical victim – that, for example, the photograph of an individual person in distress in
any given disaster is more effective than accounts of the millions at risk or dying from that situation. For Paul Slovic, this incapacity to translate sympathy for the one into concern for the many, as evidenced in the way mass murder and genocide in places like Rwanda and Darfur are largely ignored, testifies to “a fundamental deficiency in human psychology.”

Although the literature on what motivates charitable giving (the home of much of these arguments) is relatively sparse, a series of recent studies in decision psychology have produced some interesting findings. Small and Lowenstein conducted a field experiment that demonstrated when asked to contribute to a housing charity that had identified the recipient family versus one that would find a family after the donation, people’s contributions were higher to the family already identified. Kogut and Ritov asked participants to donate towards treatment for one sick child or a group of eight sick children, with both the individual and the group represented in photographs. Although the total amount needed was the same in both cases, donations were higher for the individual child than for the group of children. Small, Lowenstein and Slovic asked givers to respond to a statistical description of food shortages in southern African affecting three million children versus a personal appeal with a picture on behalf of Rokia, a seven-year-old Malawian girl, and the identified victim triggered a much higher level of sympathy and greater donations. In a similar study, when potential donors were faced with the option of helping just two children (the girl Rokia and a boy, Moussa) rather than a single individual, the response for the individual child was far greater than for the pair.

In analysing the form of the image that best elicits a response, Small and Verruchi found that sad facial expressions in the pictures of victims produced a much greater response than happy or neutral images, and that this was achieved through “emotional contagion,” whereby viewers “caught” vicariously the emotion on a victims face. As a more detailed moment in the production of the identifiable victim, sad pictures generated greater sympathy and increased charitable giving.

These studies confirm the intuition that images are central to the transmission of affect, and that while some are more powerful than others, “when it comes to eliciting compassion, the identified individual victim, with a [sad] face and a name, has no peer.” This establishes the phenomenon, how it operates, but not why. Some of the reasons, at least in terms of the psychologists conducting these studies, could include the following:
(1) That a single individual is viewed as a psychologically coherent unity, whereas a group is not;  
(2) That identifiable victims are more “vivid” and hence more compelling than colourless representations;  
(3) That identifiable victims are actual rather than likely victims;  
(4) That as an identified, actual victim, blame is more easily attached, whereas for people who are not yet victims responsibility is harder to assign;  
(5) Identifiable victims generate concern when they are a significant proportion of their group. This is “the reference group effect” which suggests, for example, that those infected with a disease that kills 90% of a small population attract more sympathy than, say, one million victims in a country of 20 million people.

As much as the social scientific methodologies of these studies suggest they have produced definitive reasons for the ‘identifiable victim effect’, they generate “no evidence that these are the actual mechanisms that produce the effect.” They reiterate, nonetheless, findings from related studies to suggest what is happening. Small and Lowenstein argue that “people use distinct processes to make judgements about specific as opposed to general targets,” with the processing of information about specific individuals being more emotionally engaging than deliberation about abstract cases. Small and Verrochi maintain that there is a difference between empathic feeling and deliberative thinking, with the emotional contagion produced by particular pictures of specific individuals happening outside of awareness. Although they are distinct, these two processes can intersect. Indeed, if emotional engagement is significant enough, it can lead individuals to explore deliberatively contextual information about the identifiable victim they originally responded to. Here, though, some studies identify a potentially paradoxical outcome – the greater the deliberative thinking that takes place, the more the emotional engagement is overridden, sympathy diminishes, and charitable donations decline.

Having detailed the “identifiable victim effect” and the images that contribute to it, these psychological studies have set out an interesting problematic even if they have not identified the causes for this effect. They also leave us with a number of challenging questions: is our capacity to feel limited such that anything beyond the specific individual leads to a decline in emotional
concern for others? How might other emotions, such as anger, disgust and fear affect sympathy? Would the role of pictured expressions on the faces of adults differ from those found with children?

Many of these issues and questions become more complex when we move beyond small field experiments about charitable giving to large-scale social and political phenomena. Although, in a manner not dissimilar from Moeller’s political critique, Slovic wants to maintain that the repeated American failure to respond to mass murder and genocide globally represents a fundamental psychological flaw – stemming from the inability to make an emotional connection to the victims of the violence – he concedes that in cases such as the South Asian tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 there was a significant cultural response to the plight of millions of individuals who formed a collective and sometimes distant community of suffering. These moments were different, claims Slovic, because of what he calls the dramatic, intimate, exhaustive and vivid media coverage of these events for spectators beyond the danger zone. This stands in direct opposition to the compassion fatigue thesis, whereby the deluge of imagery is said to inevitably dull feeling. As a result, Slovic maintains - this time in opposition to Moeller’s thesis - that the reporting of on-going genocides is sparse and sporadic.

Beyond the work cited above, there are very studies examining the compassion fatigue thesis. Stanley Cohen and Bruna Seu report on a 1998 pilot study at Brunel University in England where three focus groups of fifteen people were shown Amnesty International appeals about Afghanistan and Bosnia. Although the sample was small, Cohen and Seu confidently report that the emotional response of the subjects meant that “the strong compassionate fatigue thesis...cannot be sustained.” Those in the focus groups recognised an accumulation of atrocity images but that did not produce indifference, even if they resented how charities played on their guilt for circumstances beyond their control. What the accumulation of images did produce was a sense of demand overload, meaning that there were too many demands on their compassion and insufficient means to determine which of the demands could be most effectively met.

Birgitta Hoijer’s research during the 1999 Kosovo crisis, in which detailed telephone interviews and focus groups with more than 500 people in Sweden and Norway explored their reaction to images of suffering in news coverage, confirms much of Cohen and Seu’s argument. Hoijer found that 51% of respondents said they often or quite often reacted to atrocity images,
14% said sometimes or not at all, with only 23% saying they never reacted. Gender and age were important with women reacting more than men, and older people reacting more than the young. In an important statement, Hoijer says that “women especially said that they sometimes cried, had to close their eyes or look away, because the pictures touched them emotionally,” thereby demonstrating that averting one’s gaze can itself be an affective response rather than a sign of indifference. It is also a response that recalls the idea from the medical literature that ‘caring too much can hurt’.83

Hoijer’s research intersects with the literature on the “identifiable victim effect” when she reports that the audience for the Kosovo images accepted the media’s code of victimhood in which women and children were seen as innocent and helpless, and it was this victimhood which made them deserving of compassion.84 Hoijer does note that when the Kosovo crisis ran on into a 78 day war feelings of powerlessness overcame the audience such that time did undermine compassion. Even if this was expressed in terms of distanciation or numbness it is not evidence of compassion fatigue. Rather, it confirms that compassion has to be connected to a finite outcome otherwise it could be directed towards a different issue. As a result, Hoijer says her research “opposes, or strongly modulates, the thesis about a pronounced compassion fatigue among people in general.”85

The final source of evidence that can cast concrete light on the compassion fatigue thesis concerns charity appeals. The OED definition of compassion fatigue at the outset cited the “diminishing public response” to such appeals as evidence. But is the public response diminishing? While answering that would require a detailed longitudinal study, a few observations suggest the public still respond quite eagerly to calls for charity.

In Britain there are 166,000 charities that received donations totalling £10 billion in 2009. In the United States, there are more than 800,000 charitable organisations, and Americans gave them more than $300 billion in 2007.86 The British public’s response to disasters like the 2010 Haiti earthquake (for which the Disasters Emergency Committee raised £106 million) shows that the willingness to act on empathy for the victims of natural disasters is still considerable even when they are distant.87 The DEC conducts consolidated appeals for the fourteen leading aid NGOs in the UK, and a look at their various appeals over the last few years shows that there is a constant willingness to donate, albeit at variable rates, from the 2009 Gaza appeals’s £8.3 million to the
massive £392 million given for the 2004 Tsunami appeal. There are clearly differential responses, but these do not add up to a generally diminished response.

Conclusion

In order to clear the way for a sustained consideration of how the pictures produced by photojournalism work, this essay has worked through the various claims, subsumed by the idea of ‘compassion fatigue’, that seemingly explain how photographs of atrocity and suffering effect people generally. These assertions, made by a wide range of commentators and photographers, fall into three broad groups.

The first involve in the global visual economy, including the media and non-government organisations. There is said to be a general and accelerating abundance of imagery that inundates and overpowers the public leading to widespread cultural anxiety. This overexposure can be the result of seeing a few images too often or too many pictures incessantly. The second deals with the nature of the pictures that allegedly overload us. There are either too many of the same type of images, their thematic content is unbearable (either too graphic or too violent), or the scale of the atrocity or suffering portrayed is too vast. The third set of statements deal with the audience for the images, which is said have too short an attention span, shows a lack of interest, feels powerless or has a deadened conscience when faced with visual representations of humanity’s problems.

Taken individually and investigated critically each of these claims could have some merit, assuming some supporting evidence. But lumped together as components in a generalised and universalised condition called ‘compassion fatigue’ their contradictions outweigh their coherence. Indeed, in the context of media and politics, ‘compassion fatigue’ has morphed into a catch-all concept that is both cause and effect, reason and consequence, which is somehow designed to explain many of the ills that beset both international reporting and global politics. It is little more than an allegory that serves as an alibi for other issues while preventing their critical investigation.

One of the striking things about the ‘compassion fatigue’ thesis in media and politics is how it differs from the concepts’ usage in health care and social work, where it marks the consequences of an excess of compassion. However, this deployment of ‘compassion fatigue’ does
not offer the correct definition to which media and politics must conform, for definitional clarity is not our primary concern. What this alternative rendering of compassion does make clear, though, is the need for evidence to support the claim that something about the number or nature of images has drained the general public of its capacity to be both affected by and respond to representations of atrocity and suffering. This is all the more so because the major proponents of the idea of compassion fatigue in relation to photography (especially the early Sontag and the ongoing Moeller) constructed their arguments with little if any evidence. As noted above, the evidence that is available demonstrates that far from diminishing compassion, the public at large still gives generously, if differentially, to charitable appeals using familiar and repeated imagery to foster a response to international events.

Photojournalism’s dream has been that its pictures of crisis move viewers to respond. Given the persistence and scale of disease, famine, war and death in the late modern world it is not difficult to conclude that somehow visual representation has failed, and that either the producers or viewer of our abundant imagery are culpable. In many ways, this is the great achievement of the myth of compassion fatigue: it has provided an answer to a question posed in its own terms.

There may well be a problem with compassion, but it is not one of a generalised or universal fatigue brought on by repeated exposure to certain kinds of imagery. The problem might be that there is an excess of compassion, though not in the sense envisaged by the medical literature. Instead, there might be excess of compassion in so far as compassion, and only compassion, has become the dominant mode through which to interpret the public response to extreme events. Rendering our capacities solely in terms of compassion - either its excess or lack -- is too singular and limited a view.

This is because, as James Johnson argues, compassion can only operate at an individualising level. By itself compassion cannot be the basis for political mobilisation because it is limited to a vicarious experience of suffering usually between two individuals (the one suffering and the spectator of that suffering), and can thus only ever deal with the particular rather than the general. As such, framing the problem in terms of either the diminishment or promotion of compassion means we are incapable of generating the move from singular expression to collective action. The myth of compassion fatigue, then, frames the issue in a way that can only fail.
‘Compassion fatigue’ - aside from being unsupported even in its own terms - is entirely the wrong concept for thinking about how the images produced by photojournalism work. And for too long it has prevented that thinking from progressing.

Endnotes
4 For example, Life, 100 Photographs That Changed the World (New York, 2003).
5 Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, p. 103.
6 Here are some moments from 2010-12 in which this belief manifests itself: in an interview following his World Press Photo award, photography Pietro Mastruzo noted “Shocking pictures do not really communicate anymore, because the audience is accustomed to looking at them” (http://bit.ly/seAiTc); the late Magnum photographer Eve Arnold was reported as once saying, “You know in the beginning we thought we were going to change the world. I think people live in so much visual material these days, billions of photographs annually, that they grow numb after too much exposure” (http://www.bip-online.com/british-journal-of-photography/news/2135528/magnum-photographer-eve-arnold-dies); the new media artist Peggy Nelson told Nieman Storyboard that, “we can’t have all the news from everywhere and everyone all the time. There’s info overload and there’s compassion fatigue” (http://www.niemanstoryboard.org/2010/02/12/peggy-nelson-on-new-media-narratives-every-twitter-account-is-a-character/); in an analysis of disaster coverage, University of London professor Pavarti Nair wrote, “The floods in Pakistan have given rise to a veritable deluge of photographs documenting devastation. On a daily basis, we have been seeing representations of untold suffering, as people struggle to survive, while filth and chaos reign around them. Nevertheless, despite efforts to mobilise relief, a certain degree of apathy often accompanies our responses to such images” http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/22/photo-reportage-thwarted-potential); in his review of the Tate Modern’s Exposed, noted photography writer Gerry Badger made a direct endorsement of Sontag’s 1977 statement that “Images anaesthetise” (http://www.bjp-online.com/british-journal-of-photography/review/1728987/gerry-badger-reviews-tate-moderns-exposed-voyeurism-surveillance-camera); Xeni Jardin, co-editor of Boing Boing, said of violent images on the web, “human beings do not have an endless capacity for empathy, and our capacity is less so in the mediated, disembodied, un-real realm of online video….at what point do each of us who observe this material for the purpose of reporting the story around it, become numb or begin to experience secondary trauma?” (http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/spr/04/digital-media-xeni-jardin); and award-winning documentarian Danfung Dennis introduced his new video app by claiming “Society was numb to the images of conflict” (http://lightbox.time.com/2011/11/11/a-new-way-to-photograph-war/). Even academic research projects exploring how images affect people start from bold assertions of compassion fatigue. See Charlie Beckett, “Four steps to success in a humanitarian appeal,” 15 November 2011, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/11/15/four-steps-to-success-in-a-humanitarian-appeal/, which begins: “People are exhausted by messages they receive from humanitarian NGOs. They’ve become desensitized to images of distant suffering and repeated appeals for help.”

8 *Oxford English Dictionary*.


19 Ibid, p. 20.


24 Ibid, p. 82.
26 Ibid, p. 98.
27 Ibid, p. 89.
28 Susan Moeller, Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death (New York, 1999).
29 Ibid, p. 52.
30 Ibid, p.2. All emphases added.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid, p. 12.
34 Ibid, p. 17.
35 Ibid, p.40
37 Moeller, Compassion Fatigue, p. 2.
38 Ibid, p. 9. How one can be simultaneously overstimulated and bored is not clear.
39 Ibid, p. 11.
40 Ibid, p. 32.
41 Ibid, p. 32.
42 Ibid, p. 53.
46 Moeller, Compassion Fatigue, p. 235.
47 Quoted in Ibid.
48 Quoted in Ibid, p. 304.
49 Ibid.
Samantha Power, ‘A Problem from Hell’: America and the Age of Genocide (New York, 2002).

Moeller, “Compassion Fatigue,” p. 110.

David Campbell, National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia (Minneapolis, 1998), especially chapter five.


Moeller, Compassion Fatigue, p. 2.


Ibid, p. 703.


This tendency is discussed in Libby Brooks, “The Turkish earthquake baby has evoked an empathy we too often repress, The Guardian, 27 October 2011, at http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/27/turkish-earthquake-baby-empathy


Small and Lowenstein, “Helping a Victim or Helping the Victim.”


70 Slovic, “‘If I Look at the Mass I Will Never Act,’” p. 86. The continued use of pathetic images in charity appeals for international humanitarian crises offers a strong contemporary inference for this claim. There is, however, one study which runs counter to this conclusion, arguing that its experiment with contrasting charity appeals showed photographs had less impact than expected, but that the response engendered by positive imagery exceed that of the negative. See Evelyne Dyck and Gary Coldevin, "Using Positive vs. Negative Photographs for Third-World Fund Raising," *Journalism Quarterly* 69 (1992), pp. 572-79.

71 Slovic, “‘If I Look at the Mass I Will Never Act,’” p. 89.

72 Small and Lowenstein, “Helping a Victim or Helping the Victim,” pp. 5-6.


74 Ibid, p. 6.

75 Small and Verrochi, “The Face of Need.”

76 Small, Lowenstein, Slovic, “Sympathy and Callousness.”

77 Slovic, “‘If I Look at the Mass I Will Never Act,’” p. 90.

78 Small and Verrochi, “The Face of Need.”

79 Slovic, “‘If I Look at the Mass I Will Never Act,’” pp. 81-82.


83 Ibid, pp. 519-520.

84 Ibid, p. 521.

85 Ibid, p. 528.


