

Has Empathy Become Obsolete? Journalism's Exploitative Undercurrent and Impact on Compassion for Marginalized Groups

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Day after day, we see people suffering on most of every platform of the news media. War in Ukraine, the fentanyl crisis, another shooting. At first we are shocked, but, with each additional click, we grow tired and care less about issues we once found important and shocking. When will it end? Will it ever end? Journalism has made the world accessible through our fingertips, but at what cost? Jamil Zaki, author and professor of psychology at Stanford University, has deemed this phenomenon as, "compassion fatigue." The way in which journalists are inclined to circulate important information is one of the main causes of it for the general public. Of course, we can acknowledge that journalism and the news media have had great impacts on the circulation of information around the world for centuries, nonetheless, desensitization is on the rise, and with it, empathy on the decline. Journalism in the 21st century has become less about voicing the issues within a community and more about regurgitating shocking titles and visuals for clicks and profit. The way in which journalism has evolved has steered more toward being exploitative rather than informative. Journalism has lost its effectiveness because of the compassion fatigue and desensitization people, as media consumers, experience. In order for journalism to stay effective in its message, reporting techniques have to change.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines compassion fatigue in non-medical contexts as: "apathy or indifference toward the suffering of others as the result of overexposure to tragic news stories and images and the subsequent appeals for assistance." Otherwise known as "news fatigue" (Zaki 97), this process occurs largely due to, as the term suggests, the news media. Jamil Zaki depicts the issue as so, "In minutes, an addled reader can click through stories of mass shootings, children separated from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border, and natural disasters ripping through the Caribbean" (Zaki 97). Due to this, a reader's empathetic response will diminish over time, leaving behind something of a "tolerance" to tragedy and a belated sense of care for those who are suffering. The issue of compassion fatigue in journalism has deeper implications such as desensitization to tragedy and the exploitation and negative stereotypes that are often associated with marginalized communities that are reported on by journalists.

A study conducted by Anita Varma on journalistic humanizing techniques practiced in the 2020 San Francisco Homeless Project shows how journalists attempt to humanize the homeless population in San Francisco and how effective these techniques are in enacting change in the community (Varma). Varma mainly studies two journalistic humanizing techniques, those done to evoke empathy, usually through an individual story-telling lens, or to enact solidarity, usually through a broader community and politically-oriented lens meant to elicit systemic change. Throughout the study, Varma critiques the first of the two techniques and concludes that, "solidarity in journalism moves beyond the narrow individualism of empathy and is therefore better aligned with journalism fulfilling its public service role" (Varma). She touches briefly on the topic of compassion fatigue in regards to individualistic and empathy evoking journalistic techniques. I was glad to see that she discussed this topic and acknowledged the existence of compassion fatigue, especially pertaining to journalism, because of its implications on its audience. She explains how continuous calls for empathy can backfire on marginalized communities because of an audience member's fatigue towards the subject because of the lack of a call to action many of these stories have. The audience's fatigue can even transform into resentment towards the group they previously empathized with, placing blame on the individuals rather than acknowledging the greater systemic issues that have led the individual to their circumstances (Varma).

Most, if not all of the empathy-centric stories published for the SF Homeless Project failed to recognize these systemic issues that have a tight grasp on the homeless population and prevent them from coming out of poverty. This idea made me question the purpose of empathy-driven stories and how effective they are in soliciting action and change. To be truthful, I feel as though these stories are ineffective in their message and serve no greater good other than telling the stories of a select few. Sure, someone will read a heart-wrenching story about an individual's backstory and how the events in their life led up to their situation now, but what happens when that same person sees a homeless person on the streets asking for money? Of course, there will be the exception of a few good Samaritans who will go out of their way to help a person in need, but in most cases, and I am guilty of this, people will dismiss and ignore the homeless person altogether and go about their day. I am not saying it is required of us to help others (although it is a nice thing to do), what I am trying to get across is the ineffectiveness of empathy driven stories.

These types of stories activate what is called “fast-twitch empathy,” a term used in *The War for Kindness* by Jamil Zaki. “Fast-twitch empathy” refers to an empathetic response that is activated quickly within a person but is similarly deactivated quickly, not leaving a lasting “care” response within a person's life. In the instance of my previous example, fast-twitch empathy would be the immediate empathetic response to reading a story about a homeless individual's backstory and feeling sad for their situation but then forgetting about the story days, hours, or even minutes later. Here is another example I'm sure many readers will be familiar with. Have you ever scrolled through your social media feed and seen posts about, for example, a humanitarian crisis in a foreign country, and thought to yourself, “this is really terrible I'm going to educate myself more on this topic and see if there's anything I can do,” only to forget about it hours later and go about your day. That is how I see fast-twitch empathy. It is a start to building up our empathetic muscle to a more “slow-twitch” or more lasting empathetic response, but, in my opinion, empathy altogether proves no significant long-term effects, especially with issues as pervasive as homelessness. Even if everyone helped every homeless person they saw, it wouldn't cause any long-term impactful change. People would still continue without basic necessities and the system that causes these issues through lack of affordable housing, lack of shelters, unlivable wages and deinstitutionalization would still be in place (Streeter). The connotation that empathy driven journalism creates is that homeless people will occasionally need help in desperate moments that are out of their control, but usually they will get sufficient help from compassionate neighbors rather than required systemic reform (Varma). This assumption is entirely incorrect and provides a false, damaging view of the world which is extremely unrealistic. By helping a person in need you could lighten up their day or make their week better than usual and that's great but other than that, no good would be done and these issues would still cause them to suffer at the end of the day.

Throughout my time as an individual on the internet I have started to pick up on the exploitative tendencies of journalism, primarily seen in these individualistic-type empathy centered stories. Many news networks want to seem “woke” for covering issues such as homelessness and act like they're doing something revolutionary for speaking to a homeless person (god forbid!) but they fail to report their interactions in a way that portrays everyone as equals. Anita Varma voices this well by saying, “personalized journalism focuses on individuals' exceptional qualities and their relatability to a comparatively privileged audience which both serve to qualify the claim that members of marginalized communities are indeed human—and suggest that others who lack exceptional or relatable qualities may not be.” By centering a report on a specific individual, it seems as though journalists are pushing the rhetoric that there are “good ones” and “bad ones” within marginalized communities and implies that marginalized communities need to earn their humanity (Varma). These stories don't account for everyone that is affected by these issues and places blame on those who are not classified as “good ones,” leaving them to fend for themselves and ultimately doing more harm to a community than good. Not only is this a problem, but how many times can we read the same stories about a person's challenges throughout their life before we don't care anymore? A cause of compassion fatigue is the feeling of helplessness. We can listen

and read these stories all we want but when there is no greater call to action there is only so much a person will do.

To create an effective reporting style of journalism on account of marginalized communities, journalism should evoke solidarity and systemic change through politicizing its reports rather than only focusing on social change. Acknowledging systemic issues and disadvantages placed on marginalized communities gets rid of the connotation of blame perpetrated by individual based reports and removes the separation between “good ones” and “bad ones,”

Isolating homeless people from ‘relevant social and institutional context’ diverges from solidarity because it means journalists do not provide an account of the systemic factors that give rise to homelessness... solidarity [on the other hand] shifts focus to the community-level and construes homelessness as socially unjust regardless of the merits, relatability, or personal demons of the individuals it affects (Varma).

A solidarity driven and politicized style of reporting does not favor certain individuals over others, it accounts for everyone affected by systemic issues, providing an equal approach to educating audience members on radical issues. Politicization gives contexts to the causes of marginalization due to institutional factors and emphasizes the constraints that prevent individuals from lifting themselves out of marginalization (Varma). Solidarity driven journalistic humanizing techniques, in the case of the SF Homelessness Project, encouraged collective action on the issue of homelessness and publicized the perspective of people in poverty in a way that didn’t diminish their perspective to that of experience (Varma). Because of this, audience members also don’t feel as though they are helpless to other people’s situations which helps reduce compassion fatigue. Through incorporating politicization into journalism, journalism itself becomes more effective in enacting long term and significant change within a community.

It is crucial that we recognize the flaws within journalism to make it possible to educate the public in an effective way. Because of the causes of compassion fatigue, journalism cannot always have a false sense of hope attached to it that leaves readers feeling as though there is nothing to be done, it must strive to depict topics realistically. In an ideal world, journalism would both educate and inspire its audience and trigger radical change within a community. Of course, this in itself is rather unrealistic, but with a change in how journalists report those stuck in marginalization, it is possible to be able to make small steps in the right direction. Journalists can no longer dismiss these long withstanding systemic issues that have oppressed marginalized communities for decades, if not centuries. It is time for a new age of journalism, one that challenges us to bring action to fruition.

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