

Marco Solaroli

Simon Cottle, Global Crisis Reporting. Journalism in the Global Age. Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press, 2009, 199 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/31380)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2-3, maggio-dicembre 2009

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

Simon Cottle, *Global Crisis Reporting. Journalism in the Global Age*. Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press, 2009, 199 pp.

doi: 10.2383/31380

Over the last few years, both the professional field of journalism and its intricately constitutive relationships with global crises – major conflicts and threats to humanity which, in today's globalizing world, can become transnational in scope, public understanding, cultural impact and political reaction – have deeply changed. Scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds are becoming increasingly aware of further levels of complexity and intellectual challenge. However, as it is widely acknowledged, the contemporary field of global media and journalism studies remains theoretically underdeveloped in this crucial domain: quite paradoxically, it seems that, on the one hand, the great amount of detailed research developed on a variety of issues and through different analytical dimensions has not yet succeeded in outlining a multi-dimensional, epistemologically funded and empirically sustained (and, therefore, potentially useful) conceptual framework; on the other hand, despite recurrent intentions it has not yet paid enough attention to the increasingly global status of its research objects. On this basis, it clearly emerges that we need further analytical tools, more refined theoretical frames and, above all, deeper empirical engagement. We need, in other words, to attend much more closely to the differentiated and fast-changing professional practices and representational forms, and to the heterogeneous ways through which the contemporary nature of global news reporting potentially provides both different opportunities for the transnational public visualization and elaboration of crises, and different (and hardly predictable) consequent deliberative effects within the global civil society.

In this context, Simon Cottle's most recent book represents a brilliant and most welcome contribution towards a shared systematization of this increasingly relevant yet strikingly under-investigated field of studies. If it doesn't completely succeed in offering a minutely exhaustive as much as constructively critical account of the fragmented nature of contemporary studies dealing with the multiple, often contradictory and rapidly evolving relationships between news media and global crises, this work unquestionably represents one of the very closest attempts available today to reach that goal. Involving as much a commitment to breadth as to depth, it provides a rich and sophisticated analysis of a vast amount of both theoretical debates and empirical researches concerned with the role of news media in defining, framing and narrating particular events as crises of global significance – and with potentially global effects. The analysis does not even implicitly privilege the author's own perspective or work, but it strives to be generally fair and balanced also in the most critical assessments of other scholars' works. In particular cases it offers precious examples of how to fruitfully develop theory-driven empirical research, with illuminating discussions of the difficulties, complexities and contingencies involved. Furthermore, for such a conceptually dense work the writing style is quite flowing and elegant, and even if in a few points it could appear somehow heavy, it also comes to be lightened by theoretical graphs and a fitting (and enviable!) employment of newspapers'

covers and news images reproduced throughout the book, as well as a brief terminological glossary at the end.

The author effectively argues that global crises, conceived as “the dark side of a globalized planet” [p. 1], are communicated by (mediated) as well as, increasingly, constituted within (mediatized) the news media in potentially very different ways, which can (or cannot) demand concerted re-action. In this sense, by critically investigating the potential role of news media in sustaining emergent forms of global cosmopolitan citizenship and prompting awareness of our “civilizational community of fate,” Cottle (who clearly has a soft spot for Ulrich Beck, repeatedly quoted in the book, first and last page included) advances, as Stuart Allan has underlined in the foreword, “a cautiously optimistic conception of how a socially responsible news media can effect social change in progressive ways.” More specifically, the book is articulated in different chapters reciprocally dealing with different contemporary global crises – from, among others, climate changes and (un)natural disasters (i.e. Hurricane Katrina and the South Asian tsunami) to humanitarian tragedies (related to world poverty, forced migrations and violations of human rights) and the war on terror. The field of war and media, in particular, turns out to be paradigmatic to realize both the fragmented nature of the disciplinary state-of-the-art and the added value of Cottle’s work. Notwithstanding the wide and diversified literature in the field of media studies concerned with the roles of news media in contemporary conflicts, in fact, scholars don’t share yet “any clear framework for collecting and interpreting observations and information about contemporary war situations, only a disparate set of issues and formulations, in varying states of development and supported only in varying degrees by effective methodologies;” and the lack of a convincing and widely accepted theoretical vision eventually generates a “rather depressing account” [McQuail 2006, 114-117]. In this context, elaborating on and updating his previous *Mediatized Conflict* [Cottle 2006], in this work the author widens the scope and deepens the analysis, the critiques and the suggestions. By further and critically weighing up both the potentialities and the limits of the dominant paradigms developed mainly during the last decade of the last century (from the post-modern media war spectacle to Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model) and constructively updating the conceptual scenario on the basis of the most recent and illuminating theoretical debates and empirical studies, Cottle throws new and fertile light on, among others, war journalism’s (and photojournalism’s) organizational constraints and professional risks, the new relational environment and ideological pressures of the military, and the commonly overestimated theses of the “CNN effect” and “compassion fatigue.” In so doing, also presenting the results of his own research, Cottle aims to (and invites to) productively re-address the lack of robust empirical evidence on which these theses are often contradictorily based, and to investigate in greater analytical depth the contexts and conditions upon which journalists can inscribe – with hugely variable efficacy and effects – a feeling of moral compassion and a “mediated ethics of care” in their visual narrations of disasters and crises within today’s increasingly complex and interconnected global news ecology.

Notwithstanding the unquestionably well articulated and potentially very useful effort of critical systematization presented in this work, a less than two hundreds page single book can’t do everything, as Cottle modestly anticipates in the initial acknowledgements, when he writes: “Given the global scale and human urgency of many of

the issues and crises raised... I am acutely aware of the book's failure to deal with any of them in the depth and detail that they deserve" [pp. xi-xii]. From a theoretical viewpoint, however, there are at least two fundamental conceptual frameworks which could have been addressed and integrated with potentially fruitful results. First of all, given the explicit aim of the book to critically and productively provide a mapping of the global journalistic field in its constitutively relationships with global crises, I was quite surprised not to find even a brief quotation of, not to say a seriously constructive theoretical engagement with, Pierre Bourdieu's widely known notion of cultural field, which had already, briefly but quite fruitfully, been adopted by the author in his previous work [see Cottle 2003] and, most relevantly, has been object of an increasing and extremely productive attention among sociologists of media and journalism scholars over the last few years, at least since the publication of the seminal collection of essays on Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field edited by Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu [2005]. In a few passages of the book Cottle seems to be implicitly aware of the difficulties and potentialities that lie ahead and that could be appropriately dealt with through the bourdieuan concept of field, for example when he claims that "we need to attend to both structures and agency and their mutual interpenetration and conditioning within the field of global journalism" in a way that must be "sensitized to the... complexities and contingencies, as well as market determinations and strategic dynamics of power" [p. 42]. More specifically, a serious as much as creative articulation of the concept of "global journalistic field" might eventually turn out to have fertile repercussions on at least two crucial fronts. On the one hand, following Beck, it could help move beyond methodological nationalisms: nowadays empirical research is still predominantly conducted within the borders of specific national contexts, or at best comparatively, but since – as this book brilliantly highlights – many of the most pressing crises of today's globalizing world are transnational in nature, they should accordingly be theorized and investigated beyond national prisms and, above all, within the wider flows and outputs of global news media. On the other hand, it could help readjust the mostly western-centric theoretical focus of so-called global media studies and, in so doing, also account for those apparent structural contingencies on the basis of which even relatively "peripheral visions" can suddenly, contestedly and strategically move towards the mainstream, with (field) effects regarding both the political and journalistic handling of the crisis and its aftermaths (for example, just think about the crucial role played by Al-Jazeera English during the recent Gaza conflict). Secondly, I believe and suggest without reserve that the field of studies on media and global crises could greatly benefit from a deeper engagement with the cultural-sociological theoretical frameworks developed over the last few years by Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues at Yale (particularly, but not exclusively, with the concept of cultural trauma), that is, by paying greater attention to the cultural narratives which structurally (in)form the basis of news reporting and civil discourses about collectively defined traumatic events. Cottle argues for the relevance, for example, of the "wider circulation of particular cultural templates and narratives found in the wider media ecology... the cultural shifts that permeate the 'cultural air that we breath'" [p. 138], but he does not deeply engage in the analysis of these "cultural templates and narratives," which actually play a crucial – yet widely under-investigated – role in the mediatization of global crises [for a convincingly articulated and empirically sustained

analysis of the case of war see Smith 2005]. A cultural-sociological approach to the study of media production, framing and diffusion of visual narratives of wars and crises could eventually help us unveil the culturally coded structures that shape the cognitive, emotional and moral ways in which people construct the cultural meaning of those wars and crises – and, potentially, re-act to them. Both these – often woefully conceived as divergent – conceptual frameworks are surprisingly under-considered today in the field of media studies and rarely employed in empirical research (at least outside the niches of members of their reciprocal theoretical-academic “schools”...), but they could eventually turn out to be an extremely relevant brick towards the construction of a theoretically-epistemologically solid wall aimed at widening and deepening our interpretative perspectives on the multi-dimensional complexity of today’s global news ecology and global crises.

Ultimately, as these last comments briefly aimed to suggest, this deeply inspiring book represents a highly valuable reflective account of what has already been discovered, and a very fertile foundation to consider what more it could and should be done in future research about media, journalism, and crises in the global age.

Marco Solaroli
University of Milan

References

- Benson, R. and Neveu, E. (eds.)
2005 *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Cottle, S.
2006 *Mediatized Conflict: Developments in Media and Conflict Studies*. Maidenhead and New York: Open University Press.
- Cottle, S. (ed.)
2003 *Media Organization and Production*. London: Sage.
- McQuail, D.
2006 “On the mediatization of war. A review article.” *International Communication Gazette* 68: 107-118.
- Smith, P.
2005 *Why War? The Cultural Logic of Iraq, The Gulf War, and Suez*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.