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# COMPASSION FATIGUE IN NIGERIA'S BROADCASTING SPACE

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## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on the tendency of media consumers, especially television viewers, to lose sympathy for those who have suffered tragedies, be it natural or man-made. This is known as compassion fatigue, a situation that media audience, out of long exposure to the tragedies of life published in the media, lose sympathy and concern for the victims of such tragedies. This paper examines the causes of compassion fatigue, how the media contribute to the depreciation in the stock of audience compassion as well as the consequences and manifestations of compassion fatigue. The paper argues that the media in their operations do not consider the possible compassion fatigue that their reportage could cause in the audience, so long as their operations remain profitable. Therefore, the paper concludes that the profit motive that drives the media would make it less likely that the media would consider the stock of sympathy in their audience concerning a story more than the economic sustainability of the media organisation. Hence, the individual should connect with sufferers of tragedy more as people than victims, and should not give into the desire to withdraw from people and the media as this could escalate compassion fatigue.

## **Introduction**

One of the offerings in the mass media, particularly on radio and television, during the Christmas of 2019 was the pictures of Typhoon Phanfone that battered the Philippines and killed a minimum of 28 persons and caused 12 people to be declared missing. Typhoon Phanfone which made a landfall on 24 December, 2019, caused severe floods and destroyed homes in several provinces, and led to the evacuation of more than 58,000 people and stranded thousands over the holiday period.

On 27 December, 2019, television viewers across the globe woke up to images – very disturbing ones – of the passenger plane which crashed in Kazakhstan in Asia, killing at least 15 people. The aircraft on Flight Z92100 took off from Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, to the capital Nur-Sultan. At least sixty persons were injured and were rushed to the hospital. In the last few days leading to 2020, the yearly suffering and struggles of the people in Australia as a result of wild fires were delivered into homes across the globe. On 08 January, 2020, a Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 crashed minutes after take-off in Teheran, killing all 176 people on board. Footages of the crash and bodies being evacuated trended globally.

Back home in Nigeria, television viewers, almost on a daily basis, watch the horrors of Boko Haram carnages in the North Eastern parts of Nigeria. Add this to the

excruciating pictures of families displaced by the terrorist attacks and without food, shelter and clothing.

The story of suicide is common in the media. According to Olufemi (2019), 15 Nigerian students committed suicide in the first eight months of 2019. Similarly, Mac-Leva, Ibrahim and Usman (2019) report that within the first six months of 2019, 42 Nigerians committed suicide, among them eleven students.

Need we mention the daily scenes from road accidents, atrocities by herdsmen, communal border skirmishes as well as inter-cult clashes across the country that are made to invade our homes through television on a daily basis? We may add the scenes of earthquakes that occur in different parts of the world as well as the bush fires in Australia that we are inundated with.

The cases cited above are not exhaustive, and are brought to viewers' attention frame by the mass media through their discharge of their normative functions of surveillance and correlation. Watson (2003, p.104) explains the surveillance (information) function as “providing information about events and conditions in society and the world; indicating relations of power and facilitating innovation; adaption and progress”, and describes correlation as “explaining, interpreting and commenting on the meaning of events and information; providing support for established authority and norms; socializing; coordinating separate activities; consensus building; and setting orders of priority and signaling relative status”.

The mass media at all times have a product to sell. The product is their contents. Sometimes, the more unusual and weird or negative an event is, the more the mass media celebrate it. Bad news is good news after all. With the globalised world, such news - good or bad – is beamed into people's homes through television. The audience do not invite such footages; they are left with no choice but to receive the pictures because of the lure and pervasiveness of the television as well as the innate desire on the part of the audience to have the latest update on global events. Watson and Hill (2015, p.55) are of the view that “media reportage of world suffering risks affecting mass media audiences in unintended ways, often prompting resistance rather than empathy. The news becomes too much to bear, causing what is termed as compassion fatigue”. That is to say, the ceaseless exposure of audience members to scenes of carnage, sorrow, affliction and suffering, in the long run, makes the audience less sympathetic because of having been used to such scenes. In other words, they become resistant to the sympathy and empathy that such events usually invoke in people. Simply put, the audience are tired of showing compassion since those scenes have become part of their daily existence. It is, in a sense, *deja vu*.

In Nigeria, the above feeling exists among the audience. When terrorists strike, whether within or without the country, the reaction tilts more towards

ascertaining the number of casualties than sympathy towards the victims and their loved ones. A great sense of relief is felt or expressed when the figure is low. The same could be said of road accidents where the casualty figure is increasingly carrying more weight and becoming more important than the pains from injury and deaths. The loss of sympathy and empathy could also explain why users of social media feel no compunction in disseminating footages of scenes flowing with blood, scenes of death and scenes of suffering. Rather, there seems to be a competition among social media users on who to be the first to break and disseminate such news to the public. Again, the rivalry is not as much in breaking positive news as it is in breaking and disseminating not just the bad news, but one that potentially carries much sorrow and pain. The television and radio stations and, of course, other mass media, are not doing less. Truly, they are at the forefront. The news values of immediacy, oddity and impact, consciously or unconsciously, prod editors to put out such scenes for public consumption. Just as the reporters and editors carefully package and send those footages without sympathy, the public – the audience – overtime - receive the footages without compassion.

In this work, *compassion* means the sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others. *Fatigue* here means extreme tiredness resulting from mental exertion. Hence, *compassion fatigue* is the apathy or indifference exhibited by the audience towards the suffering of others as a result of over-exposure to tragic news stories and images, and the subsequent appeals for assistance. On the other hand, *broadcast mediaspace* means the time or frequency that radio and television stations in Nigeria broadcast world suffering into people's homes.

### **The Concept of Compassion Fatigue**

Compassion fatigue as a term has its roots in psychology. It is also known as secondary traumatic stress (STs). It is “stress resulting from exposure to a traumatized individual. Compassion fatigue has been described as the convergence of secondary traumatic stress (STs) and the cumulative burn out, a state of physical and mental exhaustion caused by a depleted ability to cope with one's everyday environment” (Cocker and Joss, 2016). Compassion fatigue is a condition characterized by a gradual lessening of sympathy over time. Non workers, such as family members and other informal care givers of people who are suffering from a chronic illness, may also experience compassion fatigue.

From the above, compassion fatigue occurs when one, out of prolonged exposure to a situation, begins to develop a mental exhaustion such that his sympathy stock starts to deplete. In such circumstances, compassion for victims of a negative situation is gradually lessened to a point that the compassion is burnt out. This is very evident in medical personnel and care givers of people who are suffering from one

problem or another. At a point, their stock of mercy for the sufferers experiences a depreciation as a result of long exposure to and contact with the sufferers.

Gabbert (2018) quotes Roxane Gay, a columnist with *The Guardian*, as saying that “it is damn hard to expand the limits of our empathy when our emotional attention is already stretched too thin”. Renowned psychologist Charles Figley sees compassion fatigue as: “A state of exhaustion and dysfunction, biologically, physiologically and emotionally, as a result of prolonged exposure to stress” (Figley, 1995).

Gabbert (2018) states that the term “compassion fatigue” first appeared in print in a 1992 article by the writer and historian, Carla Joinson, and that not long after, compassion fatigue emerged as a concept in healthcare. Thereafter, the term began to appear in media studies with Susan Moeller leading the charge in her book, *Compassion Fatigue. How the Media sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. According to Moeller (1999): “It seems as if the media careen from one trauma to another, in a breathless tour of poverty, disease and death... The troubles blur. Crises become one crisis. The volume of bad news drives the public to collapse into a compassion fatigue stupor”. Moeller defines compassion fatigue as a “defence mechanism against the knowledge of horror”. Sontag (2003) toes the same line: “Flooded with images of the sort that once used to shock and arouse indignation, we are losing our capacity to react. Compassion, stretched to its limits, is giving numb. So runs the family diagnosis”.

Explaining further, Gabbert (2018) says the idea is that the audience are already tired as the “media overload dulls our sensitivity to suffering”. She rhetorically asks: “Whose fault is that – ours or the media's?” While not giving a direct answer to the question, Gabbert (2018), drawing from Moeller's writing, says that “compassion fatigue is a vicious cycle. When war and famine are constant, they become boring – we've seen it all before. The only way to break your audience's boredom is to make each disaster feel worse than the last. When it comes to world news, the events must be more dramatic and violent to compete with more local stories”.

Moeller (1999), Sontag (2003) and Gabbert (2018) tend to suggest that compassion fatigue regarding media audiences is intrinsic in journalism itself. The media, always looking for something dramatic to thrill and hold audience's attention, thrive on redundancy – the repetition of news deemed necessary by the editors until the media space is suffocated and audience members are bored. Thus, to the extent that the media are in business and are guided by the age-long principles of journalism, to that extent will the media continue to create conditions that will decrease the stock of compassion for victims of suffering reported in the media.

## Theoretical Framework

The guiding theory for this work is the Narcotizing Dysfunction Theory propounded by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton in 1949 in their seminal work, *Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organised Social Action*. Narcotizing dysfunction theory states that as the mass media inundate people on a particular issue, the people become apathetic to it, substituting knowledge for action; that mass media's overwhelming flow of information has caused the populace to become passive in their social activism.

Commenting on the theory, Mateus (2020) states:

While the mass media increasingly provide people with a huge amount of information, this does not necessarily lead to a more proactive attitude on their part. Narcotizing dysfunction denotes an apparent paradoxical phenomenon. As media exposure escalates, people tend to become apathetic and fail to engage with the gigantic amount of information they receive. Citizens may know and assimilate facts and, nonetheless, they may take no action or make no decision based on it. The narcotizing dysfunction concept suggests that the vast supply of communications may elicit a lethargic feeling, as informational flood induces a numb, drowsy sensation in citizens. It is as if the intense media experience has a psychoactive dimension, leaving individuals narcotized and desensitized.

Lee (2016) comments on the theory thus:

Essentially, the more information we have at our fingertips, and the more time we spend consuming, the less likely we are to actually take real world action to address the issue. We are all superficially concerned with the problems of society but this is merely cloaking mass apathy. We rant and argue and at the end of the day we're satisfied that we've made a difference. Yet at the end of the day, society has changed none - the social issues remain (perhaps even worse).

The theory of narcotizing dysfunction is very germane to this work as it rightly explains compassion fatigue among viewers and listeners after much or long exposure to social problems. Exposure to a flood of information may serve to narcotize rather than energise the audience, and in the process rob them of any sympathy or human feelings they would have developed for the sufferers of the social problems.

## **The Broadcast Media and Compassion Fatigue**

There is hardly a day that passes without television beaming footages of traumatic events into the homes of the consuming public. There is so much bad news, as Gabbert (2018) says, that it feels like we are running out of emotions.

From Nigeria's North East where Boko Haram kills and maims, across the Middle Belt where ethnic cleansing appears to be systemic, to the Niger Delta where kidnapping and cult clashes are the order of the day, to the South-West where ritual killings hold sway and to the North-West where banditry rules, Nigeria's broadcast space is daily filled with traumatic events which should, ordinarily, excite the audience sympathetic emotion. This is the trend globally – television viewers are inundated with scenes of affliction. This much Gabbert (2018) agrees: “We have never been more aware of the appalling events that occur around the world every day. But in the face of so much horror, is there a danger that we become numb to the headlines - and does it matter if we do?”

Just like their counterparts globally, Nigeria's broadcast stations and indeed other mass media are advertisement-supported, hence they “survive on attention, and this leads to sensationalism and images meant to shock: starving, bloated children, cities ravaged by war” (Gabbert, 2018), and other forms of inhuman atrocities – suicide cases, bomb explosion, murders, genocide, ethnic cleansing, fire disasters etc. A glance, too, at the social media - Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp etc - would probably push someone to say, “I'm fed up with these footages”. As Gabbert (2008) stated earlier on: “There is so much bad news that it feels like we're running out of emotions”. Through their surveillance function, the broadcast media in particular, and the mass media generally, “provide information about events and conditions in society and the world... indicating relations of power and facilitating innovation, adaptation and progress (Watson, 2003, p. 104). The exercise of this great and primary function is not without effects – what could be appropriately described as dysfunctions – unintended and latent and often negative consequences in the use of the media. By disseminating news with horrible scenes, the broadcast media cause panic among the audience. Initially, such reports could evoke compassion. Consistent reports have the tendency to deaden the feelings of the audience members and weaken and eventually kill the compassion which had initially swelled up among them.

Thus, consistent media reporting of trauma helps to decrease the stock of positive emotions in the audience, for the simple reason that the scenes have become commonplace and the audience therefore become used to the situation. At a point, the audience appear drugged into the inactivity of accepting the traumatic scenes and the lot of the victims as natural. This further manifests in silent inactions – which amount to actions – of quietly withdrawing the emotional support for the victims.

Media emphasis on the criterion of “fresh, unpublished, mutual and generally interesting” event (Harcup, 2009, p.41) compels the broadcast media to go for the sensational, almost at all times, with a competition among themselves to be the first to break the news. Harcup (2009) further states that without some additional element to grab attention, for example, the death of a child in a simple road accident or fire in a warehouse could be taken as if there was no news.

The broadcast media are not concerned with any possible loss of compassion. Theirs is to push to the public that which they consider is as news – oftentimes, but not limited to, bad news – stories with negative overtones such as conflict or tragedy. To them “bad news” is “good news” because it helps to draw and sustain the attention of the audience which they desperately need for their economic survival. Thus, the news values of shock and impact energise editors to go for news that will meet these criteria. The many hours of broadcast now available opens up the space further for “impactful news”, as Harcup (2009, p.42) observes: “The advent of 24-hour broadcast news channels and constantly updated news websites has also impacted upon news values in that they have so much more time and space to fill”.

Overtime, the broadcast media have conditioned the minds of their audience to accept that only stories with action and negative impact can truly be regarded as news. Hence, television channels glory in transmitting pictures of people doing things – fighting, killing, crashing, burning, looting, robbing, rioting, stealing, stalking, kidnapping, resigning, conning, suing, investigating, quizzing, hating, bonking, chasing, fleeing, destroying, invading, deserting, rejecting, losing, dying, burying etc. (Harcup, 2009).

No doubt, commercial pressures, combined with the emergence of online news and 24-hour broadcast news channels, means that stations strive, as gatekeepers, to ensure that only news items that tend to keep the stations current and ahead of the competition in the breaking of impactful news that are allowed through the news gate. Stations now tend to thrive on the bad and the negative: “Death, tragedy, job losses, factory closures, and falls from grace are all examples of somebody's bad news being good news for journalists. Sometimes journalists might also *create* bad news by seeking hostile reaction to an incident or comment in the hope of starting – and reporting - a “row”. Or, if they are really lucky, a “war of words” – with or without a community being “up in arms” (Harcup, 2009, p. 50).

The selection of news items on the basis that they are likely to appeal to a certain type of audience, who in turn might appeal to a certain type of advertiser, is a form of market-driven news. In effect, therefore, the pursuit and transmission of news which is traumatic is commercial in intent.



The news values of shock value, drama and immediacy play a part in broadcast media's projection of stories with negative overtones such as conflict or tragedy. Hudson and Rowland (2007), recalling the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, state thus:

It was shocking to wake up on a summer Sunday morning in 1997 and discover that one of the most famous women in the world had died in a car crash; so shocking that most of us spent the rest of the day in front of our televisions...certain stories grab audiences because they are dramatic in their own right...it is stating the obvious – but news has to be new. When it is no longer news, it's not news...Broadcast news is of the moment or it is nothing. That's one reason why so much emphasis is placed these days on reporting live from wherever the news is happening. If you can't go live, then you have to tell the very latest on a story...Journalism is about more than just reporting events. So, what happened may not be new, but the information must be. Terrorists know this. They will release a video of a suicide bomber's last message weeks after the bombing, or even on the anniversary of the event. It revives the story.

Aside from the surveillance function, the broadcast media, through the correlation function, unintentionally, escalate compassion fatigue. Watson (2003, p. 104), citing Mc Quail (1983), state that correlation is:

- Explaining, interpreting and commenting on the meaning of events and information.
- Providing support for established authority and norms
- Socializing
- Co-ordinating separate activities
- Consensus building
- Setting orders of priority.

The more the discussion, and perhaps interpretation, of traumatic events and information on radio and TV, the more emphasis is being given to such events, and information. At a point, the audience, depending on the perspectives given such events, may reach an emotional point where he or she is not interested in further exposure to information on such event. The perspectives given on radio or TV may deaden the feelings of the audience towards the victims of those traumatic events. Thus, while the correlation function of the media serve both the media institution and the audience, it has the dysfunction of giving extra meaning to events and possibly justifying why those victims deserve their lot. And, naturally, when there is too much redundancy, and when a given event – traumatic in this case – is placed on the frontline of discussion and interpretation on radio and TV, there is a tendency that the

audience would be overloaded to the point of not being able to accommodate more, and may, depending on their experiences – background, religion, political inclination, ethnic background – begin to lose sympathy and empathy to those suffering from such events.

According to Kinnick, Krugman and Cameroon (1996):

Issue life cycle studies, while focusing on the rise and fall of public interest in an issue rather than on fluctuations in emotional responses toward victims, provide support for the idea that there is a limit to the effectiveness of message repetition about social problems. Public attention eventually reaches a threshold point, beyond which increases in communication about the issue fail to elicit increased interest in the issue. This decline in interest is attributed to message saturation, the flooding of multiple communication channels with redundant messages...A threshold point has a negative rather than neutral effect. Thus, when messages about a social problem reach the point of saturation, rather than simply having no impact on the audience, they may have a negative impact on the audience, which might be measured in subjects' affective, attitudinal and behavioural responses to the issue.

### **Compassion Fatigue and the Media Audience**

Generally, compassion fatigue results from the manifestation of desensitization of the audience on traumatic issues. The consequences of compassion fatigue manifest in many ways.

1. Desensitization and emotional burn-out. When the media appear to be saturated with persuasive communication on particular social problems, the audience are in turn, though unwittingly, desensitized on such issues. Their interest in those social problems goes on a steep decline. The decline is both a cause and consequence of emotional burn-out – a situation in which audience sympathy for a particular situation is exhausted and seems no more. Audience members suffer irritability, physical and emotional exhaustion.
2. Compassion fatigue numbs public concern towards social problems. Having been over-exposed to those social problems, the audience are wont to lose feelings of sympathy for victims of such situations – because of emotional burn-out.
3. Having noticed public apathy to the social problems, the media now portray the public as people who are weary of unrelenting media coverage of human tragedy. Kinnick *et. al.* (1996) capture it aptly: “Compassion fatigue is characterized as a negative societal phenomenon, without ominous implications...mere exposure through the media to human suffering no longer necessarily raises public

consciousness of that suffering because over-exposure to the violent and the desperate dulls the senses, building its own wall of indifference". In one word, the public becomes not neutral, but negatively indifferent to further exposure to human tragedy.

4. Over-exposure to social media can and do alter compassion in the way audience members see reality. It can change how users see violence, for example, and create a reality where violence is tolerable. This is because the sustained coverage of violence tends to suggest to the audience that violence is normal, and therefore an acceptable way of life. It does blur the line between what is socially acceptable and what is not. Kraft (2016) argues that compassion fatigue makes the public to internalise trauma – from the relentless horrific stories in the media.
5. Compassion fatigue, according to Kraft (2016), creates fear and suspicion about people, especially those who are victims of the human tragedy. This is what Kinnick *et al.* (2016) call “affective manifestations” of compassion fatigue. The audience now perceive that the conditions were self-inflicted and therefore deserved, hence no offer of sympathy.
6. Compassion fatigue may bring about emotional exhaustion which influences people to become desensitized, cynical and resistant to helping those who are suffering (Kraft, 2016). The audience are saturated, numb and tired of being exposed to the issues which, in their estimation, have received unwarranted media attention at the expense of other social problems.
7. Compassion fatigue has physical manifestations, according to Kinnick *et al.* (1996). The physical manifestations include sleeplessness, crying and loss of appetite, nausea, stomach ache, perceptions of increasing high blood pressure and racing heart, feelings of anxiety and depression, nightmares and headaches. They state that many people may occasionally experience somatic reactions in response to coverage of disturbing issues.
8. Compassion fatigue causes changes in media use, as a result of audience reactions to the issues that they feel most sensitive. Kinnick *et al.* (1996) state that changes in media use reflect decreased information-seeking. The changes manifest in selective avoidance of the topics; avoidance of local newscasts, channels-switching, turning off the TV or radio, turning the volume down, being more selective in choosing programming, decreasing overall media use and monitoring children's viewing. They state that “compassion fatigue sometimes manifests in strict or total media avoidance as a form of self-protection from content which elicits emotional distress. The need for self-protection may outweigh the need to know about an event” (Kinnick *et al.* (1996).

## **Why Broadcast Media contribute to Compassion Fatigue**

A few factors, intrinsic in the media, place the media in a position to, unwittingly, contribute to compassion fatigue. Kraft (2016) lists these factors as:

- 1. The pervasiveness of the media.** That the broadcast media have become part of people's lives makes it difficult for the audience to be divorced from the activities on the screen. The audience do not have to invite the items on various social problems. The TV and radio stations feed the audience every minute of the day. Added to the above is the "sameness" in content across the media space. When most of the media that the audience are exposed to carry the same content, the impact - positive or negative - is weightier. There is always a bandwagon effect in which the "media follow each other's leads for programme content to the point that it becomes impossible to turn on the news or open a paper without reading another account of the same bad news. Pervasiveness may lead to normalisation of social problems." This is because such events have come to seem normal
- 2. The ubiquity of the media is everyday life.** There is great dependence in the world today on the media because they stand between events and the audience. Everywhere and anywhere one turns, the media are there to inundate the audience with tales of tragedies that have befallen and are still befalling the human race. The ubiquity of the media exposes the audience to media content, to the extent that their compassion for social problems starts to wane.
- 3. News values.** The emphasis of the news media on some news determinants pushes the audience to compassion fatigue. News media emphasise the sensational and the bad news: "The desire to attract media consumers has fuelled a preference for conflict, violence and crises over chronic – but perhaps more profound - problems, and for social problems which are visually dramatic and consequential for a large number of people. The bad news syndrome is exacerbated by the tendency of the media to present problems but not their solutions, contributing to the feelings of inefficacy among media consumers" (Kraft, 2016).

## **Can Compassion Fatigue be avoided?**

The question arises, can the media, with all the embedded factors to cause compassion fatigue, do anything to lessen compassion fatigue or boost the stock of compassion of audience members in the face of relentless reportage of tragedies, caused by man and nature, with far reaching consequences for the wellbeing of mankind? We recall that the commercial media and even noncommercial ones thrive on news that carries tragedy, among other news values. These are the values that keep the media commercially viable. Is it possible or considerable that the media will, or

can, for the sake of increasing the stock of sympathy of their audience, jettison the very values that keep them in business?

Also worth considering is that the media are not concerned with the stock of sympathy of the audience; are not even bothered if they show compassion to victims of tragedies but are interested in the extent that the audience are exposed to the media, a template which also interests the advertiser in his relationship with the media. Therefore, so long as the media strive to draw and sustain audience attention, both in the short- and long-runs, so long would the media engage in reportage that cares not if the compassion of audience members has depreciated or not.

Krebs (2018), however, has some tips for the media audience in the face of possible compassion fatigue. She advises the audience member to connect and interact with friends as a way of purposefully easing the swelling tension – an early sign of compassion fatigue – and diverting the mind from it entirely, possibly. To Gabbert (2018), it is necessary for the audience member to “personalize the tragedy; read the stories of each of the dead and connect with them as people, not as victims. This simple act of reading their stories can maintain compassion and protect us from apathy”. She advises that the audience member should not give into the desire to withdraw either from people or the media.

The audience can exercise the option to avoid the media in order to avoid content that can affect their stock of mercy. That would only be a temporary shield. It is only a short-term measure. In the long-term, the audience would return to the media for daily intelligence and embedded in the intelligence are stories of the tragedy, shock and oddity which trigger compassion fatigue after long exposure to such stories. From the discourse above, it can be concluded that given the functions of the media and the processes through which the functions are discharged; and given the fact that the audience need the content of the media, part of which is compassion-provoking, compassion fatigue has come to stay as one of the dysfunctions of the media.

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