

# COMPASSION FATIGUE: HOW THE MEDIA SELL DISEASE, FAMINE, WAR AND DEATH BY SUSAN D. MOELLER

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"THIS IS A VERY IMPORTANT BOOK."  
—Walter Cronkite

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From Publishers Weekly

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Review

"Moeller's patient dissection of media is a penetrating analysis, concluding that after more and more death and war, disease and worse, consumers just get tire of caring. Change is needed."

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"Criticism of the press for its foreign coverage is hardly novel, but in this unrelenting, uncompromising book, Moeller manages to cast a fresh, unwavering eye on the problem....That Moeller's suggestions probably will not be acted upon should not diminish the accomplishment of this impressive book."

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Language Notes

Text: English, Spanish

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In her impassioned new book, *Compassion Fatigue*, Moeller warns that the American media threatens our ability to understand the world around us. Why do the media cover the world in the way that they do? Are they simply following the marketplace demand for tabloid-style international news? Or are they creating an audience that has seen too much--or too little--to care? Through a series of case studies of the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse"--disease, famine, death and war--Moeller investigates how newspapers, newsmagazines and television have covered international crises over the last two decades, identifying the ruts into which the media have fallen and revealing why.

- Sales Rank: #2145805 in Books
- Published on: 1998-09-23
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.22" h x 1.22" w x 6.29" l, 1.75 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 398 pages

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Most helpful customer reviews

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Exposes the Media's Voyeuristic, Shock And Awe Tendencies

By Gregory McMahan

"At breakfast and at dinner, we can sharpen our own appetites with a plentiful dose of the pornography of war, genocide, destitution and disease." So says one of the first lines in introduction to Compassion Fatigue. With that statement as simultaneously an opener and a teaser of the things to come, Professor Moeller takes the reader on a guided tour of the presentation and commodification of human tragedy and suffering.

Compassion Fatigue tells you the how and the why behind what makes the nightly news, and also reveals why a great many other things do not make the news. While mostly a critique of US based media and journalism, it does reveal the gradual trend towards the 'One World' view of things and events that has come to typify reporting of any sort.

Without intending to do so, the book does much to demonstrate that the media, always locked in competition with other forms of 'programming' for our attention, has resorted to marketing information- current events, as a form of entertainment. In place of in-depth, investigative journalism, we now have soundbites featuring 'talking heads', and the cuter or more obscene the personality (and increasingly both), the better.

Each of the so-called 'Four Horsemen'- war, disease, famine and death, are presented and profiled in turn, with detailed discussion about the mechanics behind their delivery to readers and viewers. This book differs from most critiques of the media because it tells the narrative with the assistance of journalists themselves, in the words of the journalists.

Many people in the media know what they are doing is not only questionable, but in some cases, flat out wrong. However, marketability (how well something will go over with viewers) matters more than anything else. Marketability makes for high ratings, and high ratings in turn makes for fat profits for the parent company. Ergo, the trend towards to self-interested and self-centered journalism, and the tendency to feature celebrity involvement with current events. The latter trend is most pernicious, because it is not necessarily the event, but what they think of it that matters most, as being able to get people's attention is the most important thing, not what's really going on in the world. This in turn is both related to and feeds into the Body Count Syndrome, whereby each tragedy or documented depravity has to be bigger and obscene than the one before it, once again, to get our attention.

Although the book was a bit wearying at points (mostly because of the nine point font of the text), overall the content was top-notch. I especially liked the final chapter, where Professor Moeller compared and contrasted the funerals of Princess Diana and Mother Theresa, both of whom died at the same time. One was tabloid

fodder, and the other dedicated her life to bringing a little joy to impoverished and suffering masses of humanity. Yet even in death, one managed to monopolize nearly all media attention for a month, while the other could barely get something less than a one page obituary (even here mostly devoted to how many dignitaries and personalities came to pay their final respects) in TIME magazine. That one observation says a lot about not only the morals and values of the media, but even more about those of us viewers.

The motto of the media should be changed to reflect the sorry state of our times, and should now be: all the news that's (un)fit to print.

10 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

Good read, but cliché conclusions

By Peter E. Harrell

Moeller divides her book into six sections; an introduction, a section on media coverage of disease, a chapter on media coverage of famine, a chapter on coverage of assassinations, a chapter on coverage of genocide, and a conclusion. Each section is filled with case studies and alternately amusing and horrifying anecdotes; she recounts, for example, that the editor of one Boston paper said that "the distance from Boston common divided by the number of bodies" decides which stories make the final cut. The book makes a great read (especially relative to the bulk of academic writing), and you'll certainly pick up little tidbits you can later cite in conversations about current events.

The conclusions Moeller draws, however, are cliché. What do you know, the media disproportionately focuses on the US, and most of what we see of Africa and the Middle East is tragedy, so we get a skewed picture. And the media sensationalize everything, and are fond of shallow, sound-bite explanations of complex tragedies. Who would have guessed any of this without reading the book? I also find her conclusions somewhat contradictory; she argues both that excessive coverage of disasters leads to a hardening of the public's sympathies AND that the media need to increase coverage of foreign tragedies. I think she's arguing that the type of coverage needs to be changes - fewer pictures of starving children, more hard-boiled analysis, but her conclusion is so brief she doesn't elaborate much. So while you will probably enjoy the book, and love the stories, I doubt that when you have finished you will feel that you have a better understanding of the American media.

4 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Compassion Fatigue demystifies the editorial formulas which

By A Customer

Compassion Fatigue demystifies the editorial formulas which lead to homogenized, Americanized and unconscionably-thin international news coverage. In this important work, Susan Moeller holds American news moguls, editors, journalists and their audiences accountable for failing to overcome public apathy and to assume the unprofitable responsibility to accurately report and measure the human significance of epidemic, assassination, massacre and famine.

Submitted by: Former Washington Post reporter Scott Armstrong, the founder of the National Security Archive and co-author with Bob Woodward of The Brethren.

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