

# 2015: a year of crisis journalism that is reshaping news

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News seems to be bifurcating, like so much of the Internet. When we look at the digital infrastructure we have search dominated by Google with Facebook sprawled across social. Much further down the long tail there are a billion minor players carving out digital niches. So it is with news. On the one hand we have the one-off, live, scaled, viral event and on the other countless content made up of detail, data, comment, nuance, analysis. The Big News sucks in the social networks, while the Small News has to force its own way onto the platforms where it must plead for attention.

This separation is most obvious and most important around those stand-out stories that will dominate the Year Review compilations. But to be properly informative, journalism about those major crises must combine the Big and Small News effectively.



This year, News Events such as the Paris Attacks were covered very professionally despite the odd gaffe. The challenge of a faster news cycle combined with the swirl of social interaction means that the danger is that journalists and audiences have less time for the context, depth, debate and detail. So often the mainstream coverage can become predictable, formulaic and ritualistically un-informing. These are agenda-setting moments and journalism needs to strain every editorial muscle to be more critical of how it frames the narrative.



It's been a year of crisis. Every year is. Looking out from a London vantage we've seen a 'glocal' crisis like Ebola damaging swathes of west Africa but also spreading fear beyond those borders. We've also seen the disintegration of Europe's border as disasters in the Middle East and Africa sweep like flood waters into the bastions of the bourgeois West. And talking of floods, the inundation in the north of England has brought climate change back into our living rooms (literally...). Terror has become a defining factor of a political climate change that sees European citizens join a crusade (as it were) of universal proportions. Some of these are time-contained News Events but others, such as the refugee crisis are longitudinal narratives with similar dynamics to a one-off disaster.

How should journalism respond?

As a journalist I was at the heart of the coverage of major events such as 9/11 and 7/7 in the UK and now at the LSE I regularly analyse the reporting of crises. Indeed, our [annual April 2016 conference has the theme of journalism and crisis this year](#). So I accept that my sense that crisis reporting may be becoming over-logistical and under-critical may be born out of over-familiarity.





When I was watching the coverage of the floods this winter in the north of England there was a sense of painting by numbers. I am not saying that the reporting was poor. Quite the opposite in some ways. Mainstream media has sumptuous visuals, detailed maps and lovingly garnered user generated content. Journalists tried to get at the policy behind the sodden homes and roads turned into rivers. Climate change. Flood protection policy warnings ignored. But the dynamics of the spectacular networked coverage means that apart from the occasional Q&A with a minister in wellies, the deeper stuff is left to the niches.



You could say something similar about the Summer Refugee Crisis in Europe which then became an Autumn, now Winter and probably Spring refugee crisis. The Big News events were covered, although of course, it was subject to the herd mentality at times. The boats landing. The fences breached. The teeming camps.

The sheer scale made it difficult to give a rounded picture of a narrative that combines a complex brutal war(s) with the byzantine politics of the European Union and its many member states. But there has been some brilliant reporting often exploiting the new tools and technologies to create much more sophisticated, interactive content that can provide more context and humanity as well as the drama and debate. But does the Big News swamp this kind of journalism?

This all matters because crises are not just important in themselves. How a society or world deals with issues like refugees represents a set of policies and values that goes beyond the immediate problem. We live in a world where the politics and attitudes of the public and people in power are increasingly shaped by media: news and social. So I would argue that there is an ethical responsibility for journalism to report crises more intelligently, empathetically and engagingly. It also makes business sense. If we just want to be the equivalent of a CCTV camera on the world, then we will soon find ourselves replaced by robots. We have to do more than simply report.

So how should journalists best add value to crisis journalism while working at speed? [How best should journalists foster the art of paying attention to the difficult stuff?](#) What [role does emotion have](#) in the way that journalists tell

these stories and the way that we interact with or share them? Those are the questions that will be shaping my research in 2016 and our series of events looking at journalism and crisis. See you next year online and in person.

On Thursday February 11th we'll have a [panel of top journalists](#) to discuss reporting crisis – in partnership with the London Press Club. [Free tickets here.](#)

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