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BIPSS Towards a Secure World

The Empathy Gap: Algorithms Deciding Which Wars to Mourn

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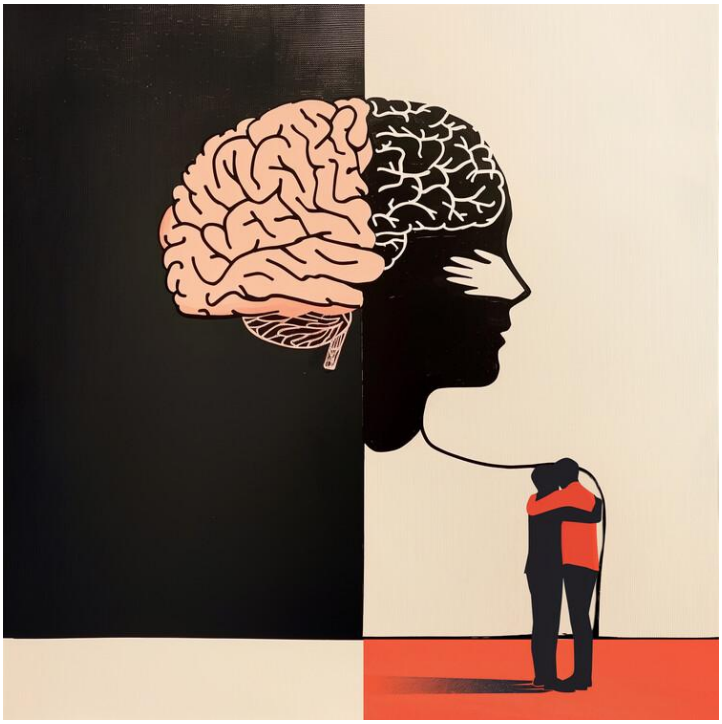

Source: Arch Daily[2]

Introduction

The struggle for power, resources, territory has been the central point of the most occurred conflicts in the human history. In early 2022, images from the Russian invasion of Ukraine dominated the global headlines and the front pages across the world carried the near-identical images of the war; bombed apartment blocks, families fleeing home, presidents delivering defiant speeches. By the help of fast internet connection, every mobile phone turned into a scene covering camera by every minute of the situation. On the other hand, protracted conflicts in places such as Yemen or the eastern provinces of Democratic Republic of Congo, in spite of producing staggering amounts of human sufferings, have barely sustained comparable level of

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[2] https://www.archdaily.com/1018841/ai-and-the-human-vector-in-architecture-embracing-emotional-engagement-and-empathy

saturation in Western media ecosystems. The difference is not merely quantitative; it is emotional. Some conflicts demand immediate, visceral solidarity while others are forgotten as distant noise.

This asymmetrical level reveals what might be called an “empathy gap”, a structural inequality in how global suffering is being perceived, narrated and mourned. Empathy is a spontaneous and universal human response which does not circulate evenly across conflicts, regions. It gets filtered through editorial priorities, geopolitical alignments, cultural proximity. And more increasingly, digital algorithms that rank and amplify content according to engagement metrics. Grief competes for visibility, and visibility is governed by systems optimized less for moral urgency than for attention capture in this contemporary digital environment.

This results in a new architecture of emotional distribution. Traditional media institutions still decide which conflicts will be broadcasted, but platform algorithms determine which of those conflicts dominate timelines, trend across feeds, and trigger collective reaction. Engagement which is measured in clicks, shares, watch time, and outrage, becomes the proxy for importance. Conflicts which generate immediate emotional intensity are algorithmically elevated and which do not, are rendered peripheral, regardless of their humanitarian magnitude. So, empathy is no longer solely a human impulse rather it is shaped by digital infrastructures that sort, rank, and monetize attention.

This article examines the uneven geography of mourning around the world, which is intentional. It arises from the confluence of algorithmic amplification systems that reward proximity, spectacle, and strategic relevance with media political economy. These pressures combine to produce hierarchies of suffering, which are implicit assessments of which tragedies are more pressing, which lives are more relatable, and whose wars need ongoing international attention. Therefore, the main question is not just why certain conflicts are covered more than others. It determines which battles the world is encouraged to lament, as well as the implications of that choice for global politics, humanitarian efforts, and the moral imagination of a digitally connected world.

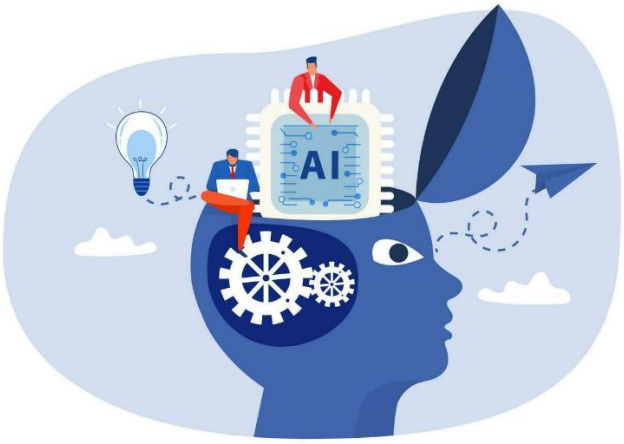
Empathy as a Political Resource

Empathy is most frequently seen as an inherent moral reflex which is a spontaneous human ability to care for others. However, both psychology and political theory suggest that empathy is

selective, bounded and heavily influenced by factors that are contextual. If the modern information environment appears to prioritize particular wars above others, this is simply because empathy has structural strains that can be triggered, narrowed or expanded. It is crucial to understand empathy as more than just an emotion, but as a valuable political resource before delving into algorithms and media systems.

The Architecture of Empathy

Psychologists typically distinguish between affective empathy, the capacity to share another's emotional state and cognitive empathy, the ability to understand another's perspective without necessarily sharing their feelings[3]. While both forms can inspire pro-social behavior, they do not operate uniformly across groups. Empathy is more easily triggered by individuals who are perceived as familiar, culturally proximate, or similar to oneself[4]. This built-in bias assists explaining why audiences often respond more intensely to crises involving populations that resemble them linguistically, racially or geopolitically.



Source: Vecteezy[5]

According to Paul Bloom, empathy, particularly its affective form, is fundamentally parochial. It concentrates on identifying individuals rather than statistical victims, and it prioritizes

[3] C. Daniel Batson, *Altruism in Humans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195341065.001.0001

[4] Jamil Zaki, *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World* (New York: Crown, 2019).

[5] https://www.vecteezy.com/vector-art/29883717-ai-artificial-intelligence-or-processing-chip-into-human-brain-with-light-bulb-development-innovation-concept-vector

emotionally intense cases over large-scale, abstract suffering.[6] This dynamic is reinforced by what social psychologists call the "identifiable victim effect", whereby people are more likely to donate or mobilize when confronted with a named and pictured individual than with aggregate data.[7] In conflict reporting, this translates into disproportionate emotional mobilization around photogenic, narratively accessible victims, while structurally complex crises fade into abstraction.

Empathy also gets tired. Susan Moeller's analysis of humanitarian coverage demonstrates that repeated exposure to distant suffering can produce desensitization, reducing both audience engagement and policy urgency.[8] The emotional intensity that propels reportage diminishes in long-term conflicts because violence becomes commonplace rather than exceptional. In fact, this leads to decreased emotive response rather than indifference in theory.

Empathy in International Politics

Empathy is not merely psychological; it has policy consequences. According to the "CNN effect" theory, extensive media coverage of humanitarian crises can put pressure on governments to step up help or use force. There is general consensus that persistent emotional attention impacts the policy agenda, even though experts disagree on the degree of this effect. Agenda-setting theory similarly demonstrates that media salience influences public perception of issue importance, thereby constraining political decision-making.[9]

Humanitarian interventions in places such as the Balkans in the 1990s were accompanied by highly personalized, emotionally charged coverage. Conversely, slower-moving conflicts with diffuse victims often fail to generate comparable diplomatic urgency. Aid allocation patterns frequently correlate with media visibility, suggesting that attention and by extension empathy, functions as a gateway to material response.[10]

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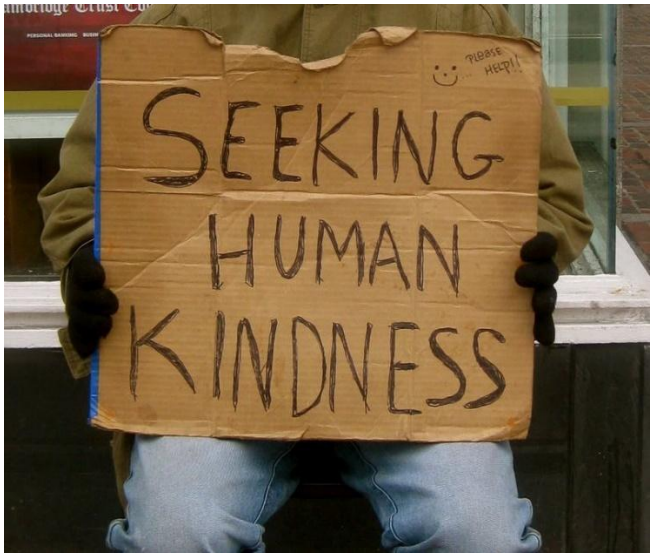
[6] Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York: Ecco, 2016).
[7] Deborah A. Small, George Loewenstein, and Paul Slovic, "Sympathy and Callousness: The Impact of Deliberative Thought on Donations to Identifiable and Statistical Victims," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 102, no. 2 (2007): 143–53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.01.005
[8] Moeller, S.D. (1999). Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203900352
[9] Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–87.
[10] Matthew Baum and Philip B. K. Potter, "The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 39–65.



Source: OpenDemocracy[11]

Empathy is thus more than just a moral virtue; it is a driving force behind international prioritizing. It determines which situations receive sanctions, peacekeeping deployments, or reconstruction funds. However, because empathy is fundamentally selective and susceptible to bias, it results in uneven patterns of global concern even before algorithmic algorithms interfere.

These inequities did not emerge from the digital age. Rather, it intensifies them. If empathy is already partial, proximity-driven, and fatigable, engagement-optimized systems would automatically prioritize conflicts that elicit strong emotional responses. Understanding empathy's psychological architecture explains why certain wars progress while others remain marginal. The next phase will be to investigate how media institutions and computer infrastructures translate these predispositions into structured hierarchies of global grieving.

The Political Economy of War Coverage

Before algorithms amplify certain conflicts, editorial systems decide which ones enter the global conversation. Selective empathy did not originate with social media rather it is embedded in the institutional logic of news production itself. One must examine the political economy of international reporting - the structural incentives, ownership patterns, and geopolitical alignments

[11] https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/can-politics-ever-be-compassionate/

that shape what becomes "news" to understand why some war dominates headlines while others struggle for visibility.

News Values and Structural Filters

Classic media theory demonstrates that events do not turn into news simply because they are important. They do so because of befitting institutional criteria of newsworthiness. Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge identified factors such as proximity, cultural familiarity, elite involvement, and negativity as the key determinants of coverage.[12] Conflicts that involve powerful Western states, strategic allies, or culturally proximate populations are thus structurally advantaged within precarious editorial systems.

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's "propaganda model" further argues that ownership structures, advertising dependence, sourcing practices, and ideological filters systematically shape media narratives.[13] Even without overt censorship, these filters tend to align coverage with the strategic interests and worldview of favorable political and economic actors. Wars involving allied states may be framed as defensive or tragic necessities, while conflicts in geopolitically marginal regions are more likely portrayed as chaotic, endemic, or peripheral.

This structural bias is reinforced by practical strains. Foreign bureaus are expensive as many Western news organizations have reduced on-the-ground correspondents in parts of Africa, Latin America, and South Asia over the past two decades.[14] Fewer reporters mean fewer stories, and this results in reduced narrative presence. Entire conflicts can thus remain underreported not because they lack significance, rather they lack institutional infrastructure.

Quantitative Disparities in Coverage

Empirical studies reveal noticeable asymmetries in war reporting. During the early months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, major Western outlets produced thousands of articles within weeks. By contrast, the protracted war in Yemen which was widely described by the United Nations as one of the world's worst humanitarian crises that received significantly less

[12] Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge, "The Structure of Foreign News," *Journal of Peace Research* 2, no. 1 (1965): 64–91.
[13] Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
[14] Philip Seib, *The Future of Foreign Correspondence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

sustained front-page attention in comparable periods. Similar patterns were observed in coverage of violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, despite casualty figures that rival or exceed many headline conflicts.[15]

There is more to this discrepancy than just rumors. According to comparative content assessments, wars in Europe receive more episodic and human-centered narrative, whereas conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa are more frequently portrayed in aggregate or structural terms.[16] The former invites identification and the latter encourage abstraction. Since empathy is more easily activated by identifiable individuals than by statistics, narrative format directly shapes emotional response.

Algorithms as Emotional Gatekeepers

If traditional media determine which wars enter public discourse, digital platforms determine which wars dominate it. Social media algorithms are designed to maximize engagement that is measured through clicks, shares, comments, and watch time.[17] Content that provokes strong emotional reactions consistently outperforms neutral or complex reporting. As a result, conflicts that generate anger, fear, outrage, or moral clarity are more likely to be algorithmically amplified than those requiring contextual depth or historical nuance.

Emotionally charged content travels online more quickly and extensively than informational stuff, according to research.[18] This dynamic produces an emotional sorting mechanism: slow-burning or geopolitically complex conflicts find it difficult to compete in attention markets, whereas wars that can be reduced to visually dramatic, morally binary tale trend. Instead of assessing humanitarian severity, the platform logic assesses the likelihood of engagement.

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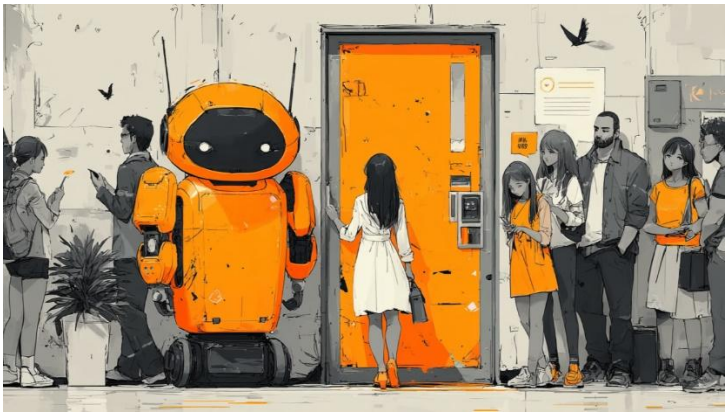
[15] Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).
[16] Teun A. van Dijk, *News as Discourse* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988).
[17] Zeynep Tufekci, "Engineering the Public: Big Data, Surveillance and Computational Politics," *First Monday* 19, no. 7 (2014).
[18] Jonah Berger and Katherine L. Milkman, "What Makes Online Content Viral?" *Journal of Marketing Research* 49, no. 2 (2012): 192–205.



Source: Jim Stroud[19]

This approach, which translates human experience into behavioral data tailored for profit, is what Shoshana Zuboff refers to as surveillance capitalism.[20] This design turns empathy into quantifiable, marketable, and strategically distributed data. Which conflicts are important is not a conscious decision made by algorithms. However, they operate as de facto gatekeepers of global mourning by giving preference to emotionally charged, engagement-rich information, which shapes the exposure that comes before policy attention.

The Racial and Geopolitical Hierarchy of Empathy

Selective empathy does not function in a historical vacuum. Digital amplification systems build on previous civilizational narratives that have long shaped Western conceptions of warfare. Edward Said's idea of Orientalism illustrated how the "East" has always been portrayed as irrational, aggressive, and inherently unstable, as opposed to a logical and orderly "West."[21] Such representational traditions continue to impact current war coverage, subtly determining which battles are portrayed as dramatic outliers and others as chronic realities.

Empirical evidence supports this imbalance. Studies in intergroup psychology demonstrate that individuals have more empathetic brain responses to perceived in-group members than to out-groups.[22] When media narratives emphasize cultural similarity, such as shared lifestyles,

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[19] https://blog.jimstroud.com/jim%20stroud/technology/

[20] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

[21] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

[22] Mina Cikara, Emile G. Bruneau, and Rebecca Saxe, "Us and Them: Intergroup Failures of Empathy," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20, no. 3 (2011): 149–53.

professions, democratic values, these expands empathy. When coverage highlights difference, instability, or religious extremism, emotional identification narrows.[23]

In contrast to earlier refugee movements from Syria or sub-Saharan Africa, which were more frequently discussed through lenses of migration control and security risk, the 2022 refugee influx into Europe, for example, was frequently framed in major Western outlets as a humanitarian emergency involving families "like us.".[24] These framing distinctions are not trivial; they influence public support for asylum policies and humanitarian assistance.

Consequences: When Empathy Shapes Policy

Empathy does not remain confined to the emotional sphere but it translates into material outcomes. Agenda-setting research demonstrates that sustained media attention influences public perceptions of issue importance, which in turn constrains policymakers.[25] When a conflict dominates headlines and social feeds, elected officials face pressure to respond whether through sanctions, military aid, humanitarian funding, or diplomatic engagement. Conversely, conflicts that remain peripheral, struggle to generate urgency within legislative and executive institutions.

Studies of foreign aid allocation suggest a correlation between media visibility and humanitarian assistance levels.[26] Highly publicized crises attract disproportionate funding relative to less-covered emergencies with comparable or greater need. In this sense, attention functions as a gatekeeper to resources. The empathy gap thus produces not only unequal mourning, but unequal intervention too. When visibility determines priority, algorithmically amplified conflicts gain strategic weight, while underreported wars risk diplomatic neglect.

Counterargument: Are Algorithms Really to Blame?

One typical criticism is that algorithms don't produce bias; they only reflect consumer preferences. Platforms don't independently determine moral worth instead, they react to what

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[23] Teun A. van Dijk, *Racism and the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991).
[24] Anna Triandafyllidou, "A 'Refugee Crisis' Unfolding: 'Real' Events and Their Interpretation in Media and Political Debates," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2018): 198–216.
[25] Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–87.
[26] Matthew Baum and Philip B. K. Potter, "The Relationships Between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008): 39–65.

users click, share, and watch.[27] From this perspective, selective empathy originates in audiences, not in code.

However, this argument overlooks structural design. Platforms optimize for engagement because engagement drives advertising revenue.[28] Autoplay, alerts, trending lists, and other behavioral cues largely influence what users see and how long they stay exposed. Over time, these algorithms filter out less engaging content and reward emotionally charged stuff. Even while algorithms lack purpose, they incorporate financial incentives that consistently favor particular storylines. The outcome is programmed amplification rather than neutral reflection. Conflicts compete according to the value of emotional intensity in a profit-driven attention economy.

Conclusion

This commentary has traced the empathy gap from its psychological foundations to its institutional and digital amplifications. Central to moral life, empathy is inherently selective which is shaped by proximity, identification, and cognitive limits. Traditional media structures translate these predispositions into patterns of coverage that is influenced by geopolitical interests, ownership models, and narrative framing. Digital algorithms which then intensify these asymmetries, privileging emotionally charged, engagement-rich conflicts over complex or distant crises. The result is not random disparity, but a structured hierarchy of global mourning.

It is clear that the contemporary systems of information distribution do not merely reflect unequal empathy, they systematically produce it. In a world where attention conditions aid, intervention, and diplomatic urgency, algorithmically amplified visibility becomes a form of power. The international order will continue to respond not to the scale of suffering, but to its marketability, unless the architecture of attention is critically examined and ethically recalibrated.

[27] Sinan Aral and Dean Eckles, "Protecting Elections from Social Media Manipulation," *Science* 365, no. 6456 (2019): 858–61.
[28] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).