

## **The Selective Visibility of Humanitarian Crises in the Age of Algorithms By Jiarui Lin**

### **I. Introduction**

As high-profile geopolitical tensions between Ukraine and Russia, Palestine and Israel, and China and the United States capture global attention, countless other crises remain unseen and unheard. This selective visibility is not incidental but is shaped by algorithmic systems that govern information circulation and reception in the digital age. People often think they see the world. But in the age of algorithms, people often merely see a selected world. Oftentimes, they hear only the voices in their immediate environment. The rest remains unrecognized and unpublicized.

In the age of technology and media, over five and a half billion people on earth are social media users, consisting of 93% of internet users (We are Social and Meltwater). The conventional channels through which people obtain news have shifted dramatically. Surpassing the once-dominant evening television broadcasts, social media has become the primary news source for more than half of Americans. In the United Kingdom, this figure rises to approximately 75% among individuals aged 16–24 (Savage). The present-day “news outlet” no longer operates solely under editorial judgment, but mainly under internet algorithms engineered to privilege engagement above all else. These algorithms typically rank content based on preset engagement measures, such as watch time, shares, comments, and completion rate, rather than a story’s civic importance or urgency. Here, people are met with their “FYP”, a specialized page living up to its name: The “For You Page”.

Content that neither explicitly appeals to viewers’ national or cultural identity nor capitalizes on “hot” trending headlines—and that lacks sensational narrative framing—struggles to gain visibility in the public sphere. For example, global humanitarian crises, which usually fail to appeal to viewers’ direct relevance or interest, are omitted from viewers’ pages. Research on global humanitarian crisis media coverage shows that media attention is highly uneven—conflicts or disasters affecting significant numbers of people do not always receive proportional media coverage (Dragomir).

This essay examines how modern algorithm-driven media determines global awareness by prioritizing engagement over severity and urgency, resulting in inadequate attention and funding. A self-reinforcing cycle of invisibility and underfunding is emphasized. Seven conflicts engulfed in protracted violence and severe humanitarian impacts in the Global South are highlighted as micro-case studies to raise awareness.

### **II. How Algorithms Manufacture Selective Silence**

Algorithms amplify events that ignite emotions, while silently obscuring the deepest and most painful crises. No outrage, no immediate relevance, no extravaganza now equals no coverage.

Crises in the Global South—particularly long-running, protracted conflicts—often struggle to maintain international visibility unless a new or “newsworthy” event occurs. As sustained suffering fades from coverage, the public becomes increasingly uninformed about what are framed as “less relevant” crises, further pushing these issues out of algorithmically curated feeds. A self-reinforcing cycle emerges: algorithmic invisibility reduces public awareness; diminished awareness leads to underfunding; underfunding prolongs humanitarian crises; and prolonged suffering is subsequently classified by algorithms as “old news.”

In the past, human editors were the ones making judgement calls about what stories count as “newsworthy,” but engagement-optimized platforms replace human judgement—which holds the potential of ethical and empathic considerations—with an automated feedback loop.

Yet those most in need of global attention do not disappear—they remain unseen and unheard. While humanitarian aid from international organizations and nation-states is essential for alleviating and resolving such crises, financial and political support remains disproportionately low. Many of these obscured conflicts constitute some of the gravest humanitarian catastrophes of the modern era, with consequences that extend far beyond national borders.

### **III. A Phenomenon With Historical Roots**

This pattern of unequal attention is nothing new. Throughout history, the issue of unequal or disproportionate attention and support to political, economic, and societal events has always existed. While the Bengal Famine of 1943 resulted in the deaths of millions, it was largely overshadowed by wartime political priorities during World War II. During the Rwandan Genocide (1994), the killing of approximately 800,000 people occurred with minimal international media coverage and delayed global intervention.

These past historical cases serve as frameworks; their purpose lies within its demonstration of how selective visibility is a long-established structural bias in how attention and resources are allocated, in which algorithms are inherited and intensified rather than invented.

Today, despite living in a highly developed, technology-driven world, these historical tragedies serve as a stark reminder that progress alone does not guarantee justice. Technology must be deployed deliberately to bridge existing inequalities rather than deepen them. Ensuring this is a shared responsibility: one that requires holding institutions accountable for prioritizing profit over human well-being. True progress demands collective advancement—where no population is rendered invisible, left behind, or locked in stagnation.

#### **Two critical questions remain unanswered for humanity to consider:**

1. How can we bring equal attention to all issues in proportion to their urgency level?
2. How much funding or aid should be given in proportion to their urgency level?

### **IV. Neglected Case Studies**

### **1) Myanmar Civil War (2021—present)**

The Myanmar Civil War is the result of long-standing tensions between the military and civil society. It is the world's longest ongoing civil war, stretching nearly eight decades (Guinness World Records, n.d.). Media focus has faded mainly due to the situation's complexity, which requires readers to review the country's long colonial history to truly understand current events. Additionally, the exclusion of important events to simplify the conflict for readers harbors the risk of framing the revolution as a "unified civilian insurgency" (Stevens).

Four years since the 1 February 2021 coup, around 90% of Myanmar's population has been exposed to political violence, as millions live in active conflict (ACLED). Civilians also lack access to electricity, communications, healthcare, and education, and are vulnerable to crime and human and drug trafficking. As of now, 19.9 million people are in need, while the UN currently aims to help a targeted 5.5 million, holding no promise, with the current requirements needing \$1.14 billion (OCHA, "Global Humanitarian Overview 2025").

The already expansive meth production and opium poppy cultivation are further stimulated by the internal turmoil as a way to gain profit for purchasing weapons. As the top opium producer, Myanmar's civil war likely contributed to new record highs of methamphetamine seizures—236 tons—across East and Southeast Asia in 2024, showcasing how a civil war has consequences stretching beyond its borders, even on a global scale (Peter).

### **2) Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) Conflicts (1996-present)**

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has undergone decades of protracted conflict, starting from the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The genocide led to a spill-over war: The aftermath of the First Congo War (1996) and the Second Congo War (1998) lasts to date. The war was the deadliest conflict since WW2, with 5.4 million deaths, yet it remains overlooked and understudied (Moulton). Today, violence is driven by continuous ethnic tensions and competition over valuable natural resources (Amnesty International, 2024). There are over 100 armed groups, including the well-known M23, in the northeastern part of the country, where civilians are directly in the crossfire. War crimes and crimes against humanity have been widely documented. Since 1998, over six million people have lost their lives, many not from direct violence but from hunger, disease, and displacement. As of April 2024, 7.3 million people were internally displaced, marking DRC as one of the world's most severe displacement crises. The country ranks fifth as the poorest globally despite holding vast reserves of cobalt and copper, with 74.6% of the population living on less than US\$2.15 per day.

The scale of suffering and instability within the region is severely disproportionate to the volume of international media coverage, being acutely underreported despite mass death tolls. This may have resulted from news editors' assumptions that "no one is interested in Africa" (Stroehlein). This presumption that their audience holds the belief of a "hopeless Africa" with permanent suffering further disinclines journalists to search for and cover potential solutions to those crises, even less so than on the deadly effects themselves. As of 27 October this year, only \$412 million has been provided out of the 2.5 billion US dollars that the UN and

partners appealed for at the beginning of the year for the Humanitarian Needs and Response plan that hoped to reach 11 million out of 21.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance (NRC, “DR Congo: Decades of Neglect Must End.”).

### **3) Ethiopian Civil War / Tigray Conflict (2020–2022, aftermath ongoing)**

In November of 2020, the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) broke into conflict that soon descended into a full-scale civil war. Today, millions of Ethiopians are still in desperate need of humanitarian aid and protection. In addition to the extremely severe food insecurity and shortfall, gender-based violence has increased significantly while women and children lack access to proper healthcare, social welfare, and justice services. UNICEF’s Humanitarian Action for Children (HAC) 2025 Appeal highlights that there is an urgent need for US\$493.2 million for the critical humanitarian requirements of children, adolescents, women, and men in Ethiopia (United Nations Children’s Fund). Yet, the conflict has been almost completely ignored by mainstream media in Europe. SRF’s *Tagesschau* programme in 2022 had spent an estimated 113,315 seconds on the war occurring in Ukraine but merely gave one 150-second report for the war in Ethiopia in that entire year (Universität Mannheim et al.). One reason may be that multiple major headlines dominated the news during peak Tigray violence, including Covid-19, Afghanistan withdrawal, and Ukraine. Another could be the political and public perception that the conflict has a relatively limited immediate impact on Western security.

### **4) Sudan Civil War (2023—present)**

The Sudan Civil War is between two rival factions of the national military government. This war is the world’s largest displacement crisis, having displaced over 12-14 million people, devastated communities, and exacerbated an already dire humanitarian crisis (Mureithi, 2025). Over 150,000 have passed, with starvation and disease killing more than direct violence, threatening millions with famine, devastating infrastructure, and sparking immense regional instability. Yet this humanitarian crisis has received little attention from the general public and almost no media coverage. The bits are sporadic, framed vaguely as “instability” or “tribal conflict”, obscuring accountability, reducing moral urgency, and drawing a stark comparison with the detailed, human-interest storytelling devoted to other events, such as Ukraine. Without a clear villain, victim, or resolution trajectory, Sudan’s story lacks a “narrative hook” to algorithmic media. Reasons may include the geographic and political distance from Western audiences, a complicated narrative, and the dangerous reporting environment. Moreover, aid organizations severely lack the money needed to cover the enormous demand for aid. In 2025, the UN and other aid organisations will need \$4.16 billion to reach 20.9 million people in Sudan (Høvring). Yet, only 9.9 percent of the emergency appeal had been funded as of 8 April.

### **5) The Anglophone crisis / Ambazonia conflict (2016—present) and 6) Boko Haram Movement in Cameroon**

Cameroon is being severely impacted by multiple, overlapping conflicts, dominated by two major crises.

The first one is called the Anglophone crisis or Ambazonia conflict, an internal separatist war in its English-speaking regions, arising from long-standing grievances over marginalization and second-class treatment of English-speaking communities within a majority-French state. The conflict now involves violence, kidnapping, targeted killings, attacks, and bombings, including school boycotts enforced with violence, with government forces being accused of serious abuses.

The second one is a war that shadows multiple borders: The Boko Haram movement by violent Sunni Islamist extremist groups. They act under the name of Islam, attempting to overthrow the existing Nigerian government and establish an Islamic state operating under a strict Salafi interpretation of Sharia law, free from Western influence. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in Nigeria and the neighboring countries of Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.

In 2025, Cameroon had 3.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, including protection, education, food security, health, nutrition, shelter, as well as water and sanitation. Of these, 2.1 million people are targeted by the 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), which requires \$359.3 million in funding. However, severe funding cuts have led to a significant reduction in assistance (OCHA, “Cameroon: The Cost of Inaction”). The Norwegian Refugee Council has named Cameroon as “a case study in global neglect: little diplomacy, underfunded and under-reported” (NRC, “Cameroon: The World’s Most Neglected Displacement Crisis”).

## **7) Yemeni Civil War (2014–present)**

The Yemeni Civil War has been deemed one of the deadliest humanitarian crises, with 19.5 million people requiring humanitarian assistance and protection services in 2025, and millions are on the brink of famine, facing widespread hunger, disease, and displacement (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, n.d.). After a decade of conflict, the crisis has been thoroughly classified as “old news”. This can be seen in the crisis’s funding levels: The 2025 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan is severely underfunded (currently only 18% funded), the lowest level in over a decade (Solidarités International). Funding cuts to humanitarian aid programs and ongoing conflict have only worsened the crisis.

## **V. Solutions**

Collaborative efforts across the government, humanitarian organizations, research institutions, media outlets, and the public will be crucial to address the lack of media coverage of certain selective humanitarian crises and the lack of funds resulting from this.

### **Institutional Measures**

On a larger scale, it is critical to create official organizations or to integrate the responsibility of existing ones to analyze different conflicts’ media coverage and humanitarian funding relative to the total number of people affected, severity, and the amount of total humanitarian aid needed. A formal contact line should be created alongside a focus on building a

solid relationship between these organizations and journalists covering social issues, development, or humanitarian affairs. This not only allows for verified data and expert analysis, increasing the likelihood of sustained media coverage, but may also act as a potential incentive for media coverage. Furthermore, integrating media literacy and global humanitarian awareness into education systems is essential to informing young people about this phenomenon. Only through such education can meaningful awareness develop.

The government, potentially through ministries or departments of humanitarian development, should be involved to regulate such activities to ensure there is no illicit behavior engaged by any member, especially ones that could impact resulting perspectives and the amount of aid, to uphold fairness and the rights of all stakeholders involved. Moreover, governments could implement regulatory frameworks and laws that promote balanced news exposure. Such as requiring major media outlets above a certain market share to allocate a minimum proportion of coverage to humanitarian crises based on urgency and severity, rather than engagement metrics alone, while still respecting press freedom.

### **Individual Action**

On the smaller scale, individuals should actively strive to educate themselves, seek information beyond the algorithm-curated feeds, and engage with multiple humanitarian news sources. As individuals collectively increase consumer demand for equitable media coverage, they can influence not only individual media firms but also the industry as a whole and, ultimately, government.

### **VI. Conclusion**

It takes a collaborative effort between the global, macro-, and micro-stages—international organizations, businesses, and individuals—to see a more truthful world—a less depicted world. This essay does not answer the two questions proposed in Section III; they remain open and are calling for the current and future generation to figure out and act. Ultimately, accountability is bottom-up; it is up to the current generation to determine the following course of attention.

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