

Ritual check-in, shocked immersion, regained stability: A sequential typology of news experiences in crisis situations

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Hallvard Moe, Torgeir Uberg Nærland
and Brita Ytre-Arne 

University of Bergen, Norway

Abstract

This short paper discusses people's news experiences before, during and after societal crisis situations, contributing with a sequential typology outlining the three phases ritual check-in, shocked immersion and regained stability. Theoretically, we draw on classical contributions to media studies and sociology, particularly the concepts of ritual communication and ontological security. Empirically, we build on qualitative interview studies with news audiences in Norway, spanning 5 years and different crisis cases including political turmoil, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. We underline the significance of emotional distancing to regain stability, and identify crises lacking start- and endpoints as particularly difficult to navigate. These insights should instigate further debate about our understanding of news audiences in a tumultuous world, particularly relevant to scholarship on news use and avoidance.

Keywords

climate change, COVID-19, crises, news avoidance, news use, political events, ritual communication, temporality

Corresponding author:

Brita Ytre-Arne, Department of Information Science and Media Studies, University of Bergen,
P.O. Box 7802, Bergen 5020, Norway.

Email: Brita.Ytre-Arne@uib.no

Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the news agenda is filled with stories about war, political and economic instability, rising food prices and a cost-of-living crisis, not to mention flood and drought and other disasters of climate change. The word ‘permacrisis’ – describing an extended period of instability and insecurity, especially resulting from a series of catastrophic events – was chosen by the Collins Dictionary as word of the year for 2022 (Sherwood, 2022). A central question is how audiences deal with the procession of different crises portrayed before us in the news, readily available with constant updates across platforms.

Media and journalism scholarship has recently seen a growing interest in concepts that conceive news use as potentially overwhelming and unsettling. These concepts include information or news *overload* (de Bruin et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2019; Schmitt et al., 2018), *issue fatigue* (Gurr and Metag, 2022) or *doomscrolling* (Mannell and Meese, 2022; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). In particular, scholarship on *news avoidance* emphasizes emotional reactions to news, including how news can induce feelings of anxiety (Aharoni et al., 2021; Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020; Toff and Nielsen, 2022). We know that few avoid all news for prolonged periods (Karlsen et al., 2020), but we also know that human psychology and our social worlds can contribute to different ways of tackling crisis situations, including distancing or denial as well as information seeking (Albertson and Gadarin, 2015; Marcus et al., 2000; Norgaard, 2011). This triggers the question: As new events rise and fade on the public agenda, how do news audiences react to crises as they develop over time?

To understand how news audiences respond to crises, an understanding of temporality is key. Research on the production side of journalism has long demonstrated how extraordinary events disrupt newsroom routines, and how normality is re-established (e.g. Berkowitz, 1992). Likewise, several elements of audiences’ news experiences are prone to fluctuate over time: levels of engagement might vary, as can practices of news monitoring. These fluctuations could relate to personal events in the lives of news audiences, but also to the timelines of different news stories. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a particularly striking illustration: A considerable number of studies in different countries found that news use intensified in early lockdowns, soon to be followed by fatigue, distrust or avoidance, and more differentiated long-term patterns (Broersma and Swart, 2023; Kleis Nielsen et al., 2020; Mihelj et al., 2022; Van Aelst et al., 2021). These findings show that news experiences evolve over time in large-scale societal crisis situations. Yet, more insight is needed into shifts and transitions between different phases, as well as to variations inspired by crisis situations with different characteristics.

This article contributes to theoretical advancement in scholarship on news audiences, by providing a typology that conceptualizes news experiences before, during and after societal crisis situations. The typology consists of three phases that represent sequential categories, described as *ritual check-in*, *shocked immersion* and *regained stability*. In each phase, a central concern is how audiences emotionally position themselves in relation to the issues on the news agenda, as such positioning changes over time.

Our discussion proceeds as follows: We build on classic theories from media studies and sociology – Carey’s (2009) notion of ritual communication and Silverstone’s (1993)

discussion of ontological security in television news viewing – to explain news audiences’ reactions to crises. We next introduce our work on how distant news audiences perceived a shocking political event (Moe et al., 2019) as a starting point for a sequential typology. Adding insights from our analysis of news use in the pandemic, we solidify the typology, before we critically discuss its limitations against the case of climate change, also here drawing on recent qualitative research.¹

This contribution should instigate further debate about our understanding of news audiences in a tumultuous world, and encourage further attention to temporality in scholarship on news use and avoidance. Further, our critical discussion of the peculiarities of the climate crisis challenges media and journalism studies to re-think how we approach climate change as a news topic.

Theoretical underpinnings: ritual communication and ontological security

Several classic theories in sociology and media studies help explain emotional and existential dimensions encompassed in news use, in the mundane everyday and during societal crises.

In the mid-1970s, Carey ([1975] 2009) developed the distinction between a transmissive and a ritual view of communication. Space and time are central to these categories: Where transmissive modes are about sending messages in space, the ritual view of communication highlights ‘the maintenance of society in time’ (Carey, 2009: 15) through communicative acts. This view would understand news use as being less about retrieving information, and more like a ritual, ‘as attending a mass’, where the congregation gets a specific perspective on the world ‘portrayed and confirmed’ (Carey, 2009: 16).

Carey’s (2009) contribution was controversial at the time in US communication studies, but has led to rich work on the role of mediated communication in general, and news specifically. One such strand compares news to myths, highlighting familiar and ‘recurring narrative patterns’ that make news appear new, but still ‘soothingly predictable’ (Bird and Dardenne, 2009: 206). News gives ‘a sense of control’, and is well-suited to unify ‘people around shared values’ (Bird and Dardenne, 2009: 206, 209). This understanding clearly captures key aspects of news, but we should be careful (as Carey also underlined) not to let the ritual side overshadow the transmissive. News is also about information, at least sometimes – such as when something surprising happens.

Roger Silverstone wrote about news in his classic work *Television and Everyday Life* (Silverstone, 1994), discussing the seeming contradiction between news being the same all the time (and thus reassuring), but also, from time to time, breaking up the regular tv schedule to cover particular catastrophic events, which are then in turn gradually normalized as the scheduled programming returns. Today, in a very different media landscape, we might yet find examples of similar tensions: Notifications on digital platforms are routinized formats for ‘breaking news’, and news outlets must figure out the right timing for moving from momentary wall-to-wall coverage of a crisis – whether it is the invasion of Ukraine or the death of Queen Elizabeth II – to also include sports results and local events.

More fundamentally, news is a key example in Silverstone's discussion of how television contributes to our sense of security in a chaotic world (see also Madianou, 2013). Silverstone wrote:

But it is news, I think, which holds pride of place as the genre in which it is possible to see most clearly the dialectical articulation of anxiety and security – and the creation of trust – which overdetermines television as a transitional object, particularly for adult viewers. (Silverstone, 1993: 16)

Drawing on Winnicott's theories of child psychological development and transitional objects, and on Giddens' theories of the self in conditions of high modernity, he argues: 'News is addictive, the more so when the world is unsettled. News is a key institution in the mediation of threat, risk and danger, and [. . .] central to our understanding of our capacity to create and maintain our ontological security' (Silverstone, 1994: 17). The key concept ontological security comes from Giddens (1991), who in *Modernity and Self-Identity* applies the idea of ontological security to discuss how people need basic trust in the continued existence of themselves, others and the world in order to function and how the maintenance of such trust changes in more abstract modern societies. For Silverstone, then, television and news appeared central to confirm in daily life a sense of ontological security 'without which life would quickly become intolerable' (Silverstone, 1994: 19).

This tells us that even mundane news use can be deeply existential. News-checking is intended to be brief, directed at quick confirmation of our ontological security, so that we can safely get on with our daily business. In the ordinary rhythm, we check the news and proceed with life. But what happens when we cannot just do that? When is a crisis part of the ordinary and when is it extraordinary? And if news ceases to provide security, and instead reproduces anxiety, what do people do over time? Studies of news overload point to avoidance and disconnection as potential outcomes (Gurr and Metag, 2022; York, 2013). We know that few stay disconnected for prolonged periods, even after shocking or emotionally draining events. But we know less about *when* people turn back to news, *how* they do it, and what potential role news itself plays in this process. These questions spur our interest in news experiences over time – before, during and after crises.

A sequential typology of changing news experiences

Our proposed typology is rooted in a study that analysed shifts between different modes of engaging with news, focused on distant news audiences' sense-making of an event of political upheaval (Moe et al., 2019).

Establishing the typology: the case of Donald Trump's presidential election victory

In 2016, we conducted a qualitative study with diaries and in-depth interviews amongst Norwegian media users, leading us to describe their habitual news use as *approximately informed, occasionally monitorial* (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2018). We found that many reiterated variations of the ideal of the informed or monitorial citizen, underlining the

importance of knowing ‘what is going on’ or checking ‘if something important had happened’. Examples people gave of what they really needed to know ranged from traffic jams on the way to work, to whether World War Three had broken out. These examples could hardly be more different in impact, but the practice of news checking had a shared underlying logic: People felt they needed to know these things before they could get on with their day as planned.

However, our period of data collection happened to cover one news event that broke with this pattern: Donald Trump’s surprise US presidential election victory in 2016. While geographically far removed from the US, our Norwegian informants consistently expressed strong negative feelings towards Trump, but their sentiments about the election still altered before and after it took place, coupled with different uses of news. First, the upcoming election was viewed as an irritating spectacle at comforting distance, by many ignored as best they could. When Trump was declared the winner, informants reported severe shock, to the point of feeling physically ill or personally destabilized. Their perceived distance towards the election diminished, while considerations of the importance of the event increased. To move forward from this state of shock, a strategy was to seek more information, to build a deeper understanding of why Trump could win, and thereby reinstate a feeling of predictability in how the world worked.

We structured our analysis of this process through three phases characterized as (1) annoying circus far away, (2) world-shattering shock and (3) regained stability, situated in light of theories of ritual communication and audience sense-making (Bird, 2003; Carey, 2009; Madianou, 2013).

Solidifying the typology: the case of the COVID-19 pandemic

In the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers analysing news use amongst young people in the Netherlands applied our sequential typology on a different case and context (Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek, 2022). They presented four phases of news use in the early pandemic: (1) a problem far away, (2) state of shock, (3) corona-fatigue and (4) back to normal. Their study highlights themes such as distancing and ‘othering’, as well as rituals – such as live press conferences – that interpellated a shared sense of crisis.

Our own empirical work on news use during the COVID-19 pandemic as it hit Norway also serves to solidify such findings and move us towards a revised typology. We conducted qualitative studies of news use during early lockdowns in spring 2020, and again towards the end of the year as infection rates were again rising and new restrictions loomed. We have analysed these developments in several publications (Dahl and Ytre-Arne, 2023; Ytre-Arne 2023; Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021, 2023), finding similar phases of distant worries, world-shattering shock, fatigue and a new normal.

Talking retrospectively of when they first heard of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, our informants used phrases such as ‘they started talking about it on the news’, ‘I still found people were quite relaxed’ and ‘no one thought it would come here’. The following outbreak in Italy caused growing unease, and informants particularly mentioned televised images from empty cities, but the pandemic was still part of a sphere of news rather than their own daily lives. This changed with the sudden lockdown in Norway in March 2020, which marked drastic everyday changes as well as intense news

immersion: ‘like breathing and living inside the news’, as one informant put it. Another informant, a former journalist with health problems, told us how his news use fluctuated with these developments: First he followed his routine of checking trusted national and international news sources as usual, not considering himself personally vulnerable. The outbreak in Italy made a deep impression, and marked an immersive phase: checking news on the smartphone more often, watching evening news broadcasts more regularly and spending more time on news. This further intensified as he became home-bound in the Norwegian lockdown. Eventually, however, news checking became more about monitoring local infection rates to determine if plans could be realized, and media use – including news checking, but also radio, social media, Netflix and computer games – became more about passing time and restructuring daily routines.

In late 2020, less than a year into the pandemic, a narrative structure of ‘first-then-now’ was prevalent amongst our informants, while future outlooks still hinged on waiting for vaccines. While the presumed endpoint of the pandemic was constantly moving, there was a dominant view that it would pass and some form of normality would return.

We thus find the pandemic had a similar sequential structure to the Trump case, although the characteristics of the cases are very different. It is important to underline that Norwegians perceived the Trump victory as a world-shattering shock, yet only experienced this through news they could turn away from. The pandemic, in contrast, was present in daily life in Norwegian society and more difficult to avoid. This has implications for the emotional work involved in positioning oneself at a ‘safe’ distance from crises, and for re-instating one’s sense of ontological security.

On this basis, we propose that the typology drawing from these cases can be refined in the following way, to make for more broadly applicable categories:

First, a phase of *ritual check-in* in a presumed state of normalcy, before the advent of a crisis, in which people habitually, quickly and often superficially check the news, to confirm that they might safely focus on other aspects of life. In this phase, news is typically experienced as trivial, annoying or mundane. Practices of news use are typically scanning headlines or glimpsing at notifications, to maintain a pre-established sense of ontological security.

Second, a phase of *shocked immersion* immediately after a crisis has been perceived to have occurred, in which people orient themselves to gain an overview of the situation and its implications. In this phase, news could typically be experienced as scary, important or all-consuming. Practices of news use could typically entail following livestreams or checking many different or particularly trusted sources. As the world appears insecure, these practices can be interpreted as attempts to more or less desperately try to re-affirm ontological security.

Third, a phase of *regained stability* when some time has passed from the onset of the crisis, in which people gradually build an understanding of the situation and evaluate what it means for themselves and others. In this phase, news could typically be experienced as meaningful but needing careful discernment. Practices of news use could typically entail in-depth engagement with long-form content, or discussions and sharing of news with others. By explaining particulars and re-instating distance towards the crisis, news serves to re-establish a sense of ontological security.

Temporality and proximity: the climate as a different kind of crisis

While the US 2016 presidential election and the COVID-19 lockdowns are two very different events (Ytreberg, 2022 for recent discussion of media events), they appear to share the central characteristic of a distinct and acute crisis moment. In this moment – the election victory or the declaration of first lockdowns – news audiences could reasonably infer that the world was significantly shifting, and that changes in their news habits were required. This is not necessarily the case with all crises that affect the world or are covered in the news, with climate change as a case in point.

At the same time as studying news in the early pandemic, we conducted a separate qualitative study to explore how people in Norway make sense of climate issues through media (Moe et al., 2023). Here, we also found narratives of changing news habits over time, in fluctuation with views on the continued existence of the world as we know it – but these narratives did not have a shared starting point. Our informants emphasized personal rather than collective turning points, with examples such as learning of Extinction Rebellion, or observing increased pollution in their home city. Some mentioned the media coverage of Greta Thunberg as inspiring them to further climate engagement or scepticism, but these were retrospective reflections rather than a shared or distinct experience at the time.

Our typology does not fit well with the climate crisis, because of the lack of a collectively shared and singularly distinguishable moment of climate emergency, and a temporal perspective which is ‘out of scale’ with both news formats and human experiences (Jensen, 2017). Several scholars have observed that there is a fundamental disconnect between the complex temporalities of climate change and events-focused journalism (Bødker and Morris, 2022). Climate change does not have a defined starting point, and there is no end in sight, although the notion of a ‘new normal’ as also applied in the pandemic might be relevant. This problem of temporality is joined by a similar problem of proximity, with practical and emotional aspects: For some, including our informants, it is possible to consider climate change as mainly happening elsewhere, as not impinging on their everyday lives in a direct sense.

In contrast to the types of crises to which our typology does fit, the climate crisis can be understood as what eco-philosopher Timothy Morton terms a ‘hyperobject’ (Morton, 2013). Hyperobjects are so massively distributed in time and space that they transcend spatiotemporal specificity, and complicate any clear understanding of what the object or problem is in the first place. Morton’s own examples include global warming and radioactive plutonium. In consequence, the problem appears to be too vast and complex to do something about. Perhaps for this very reason, the climate crisis instils in people a collective and more enduring sense of ontological insecurity.

Our typology may also be problematized by alternative understandings of what a crisis is. We have implicitly assumed crises to involve successive yet discrete events, with a start, a critical ‘high point’ and an end. However, the crises we have focused on may well be understood as manifestations of meta-level crises. Take the election-win by Donald Trump in 2016: It might be regarded as one of many examples of a global surge of populism (Fukuyama, 2018), or as a political culmination of global social inequality

(Piketty, 2020), and thus connected to what commentators have labelled a crisis of the liberal world order.

The climate crisis can clearly be understood as an example of a meta-level crisis. It is connected to consumerism, capitalism, collective inaptitude to change course or handle problems. At the time of data collection (2020) our informants did not experience the climate crisis as manifested into temporally bounded sequential events, in proximity to their everyday lives, but this could unfortunately change as consequences of climate change become more widespread. The meta-level crisis might manifest in the form of more floods or wildfires, or sudden waves of immigration from parts of the world deprived by climate change. Our three-phase conceptualization is likely to have explanatory value in terms of how people respond to and make sense of news of such crisis manifestations, but this leaves the question of how well news of such events represent the complexities of the meta-level crisis (see also Bødker and Morris, 2022).

Conclusion

Instigated on the one hand by a news agenda of crises, and, on the other hand, journalism scholarship's recent attention to news use and avoidance, we have developed a typology to better grasp the temporality of news experiences before, during and after crises. Based on the theories of Carey and Silverstone, and our own work on news use among Norwegians during several different crisis situations, we have proposed a sequential typology describing three phases: *ritual check-in*, *shocked immersion* and *regained stability*.

Our typology is developed iteratively in a movement between empirical work and sensitizing conceptualizations. We should underline that the empirical data – our own as well as that of other scholars we build on – is heavily biased towards the Global North, affluent societies with widespread use of digital media technologies and stable editorial news media, also freely available to citizens. For people in societies where such an informational infrastructure is weaker, or less readily available to the larger public, transitions between the phases we describe might be much harder: If you are without well-established news habits, and more generally lack a preparedness for public connection (Moe, 2020), finding the sources needed to satisfy the need for more information can be really difficult. And if trusted sources of reliable news are few and far between, then journalistic news might not be a resource to use when transitioning from a phase of shocked immersion to regained stability. News use and avoidance differs according to socio-demographic variables, also within societies, and this matters for the role news plays in people's lives, and for feelings of anxiety associated with news (Toff and Nielsen, 2022).

With climate change as an example of a different type of crisis, we have critically discussed limits to the typology's relevance, but also highlighted broader challenges for citizens, journalism as well as media scholars to understand climate change. Our typology holds when faced with concrete manifestations of crisis – experienced as sequential with a distinct start and a potential endpoint. Regarding the climate crisis, much more exploration is needed of how people navigate in the informational landscape of a meta-level crisis, or a hyperobject, also beyond news. In our two first cases we have shown how changing news experiences could assist people in regaining a sense of ontological

security which helps them move on, emotionally and practically. The climate crisis is a more fundamental challenge to people's basic trust in the continued existence of themselves, others and the world as they know it, as well as society's ability to take action.

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ORCID iD

Brita Ytre-Arne  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4452-6007>

Note

1. Altogether, we build on three different studies with distinct data sets, all including in-depth informant interviews with Norwegian media users: a 2016 study of public connection (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2018 for details on data and methods), a 2020 study of news use during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ytre-Arne, 2023 for details on data and methods) and a 2020 study of media use and negotiations of the climate crisis (Moe et al., 2023 for details on data and methods).

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