

# Reporting Civilizational Collapse: A Wake-Up Call

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## **Abstract**

We are living in a visibly dying world, but this for the most part is diluted, disaggregated, and dissimulated in mainstream news reporting, and it barely registers in academic journalism scholarship. How are we to account for this? This article sets out why we need to move beyond thinking about global crises as separate or distinct issues to a more holistic view of an interconnected, interdependent world-in-crisis, and theorised in relation to ideas of the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene, and beyond to the Symbiocene. Journalism, it is argued, continues to propagate a worldview of 'business as usual' against a background assumption of 'life as normal,' and both journalism and its academic interlocuters exhibit a seeming 'existential aversion' to the demise of the planet. That is, an aversion to *both* recognising the accelerating and deepening existential threats as an entangled expression of a world-in-crisis, as well as an aversion to engaging in existentially life-affirming responses to this (whether through reporting or research). This is first documented and then explained in terms of interleaving professional, psychological, phenomenological and political practices. Finally, journalism's orientation to communicating the planetary emergency as well as processes of deep adaptation and pathways to transition is re-imagined and, by this means, a commensurate research agenda is also envisioned. This wake-up call to the prospect of civilizational and biosphere collapse invites journalists and their academic interpreters and interlocuters to both recognise and respond to today's deepening world-in-crisis, or risk irrelevance in the increasingly catastrophised years and decades ahead.

**Key words:** world-in-crisis, planetary emergency, civilizational collapse, global crises, existential aversion, Anthropocene, Symbiocene, emancipatory catastrophism.

## **Introduction**

We live at the dawn of a new age, or, more probably, at the dusk of a dying age that presages no new ages at all. The language of civilizational collapse is starting to be heard. We hear it in the considered prose of scientific reports and academic writing, in the expressive genres of film and fiction, and in the anguished pleas of growing numbers of protestors, such as Extinction Rebellion, on the streets. But we hear it obliquely and very occasionally at most in the mainstream news media. Here it is marginalised within source hierarchies and remains dependent on periodic 'newsworthy' events. For most of the time, voices seeking to raise the alarm and respond to immanent processes of unfolding collapse, are absent and unheard in the news media. And this notwithstanding the daily bombardment of press accounts and televisual scenes of human suffering, of lives lost and smashed infrastructure, of failing global supply chains, food shortages and forced

migrations, of desolated environments and destroyed wildlife, of megafires and melting icecaps.

The onward and accelerating crush of global crises and catastrophes can no longer be ignored or simply taken as the latest coincidence of randomly destructive events. These are neither accidents of nature nor society, nor the malevolent acts of someone's preferred God. We are witnessing a *world-in-crisis* even if it is not named as such, and its unfolding in real time. A world in which anthropogenic crises *caused* by the inexorable and ecologically destructive advance of human society and its predominant economic system, are finally reaching their nadir - or endgame.

The gargantuan progenies running amok in the world garden have been set loose by human parentage. They are born from and borne along by human history's most globally rapacious, economically extractive, and ecologically devastating system of production and consumption, and reinforced through a normative worldview wedded to ideas of incessant growth, material progress and human exceptionalism. These cataclysms have their names. Climate change straddles the Earth as the most precipitous threat to humanity, but it is dangerously inept to think that this is the only existential catastrophe now bearing down on life on planet earth. Pandemics, bio-diversity loss, the sixth mass extinction, energy, water and food insecurity, soil degradation and toxic pollution, war and weapons of mass annihilation, all now pose further threats to existence. Entangled within and precipitating many of them are global financial crashes and deepening inequality, increased political polarisation and instability, failing supply chains, world population growth and mass population movements and, inevitably, increased humanitarian disasters. The latter are no longer *spatially* confined 'over there' in the global South but take root 'at home' in the global North and *temporally* threaten to become permanent emergencies everywhere.

This article sets out the case for journalism to step up to the table of unfolding civilizational collapse, recognising the urgency and repercussions for world society and the biosphere, whilst also playing its part in the enacting of pathways of transition and transformation. It is imperative that the world of journalism and its academic interpretative community recognise the increasingly entangled and compounding nature of global crises today, and address these holistically as endemic to a *world-in-crisis*. The existential threats to life on planet earth are not, unfortunately, confined to self-contained 'issues,' whether climate change, global pandemics, or food precarity. They are expressive of and entangled more complexly in today's unfolding planetary emergency that now threatens both civilizational and ecological collapse. This trajectory is only set to worsen in the years and decades ahead. As it does, journalism will be compelled to re-imagine its reporting stance to a world-in-crisis, and journalism's academic interpreters and interlocutors will have to re-vision their research priorities or become increasingly irrelevant and out of step with their (End) times.

The dark telos of immanent civilizational and biosphere collapse should not be dismissed as alarmist, as simply catastrophist thinking, though it can be psychologically comforting to do so. To be clear, this author has no desire to be the messenger of bad news, a Cassandra cursed to be the utterer of true prophecies or a Nostradamus attracting those with a penchant for the superstitious, much less a latter-day Hieronymus Bosch painting pictures with glee of the waiting damnation and destruction ahead! But the accumulating weight of evidence now informing scientific and expert projections cannot be ignored and should not be distanced from thought. Journalism, as well as its scholarly interpretative community have a responsibility to communicatively address the performative, symbolic, and deliberative play of strategic politics and corporate power in a world-in-crisis, as well as the wider field of cultural engagement and pre-figurative politics that offer, just possibly, seeds of hope in the civil sphere.

The argument is set out over five interlinked sub-sections. First, the accumulating evidence of probable, impending, 'civilizational collapse,' well known to some, is briefly set out, and a case is made for why we need to move beyond particularised thinking about 'global crises' to a more holistic view of our interconnected, interdependent world-in-crisis.

Second, ideas of civilizational collapse are situated briefly in relation to recent theoretical perspectives on the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, and the ecological ideas and sensibilities coalescing under the mantle of the Symbiocene, as well as formative ideas of 'emancipatory catastrophism', amongst others. These, help to make better sense of the dark telos of collapse as well as necessary trajectories of deep adaptation.

Third, developing on these theoretical frameworks, a general critique of journalism's current reporting stance to a world-in-crisis is outlined, noting its diluted, disaggregated and generally dissimulating nature. Journalism, it is argued, continues for the most part to propagate a worldview of 'business as usual' against a background assumption of 'life as normal,' and does so notwithstanding the evident incursions of accelerating and deepening crises now impacting life chances and indeed the chance of Life itself for millions around the planet.

Fourth, a parallel observation is made in respect of journalism's academic interpreters and interlocutors, where widespread silence and research fragmentation is found to generally characterize the response to today's planetary emergency and its reporting. This journalistic *and* academic 'existential aversion,' that is, aversion to both recognising the deepening, accelerating and combined entanglement of global existential threats now immanent within a world-in-crisis, as well as an aversion to engaging in life affirming responses to them (whether in reporting or research), is documented and accounted for at multiple levels, from the professional and pragmatic to the psychological, phenomenological, and political.

Fifth, drawing on the preceding discussion journalism's critical role and responsibilities in communicating the planetary emergency as well as processes of deep adaptation and pathways to societal transition, are re-imagined and a research agenda commensurate to our world-in-crisis is thereby envisioned.

## **Civilizational collapse beyond catastrophism**

The mapping and prognoses found within the growing catalogue of scientific reports and scholarly research makes for sobering reading. It should stop us all in our tracks. The latest International Panel on Climate Change Report is unequivocal: 'Pathways reflecting current nationally stated mitigation ambitions as submitted under the Paris Agreement would not limit global warming to 1.5°C, even if supplemented by very challenging increases in the scale and ambition of emissions reductions after 2030.' (IPCC Sixth Assessment Report 2022). The consequences of exceeding 1.5 C global warming as predicted we know will be catastrophic for millions around the planet. And we are already witnessing the devastating impacts of climate change on millions of people through extreme weather events and collapsing environments. And this, notwithstanding the increasingly urgent clarion calls from scientists to the world's politicians' decades earlier. If global warming continues beyond 2.0 C to 3.0 C or even 4.0 C, as many now forecast on current trends, vast swathes of the planet will become uninhabitable in decades, not centuries, billions of people could die, and civilisation as we know it will collapse (Read and Alexander 2019, Wallace-Wells 2019, Servigne and Stevens 2020, Servigne et al, 2021, Bendell and Read 2021, Hickle 2021, IPCC 2022).

Since 1970 the world has seen a 68% average drop of population sizes of all mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, and reptiles (WWF 2020). I repeat: Since 1970 two thirds of the world's population sizes of all mammals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles have been lost. Invertebrates haven't escaped the destruction. A scientific consensus, displayed each summer on car windscreens, tells us that an 'insect apocalypse' has been underway for some time, including pollinators so central to plant propagation, food production and biodiversity (Goulson 2021, Millman 2022). Not only are species population sizes plummeting, but species are also increasingly becoming extinct at an historically unprecedented rate. We are living in the era of the sixth mass extinction, this time human induced (Kolbert 2014, Erlich 2017, Cowie et al 2022).

A recent study has calculated 'by 2070 soil erosion will increase significantly, by 30% to 66%' (Borrelli et al 2020). Intensive agriculture, including the use of fertilizers and pesticides, and increasing water runoff due to climate change, threaten to massively reduce agricultural yields and generate world food shortages as well as undermine waterways and aquatic ecosystems) (UNEP 2019).

The World Health Organisation, the United Nations and WWF International, along with the world's leading virologists, have argued in the context of the Covid-19 global pandemic that new and evolving zoonotic diseases will only increase in the years ahead due to the destructive impacts of human societies on nature and the climate. This includes continuing deforestation, the practice of monocultural agriculture, biodiversity loss, the trade in wildlife and human encroachment upon natural environments, all of which exacerbate the rise of potentially deadly diseases and their communication across species. (Lawler et al 2021). To date, methodologically conservative estimates place Covid-19 deaths worldwide at 6 million plus (John Hopkins University 7.4.22), a figure that can be tripled to between 15 million (WHO 2022) to 18 million plus, when estimated in the more realistic terms of excess mortality (Wang et al 2022).

Currently nine countries in the world possess roughly 12,700 nuclear warheads, the majority, 90% of these, owned by Russia and the United States (FAS 2022). The American plane, Enola Gay, dropped one atomic bomb with the power of 15,000 tonnes of TNT on Hiroshima on the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1945. 100,000 people died. A single Trident missile submarine can carry 100 hydrogen bombs with the explosive power of 1000 Hiroshima bombs (Toon 2018). Survivors of a nuclear war who manage to escape death from incineration, shock waves and immediate radiation fallout will venture out into a nuclear winter blanketing out the sun and extinguishing photosynthesis. The remnants of human society as we know it will also be extinguished. As I write, Russian president Vladimir Putin has invaded Ukraine and warned the world that he has put his nuclear forces on a 'special regime of combat duty', or high alert, and rhetorically rattles his intercontinental missiles in this Russian war in Europe. One minute to midnight has just moved considerably closer and upended international stability and nuclear arms control.

Published scientific and expert reports on these and other planetary threats make for disconcerting reading. The sheer volume of detailed analyses and dire projections all point to a world of worsening catastrophism and probable civilizational collapse. This dark telos is now immanent to a world fundamentally premised on relentless economic growth and the overshooting of sustainable ecological limits. *IPCC Sixth Assessment Report: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, based on the collective efforts of thousands of scientists around the world, is the most exhaustive and definitive compilation of real-world trends and sophisticated modelled projections to date. There is, it is widely agreed, a rapidly closing window of opportunity; the time to have averted the consequences of climate change has now passed. Adaptation, resilience, and mitigation have become the new *lingua franca* of living in a world accelerating along existential tracks, and pathways of transition and societal transformation are needed if we are to have a chance of denting or slowing the juggernaut of seemingly inexorable advance to civilizational collapse (Read and Alexander (2019), Berners-Lee (2019),

Wallace-Wells (2019), WWF (2020), IPCC (2022), Servigne and Stevens (2020), Servigne et al. 2021), Bendell and Read (2021)). The politics of hope in the context of climate change, is not looking good: according to UN secretary general António Guterres, "Some government and business leaders are saying one thing – but doing another. Simply put, they are lying. And the results will be catastrophic." (*The Guardian* 4.4.22)

Such global crises are now *endemic* to our contemporary world-in-crisis. For the most part they are globally *encompassing* (which is not to say they are experienced equally around the globe and issues of (*in*)justice are deeply implicated in them all). Importantly, they are also complexly *entangled* with each other – though too often this is insufficiently recognised and understood. For example, as I write, Covid-19, climate change, conflicts (including Ukraine) and rising fertilizer and food costs are all implicated in the world's latest 'seismic hunger crisis', with 811 million people in the world going to bed hungry and 44 million people in 38 countries 'teetering on the edge of famine' (World Food Programme 2022).

There is a tendency, based in institutional arrangements, academic disciplines and perhaps the constructs of mind and pragmatics of action, to cognitively discriminate between global problems or issues and place them into separate categories and arenas of specialist attention (See, for example, the United Nations website on 'Global Issues' ( <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues>)). We fail as a result to see them in holistic terms, as an integral expression of a world-in-crisis, that is, an economically overdetermined world that is now generating complex interlocking global crises that pose a threat to the very fundamentals of life. The dark telos of today's world system amounts to more than the devastating sum of multiple, contiguous crises. This is quite different to earlier historical forms of civilizational collapse (Diamond 2011). This must be more widely recognised, reported and researched as part of the pursuit of effective pathways to transition and transformation – and journalism is centrally positioned to perform a crucial part in this endeavour.

## **Theorising beyond the Anthropocene**

According to Amitav Ghosh we are living in 'The Great Derangement' (Ghosh 2016), a time of widespread denial, political disavowal, and collective insanity as the world continues on its 'business as usual' and 'life as normal' path. This notwithstanding the growing scientific consensus that we are living in the Anthropocene. An era that brings the 12,000 years or so of the Holocene, which saw the birth of settled agriculture and rise of complex human societies, to a humanly induced close. Such is the extent and depth of the recent impacts of human civilization on Earth systems and biocene. Though the exact periodisation

of the Anthropocene is still disputed along with the extent to which Earth systems are not simply reactive but constitutive in respect of human impacts (Clarke 2014), and continue to exert 'more than human' agency (Haraway 2016, Tsing et al. 2022), all can agree that the evidence of the 'great acceleration' of human society's footprint on Earth systems and biosphere since the industrial revolution is undeniable, and has proved ecologically devastating (Steffan et al 2015, Lewis and Maslin 2018).

The biologist E.O Wilson, in recognition of this, coined the term 'the Eremocene' to signal the impending Age of Loneliness that will follow the Anthropocene following the mass extinctions of other species wrought by human civilization (Wilson 2013). And Paul Erlich, one of the first biologists to draw attention to human society's culpability in processes of extinction, including its own (Erlich and Erlich 1988, 2017), remains in no doubt that collapse 'is a near certainty in the next few decades, and the risk is increasing continually as long as perpetual growth of the human enterprise remains the goal of economic and political systems.' (Erlich 2018).

James Lovelock's planetary thesis of 'Gaia' had earlier positioned recent human impact on Earth systems as unsustainable given the planet's delicate equilibrium of life and non-life systems (Lovelock 2015, Latour 2017). It took time for the scientific community to catch up with Lovelock's novel planetary conceptualisation of interacting Earth systems and their import for understanding the global precariousness of life on planet Earth, first set out in the 1970s. A similar response, it seems, greeted the Club of Rome's publication of *Limits to Growth* in 1972, which, based on early computing simulation power, extrapolated world population growth and economic trends, to argue that planetary limits would soon be breached with catastrophic human and environmental costs (Meadows et al 1972). When revisited 40 years later, Graham Turner essentially reaffirmed the study's predictions of planetary overshooting and the validity of projections of collapse (Turner 2014), as did the Club of Rome's own revisiting 50 years later and its declaration of a 'planetary emergency' in 2019 (Club of Rome, 2019). Ideas of planetary ceilings and overshooting have now informed major challenges to orthodox (ecologically myopic) economics, including influential formulations of doughnut economics (Raworth 2017), steady-state economics (Daly 1991), circular economies and regenerative culture and agriculture (Wahl 2019), as well as ideas of post growth (Jackson 2021), degrowth (Hickel 2021), sacred economics (Eisenstein 2018) and ecological civilization (Eisenstein, 2021, Lent 2021, Korton 2021).

When approached through a sharpened lens of critical political economy, the Anthropocene can be better conceived as the Capitalocene (Moore 2015, Patel and Moore 2018). In contrast to factually based descriptions and generalised claims of 'human society' characterizing Earth science's formulation of the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene invites a more historically nuanced explanation

for the ecological devastation wrought by successive waves of capitalism and its colonising and capitalisation of nature. 'The crisis today,' argues Moore in his treatise on world-ecology, 'is not multiple but singular and manifold. It is not a crisis of capitalism *and* nature but of modernity-*in*-nature.' (Moore 2015: 4). Immanuel Wallerstein's influential 'world-systems' theory had earlier projected the 'end phase' of world capitalism characterised by a period of deepening and terminal crisis (Wallerstein 2004), and with no clear successor system in sight.

Voices within and outside the traditional academy are now heard referring to the Great Unravelling (Macy 2021), the Great Turning (Kelly and Macy 2021), the Great Dying (Haque 2021), and, as we have heard, the Great Derangement (Ghosh 2016). Pantheistic ideas of spirituality, Buddhism and Taoism have also coloured the so-called 'Great Awakening' to not only the immanent forces of collapse inherent to the world system but also to the demand and desire for a more Earth centred way of life and (inter)being (Loy 2018, Lent 2021, Macy 2021, Hanh 2021). Importantly, this 'awakening' recognises not only psychological feelings of eco-grief, anger, and despair, of disempowerment and mortality (Gillespie 2021), but also the 'gift' to re-vision our sense of self and relationship to others within the natural world (Macy 2021).

A powerful intellectual bridge, built on a recent paradigm shift in the Western philosophy of science, has considerably eased the way for disparate outlooks and philosophies to coalesce under a more encompassing and ecologically centred view of impending civilizational collapse. The new philosophy of science better attuned to complex systems that are holistic, open, emergent, interdependent, interconnected and autopoietic, challenges the hold of traditional Western science and Enlightenment thinking with its linear, closed, mechanistic, atomistic, and reductionist approach to inquiry and laws of causality (Capra and Luisi 2014). It is from here as well as from the legacy of Romanticism, ideas of deep ecology (Naess 2021) and traditional indigenous wisdom (Kimmerer 2013, 2022, Pascoe 2016, Yunkaporta 2020), that ideas of 'ecological civilization,' and 'The Symbiocene' (Lent 2012) are born and posited as a necessary antidote to the unsustainable Anthropocene and Capitalocene.

These theoretical perspectives and ecologically informed sensibilities can be positioned under the heading of '*collapso-ology*', the current necessity to think through and better understand, and feel, what is happening to our world and to engage in the '*collapso-sophy*' of imagining future horizons, and the '*collapso-praxis*' of how to respond and build pathways of hope to the future (Servigne et al 2021). The ecological as well as economic dimensions of civilizational collapse are now being granted central prominence in the growing cacophony of voices and perspectives seeking to make sense of the planetary emergency and appropriate responses.

Ulrich Beck, probably more than any other social theorist, had also positioned ecology at the heart of his formulations of risk society, and then world



risk society (Beck 1992, 2000, 2009). And this carried through to his final reflections published posthumously in *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016). 'Global risk comes as a threat', says Beck, but it also 'brings hope.' Here ideas of 'emancipatory catastrophism' reverse his earlier focus on the societal production of ecological 'bads,' seen as the unintended side effects of producing commodified 'goods', to now a focus on the unintended common 'goods' of manufactured catastrophic 'bads.' In the context of climate change, for example, the growing 'anticipation of global catastrophe violates,' he says, 'sacred (unwritten) norms of human existence and civilization' and feelings of 'anthropological shock' can produce wide ranging processes of 'social catharsis.' In such circumstances, argues Beck, 'new normative horizons as a frame of social and political action and a cosmopolitized field of activities emerge.' (Beck 2016:117-118).

While the writing of Joanna Macy and others encourage a personal inward spiritual journey of hope in the face of impending ecological and societal collapse, Beck's hope for today's 'civilizational community of fate' is encountered in the sociological consequences of ecological catastrophe and the collective responses to shattered norms and expectations. The progressive as well as repressive potentiality of disasters, especially when staged in the cultural eye of the media have also been noted by others (Alexander and Jacobs 1998, Klein 2007, Cottle 2014). When reported on the media stage, disasters, conflicts and catastrophes can become 'global focusing events' with cultural affect and political charge that reverberate around the world (Cottle 2009a,b, 2011, 2019).

These theoretical perspectives on today's world-in-crisis and impending civilizational collapse, then, generally share a recognition of: i) the historically unprecedented and accelerating anthropogenic impacts of human society on Earth systems; that these are ii) rooted in the predominant form of economic system and its insatiable pursuit of economic growth; iii) that the planet has finite ecological limits which are being dangerously and unsustainably overshoot; and iv) this has set the world on a historical trajectory of immanent and probable imminent collapse. Embedded within the analysis of civilizational collapse is also, v) an enhanced recognition of the symbiotic dependence of humanity on nature and the planet's biosphere (that, for some, challenges the duality of human separateness and exceptionalism); and vi) prompts the revisioning of humanity in closer, symbiotic, and sustainable relation to the natural world and each other.

The etymology of 'apocalypse' tells us that its original meaning does not simply refer to a cataclysmic event such as the end of the world, but also to an 'uncovering', 'disclosure' or 'revelation' of some deeper truth. Perhaps there is something of this in the 'enforced enlightenment' of today's 'civilizational community of fate' (Beck 2009), and in the rise of ecological consciousness, exemplified in these disparate positions in a time of impending civilizational collapse.

## **Reporting planetary emergency: diluted, disaggregated, dissimulated**

The world of journalism continues to occupy a pivotal role in today's complex media ecology and in the communication of different global crises. Journalism often proves critical in the epistemological framing and constitutive in the ontological unfolding of crises and their societal responses (Cottle 2009b, 2011, 1996)2014, 2021). Journalism historically has often assumed the responsibility of raising the alarm and *signalling* the latest catastrophic events, labelling and defining them, and informing civil society of their magnitude, repercussions, and onward trajectory (Carey 1996). Journalism also serves to visually dramatize, culturally *symbolise* and meaningfully narrate the human stories and emotions of global crises (Cottle 2009, 2013, Smith and Howe 2015). It both breathes and oxygenates the cultural air of sense making and helps orient society to the world we live in. And so too can journalism variously *stage* public debates and political deliberation that give vent to the stakeholder disagreements that flow in, through and around crises, their political prescriptions, and wider responses (Cottle 2009a). Journalism we also know, however, is institutionally entrenched, economically determined, and often culturally and politically aligned to predominantly national structures of power and established social networks.

Journalism, with few exceptions only, is proving slow to recognise, contextualise and represent the severity and compound nature of existential crises now confronting human society and the planet. It continues for the most part to report in 'existentially averse' ways, as defined above, preferring to see the world through established professional and normative outlooks oriented to a world of 'business-as-usual' and 'life-as-normal.' When reporting on the most catastrophic global crises, this proves deficient and dissimulates the complex underpinning of today's planetary emergency or world-in-crisis. Consider for example how journalism has generally sought to report on three of the most globally pressing crises of recent times: climate change, Covid-19, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. To what extent and how has each been reported in global context and sought to draw out the complex underpinning and entanglements of today's world-in-crisis?

Recent reporting of IPCC reports, COP26 and, more recent and belatedly, extreme weather events, have all sought to incorporate and relay scientific warnings about the inexorable advance of climate change. But this reporting is at best institutionally intermittent and event dependent, whether on the release of the latest IPCC report, the public staging of COP26, or planned major protests. Extreme weather events and the latest breaking of past weather records can also create opportunities for recognising and signalling the onward march of climate catastrophes, though this is not always followed through. But the mainstream

media quickly retreat to their preferred 'life as normal', 'business as usual' normative outlook and thereby dilute and compartmentalize climate change, it seems, as a periodic and temporary newsworthy issue only, and not as an existential threat warranting daily exposure and multi-faceted depth reporting on par, say, with previous collective fights for survival as in times of total war. And rarely is it reported in its complex interaction and entanglement with other expressions of today's world-in-crisis. Climate change today, post-COP 26, with few exceptions only, is more likely to be reported through a lens of economic impacts, such as the costs of energy transition and consumer price rises than as an existential question of survival and growing citizen anxiety and anger. How climate emergency protests, for example, fare within media is a good litmus test of how far news media have yet to move beyond the conventional 'protest paradigm' and register shifting cultural sensibilities, growing ecological concerns, and demands for action (Cottle 2008, Cottle and Lester 2011).

Unlike climate change the reporting of the Covid pandemic in most liberal democracies was granted daily prominence and, exceptionally, became characterized by daily updates, elite briefings, and mediated dispatches from the frontlines of health care, as well as from the home front of lockdown (Cottle 2021). Unlike the slow-burn of climate change, Covid-19 visibly impacted health and mortality, economies, and everyday life in dramatic ways. The world of journalism for much of this period took its cue from government elites and public health specialists, but again generally failed to explore probable connections between this global public health disaster and its likely ecological underpinnings as a zoonotic disease. That is, as a long anticipated and deadly global pandemic that signals the growing breakdown of the relationship between human beings and nature (UNEP 2016, WWF 2020b). The 'liminal period' of the economic slow-down and personal lockdown of behaviour (Weil and Papacharissi 2021), was not used to seriously reappraise and rethink the world of work, priorities of well-being, and our relationship to the natural world, notwithstanding alleged sightings of dolphins in Venice and other similar stories. Even though Covid-19 demonstrated that society's carbon emissions could in fact be significantly reduced through shifts to homeworking, less car use, cancelling unnecessary flights and changed consumption patterns, the news media generally failed to make the connections between climate change and Covid-19 in this and in other major respects. The hoped-for and nationally focussed return to 'business as usual' and 'life as normal' was the explicit mantra of most governments of the day, and this was enthusiastically endorsed by the news media and continues to shape reporting in the post-period of endemic Covid (Cottle 2021).

Reporting of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been compelled to recognise and report on the entanglement of European economies, the continuing high dependency on hydrocarbon fuels, and the implications of restricted supplies on country plans to transition to clean energies and nuclear

power in the context of climate change. The forced migrations of millions of people, precipitation of a world food crisis, shortage of fertilizer and rising prices and the renewed fears of nuclear escalation and use of biochemical weapons have also all featured in the reporting of this devastating Russian invasion. This war reporting, in other words, has been compelled to register the interlocking and compounding nature of today's global crises and their reverberations around the world. However, Western news reporting has tended to report such system complexity and global interdependency through a normative and nationally inflected news lens. This has focused predominantly, at the time of writing, on national economic instability, energy sovereignty and impact on consumers prices as well as the mass exodus of refugees amidst the daily military updates and developing political responses. The reporting does not for the most part contextualise and examine the Ukraine crisis as part of a preceding world-in-crisis including the urgency of COP26 commitments to reduce carbon emissions, and it ignores the military carbon expenditure and dissimulates the ecological reality of contemporary warfare. The threats of nuclear escalation and exchange have received surprisingly matter-of-fact reporting and not the concerted urgency and in-depth analysis that might be expected given the doomsday finality now dangerously in play (Cottle 2023).

The explanations for this generally disaggregating and dissimulating news response to planetary emergencies, even when focusing on three of its most extreme expressions, are fathomable and multi-layered. We know that there is political and ideological structuration to the contemporary ecology of news media, that mainstream news providers are corporate entities shaped by political economy determinants and that they operate in a field of strategic power and vested interests, and that they enact culturally prevailing 'worldviews' (Cottle 2006, Shudson 2019, Bennett 2021). In more institutionally and professionally proximate terms, news agendas, story selections and framing, and silences, can also be understood in relation to the operation of basic news values (Harcup and O'Neil 2017), elite source dependencies and elite indexing (Bennett and Lawrence 2006), and the enactments of objectivity, impartiality and balance (Boycoff and Boycoff, 2007), as well as competing news epistemologies of scientific and social rationality (Cottle 2000).

The event orientation of news, whether, for example, protests, conferences or press releases, can also be institutionally out of synch with planetary and crisis temporalities (Bødker and Morris 2022), whether slow-burn disasters or permanent emergencies (see also Zelizer 2017, 2021). And the pragmatic division of journalist labour into 'news beats' and specialist correspondents (Robbins and Wheatley, 2021), can further reinforce the cognitive division of the world into separate 'issues.' The established communicative architecture of journalism further, variously, enables and disables ideational and imagistic, analytical and

affective, expositional and expressive, and display and deliberative modes of reporting planetary crises (Cottle and Rai 2006).

Professional journalist codes of conduct and newsroom expectations of journalist practice and conformity we also know are reinforced through structures of newsroom recruitment, hierarchy, and processes of story assignment and career progression. Each in their own ways can help account for the diluted, disaggregated and dissimulating reporting of today's world-in-crisis. However, in addition, the phenomenological hold of taken-for-granted background expectations about life, work and daily routines can also play into habituated journalist thinking and reporting outlooks. This is rooted in the temporalities of everyday life, in its routinised practices and, to borrow Marx's phrase, the 'dull compulsion of the economic' (i.e. contractual market relations and the daily grind of paying bills and so on), as well as private family relationships and commitments which, together, conspire to reproduce the phenomenological sense of life's ongoing continuity, rather than its immanent disruption or even destruction. A disposition that is at odds with reporting warnings of planetary collapse.

The psychology of denial and disavowal (Gillespie 2020) can also be in the mix of contributing explanations for journalism's seeming existential reporting aversion, a discomfiting psychology that will be differently felt and responded to by journalists who already know, defer to some distant horizon, or blatantly deny the coming planetary apocalypse. This can further become institutionalised in a paternalistic response to imagined audiences by differing news organisation in the news ecology, and through the massaged presentation of unpalatable messages and the purposeful avoidance of the charge of alarmism.

### **Existential aversion: the deafening silence of research**

Evidently the field journalism scholarship and media and communications research more broadly also suffers from 'existential aversion' when it comes to studying and researching today's world-in-crisis. Reviewing the published articles by seven of the field's leading peer reviewed journals (*Media, Culture and Society*, *European Journal of Communication*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Global Media Communication*, *Journalism Studies*, *Journalism: Theory, Practice, Criticism*, *Journalism Practice*) over a three years and 4 months (January 2019-April 2022), quickly establishes the stark silence of contemporary scholarship toward the deepening crises of our times.

Out of a total of 2633 journal articles published across this critical period, only 13 (0.4%) concerned multiple or interlocking global crises and/or made some reference to today's existential crises at world or planetary level. 35 (1.3%) articles about Covid-19, 35 (1.3%) articles about asylum seeking and migrancy, and 19 (0.7%) articles about climate change, and 11 (0.4%) concerning weather-related

disasters, generally focused on media framing in specific countries and/or media affordances and processes of media production and audiences. Most however did not situate or seek to theorise these in global, world or planetary context. (Exceptionally see: Cottle 2019, Atanasova 2022, Borth et al, 2022, Gutsche and Pinto 2022, Robertson 2022). These general findings replicate an earlier review of climate change communication research (1993-2018) that was found to be geographically biased, theoretically narrow and methodologically limited (Agin and Karlsson 2021). Also conspicuous by their complete absence are studies of food, water, energy insecurity, biodiversity loss, the sixth mass extinction, population growth, as well as weapons of mass annihilation. The lexicon of 'planetary emergency,' 'world-in-crisis', 'civilizational collapse' or similar cognate terms has yet to register, it seems, in the critical imagination and response of most media and communication and journalism scholars. How are we to explain this existential aversion in the field of communication research, a field that is often noted for its critical orientation to real-world issues and concerns?

In some respects, academics are not so unlike journalists, and this includes the community of journalism and communication scholars, and the explanations for their current research silence are equally multi-faceted. Academics researching the world of journalism and media and communications tend to drill deep rather than skate wide, intellectually building specialisms and inhabiting their preferred disciplinary and inter-disciplinary research silos. This academic drilling in some ways mirrors journalism's disaggregation of a world-in-crisis into separate and distinct 'issues.' It is also in keeping with academic institutional norms and expectations. This enactment of specialist expertise proves efficacious, of course, to the delivery of university courses, producing collegially endorsed publications, winning competitive research grants, and managing bids for promotion and career advancement. It also has the psychological benefit of warding off possible feelings of imposter syndrome and does so by not skating on thin academic ice. Being a 'Jack of all trades, and master of none', is anathema in academia, where generally 'Better to be a non-binary Jacquelin of one trade, than a mistress of many,' obtains. Today, however, we urgently need panoramic planetary vision as well as detailed (non-fossil-fuelled) research drilling.

The generally cool, dispassionate stance of academia may also play its part in keeping personal reflexivity at bay as well as the articulation of personal concerns, worries and feelings about the gathering clouds on the horizon. The psychology of eco-anxiety and eco-fear that can feed into forms of denial and disavowal in journalists, as well as the rest of us, and the phenomenology and temporality of every-day life and the 'dull compulsion of the economic,' as indicated above, can also equally ensnare academics and help explain their generally desensitized response to growing, deepening crises.

But it is not only the hold of preferred research expertise and disciplinary interests that is at work here. The hold of 'methodological nationalism' (Beck

2009), where research agendas are focused on institutions, processes and social relationships close to home and are often ringfenced in national contexts, can feed into the explanatory mix of planetary myopia. Those informed by 'critical' outlooks but who rebut ideas of political transnationalism or global cosmopolitanization, preferring to focus on the traditional locus of 'the political' within the organised fields of their own nation states, may further distance ideas of the global and the planetary. And some disciplinary allegiances are also more rooted in nose-to-the-ground empiricism and presentism than others, preferring to map, analyse and theorise the empirical present than the 'less knowable' and more speculative dystopian future. This overlooks however how future imaginaries are, and must be of course, actioned and performed in the present (Oomen et al 2022), whether in respect of the enactments of pathways of transition or the politics of denial and disavowal. Imagined futures take root in and help orient the present.

Epistemological commitments can also displace if not sometimes entirely eclipse real-world contexts and questions of extra-discursive ontology and causalities of collapse. Studies focused on the social construction, contestation, and circulation of meaning within media texts, say, whether approached in terms of semiotics, framing, discourse, narrative, dramaturgy or regimes of truth and the performative, are less disposed to engage with the ontology of real-world crises leading to planetary emergency - other than as a discursive construct, and some as we have heard eclipse entirely the immanent processes of global collapse from their academic purview. Disciplinary, presentist, methodological and epistemological optics are all conceivably at work in the sub-fields of journalism and media and communication studies. Together they are generally proving to be short-sighted, existentially averse, and out of synch with a world in which the communication of future imaginaries is desperately required if a future with hope is to be redeemed from the telos of despair.

In such professional, psychological, phenomenological, and political ways, then, we can begin to account for the deafening silence toward the planetary emergency currently heard in the world of journalism's principal interpretative community and interlocutors, and this surely must change in the years ahead.

### **Journalist imaginaries at the dusk of a dying age**

Journalism and its increasingly complex world-news ecology (Cottle 2012, Chadwick 2013, Reese 2016), we know, are situated, and practised in a force-field of power, economics, and vested interests. But journalism is also capable of giving expression to and sometimes channelling the changing concerns and hopes, sensibilities and moral horizons, of the civil sphere (Alexander 2006, Cottle 2019). Journalism is critically positioned to not only report on and deepen understanding

about the accelerating trajectory of existential crises - global, systemic, and complexly intertwined - and needs to do so with an overriding sense of daily urgency, but also to report extensively on the forging and formations of pathways to transition and transformation. A new 'journalist imagination' or 'journalistic imaginary' is both needed and increasingly compelled by the onward crush of economic and ecological crises, a journalism that is more keenly and compassionately oriented to reporting the impending threats to life on Earth than at present, as well as committed to reporting on pathways of transition and deep adaptation. Such a journalistic imaginary would be re-oriented in at least eight distinguishable ways, each of which provides critical benchmarks for journalism study and investigation in a collapsing world.

First, a culture of reporting today's world-in-crisis or planetary emergency has to take root across mainstream news media as well as outside it, and with an enhanced sense of planetary urgency. This needs to be comparable perhaps to reporting in times of total war, where an ethos of 'we're in this together' is established both in the field of reporting and beyond.

Second, reporting needs to increasingly recognise the complex entanglement of seemingly distinct crises in a world-in-crisis. Such reporting must be undertaken, at least sometimes, with expanded vision on how accelerating and deepening global crises originate and reverberate around the world and impact communities, life chances and sustainable ecologies, and not solely viewed through parochial and nationally inflected news glasses (Beck 2009, Cottle 2011, Berglez 2013).

Third, news presentism and journalism's preferred temporality of 'here and now' reporting (Zelizer 2017) must be expanded to fit the temporalities of potential extinction, a temporality in other words in which future imaginaries, whether premised on predictions of collapse or the politics of transition, are deemed to be legitimate timescapes for news reporting. And this not only in respect of the enactments in the present that are oriented to the future, but also those future imaginaries that have yet to emerge, form and contend in public and civil spheres and as the planetary emergency unfolds.

Fourth, journalism must give increased recognition to and communicatively enhance the public elaboration of pathways of transition and societal transformation and deepen its critical reporting of the patch-work quilt of incremental political programmes and policy initiatives at transnational, national and sub-national levels. It must also recognise and give voice to the cultural flourishing of ideas and pre-figurative politics of deep adaptation, many of which coalesce under ideas of deep ecology, ecological civilization and the Symbiocene.

Fifth, journalism will need to seek to creatively deploy and innovate its established communicative architecture and traditional modes of reporting when visualising and dramatizing, narrating and telling, expressing and deliberating stories that speak to our world-in-crisis. And to do so in and through the digital



affordances currently available and in today's interconnecting global news ecology (Cottle 2012, 2014).

Sixth, journalistic reflexivity needs to be encouraged and enacted in qualifying the hold of traditional news criteria and codes of news practice, and in ways that are better aligned to the reporting of planetary existential threats. Here the possible promise of various alternative and/or complementary models of journalism practice and orientation (public/civic journalism (Rosen 1999), development journalism (Waisbord 2009), peace journalism (McGoldrick and Lynch, 2005), engaged journalism (Nettlefold 2022), and constructive or solutions-based journalism (MacIntyre 2019) need to be explored and, when productive, incorporated or developed within the journalistic orientation to reporting existential threats. Here examples of industry 'good practice', for example, *The Guardian* newspaper's Climate Pledge (2019), should be publicly valorised and where possible expanded across mainstream news outlets and platforms.

Seventh, journalism as with the rest of society needs to participate in a grown-up conversation about the C-word, and how runaway financial and corporate capitalism and the elective affinity of normative ideas of incessant growth, material progress and human exceptionalism, have brought the planet to its end times. To borrow the words of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres "It's time to say: enough. Enough of brutalizing biodiversity. Enough of killing ourselves with carbon. Enough of treating nature like a toilet. Enough of burning and drilling and mining our way deeper." (Opening speech of the UN Climate Change Conference COP26, Glasgow, Scotland, 1.11.21). Journalism is positioned to increasingly become a political crucible of contention and opposing ideas, as well as a cultural forum for the expression and flowering of sentiments toward ecology and its degradations.

Eighth, more compassionate forms of journalism will be required that recognise the collective and psychological trauma of people experiencing the sharp end of catastrophe and the legitimate fears of all those now waking up to the planetary emergency and its impacts not only on human society but the ecological web of life.

When read through the prism of current understanding of journalism organisation and practice such a journalistic imaginary will seem, well, just that, imaginary! Naïve, flawed and/or hopelessly idealistic may also perhaps spring to mind. And based on much of what we already know about journalism production, practice and performance, especially when reporting conflicts, crises and catastrophes (Cottle 2006, 2009a,b, 2011), this is perhaps understandable. But we are no longer living in 'normal times,' whatever historically they are, and the trajectories of decline and collapse only look set to accelerate and deepen in the years ahead. As in times of total war, it is possible to anticipate and indeed to collectively demand that journalism better orients itself, and us, to the world we are currently inhabiting and its existential demise. Journalism need not be

assumed to be historically static or intransigent to change (Carey 1996, Zelizer 2017, Shudson 2019). The juggernaut of late modernity (Giddens 1990) can also give birth to its nemesis. It's in the ecological air we breathe as much as the compelled politics and changing economic relations forced to adapt to an increasingly catastrophised world. This is the terrain of Beck's societal metamorphosis that complexly, in myriad and often understated ways, reaches down into everyday life, into institutions and ways of doing things, and constitutes an 'epochal change of horizons' (Beck 2015: 77).

Journalism has the proven historical capacity to recalibrate and readjust its cultural sights, its collective moral compass, though not always for the better it is true. But we should not overlook or downplay the part played by modern means of communication in the deepening of democratic expectations (Scannell 1989) and in the advance of progressive movements of change (Alexander 2006): whether in respect of the civil rights movement challenging racism, gender equality and new identity politics or the universal recognition of human rights and struggles for animal welfare and environmental justice around the world. Journalism takes its cue not only from owners and powerful vested interests, but professionally and culturally from the metaphorical winds of change blowing through wider society. In hot-housed times literally blasted by winds of change, in times of 'anthropological shock' and 'enforced enlightenment,' the politics of 'emancipatory catastrophism' finds a foothold and may even be set loose (Beck 2015). In such circumstances journalism can become increasingly compelled to not only acknowledge but also grant expression to views and voices challenging the business as usual, life as normal, worldview, a view long past its sell-by-date in a visibly dying world.

Journalism's imaginary, increasingly calibrated to a world-in-crisis, also need not be assumed to be a sudden and unlikely moment of ideological conversion, but as an ongoing process of societal metamorphosis in the fading dusk of world civilization and in the gathering vortex of demands for transition and societal transformation to a more sustainable and survivable world. And indeed, there are already some grounds to say that this is already emergent in some sectors and some outlets of the current journalism field - whether in respect of the political reporting, for example, of top-down policies and programmes of energy transition or the cultural valorisation of small-scale initiatives and enterprises oriented to grass roots sustainability and ecological wellbeing. We see it in the reporting of attempted regearing of economies in a slew of top-down government policies and elaborate programmes that seek, if not always coherently or with sufficient urgency and vision, to move enterprises and behaviours to a carbon neutral, or much reduced fossil-fuelled world. This includes meaningful shifts in every economic sector, including energy, transport, housing, food production and the provision of local services (Porritt 2021, Kaplinsky 2021).

This top-down national *state-politics and international supra-politics*, however, does not exhaust the creative flourishing of ideas and practices which also bubble and ferment in the *sub-political* spaces of the creative economy and in the relatively invisible spaces and imagined horizons of the civil sphere. Here we find an eclectic cornucopia of productive ideas and shifting sensibilities. These include, for example, the ideas of deep adaptation and practices of regenerative culture and agriculture, rewilding and relocalisation; an appreciation of traditional indigenous wisdom based on ecologically sustainable relationships and reciprocity; ideas of circular, steady-state and alternative economies, of post-growth, de-growth and a new green deal and much else besides. This cultural flourishing informs the practices and pre-figurative politics of ecological consciousness and thinking about the web-of-life and emergent future imaginary of the Symbiocene, as we heard previously.

Whether we know it or not, our life chances and indeed the continuing chance of Life on planet Earth, has become a race to ecological consciousness. Journalism can yet perform an indispensable and vitalizing role in *signalling*, *symbolising*, and *staging* the inescapable necessity for deep adaptation and pathways of transition. It can do so by scrutinizing and exploring the credibility of government and corporate policies and the flourishing of ideas and pre-figurative practices built on imagined futures and compelled new horizons. Journalism's interpretative community of academic scholars must also, I politely urge, step up and challenge today's 'Great Derangement.' Because now is the time. As Hegel remarked, 'The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the coming of the dusk.'

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