Introduction: Media and the Politics of Crisis

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On Crisis

The centrality of the media of mass communication to social life is something that we take for granted in the late twentieth century. The actual function one can attribute to media – their role in society – is highly contested, however.

Debates over the relationship of media to society have to do in good measure with diverging views of the nature of society itself. In the 1990s, one of the flashpoints of this debate concerns the juncture of ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernism’ (cf. Media, Culture and Society, 1991) – that is to say, have we indeed crossed the threshold into an entirely new era, or are we rather in a later stage of the one that began politically with the great revolutions of the late eighteenth century, economically with the industrial transformations of the mid-nineteenth century, and culturally with the new artistic movements of the early twentieth century?

In short, is the present moment one of continuity or rupture with the past? Despite the intellectual attractiveness of the prospect of debating this question, we would propose that society evolves in a process of continuity and change, and that this process does not lend itself to such neat characterizations.

It is clear that such a process is not smooth. But we can nonetheless seek to understand it. We would propose the notion of crisis as a paradigm for understanding the dialectics of continuity and radical change (rupture), the thread (both real and imaginary) connecting social order and disorder in our times. This idea is suggested in M. Mattelart (1986).

The notion of crisis as an analytical category, Edgar Morin wrote in 1976, has spread to every horizon in the twentieth century: society, the family, value systems, the economy, the environment, the struggle with nature... all have been scrutinized from the perspective of crisis. A moment of crisis – by definition, a decisive moment – provides a unique opportunity for making a diagnosis, according to Morin (1976).

While we essentially agree with this view, the focus of this book will necessarily be more narrow than the panorama proposed by Morin. Our
concern is with the politics of crisis, in which, we shall argue, communications media play a central role. The notion of crisis is encountered in the literature in various guises pertinent to our consideration.

The question was addressed, for example, by the great Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1930), for whom situations of conflict between the ‘representatives’ and the ‘represented’ in society engendered a crisis of ruling class hegemony, a crisis of authority, or a general crisis of the state:

In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class’s hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of the broad masses . . ., or because huge masses . . . have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. (Gramsci, 1930: 210)

For Gramsci, a ‘crisis of authority’ arises when the ruling class no longer commands a social consensus, and must resort increasingly to coercive force to maintain its dominance. ‘This means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously’ (Gramsci, 1930: 276). This analysis begs the question: how does this come about? and indicates the importance of the means of exercising ideological hegemony.

Closer to our own day, Offe (1984) asks why the policy-making capacity of the state (ie its ‘welfare state regulatory strategies’) is so limited in effectiveness in late capitalist societies? For Offe, like Gramsci, the notion of crisis is central to the maintenance of hegemony:

the tantalizing and baffling riddle . . . is why capitalist systems have so far been able to survive – in spite of all existing contradictions and conflicts [crises] – even though an intact bourgeois ideology that could deny these contradictions and construct the image of a harmonious order [bourgeois hegemony] no longer exists. (Offe, 1984: 36)

His answer lies in the view of policy making as a form of crisis management. Crises, for Offe (1984: 36), are ‘processes in which the structure of a system is called into question’. One view of crisis, which Offe calls the ‘sporadic’ view, holds that ‘crises endanger the identity of a system’, especially when events occur that lie outside the boundaries developed by the system. This view sees crises as ‘particularly acute, catastrophic, surprising and unforeseeable events’ requiring intervention. ‘The crisis is thus seen as an event or a chain of events confined to one point in time or a short period of time. This makes it difficult to describe the tendency towards crisis or crisis-proneness of a social system’ (Offe, 1984: 37). By failing to link events with social structures, it fails to see the crisis as characteristic of the general state of affairs.

An alternative, or ‘processual’, approach conceives crisis at the level of ‘mechanisms that generate “events”’: according to this approach, crises are
seen as ‘developmental tendencies’ that can be confronted and counteracted (for example, by policy measures). Here, the crisis-prone tendencies of the system are related to its overall characteristics. Crisis and administrative (state) intervention are traditionally pitted as opposites, but they are linked by what Offe (1984) calls the continuing ‘crisis of crisis management’.

In an important essay first published in 1981, Jürgen Habermas described social modernization as a process of economic growth and organizational accomplishment that ‘penetrates deeper and deeper into previous forms of human existence... disturbing the communicative infrastructure of everyday life’ (Habermas, 1985: 8). To the extent that modern society is also marked by a seemingly endless series of crises – real and perceived, general and specific – this is a good way of characterizing the media–crisis relationship.

On Media and Crisis

Crisis can be defined as a disruption, real or perceived, of social order. In the dictionary sense, the term is also used to refer to a decisive or critical turning point in the course of events, as well as ‘a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent’ (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971: 1178). It is especially applied ‘to times of difficulty, insecurity and suspense in politics or commerce’.

A state of crisis is distinguished from its opposite, normalcy, by the threat (or promise) of change that the crisis implies. Whether change is deemed to be desirable or not is evidently a question of ideological orientation and political interest, but the very labelling of some situation as a ‘crisis’ is itself an ideological and political act. So is the failure to attribute crisis status to a particular situation. Making these choices and structuring the way they are presented in the public sphere has become one of the essential functions of mass media.

If a situation of crisis is, axiomatically, a moment of importance for the society concerned, it is, by corollary, necessarily worthy of media attention. The nature of that attention then becomes, itself, an element of the crisis, insofar as ‘the status and significance of a historical event... is inseparable from the equivocal discourses that traverse it’ (Pêcheux, 1988: 633).

The role of media will vary greatly depending on the nature of the particular crisis and the nature of the particular society concerned. As all social institutions, media thrive on stability and are threatened by change. But the contradictions inherent to the relationship between their specifically ascribed function as agents of social discourse and their economic status as purveyors of commodified knowledge/information distinguish media from other social institutions: in a certain sense, media thrive on ‘crisis’ and are threatened by ‘normalcy’.
The tendency is, therefore, for media to seek out crisis where it does not exist, and to obscure the actual forces of change that threaten media privilege along with entrenched social privilege in general. Paradoxically, this means that media will tend to pay even more attention to a fabricated crisis than to one that can stake a material claim to reality. For social actors, provoking a crisis thus becomes a form of empowerment or social control. But the ensuing access to media attention is unequally skewed, to the extent that the media themselves are socially positioned.

In a powerful and provocative essay first published in France in the wake of the events of May 1968, Guy Debord (1983) described modern society as one in which public life was reduced to a spectacle. Reviewing his earlier observations recently, Debord (1990) argued that the most significant social fact of the intervening 20 years was the unbroken continuity of the spectacle.

Debord characterizes the spectacle as 'the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign . . . The establishment of spectacular domination is such a profound social transformation that it has radically altered the art of government' (Debord, 1990: 2, 87).

Henceforth, all discussion of what the world's rulers do is organized through the spectacle, through the unilateral and uni-directional communication via the mass media of the results of decisions that have already been made. Only that which is recognized by the spectacle has historical validity; only those consecrated by the spectacle are entitled to speak with authority.

According to this view, those who consume the spectacle cannot act. The only reliable knowledge is that which one gains by direct experience. But, given the pervasiveness of media, to what extent can one participate in modern society on the basis of direct experience alone?

On Media, Crisis and Democracy

If ever a political designation has been ideologically charged, it is the term 'democracy' (cf. Raboy and Bruck, 1989). Even a cursory review of the vast array of existing and hypothetical models of democracy would be far beyond the scope of this chapter (cf. Held, 1987). But our examination of the relationship between media and crisis becomes particularly meaningful when considered in light of the evolving debate on the nature of democracy. Let us then state very briefly what democracy means to us.

In the most simple and conventional sense, a democracy is deemed to be a political system in which the majority of a given population exercises power. The obstacles encountered by systems organized along these lines have led to various critiques that highlight shortcomings such as the tendency of the majority to dominate minorities, of elites to control power
institutions in the name of the people, of the state to negotiate social peace in the interests of the elites.

We would take a different approach. We consider democracy to be a value rather than a system. As a normative concept, democracy implies equality, social justice and political mechanisms for people to participate meaningfully in making the decisions that affect their lives.

Democracy implies an ongoing struggle, in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres. If, as we have argued above, crisis is a structural feature of modern society, and media are the agents of social communication by which a crisis is made public, then the media-crisis relationship becomes a key factor in the struggle for democracy.

Challenges to the status quo in all types of society tend to be framed in terms of crisis. Crisis is a structuring concept: by labelling a situation as one of crisis, one declares the presence of a threat to the prevailing order. This declaration is usually accompanied by a political positioning with respect to the projected change.

Invoking a state of crisis has, at least in the past half-century, been the classical strategy for legitimating the silencing of media criticism, and the tendency is for media to go along. On the other hand, a serious limitation of contemporary mainstream media is their reluctance to recognize and legitimate an actually existing crisis whose logical outcome would empower those who do not currently form part of the dominant social elites.

Not all crisis is mediated, let alone media-created. Society has not yet reached a condition of stasis, and the forces of social change really do exist. The media themselves, however, constitute a contested terrain in the struggles surrounding the conceptualization, definitions, and transformation of society and democracy in different parts of the world.

As we shall see, the actual role of media with respect to the quality of democratic public life is increasingly problematic. On the one hand, it can be argued that media are most important when and insofar as the issue of democracy is at stake (cf. Keane, in this volume). On the other, one can wonder, along with Debord for example, whether media have not in fact negated the possibility of democracy.

The complicated texture of this problem was made dramatically apparent (if not quite transparent) during the major international crisis that marked the period during which this was being written: the Persian Gulf war of 1991 (see also chapters by Kellner and Masmoudi in this volume).

A Case in Point: Media and the Gulf War

Media coverage of the Gulf War must be placed in its historic context. During the single year 1989, the global mediatization of political crises reached saturation point. Live television coverage of the different manifestations of the pending collapse of the iron curtain suggested to the
viewers of the world that ‘the civic function of televised information (is) precisely to go beyond appearances and reveal the real nature of a society’ (Ramonet, 1991).

With the outbreak of the Persian Gulf crisis in August 1990, people expected the kind of coverage they had become accustomed to in Berlin, Beijing and Bucharest. The audience was primed. The technology was in place. But there was a major difference: information here was subject to pre-media control.

In the crises of 1989, the global media were tacitly supportive of the forces provoking the crisis. The contrary was the case in the Gulf War. Proliferation of images in one case, silence and blackout in the other. But, as Ramonet reminds us, news blackouts are not new. From the beginning of the 1980s alone, no western power allowed the media to be present during military foreign operations (Israel/Lebanon 1982; UK/Falklands 1982, US/Grenada 1983, France/Chad 1988, US/Panama 1989).\(^1\)

Even so, can we really claim that ‘being there’ through the eye of the camera (as in Beijing, etc) provides meaningful information, usable in the exercise of democratic citizenship? For local populations perhaps. If publics were to be informed of pending political choices, rather than after the fact, their intervention could perhaps influence those choices. As it is, we are allowed to see only that which we can no longer do more than absorb. This is consumerism in its purest form.

In the case of the Gulf War, television audiences were reduced to unabashed voyeurism. Journalists were, in the best of cases, witnesses. CNN’s famous announcement of the start of the bombing of Baghdad was a virtual exercise in non-communication (to parody Lasswell): it could not communicate with any degree of accuracy who was bombing what, with what means and to what effect (Ramonet, 1991). Yet CNN set the standard.\(^2\) Never before had an international event generated so much media coverage – and so little information, so much media criticism – and so little understanding (cf. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 1991).

Almost immediately, the role of the media became the story – in some respects even ‘bigger’, more controversial, than the story of the war itself, as if to say: ‘We know we have little input to policy processes; but we feel like participants because of our consumption of media. Perhaps if we take a critical approach to media, we can feel we are helping to make policy as well.’

The speed with which media coverage of the crisis shifted from the story itself to the ‘media-in-the-story’ was truly stunning. The war period of 16 January to 5 March, 1991 especially, produced an outpouring of hundreds of press articles and countless audiovisual reports about the media. If the media were unable to cover the war, they made up for it by covering themselves.\(^3\)

The media discourse on itself was remarkably homogeneous, in its emphasis and stressing of the following points: the denunciation of censorship, the criticism of the limitations of television as an explanatory
medium, the anxiety over the effects of spectacularization and the tendency to approach war as a kind of sporting match, and the recognition of the limitations and constraints of technologically determined journalism.

If nothing else, the Gulf War demonstrated once and for all the communicative incapacity of television and the continued importance of print media as means of reflective information. Television ‘informed’, in a crude sense, but gave viewers nothing to hang on to: ‘Overinformation led to disinformation. The avalanche of news – often uncooked – broadcast “live and in real time” made viewers hysterical with the illusion that they were being informed . . . Being there was not enough to know what was going on’ (Ramonet, 1991).

Critics concurred that the missing ingredient of the war coverage was the war itself. Coverage was of the crisis, in the abstract.

Management of information in wartime is 150 years old. But never before have we been able to give ourselves such an illusion of being informed. In this respect, television coverage of the Persian Gulf War was purely ideological in the Althusserian sense of ideology as ‘a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (Althusser, 1971: 162).

A certain managerial tendency has considered serious policy questions – especially regarding war and diplomacy – to be beyond the purview of ordinary citizens, ever since Walter Lippmann published Public Opinion on his return from the Versailles conference of 1919 (Lippmann, 1922; see also Burnham, 1941).

A state of crisis encourages this tendency. Then, in addition to the public’s declared incapacity to decide due to its lack of technical expertise, one must factor in the need for secrecy, censorship, or suppression of information in the name of national security (cf. Masmoudi in this volume). The media become not a forum for public discussion of policy issues, but a means of massaging the public with reassurances that the authorities have the crisis well in hand. Surfing on the waves of public opinion, the authorities are then able to execute all manner of political agendas, under the cover of crisis communication. But we would do well to recall that such exceptional measures are one of the basic features of totalitarianism (cf. Mattelart and Mattelart, 1979: 55).

This is precisely what happened during the Gulf War, with the preponderance of retired military analysts and other experts seconded to supplement the official information streaming from the Pentagon, the White House, and (for local purposes) other ‘allied’ capitals. In the face of the general ignorance and professional helplessness of the journalistic milieu, these experts became the oracles of the information we needed to know.

Former White House communication chief (under Ronald Reagan) Michael Deaver candidly explained the strategy to a reporter from Le Nouvel Observateur in June 1991:
The military successfully integrated a communication strategy (to its activities) . . . They understood that it was just as important, if not more, to look after the journalists as to deal with logistics or pure military strategy . . . Millions of people saw the representatives of the government speak with assurance while reducing the press to a bunch of assholes asking stupid questions. (de Rudder, 1991: 6-7)

The Gulf War not only rewrote von Clausewitz, it also gave new life to the Hollywood good-guy/bad-guy model of conflict representation (which had, as it turns out, suffered an only temporary blow with the end of the Cold War; cf. Halliday et al. in this volume). The tendency to flatten a complex and multi-textured phenomenon into simple formulations, for example by blackening Saddam Hussein and his regime, obscured all possible consideration of the real meaning of the war, of US designs and motives, of the manipulation of public opinion and disinformation (see Warren, 1991; Kellner in this volume).

The tendency was thus for most people to think as they were told, prompting one critic to remark: ‘This represents a historic triumph for propaganda; it no longer needs to bother suppressing or distorting inconvenient facts’ (Salutin, 1991: 36).

The facts, meanwhile, were available for those who wanted them in an array of small, independent print media (including some prominent ones such as The Village Voice and Le Monde Diplomatique) and, in disjointed and decontextualized fashion, in much of the mainstream press as well.

But, significantly, the strongest criticism in the media was levelled at the media. Characterizing the press as ‘a claque applauding the American generals and politicians in charge’, and television as ‘the most egregious official lap dog during the war’, Anthony Lewis of The New York Times wrote that government control and censorship alone could not explain the media’s performance: ‘We glorified war and accepted its political premise, forsaking the independence and scepticism that justify freedom of the press’ (Lewis, 1991).

Lewis Lapham, meanwhile, wrote in Harper’s Magazine that the bulk of the war coverage ‘was distinguished by its historical carelessness and its grotesque hyperbole’ (1991: 12), concluding that ‘a servile press is a circus act, as loudly and laughingly cheered by a military dictatorship as by a democratic republic’ (Lapham, 1991: 15).

Trite as it may seem to say, the Gulf crisis drove home not the horror and insanity of war but the emptiness of mainstream media news coverage, especially television. Possibly for the first time, the extent to which media spectacle has substituted for public participation in politics received some essential comment (if not quite an extensive airing) in the media themselves.

In sharp contrast, western media coverage of the unfolding of the failed coup in the Soviet Union in August 1991 was rich and expansive. By comparison to the Gulf War, there were three important differences in the circumstances surrounding the Soviet event: first of all, Soviet authorities
were unable to control the flow of information and the media enjoyed easy
direct access to oppositional forces and important arenas of action (such as
the streets of Moscow). Second, western media audiences in this case did
not need to be called upon to support policy decisions of their own
leadership and could be unproblematically addressed strictly as spectators.
Finally – and no small point as far as the media institutions were concerned
– no one was going to argue with their trumpeting that the Russian
Revolution was good news this time around.

**Media, Crisis and Democracy: Mass Communication and the
Disruption of Social Order**

The Gulf War illustrated dramatically some of the ethical and political
questions raised by media intervention in a context of crisis. The chapters
of this book suggest that these questions are not specific to a particular
situation, but are rather endemic to our era, and that they are furthermore
fundamental to the continued quality of democratic public life.

Seen another way, the contributions to this international collection
suggest that the relationship between media and democracy can best be
understood by referring to the notion of crisis. As one of the key
structuring elements of social and political life in the late twentieth
century, crisis can be seen as synonymous with both modernity and
progress. But situations of crisis are more revealing about society and its
structures than situations of normalcy. This, the book shows, is particularly
true insofar as the role of media in society is concerned.

Returning to the classical origins of liberalism that lie at the root of
modern media theory, John Keane argues that the threat to the
sovereignty of the nation-state that is deemed to accompany a state of crisis
actually subverts the democratic foundations of the media. He proposes
instead a new understanding of the relationship between democracy and
information. Keane's chapter turns around the relationship between
communication and civil society – a theme that characterizes much of his
work (see eg Keane, 1988) – and ends with some reflection on the
possibility of a truly international civil society (cf. also Bruck and Raboy,
1989).

Keane's is the first of several contributions in the book that emphasize
the relationship between crisis situations and state security measures from
the perspective of the relative freedom of media activity (see also
Masmoudi in this volume). As crisis situations tend to mobilize for security
measures, a classical strategy for legitimating clampdowns has been to
invoke a state of crisis (cf. Gerbner in this volume). In this context, media
become an extension of the state, ensuring 'that a latent crisis becomes
manifest' (cf. Keane in this volume).

The most sophisticated argument of this type in recent decades was the
mid-1970s formulation of a 'crisis of democracy', put forward by the
high-powered ‘Trilateral Commission’ of business and political leaders of Europe, Japan and North America (Crozier et al., 1975). Its specific emphasis on the role of the media is central to the arguments in this book by Kellner and the Mattelarts.

But Keane emphasizes that there is no longer a single ‘centre’ of state power in modern society; that power is diffuse, and diffused throughout civil society. This corresponds to the notion of hegemony discussed in the opening section of this introduction – and indicates an even more critical role for media in maintaining traditional power relations.

The notion of ‘sovereignty’ is central to Keane’s argument: for Keane, it is clearly the people (through the institutions of civil society) who must be sovereign if democracy is to be meaningful – regardless of the implications of that reality for the state. In this sense, he would appear, on superficial reading, to be at odds with our next contributor, Mustapha Masmoudi, for whom the state appears to be the legitimate incarnation of the popular will – and thus, a legitimate exerciser of communicational authority.

The distinction between these two essays centres around the authors’ respective geopolitical contexts. As one of the architects of the UNESCO-led project for a New World Information and Communication Order, Masmoudi writes from a Third World perspective in which the state is the instrument of progress, modernization and a collective project. Nonetheless wary of any suggestion of state interference in the free circulation of information, Masmoudi (a professional journalist as well as the former Tunisian ambassador to UNESCO) struggles with the inevitability of conflict between the untrammeled exercise of media activity and the higher reason of state. His call for a codified ethic governing media behaviour in time of crisis has a welcome pragmatic tone, especially in light of the Gulf War, which also directly informs his chapter.

Interestingly, both Keane and Masmoudi mention media accountability as a crucial condition of their playing a democratic role, and as assurance of media responsibility, especially in time of crisis.

Masmoudi’s essay also dovetails with that of Douglas Kellner, whose focus is on the hegemonic role of mainstream media in the United States. Elsewhere, US television is seen by critics as a beacon of US imperialism; within the US itself, according to Kellner, it acts as a restraining mechanism on the exercise of political democracy.

Like Masmoudi, Kellner uses embryonic case material from the Gulf crisis to illustrate his thesis (well developed in earlier works, cf. Kellner, 1990). Kellner relates the performance of US media vis-a-vis the Gulf to a political economy analysis of the role of media under capitalism. This role, according to Kellner, constitutes a crisis of democracy which only a radical alternative to dominant mainstream media can overcome.

Here the perspective is firmly rooted in a context critical of the way in which the free flow of information has been integrated into a media system based on commodification and control. Kellner makes his argument strongly, and pits it against that of the Trilateral Commission, for whom
too much media independence constituted a threat to the liberal democratic model of societal management. In Kellner’s argument, the crisis is that there is not enough democracy – in spite of a proliferation of what passes for information.

As did Keane, Kellner evokes the need to create alternatives if media are to fulfil their democratic function. And here too – with the aid of the counter-examples provided by the Gulf War experience – the notion of crisis allows us to see the emergence of possible spaces of resistance within the media/spectacle society.

As Kellner shows, the demonization of Iraq/Saddam/Islam/ the Arab world in general was an essential part of the mediatization of the Gulf crisis. In their discussion of media representation of the end of the Cold War – written before the outbreak of the crisis in the Gulf – Julian Halliday, Sue Curry Jansen and James Schneider demonstrate the importance of representation of the other in media/crisis politics. The end of the Cold War had a perverse effect on western (US) media by removing the state of permanent crisis under which they had flourished since 1945. This itself brought about a new ‘crisis of representation’ – which culminated in the construction of a new all-encompassing enemy in Hussein.

Halliday, Jansen and Schneider look at the framing of the changes in eastern Europe from the perspective of different types of media discourse: academic, news and advertising. Their argument focuses on the importance of mythology in situating the individual social subject in history. Between the discourses of explanation (which one finds in certain mainstream academic literature) and those of assimilation (as in certain forms of popular culture – where they situate advertising), we find the framing of crisis events which denote ‘a dramatic disturbance of order’. The frightening implication of their thesis is that western media have come to rely on crisis denotation as a way of identifying and, especially, targeting the foreign ‘other’ necessary for maintaining the structures of power. This analysis helps account for the replacement of the ‘threat of peace’ in eastern Europe with the bogeyman of Saddam in the Middle East.

One of the leitmotivs of this book is that media play a role in the preservation of social order by declaring a crisis where one does not necessarily exist, while denying a state of crisis that is in the interests of elites to obscure. There can be no better example of this than the experience of eastern Europe from 1945 to 1989, where media were seen as strictly instrumentalist. As Karol Jakubowicz shows with special emphasis on Poland, the forced concordance of media performance and state policy in a situation of recurring, if not quite perpetual, crisis, resulted simply in the alienation of mainstream media from any democratic function.

Reading Jakubowicz, one can distinguish a curious parallelism between the soviet totalitarianism he describes (after Kolakowski, 1989) and Kellner’s ‘crisis-of-democracy’ America. At the risk of appearing unfashionable, we would suggest it useful to read his rich study of eastern
bloc media as applicable to 'western' media as well. In both systems, information is/was used as a form of political power; in both systems, the ground rules governing media operations have been mastered by political authorities anxious to deliver a message. In both systems, situations of crisis provide a vulnerable and fertile ground for the sowing of a political crop. One of the key distinctions between the two systems, in fact, is the relative success of the media in the west vis-a-vis their counterparts in the east, instrumentally speaking.

The subsequent two chapters argue that crisis is essentially a media construct. Drawing on more than 20 years of research into the mediatization of violence in its different forms, George Gerbner argues forcefully that this phenomenon reinforces social power through a variety of means, notably by fostering feelings of insecurity among the powerless and legitimating the mobilization of state violence against often marginal opposition groups. Labelling a situation as one of crisis, Gerbner reminds us, is a means of social control.

What does exposure to violence and terror do to different groups’ conception of their own vulnerability, to society’s approach to conflict, to the distribution of power and the likelihood of its abuse, Gerbner asks? As the Cold War turns into a new Holy Alliance (whose first mission was in the Gulf), media violence will tend increasingly to encourage audience passivity. Meanwhile, few countries appear willing to invest in a cultural policy that does not surrender the socialization of its children to market forces. Gerbner concludes with a call for a new ‘international cultural environmental movement’ dedicated to media reform – echoing the implied conclusions of other contributors.

Peter Bruck also makes a convincing argument for crisis as a strictly media-constructed phenomenon. Crises, Bruck argues, do not exist in the real world, but only in discourse. Bruck illustrates the role of sensationalist tabloid news formats in the spectacularization of social life, and the resulting disempowerment of individual members of society, who are led to consume the various aspects of their own social reality rather than act to change it.

Spectacularization, to Bruck, is a media technique for focusing a crisis in such a way as to achieve a discursive distance between the spectators and the observed. The spectacle, in this framework, is the pay-off to the consuming reader/viewer. Successive crises provide the material with which to describe a world in turmoil. As in Gerbner’s analysis, the logical upshot is that media consumers will tend to make loyal subjects. And since media need crises, their news-diffusing codes and routines will tend to create them. The implication is that defining a crisis undermines the democratic function of media.

On the other hand, we would argue that there are actually existing crises in the real world and in history. One could go even further and claim that denying the crisis that exists can be a strategic political choice in an attempt to preserve social order. To the extent that media follow the lead of
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political authorities, their role can be to attenuate the crisis, rather than exacerbate it. In such cases, the full contradictory nature of mass media emerges – one can almost say that it is in times of crisis that the media reveal themselves, their workings and their motivations.

The chapters by Bernard Dagenais, Marc Raboy and Lorna Roth provide examples of the contradictory role of media in three radically different types of crisis situation: one directly challenging the political authority of a national government; one involving a profound crisis in social relations; and one concerning a stand-off between a distinct social group and the rest of the society of which it is a part. The three are all drawn from the editors’ home context, Canada, but the phenomena they inform are, we feel, universal, rather than local.

Quebec’s October Crisis of 1970, discussed by Dagenais, marked the transfer of the politics inspired by the ‘urban guerilla’ movements of Latin America to the advanced industrial north. Later overshadowed by the spectacular activities of groups like the Red Brigades and Baader-Meinhof in Europe, the October 1970 kidnappings of public officials by the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) were actually the first of the kind in a highly industrialized and highly mediatized society. Exacerbating a prevailing climate of general social unrest, the FLQ action led the Canadian government to declare a state of ‘apprehended insurrection’ and suspend civil liberties. This type of confrontation, perceived by authorities as being greatly threatening to the legitimacy of the state and the preservation of social order, characterized the crisis politics of the west in the 1970s and well into the 1980s. Dagenais’ study illustrates the richly ambiguous nature of media involvement in such a crisis, the multi-layered texture of the media’s role in a crisis situation. As he shows, it is too facile to pigeon-hole media into a single role: they are both observers and actors.

Far from the high politics that surround such notions as legitimization of the state, are the multiple manifestations of continuity and change as they are played out in the activities of everyday life. These rarely find their way into the media spotlight – until some spectacular event exposes the crisis. But, as Raboy shows, even then there can be strong pressure to deny the existence of a crisis situation, especially when the crisis is as deep-rooted and ultimately threatening as the one provoked by the profound change in male–female relations over the past 20 years.

The extraordinary event Raboy analyses – the mass murder in Montreal of 14 women by an avowedly ‘anti-feminist’ gunman – revealed the media’s great difficulty in rendering meaningful the most fundamental crises of everyday life. Raboy sees the media as a site of ‘discursive struggle’, where naming the crisis for what it is can become a decisive battle. This analysis can be applied, on a macro-social scale, to treatment of such questions as famine and poverty, chronic unemployment and generational welfare, or the unequal distribution of wealth and resources. In all of these cases, media attention is generally event-driven, and attempts to politicize the discussions tend to be dismissed as ideological.
The modern saga described by Roth – an episode in the centuries-old struggle of North American native peoples for self-determination and sovereignty – has a singularity of form and content which removes it to a plane beyond that of a simple case study. By trying to capture the ‘structure of feeling’ of the 1990 confrontation between the Mohawk communities and the non-native authorities in Canada, Roth demonstrates the profound cultural bias (in the anthropological sense) of the media of communication developed by and associated with Euro-American society. Notwithstanding the sympathies of individual media workers, however important, the media as institutions remain part of the colonial apparatus from which indigenous peoples in the Americas are trying to shake free. The mediatization of Canada’s ‘Mohawk crisis’ of 1990 helped place the issue of native self-government on the public agenda – but ironically, as Roth shows, this was accompanied by a commodification effect which made a grotesque caricature of even the most high-minded critique of media commercialization. The result, here, of what she calls the commodification of crisis is nothing less than the commodification of culture.

In the final chapter, French scholars Armand and Michèle Mattelart seek to present an overall picture of the media–crisis relationship. They are ideally suited for this task, having published an important book on the role of media in time of crisis in 1979. Here (in a text first presented as the inaugural lecture of the ‘Media and Crisis’ conference held at Laval University in October 1990; Mattelart and Mattelart, 1990) they update their earlier thesis.

‘A certain idea of crisis is in crisis’, write the Mattelarts at the start of their contribution, referring to what they see as a major distinction between two periods: the late 1960s–early 1970s, and the late 1980s–early 1990s. Their chapter presents aspects of the changing role of media in time of crisis, from 1968 to 1990. Placing media function in a framework of national, international and global crisis management, the Mattelarts cover the changes in the relationship between media and social movements, communications development in north–south relations, and the role of technological innovation in the new social context where capitalism appears to have emerged, at least for the time being, ‘as the best of regimes for lack of a better one, the only one capable not only of managing crisis but of managing itself through crisis’.

This approach provides fascinating and illuminating insight – not only into the period concerned, but into the historic nature of the media–crisis relationship and its impact on democracy. In itself, this study demonstrates what we meant above when we suggested that crisis could be a paradigm for understanding the tensions between social continuity and social change.
Notes

The authors wish to thank Doug Kellner for his helpful and constructive comments on this introduction.

1 Chantal de Rudder (1991) reports that US military strategists began planning 'special operations' to counter the persistence of anti-militarist sentiment in the United States, and 'especially in the media', as early as 1983. This is consistent with the well-publicized view of the Trilateral Commission (Crozier et al., 1975), that media freedom by the mid-1970s constituted a 'crisis of democracy' (see chapters by Kellner and Mattelart and Mattelart in this volume).

2 "CNN owned Baghdad", said John MacFarlane, managing director of news programming for CTV (the Canadian private sector network) . . . "At the reporting end, they're not always slick, it could almost have been your sister or grandmother reporting from that hotel room. But when you look at Wednesday night, it doesn't really matter. What matters is being there and being able to disseminate information . . . What's a Herculean effort for the rest of us, is just business as usual for them . . ." (cited in Harris, 1991, emphasis added).

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation had a crew in Baghdad but, like most of the foreign reporters in town, they could not find a working telephone line. This prompted the CBC's national news editor, Tony Burman, to describe the CNN effort 'as more a telecommunications achievement than a journalistic one' (Harris, 1991).

According to Peter Rehak, executive producer of CTV's flagship current affairs programme W5: 'CNN has forced everybody (in broadcasting) to re-evaluate the way they cover news. You don't have to wait for the Cronkite show or the Brokaw show anymore. You just turn on CNN. We all have to react to that' (Harris, 1991).

3 Media academics were among those to cash in on the commodification of the Gulf media crisis — in France, a spate of instant books was off the press and in the shops by early May (L'Événement du jeudi, 1991). Leading the way was the irrepressible Jean Baudrillard, with a steamy pamphlet entitled: La guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu ('The Gulf War did not take place') (Baudrillard, 1991).

4 The cultural framework that has marked western media reporting on the Middle East in general has been well characterized in the work of Edward Said (1979, 1981), as 'orientalism'. Gulf War coverage abounded with examples of television anchors speaking about the 'anti-Arab' (instead of anti-Iraqi) coalition, asking their studio expert guests to 'Try and take us inside the Arab mind', or to explain to the audience 'In ten seconds, what is an Arab?' (all observed on newscasts of the relatively unjingoistic Canadian Broadcasting Corporation).