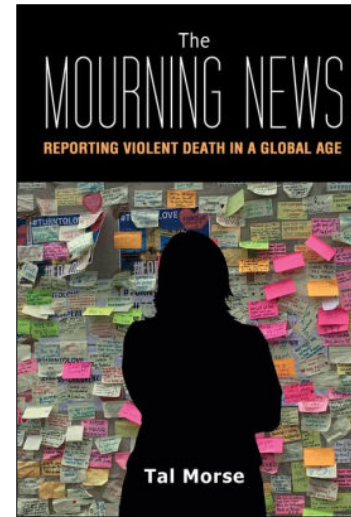


Tal Morse, **The Mourning News: Reporting Violent Death in a Global Age**, New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2018, 267 pp., \$97.95 (hardcover).

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In a time when world events are more visible than ever, Tal Morse's new book grapples with a consequential aspect of international news coverage: confrontation with mass death. Expanding existing scholarship on death and the media, ***The Mourning News: Reporting Violent Death in a Global Age*** advances the literature by examining how these forces shape and organize social life in an increasingly interconnected world. Drawing from anthropology, sociology, and moral philosophy, Morse evokes a ritual approach to communication, studying how TV news outlets perform "death-related media rituals" in the wake of mass death. It is through these performances, Morse argues, that particular kinds of cosmopolitan solidarity are constituted. The bonds and boundaries that emerge from these practices facilitate specific relationships between spectators and distant others. To articulate these relations, Morse focuses on grievability, or the ways in which news media construct death as grievable and therefore included or excluded from a larger imagined community. By exploring the mediatization of death, Morse ultimately invites us to reflect on broader questions surrounding interdependency, community, moral agency, and solidarity in our contemporary political moment.



The first section of *The Mourning News* lays the theoretical foundation for Morse's conception of death-related media rituals, cosmopolitan solidarity, and the notion of grievability. Arguably one of the most useful parts of the work—especially for scholars interested in death and the media—chapters 1 through 4 provide a robust overview of pertinent literature and an outline of what Morse calls "the analytics of grievability." Chapter 1 begins by establishing a key argument of the book, in which the media is situated as a "pivotal social institution whose performance during and in the aftermath of mass violent death events can serve as a ritual that provides moral orientation for global audiences about their interrelations with distant others" (p. 13). To ground this idea, Morse first offers the term "cosmopolitan solidarity" to describe a sense of the moral obligation to others based on a shared humanity that is exposed when the other's vulnerability is made visible (p. 21). Here the media not only display these vulnerabilities but use these moments to cultivate specific ideas about community in a global age. As a core social institution in modern life, the media's performance of certain rituals plays an important role in orienting the public's sense of solidarity as well as morality. Death-related rituals in particular, according to chapter 2, "engage us with remote death, and claim its relevance or irrelevance to the social structure we are part of" (p. 51). Thus, the media's treatment of death becomes critical in facilitating public understandings of order/disorder, us/them, grievable/ungrievable.

Returning to the idea of cosmopolitan community, chapter 3 explores the complex relationship between media and cosmopolitanism, in which hierarchies of person and place as well as diverging visions of the global “we” steer how the media construct solidarity in times of crisis. To examine different performances of death-related media rituals, Morse lays out his choice to compare BBC World News and Al-Jazeera English, which, he asserts, represent hegemonic and counter-hegemonic worldviews respectively. Leading up to his examination of these networks, then, Morse uses chapter 4 to build his analytical framework: “the analytics of grievability.” Drawing from Butler’s (2004, 2009) notion of grievability and Chouliaraki’s (2006) analytics of mediation, Morse puts forth a “systematic methodology for analyzing news about death and identifying the ethical solicitation addressed to spectators about how they should feel and act in the light of distant death” (p. 92). The ways in which the media (de)humanize victims, constitute spatiotemporal commonality, and produce a witnessing text determine whether distant death is rendered grievable and thus part of a greater cosmopolitan community.

The next section of this book analyzes cases of mass death in order to interrogate the different ways transnational news networks constitute grievability in the wake of terrorist attacks, war, and natural disaster. Chapter 5’s focus on the 2011 Norway attacks, for instance, allows Morse to exhibit the mediated rituals around the “disaster marathon.” Revealing our shared vulnerability, this coverage evokes what Morse calls *empathizing grief*, in which the media—both BBC and AJE in this case—invite the Western spectator to identify and empathize with the “familiar” other. In chapter 6, however, Morse uses the 2008–2009 Gaza War to show diverging representations of death during wartime. By obscuring the human costs of war in favor of factual information, the BBC evokes a *judicial grief*, in which death is constructed as remote and on the boundaries of community, thereby calling spectators to pass moral judgement on the scene yet to do little else. AJE, in contrast, shows the horror of war “as is,” producing a *condemnatory grief* that expands the boundaries of solidarity and “[transforms] grief into political consciousness” (p. 157). Using the 2010 Haiti earthquake as a final exemplar, chapter 7 then examines the nuances of what Morse names *moving grief*. Through complex combinations of humanizing and dehumanizing imagery, moving grief appeals to the spectators’ emotions and sense of interconnectedness to demand some kind of direct response. Because of their disregard for borders and state lines, natural disasters often serve as unique instances through which cosmopolitan solidarity manifests. Across these three case studies, then, the media’s performance of certain rituals in their coverage of mass death articulated the relationship between spectators and distant others that ultimately established the boundaries of community and care in moments of crisis.

Though the analysis in this section was undeniably thorough, discussion about the ethical issues undergirding photojournalistic practices seemed largely underplayed. These concerns seem particularly salient not only in times of crisis but also in the depiction of those already treated as “other.” Thinkers like Teju Cole (2019), for instance, have grappled with the colonizing and otherizing power of news photography that frequently packages distant suffering for gaze and consumption. And while Morse is undoubtedly cognizant of these tensions, serious interrogation of the ethics underlying death’s mediation are ultimately relegated to the background. This is especially evident in the chapter on the Gaza War, in which one of the sample reports shows a person pushing the camera away from himself and the scene of trauma. While Morse does discuss the power relations between Western spectators and the non-Western dead here, he does not comment on this person—and the many others—who may not wish to be seen. This begs the question: Are these appeals to cosmopolitan solidarity and acts of witnessing enough to warrant what is, at

best, an intrusion, and, at worst, a violation or exploitation of traumatized persons? This question and others like it are certainly important to research on death and the media but can also change the trajectory of a work. Morse's decision to focus mainly on how the media constructs grievability as a type of ethical solicitation to audiences—rather than of image producers—enables him to illustrate what this actually looks like in a more concrete, analytically-productive way.

Indeed, in the final section of *The Mourning News*, Morse synthesizes the the study's findings into a typology of mediatized grief. No question the greatest theoretical contribution of this work, Morse asserts four propositions for understanding the mediazation of mass death—empathizing grief, moving grief, condemnatory grief, judicial grief—and methodically explains the nuances of each one. While certainly a compelling framework, I was left wondering how this typology might have changed with different data. Whether that involves a larger sample of news reports, additional networks, or more case studies from different times and places, expanded data may have altered some of Morse's categories, while enhancing the generalizability of this framework. At the same time, , such an approach would have also hindered the meticulous, multimodal analysis Morse was able to do with a much smaller pool. Future research, then, could explore avenues like this to develop the typology started here. In fact, in the concluding chapter, Morse makes a similar call, advocating for the application of this framework to other news contexts, such as the digital realm. Morse concludes his work by stressing the "centrality of death in shaping the global news agenda and in establishing hierarchies of lives and deaths" (p. 229). The "analytics of grievability" as a mechanism for understanding—and perhaps changing—such processes makes *The Mourning News* a critical work for not only scholars in related fields but also for media practitioners, who could use these insights to reconfigure how they have us see the world.

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