

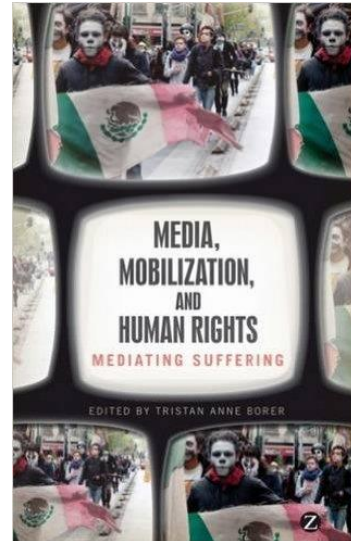
Tristan Anne Borer (Ed.), **Media, Mobilization, and Human Rights: Mediating Suffering**, New York, NY: Zed Books, 2012, 264 pp., \$125.95 (hardcover), \$36.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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“Why do news stories of atrocities sometimes mobilize people, while at other times they are met with indifference?” This question begins the back cover blurb of **Media, Mobilization, and Human Rights: Mediating Suffering** and serves as the primary query framing this collection edited by Tristan Anne Borer. This compilation of eight chapters along with Borer’s introductory chapter is motivated by various political and theoretical debates on the impact of media on audience motivations to act to help those suffering human rights abuses. The volume debunks the common belief that just because we know about suffering we will respond to it with some form of action to help alleviate it. This is an assumption, Borer argues, that “has taken on the quality of a truism whose factual basis is deemed almost too obvious to examine” (p. 3). Yet she argues that it is an assumption well worth questioning since “it is primarily through the media that we, citizens and politicians alike, meet depictions of the suffering of distant strangers” (p. 5).



Useful for scholars and students in political science, cultural studies, international studies, and media and journalism studies, the book is highly interdisciplinary and offers a practical and thought-provoking examination of a range of issues on media coverage of human rights abuses. Only one of the volume’s contributors works in the field of communication and cultural studies; the others bring perspectives from political science, English, human rights, American studies, and sociology. Others who would find the book useful include international aid workers, human rights advocates, and journalists, especially foreign correspondents and editors. The volume’s variety of case studies and examples provide grist for its engaging discussions of key issues centered on human rights mediation.

In the introduction, Borer lays out the global context, raising concerns about the role of media in state-level policy making, especially in the post-Cold War and post-September 11 eras. She notes the importance of media in bringing us news of suffering in faraway places, demonstrating that the factors involved in mediating suffering are complex. She reviews research on the various strategies media use to provoke audience responses, strategies that are detailed in the volume’s additional eight chapters. Borer notes problematic issues with news production and how newsworthiness is determined, arguing that to be covered, stories generally need to involve rights violations and often frame victims as criminals. She also notes that “in reality, the majority of human rights violations go uncovered by the media” (p. 20).

The chapters include discussions of popular culture texts about the war in Vietnam and the humanitarian intervention in Somalia; the ability of graphic novels to promote a human rights culture;

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how decisions about human rights coverage are affected by journalistic, economic, and political aims in both market-oriented and state-oriented newspapers in Mexico; news coverage of social and economic rights in the United States; shock media coverage of human rights abuses and its unintended consequences; the use of celebrities as human rights mobilizers as state-based politics make way for a more networked form of diplomacy involving multiple stakeholders; the role of social media in activist movements; and the ways that sensationalistic coverage creates a complex spectacle that arguably replaces political action with spectatorship.

Overall, the book's primary query about why media audiences are mobilized by mediated representations of human rights atrocities in some cases but not others is answered in a roundabout way through a focus on media content rather than audience research, an approach that is common in media research. The chapters also pay little attention to the specific contexts within which these stories are being read. This is a significant omission if the goal is to understand how coverage affects audience motivations to act to alleviate suffering. While Borer's introduction does touch on audience reception, which she identifies as "the other half of the equation" (p. 23) after media attention and framing of the issue, her focus then turns to the three primary strategies media outlets use to grab audience attention, rather than to audience reception and the motivation to take action among audience members themselves. The two exceptions to the volume's focus on analyzing media content are the chapters by Sarah Kessler, who includes quotes from interviews with leaders of organizations or groups using social media to promote change, and Ella McPherson, who conducts ethnographic research to understand the work of reporters at Mexican newspapers. While these and the other chapters provide valuable insights into the strategies of media producers and how audiences might potentially be affected by these strategies, they are similar in that they do not directly document or analyze audience reception or reaction to media messages. While we might consider leaders of activist and advocacy organizations who are also social media users as audience members given social media's dissolution of the producer/audience distinction, this does not really address the reception of those messages, which is the volume's stated primary query. Borer measures audience motivations by examining state-level decisions about humanitarian intervention, a move that makes its own assumptions by conflating the two.

Another recent volume, *Mediating Human Rights: Media, Culture and Human Rights Law* (2015), addresses an important issue not considered in Borer's collection by focusing on the UK and what author Lieve Gies argues is media's hostility to human rights, in particular the 1998 Human Rights Act and its impact on the development of a "human rights culture." This idea is generalized into the argument that there is a "striking level of opposition to human rights within mainstream Western culture" (Gies, 2015, p. 9). To be fair, this volume was published after Borer's collection, but it nevertheless contrasts a long-standing public perception in the UK that human rights are a foreign concept "often seen as exogenous and lacking in historical pedigree" (Gies, 2015, p. 149), with the idea that civil liberties, "framed as constituting [Britain's] 'true' heritage" (Gies, 2015, p. 33), have garnered a greater level of public support than human rights. Unlike the assumption throughout the chapters in Borer's edited volume that discussion of human rights abuses tends to generate sympathy (if not action), or at least "compassion fatigue," Gies's (2015) book documents a different experience entirely: a hostility to the very concept of human rights. This would have been useful to contemplate as a way to round out the discussion of Borer's primary query.

A related and significant oversight of *Media, Mobilization, and Human Rights* is the lack of contextualization regarding various conceptions of human rights, their origins, and their necessity. These conceptions have a significant impact on media representations and on the ways in which audiences react to coverage of rights abuses. For the most part, contributors to Borer's volume, including the editor in her introduction, do not explicitly define human rights, contextualize them within the international human rights system, or elaborate on the various ways media emphasize some rights over others. The exception to this is Dan Chong's chapter on the ways in which economic and social rights are framed in U.S. media, which focuses on the dominant emphasis on civil and political rights at the expense of economic and social rights. Ella McPherson's chapter on rights coverage in Mexican newspapers does note how some of the journalists she interviewed rely on "the Western idea of human rights" (p. 99). She says this view draws on the UN's concept, but she does not define these conceptualizations. In a footnote, she explains that "rather than imposing my own definition of human rights reporting or of human rights on this research, I was guided by how my informants defined these categories—interesting data in itself" (p. 119). But she does not detail the data. And Borer, in a footnote in her own chapter on shock media, describes the debates between those holding a universalist position and those cultural relativists who argue that there can be no universal standards for evaluating state treatment of citizens. Otherwise, however, human rights are discussed without definition or critique, and the volume lacks significant discussion of how varying conceptions of rights might affect media coverage and the reactions it provokes. In contrast, another recent book, *The Media and Human Rights: The Cosmopolitan Promise* (2015) by Ekaterina Balabanova, as well as Gies's (2015) book both consider debates over varying definitions of human rights and critique "the problematic and monolithic ways of thinking about the topic," which Balabanova (2015, p. 2) argues needs to be deconstructed.

Media, Mobilization, and Human Rights: Mediating Suffering has some comparative strengths, however, one being that the collection does not conflate media with journalism, another common problem in media research that also unfortunately characterizes Balabanova's (2015) volume. Contributors to Borer's volume address a wide range of media, including various types of entertainment media. Nor does Borer's volume limit the discussion to humanitarian intervention or freedom of speech, a limitation of much research identified by Balabanova (2015), who urges "an expansion of this rather narrow focus and inclusion and examination of a wider range of human rights" (p. 3). Borer's edited collection meets this challenge in its wide-ranging set of essays, which also move beyond the focus on media in North America and Europe that is found in much media research. Overall, then, despite some drawbacks, *Media, Mobilization, and Human Rights: Mediating Suffering* offers much of value to the burgeoning discussion of human rights mobilization and media's role in this process.

References

- Balabanova, E. (2015). *The media and human rights: The cosmopolitan promise*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gies, L. (2015). *Mediating human rights: Media, culture, and human rights law*. New York, NY: Routledge.