



**THE BLOG** 02/02/2009 05:12 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# Compassion Fatigue



By Marty Kaplan

It's no contest. Former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich's corruption is way more entertaining than Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe's. A mother having in vitro octuplets on top of six prior in vitro kids is much more attention-grabbing than a massive famine and cholera epidemic half a world away. The \$1.22 million that ousted Merrill Lynch head John Thain spent redecorating his office provokes far more American outrage than the \$7.3 million from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria that was confiscated by Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank.

It makes perfect sense that network news obsesses about Florida tot Caylee Anthony's disappearance and death. Tease us with shocking tidbits about her indicted mother Casey, and we'll patiently consume minute after minute of ads for mattresses and Malibu rehabs until the melodrama resumes. But billboard a story about Zimbabwe, and instantly we're grabbing the clicker in search of something less alien to care about.

If you belong to the dwindling tribe of Americans who read national newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, you may have come across last week's story about Zimbabwean opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai agreeing to join Mugabe's government after months of pressure. (If the *Los Angeles Times* is your paper, you may justifiably fear that the shoehorning of the California section into the A section means that both international and local news — competing for the same news hole — will suffer.)

If you read through all the inches of the latest dispatch from Zimbabwe, you may have learned that Mugabe stole last year's presidential election; that the annual inflation rate in Zimbabwe has reached 516 quintillian percent; and that seven of that country's 12 million people risk starving in the next two months.

I have to confess that I didn't read any of those stories, in print or online. There's only so much time in a day, and the onslaught of information clamoring for our attention inevitably requires some kind of triage. Domestic politics? Check. But Somalia? Sudan? Not so much.

The only reason I googled up those articles about Zimbabwe was a few horrifying seconds of BBC News I happened to catch in the car last week, on the public radio program “The World,” about the United Nations World Food Program having to cut in half the already inadequate monthly rations it provides that country. It takes about 36 pounds of corn a month to keep an adult alive. But now, because of donor shortfalls (the United States and Europe are unwilling to lift sanctions, including famine aid, on Mugabe), the World Food Program is being forced to reduce its rations to 11 pounds of corn per person per month. The only way someone can survive on that is to scavenge enough wild fruit to stave off malnutrition and disease. Seven million people could die by April.

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain asked the Creator. Are Zimbabweans our brothers and sisters? Of course. So are the women raped and mutilated in Darfur, and the child soldiers conscripted in Congo. So are the political prisoners in Burma, Sri Lanka and China. So are the terrorized and the tortured, the wounded and the dead, in the Middle East and southwest Asia. And so are the tsunami victims of Malaysia and Thailand, the earthquake victims of Kashmir, the flood victims of Katrina.

Where do we draw the line? Said President-elect Obama, “Empathy strikes me as the most important quality that we need in America and around the world.” But if the American media relentlessly reported all the world’s miseries, surely compassion fatigue would set in among its consumers.

So the principles the press uses to select what global misfortunes to cover, like the principles that determine what disasters we audiences can absorb, come down to scale and similarity. The worst catastrophes, and the ones whose victims are most like us, generally get the most attention. To be sure, a crusading journalist, an enterprising news outlet or a heroic non-governmental organization can occasionally put a remote or untold story onto our radar screen. But by and large, we tend to hear about horrors too huge to ignore, and to care about people who are, one way or another, like ourselves.

This is not inherently shameful. It is likely a consequence of our hardwiring, our evolutionary instinct to protect our own gene pool. The task of civilization, then, and the responsibility of its wisdom traditions, including religion, is to expand the borders of our empathy beyond our ethnicity, to teach us to see the Other as our brother, and to recognize strangers as neighbors.

It would be nice if our news media — as a sign of our being civilized — shouldered a heftier share of that responsibility. But ever since news became a revenue center for conglomerates, rather than a public service for citizens, the calculus of what to cover has grown crueler. No advertiser will spend a hundred thousand dollars per second, as they did during the Super Bowl, to rent the eyeballs of people paying attention to news from Zimbabwe. But surely there also exists a moral currency that values the distribution of news like that at more than nothing; surely there also exists an attention economy that pegs the worth of consuming news like that not to dollars, but to decency.

UPDATE: Jon Liden, communications director of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, points out in a comment that after considerable pressure, Zimbabwe’s Reserve Bank released the \$7.5 million, and it has since been put to good use saving lives in Zimbabwe.