Reframing Our World: Examining the Crisis of Crises

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Abstract

A perceived crisis demands immediate attention. The fight or flight response, hardwired into human cognition, directs attention and seeks to urgently resolve potential threats. This response has, over time, come to be exploited by news publishers to attract an audience. However, this instrumentalisation of crisis rhetoric is not merely a benign symptom of a competitive media landscape—it is also a cause of significant and problematic outcomes. Specifically, crisis rhetoric hijacks cognition, foreclosing the potential for detached rational appraisal of the relevant data. It engages cognitive tools that are ill-suited to the complexity inherent in many of the most pressing problems facing humanity. I call this the 'crisis of crises': the overuse of crisis rhetoric undermines our ability to effectively engage with actual crises, leading the public to either ignore or misframe many states of affairs. Using the system 1/system 2 model of cognition as a framework, this paper will examine the 'crisis of crises', its origins, outcomes and potential remedies.

Section 1—Introduction

We live in an era of perpetual crisis. The migrant crisis, climate crisis, democratic crisis, healthcare crisis, pandemic crisis and the crisis of higher education confront us daily. We anticipate some vague AI related crisis in the near future, if the imminent crises of automation or filter bubbles do not destroy society first. The various media that structure everyday life—print, social, television—speak in the rhetoric of crisis. Yet this rhetoric, though often tied to real issues, does not always generate the mass panic or sustained engagement which we associate with genuine crises. Instead, research has indicated that recent years have seen a general decline in public attention to serious issues such as the environment (Mccallum and Bury, 2013) and politics (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2016. pp.16-20). What effect then does this rhetoric have? Why is it deployed? Should we interpret this trend as a benign symptom of the media's attention-seeking *modus operandi*, or an accurate and necessary, if somewhat glib, portrayal of serious events?

I will argue that the above illustrated dialectic is not the whole story, and that the pervasive overuse of the rhetoric of crisis is not only a symptom of the media's drive to capture attention, but is, itself, a cause of significant and pernicious outcomes. If we understand the media as playing a significant role in structuring our world, our interactions with it and our sense of its possibilities and limits, then the manner in which the media represents this world is significant (Couldry and Hepp, p.2018). This mediating role means that the pervasive overuse of crisis rhetoric directly affects how humans relate to the many and varied problems they are confronted with. Moreover, the overuse of crisis rhetoric affects our collective problem-solving capabilities—by shaping our perceptions of crisis itself, leading to short term, non-systemic conceptualisations of the data the news represents. I call this the 'crisis of crises': the overuse of crisis rhetoric undermines our ability to effectively engage with actual crises, leading us to either ignore or misframe many serious issues.

This paper aims to contribute to social constructivist literature, which examines "the consequences of the social world being mediated, that is, constructed from, and through, media…" (Couldry and Hepp 2018, p.213). Using this definition as a starting point, this paper examines how one feature of the media landscape, the rhetoric of crisis, affects the social world and, in particular, our collective decision-making processes. Though the conclusions drawn in the paper are widely applicable due to the international penetration of contemporary media technology, the main focus of the present study is the developed world.

I propose that crisis rhetoric triggers a 'fight or flight' response, prioritising intuitive and quick decision-making in the face of potential danger. This response has served valuable evolutionary functions—such as enabling us to escape predators—but in contemporary life such a response is often inappropriate. The core problem with crisis rhetoric is due to this causal chain: initiating a fight or flight response encourages intuitive, quick, and unmethodical decision-making which is unsuited to the sort of 'crises' such rhetoric describes. The migrant, climate, and democratic crises, for example, are all extremely complex issues with stark and immediate world-changing outcomes, ones that require deliberate and systematic reasoning for their resolution. Yet, when consistently framed in terms of 'crises', the wrong sort of cognitive routines are engaged, whereby immediate and simple solutions are presupposed, expected, and sought. Other outcomes discussed in the literature may also be related to crisis rhetoric. For example, compassion fatigue, whereby the proliferation of empathy-triggering news leads to disengagement due to overloading an

individual's capacity to feel compassion, can also be prompted by an excessive use of crisis rhetoric (see Moeller (2002) for an overview). However, the focus of this article is to examine the effect that crisis rhetoric has on how we process the information it intends to convey.

When the complexity of the issue being presented has no simple solution, agents primed by crisis rhetoric become vulnerable to at least two problematic outcomes: either disengaging with the data or becoming susceptible to manipulation. The fight or flight response—when agents under stress respond by fleeing or attacking—can be used to understand the processes that crisis rhetoric triggers. In the context of media consumption, 'flight', when the agent tries to escape the cause of the stress, leads agents to misframe and disengage from the data. Alternatively the 'fight' response evokes an urgent desire to resolve the situation via direct action, leading agents to favour simple and intuitive solutions to often highly complex problems. This can open a window of opportunity for the manipulation of otherwise rational agents: by supplying simplistic solutions, would-be manipulators can capitalise on the overuse of crisis rhetoric to build support for their cause. In the recent wave of far-right populist political upheavals, for example, simplistic solutions that mirror the tone of crisis rhetoric are used to attract and coordinate agents around irrational goals.

The paper will unfold as follows: section one outlines the deep evolutionary roots of our crisis response mechanisms and explores how and why these mechanisms are exploited by the media. Section two shows how this exploitation affects the manner in which agents conceptualise the data presented by the media, drawing on the system 1/system 2 model of cognition (Kahneman, 2011). Section three draws out the implications of this shift in cognition, examining how it leads us to misframe problems and oversimplify complex issues to the detriment of their resolution and to the benefit of those offering solutions that mirror this problematic framing. Section three uses the discourse surrounding climate change and emerging technology as case studies in order to highlight some concrete effects of the overuse of crisis rhetoric. I argue that these fields are in danger of taking the rhetoric of crisis at face value and further perpetuating it by engaging in their own form of crisis framing. The final section alludes to the potential for empirical study of crisis rhetoric and then examines tentative solutions to the crisis of crises, suggesting that there is no clear exit strategy given the contemporary media landscape and the hardwired nature of system 1 responses.

Section 2—Stress, Attention and the News Media

2.1—Stress

To explain how a perceived crisis affects human cognition, it is necessary to first examine the origins and implementation of stress coping mechanisms. An organism experiences stress when its internal stable environment is under threat from an external source (Knight, 2014). In other words, stress is generated when an organism is forced to restore its internal state of stable equilibrium, also known as its homeostasis. Reactions to stress and attempts to re-establish and support homeostasis are observed across the entire spectrum of life, from the cellular level to large mammals. Stress and stressors, as opposed to competition alone as emphasised by Darwin, are increasingly thought to play a pivotal role in the processes of natural selection (Bijlsma and Loeschcke, 2005). The core functional components that underpin mechanisms for dealing with stress are similar across all vertebrate groups, attesting to their primitive origins (Monaghan, 2014). In the case of mammals, stress activates a set of overlapping areas in the limbic forebrain, hypothalamus and brainstem (Ulrich-Lai and Herman, 2009). These modules mediate the reaction to a stressful situation in accordance with its severity and impact.

The so called 'fight or flight' response is the paradigmatic mammalian stress response behaviour generated by these mechanisms. Though initially used as a literal description of behaviour, i.e. the organism must decide to fight or escape, the term has evolved to refer to a bundle of behaviours engaged in by mammals when confronted with a potential or actual disruption to their homeostasis (Bracha, et al., 2004; Roelofs, 2017). Through experimental work examining stress reactions in primates, the fight or flight response is now understood to follow a specific pattern: first freeze, then observe, flee if possible and, if not, then fight (Gray, 1988). This instinctual set of behaviours has its roots in ancient cognitive mechanisms that are engaged when mammals are confronted with real or perceived threats. Crucially, prior to attempting to flee or attack, the agent first observes the stressor to determine the most suitable response. This automatic pattern of behaviour has, as we will see, been put to unexpected uses in the cultural sphere. In particular, the attention directing response that lies at the heart of the fight or flight mechanism is being increasingly exploited to capture audiences.

2.2—Crisis and the News

As the media industry has increasingly come to rely on the capture of attention to secure revenue (Wu, 2017; Hendricks and Vestergaard, 2018, p.xii), it has adapted to exploit the evolved stress coping mechanisms described above. These mechanisms provide a stable and low cost means to capture attention. Due to market saturation, both in terms of publishers and the means of publishing, attention capture has become increasingly difficult (Sridhar and Sriram, 2015; Webster, 2014). As most news media is funded via advertising revenue, and revenue streams are typically tied to audience size, publishers aim to capture the attention of the largest possible number of readers. A crisis, or a situation presented in the form of a crisis, is by definition a stressful situation, representing a potential threat to an agent's homeostasis. Thus, a perceived crisis engages a powerful attention directing mechanism with deep cognitive roots. In other words, by framing various states of affairs as a crisis, a news outlet has a highly reliable means to secure attention.

This use of evolved cognitive mechanisms to secure revenue streams has been termed 'limbic capitalism' and increasingly plays a key part in contemporary business models (Courtwright, 2019). The arrival of the digital era has served to exacerbate this exploitation: as the media landscape has become increasingly diffuse and pervasive, forms of rhetoric that tap into primal response mechanisms have become essential tools in the battle to secure an audience. The deployment of crisis rhetoric in the online sphere generates a 'race to the bottom' scenario. As competing news outlets vie for audience share, formerly reputable sources are forced to utilise the rhetoric of crisis to maintain their readership (Andersson, 2013).

The rhetoric of crisis has been instrumentalised by media outlets in order to reliably capture attention. Yet this explanation alone is not sufficient to explain the scale of the crisis of crises. To account for this, we must recognise that media consumers themselves often *seek out* information framed in terms of crisis. The widespread usage of crisis rhetoric reflects not only supply driven growth but also demand led pressure. The concept of 'deep mediatisation' can be of use here: as media consumers are exposed to crisis rhetoric, they are shaped to conceive of the world in terms of such a rhetoric. In the words of Couldry & Hepp:

> the role of 'media' in the social construction of reality becomes not just partial, or even pervasive, but 'deep': that is, crucial to the elements and processes out of which the social world and its everyday reality is formed and sustained. (2018, p.213)

As the media presents reality in terms of crisis, news consumers begin to understand the world, or

at least the world of the news, through a prism of crisis. Agents embedded within this social world begin to assimilate this as the default mode of presentation, seeking out further examples as crisis rhetoric becomes the model form of social discourse. This means that the rhetoric of crisis has effects beyond merely capturing attention. Its overuse shapes contemporary discourse—it affects how agents represent their world. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the crisis of crises applies primarily to the sphere of media. In the case of actual crises faced by individuals, such as an avalanche or car crash, the crisis response is not deficient, and indeed can be optimal. The target of criticism in this paper is the incorrect initiation of a crisis response in reaction to states of affairs that are not imminent crises in the sense of manifesting an immediate and personal danger. Though, from the perspective of 'deep mediatisation', the effect of constant exposure to crisis rhetoric will likely have effects on how individuals conceptualise more quotidian information.

Utilising crisis rhetoric to engage cognitive routines rooted in the mammalian stress response gives the news media a reliable means to capture attention. The pervasive use of such rhetoric then shapes audiences to seek out further examples of crisis rhetoric. This combination of supply and demand driven growth has led to a situation whereby public discourse is saturated with various supposed crises. Crisis rhetoric is, however, more than merely a benign symptom: it, itself, has undesirable outcomes. In particular, it may cause its audience to inaccurately conceptualise the information presented.

Section 3—Crisis and Cognition

In order to understand how such misconceptualistions occur, we can turn to recent work that explores the mechanisms of human cognition. This work, summarised by Daniel Kahneman, in *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), suggests that human cognition is characterised by two distinct states. Kahneman presents a model of human cognition that seeks to move beyond the conception of humans as solely rational animals. Instead, human cognition takes two distinct forms, termed system 1 and system 2, which are roughly analogous to a distinction between intuitive and deliberate cognition. System 1, intuitive or 'fast' thinking, characterises the bulk of human cognition, guiding quotidian actions and thoughts. It relies upon a mixture of evolved competencies and learned heuristics and enables us to rapidly react in various situations. Feelings are examples of system 1 cognition: they emerge unbidden and often determine our actions.

Associative memory lies at the core of system 1 cognition—it constructs a model of the world based on previous experiences and attempts to extrapolate outcomes based on this model. For example, intuition is the recognition of patterns that emerge from analysing previous experience. As a result, it is poor at dealing with novel information—it cannot process information that does not fit into pre-existing patterns. When the incoming data does not fit an existing system 1 model, system 2 cognition is engaged to rectify this dissonance.

System 2, then, refers to slow and methodical reasoning carried out deliberately when we are confronted with novel problems. It is this kind of thinking that is commonly characterised as rational. The intuitive heuristics that emerge from system 1 cognition act to streamline and simplify interaction with the world, whereas system 2 cognition is costly in terms of cognitive load and, as a result, is relatively slow. Furthermore, system 1 cognition can be said to partially determine the content of system 2. To understand how this can be the case, one can imagine a scientist following a hunch generated by system 1 in order to design an experiment using system 2 deliberation. Conversely, it is notoriously difficult to dismiss emotions emerging from system 1, even when it is clear that they are irrational from a system 2 perspective. As a result of this hierarchy, system 1 can be said to be the default mode of human cognition, with system 2 building on and refining its outputs.

Kahneman developed the dual model view of cognition to explain the various biases that research has shown emerge from intuitive thinking. Instead of seeing irrational choices as the result of poor cognition, he proposed that they are instead due to the design of the machinery of cognition itself. In other words, what appears as a poor decision in the light of objective facts is actually the correct decision for our intuitive cognitive machinery, which is ill designed, in some cases, for the task of navigating the type of complexity presented by contemporary life. This mismatch, between intuitive thinking and the correct response to complexity, is what underpins the problematic relationship between crisis rhetoric and public discourse. The type of crises that humans have evolved to respond intuitively to must be resolved quickly, lest we get eaten by a tiger. Because system 2 is, by its nature, both slow and resource hungry, it is system 1 that, for better or worse, guides action in a crisis. Responses such as fight or flight are paradigmatic examples of intuitive, system 1 driven action.

The use of crisis rhetoric, by generating a sense of immediate crisis thus favours a system 1

driven response. Instead of the information being processed by using system 2, crisis rhetoric forces the system 1 processes to dominate. Effectively, the use of crisis rhetoric hijacks the agent's thought processes, prompting a stress mitigation response and thereby diverting the agent from engaging in a more nuanced, system 2 driven interaction with the facts. An intuitive, visceral reaction is not the best response to many of the states of affairs presented using the rhetoric of crisis. The complexity of real-world problems is effaced as agents seek to escape or attack the apparent cause of the disbalance. In the case of crisis rhetoric, however, the cause is the information itself. Thus, after initially directing their attention towards the information, agents then either disengage or respond with an intuitive reaction, thereby relying on an overly simplistic framing of the state of affairs and potential reactions.

This problematic hijacking of thought processes is further reinforced by a specific cognitive bias known as the availability heuristic. This is a system 1 pattern recognition shortcut that uses past exposure to experiences as a guide to likely future outcomes (Tversky and Kahneman, 1973). When confronted with a new problem, question or situation, the availability heuristic leads humans to rely on easily recalled examples as a guide for action. The more often something has occurred, or the more dramatic and easily recalled the previous examples are, the more likely it is deemed to occur again. In the context of the crisis of crises, the availability heuristic has two effects: first, it causes agents to expect information to be framed in terms of crisis, further driving the general demand for crisis type framing; second, it lessens the power of crisis rhetoric to motivate action. This second effect emerges when crisis coping mechanisms are initiated in situations that are not a real crisis, creating a pattern in which these types of 'crises' do not require serious action. That the availability heuristic leads to this effect has been demonstrated via a study of its operation in relation to risk represented in the media. This work has shown that exposure to risk via the media has a negligible effect on subjects' perception of risk overall (Pachur, Hertwig and Steinmann, 2012). This suggests that crisis rhetoric does not lead to serious engagement, and indeed causes agents to dismiss out of hand the importance of the information conveyed.

The interaction of these cognitive systems explains how we can experience crisis as an arresting of attention without any actual effects on the real world. This can be attributed to the overuse of crisis rhetoric leading to system 1 cognition, which leads its audience to 'take flight' from the information, dismissing or ignoring it out of hand, or to attempting to 'fight' the data with intuitive, simplistic responses. The overuse of crisis rhetoric alters how information is received and acted

upon, leading those exposed to engage suboptimal cognitive routines. The repeated engagement of stress coping mechanisms in incorrect settings has a detrimental effect on the general public's capability to engage with what are pressing, serious and often life changing issues.

Section 4—Crisis Rhetoric and Public Discourse

The overuse of crisis rhetoric causes the cognitive misframing of serious states of affairs. It generates several problematic outcomes: disengagement with the data presented; an effacement of the relative importance and systemic nature of urgent issues; and the perpetuation of false solutions that mirror the rhetoric of crisis. Rather than an exhaustive list, these represent the most visible outcomes emerging from the overuse of crisis framing.

Crisis rhetoric directs an agent's attention and leads them to attempt to solve problems using intuitive system 1 response: fight or flight. However, an intuitive response is often both inappropriate and ineffective when the problems are complex and spatially or temporally diffuse. This mismatch can lead to premature disengagement with the data being presented. Once the system 1 cognitive routine runs its course and the ostensible crisis has been dismissed, the problem seems solved; the 'crisis' is averted. The availability heuristic compounds this effect: repeated exposure creates a pattern in which issues incorrectly framed as crises are resolved in a superficial manner. As a result, disengagement with states of affairs described in the rhetoric of crisis emerges as one problematic outcome of the crisis of crises. This disengagement has serious effects for public discourse, driving both disengagement with the data and consequently with the means of resolving actual crises. In particular, crisis rhetoric is changing how democracy is perceived, and thus altering the means via which structural problems are resolved, or not.

Many urgent issues—for instance climate change, or income inequality—require profound reshaping of society for their resolution. It is difficult to quantify a general decline in engagement with resolving serious issues of this sort, but studies of participation in democratic politics can partly serve as a proxy. This is because democratic decision-making is the primary mechanism by which stakeholders in the wealthy, established democracies, have traditionally resolved serious crises. Therefore, less political engagement indicates declining interest in the large-scale structural issues of the sort that require political action for their resolution. Various studies indicate that democratic participation has been falling across the developed world (Grasso, 2016; Mair, 2013).

Additionally, a rejection of democratic institutions, referred to as a 'democratic disconnect', has been diagnosed, where citizens are increasingly unhappy with democracy in general (Foa and Mounk, 2016). For many democratic political action is thus no longer seen as a legitimate route to tackle societal ills.

Many factors play a role in generating this sense of disconnect, but the overuse of crisis rhetoric plays a key part. By presenting the many urgent issues facing contemporary society as crises, favouring system 1 cognition, and incorrect conception of such issues is encouraged, making them appear as if they require, and are amenable to, immediate resolution. This then generates the sense that, right or wrong, our traditional political institutions struggle to resolve these crises. Indeed, due the reactive and inherently cautious nature of good governance, established democracies can often appear to exacerbate crises in the moment due to apparent inaction. The effectiveness of a government is often judged by how well it appears to respond to a crisis—regardless as to whether is it real or manufactured by the media to capture attention or by malicious actors to gather support for their simplistic and *prima facie* effective solutions. This metric of success both incorrectly incentivises governments to implement short-sighted, 'quick fix' solutions and perpetually sets them up to fail in the eyes of the public. The disengagement encouraged by the overuse of crisis rhetoric compounds this perception by encouraging a superficial understanding of the states of affairs, a system 1 driven conception, whereby complexity is largely dismissed.

The 'deep mediatisation' perspective mentioned above is relevant here: as crisis rhetoric becomes more prevalent, the world is increasingly viewed through a prism of crises needing urgent action and the simplistic solutionism this engenders. As citizens are given the impression of a government struggling to resolve overwhelming crises, they begin to reject the political system that has generated this state of affairs (Foa and Mounk, 2016). However, because the political arena is the primary domain wherein individual citizens can effectively engage with large scale structural problems, this rejection is also necessarily a partial disengagement with these types of problems. Democratic politics is the primary means available to enact real change in the world. Thus, the overuse of crisis rhetoric, by causing the public to disengage with the complex nature of contemporary urgent states of affairs, drives a disengagement with the types of structural issues that political systems are designed to solve and a rejection of those means as legitimate.

A second problematic outcome of the proliferation of crisis rhetoric is the effect of making

hierarchically structured and interwoven sets of causes and outcomes appear as equivalent. By presenting many different and incommensurable events and processes in the same register, the importance of some issues over others is masked. The consistent use of crisis rhetoric obscures the relative importance of each instance. This effect has been termed informational pollution; the glut of information and the overuse of a highly emotive register leads to the devaluation of what are true crises (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). As a result, even if the engagement of system 1 cognitive routines caused by crisis style conceptualisations could be overcome, the loss of a hierarchical ordering of the relative importance of the various states of affairs would still hinder adequate engagement. This commensuralisation also perpetuates non-systemic understandings of the various issues facing humanity. Many of the most urgent issues are intertwined; for example, research has shown that the migrant crisis is driven in part by the climate crisis which has caused widespread drought in the Middle East and North Africa (Abel, et al., 2019). Furthermore, the climate crisis is, itself, partly a product of a crisis of democracy, insofar as our political institutions are disincentivised to tackle the problem due to their structurally enforced short-term outlook (itself, in part, a result of the crisis of crises). Yet, by presenting all urgent states of affairs as individual, equally urgent crises, they appear as one-off unrelated phenomena. And as crisis prompts an immediate response, each individual instance must be dealt with in the moment, precluding effective engagement with the interwoven nature of many of the most pressing issues.

Broad public disengagement, the commensuralisation of states of affairs and the concealment of their systemic nature are the most widespread effects of the crisis of crises. However, the prevalence of crisis rhetoric is also at the root of another undesirable outcome: the rise of right-wing populist political actors. It is important to note that, although it superficially represents an increased political focus on the urgent states of affairs that face humanity, the rise of populist politics is not a welcome form of scrutiny as it feeds upon and exacerbates the type of simplistic framing inherent to crisis rhetoric. Recent research in political science has identified perceived crisis states as central to both enabling the rise of populism and its maintenance of power (Moffitt, 2016; Müller, 2017, pp.42-43). In fact, rather than merely thriving in apparent states of crisis, populists actively seek to manufacture them, explicitly using the rhetoric of crisis (Moffitt, 2016). In Moffitt's words,

> crises are never ‘neutral’ phenomena, but must be mediated and ‘performed’ by certain actors, setting the stage for populist success…populist actors actively participate in this ‘spectacularisation of failure’

> that underlies crisis…[they] radically simplify the terms and terrain of political debate; and advocate strong leadership and quick political action to stave off or solve the impending crisis (p.109).

This performance of crisis as a means to both seize and maintain power has been a central element of the many recent examples of populist political success: Trump's border crisis, with the wall as its simple, intuitive solution; the Brexiteer's crisis of identity, in which an extremely complex state of affairs is reduced to the simple question of sovereignty or servitude; the European migrant crisis, as weaponised by Orbán, Salvini and Le Pen, is reduced to a simple call to keep the 'other' out of Europe, ignoring the complex intersection of climate change, political instability and global power imbalances at its source. These states of affairs are not true crises (and, in the case of the first two, are arguably not even states of affairs), but are framed using crisis rhetoric, capturing attention and engaging system 1 cognition which favours action over deliberation. This rhetoric has the effect of distracting its audience from the reality of the situations described and encouraging immediate action. Effectively, populist political actors mirror back to their audience the already perceived sense of crisis and provide solutions that satisfy system 1 driven cognition. By representing complex states of affairs as simple, existential threats, populist actors satisfy the simplistic decision logic that is prompted by crisis rhetoric. If you can frame a state of affairs as a crisis then a simple, quick and emotive solution like 'build the wall' or 'Brexit means Brexit' can gather support. Thus, paradoxically, populist actors often utilise crisis rhetoric to reanimate an apathetic and disengaged polity, except it is political discourse reborn in the image of system 1 cognition.

4.1—Crisis Rhetoric in Action

The preceding discussion has primarily been theoretical in content; the paper now examines how these effects emerge in the context of actual states of affairs, specifically in relation to the climate crisis and reactions to emerging technology.

Humanity is in the midst of an unprecedented period of anthropogenic climate change. World temperatures are expected, under the best-case scenario, to rise by 1.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century (I.P.C.C., 2018). An increase of this magnitude will cause widespread extinctions, extreme weather events and a fundamental shift in human life-ways. The catastrophic and imminent nature of these changes is routinely communicated to the public, but, for the most part,

this information does not prompt urgent action. Worldwide engagement with climate change has increased incrementally, but, considering the magnitude and scale of the danger, the response is disproportionate. According to a recent report, "public engagement with the issue of climate change is low and too few people are adopting mitigating actions" (Jones, Hine, and Marks, 2017). Yet, this is not a problem caused by lack of information. Media coverage of climate change is widespread: as various temperature records are passed, they are reported; natural disasters make headlines; it is newsworthy when world leaders fail to reach agreement in climate negotiations. All this reportage, however, has not increased public engagement (Leiserowitz, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, Feinberg, and Howe, 2013). Instead, because the tone of this coverage typically conceptualises the climate emergency as an immediate crisis to be resolved, it engages the mechanisms outlined above. Thus, what is undoubtedly an urgent situation is presented in a form that causes its audience to disengage. Because there is nothing that can be done by a lone agent to combat climate change in a meaningful way, no immediate, intuitive, reaction can have any effect. By engaging a crisis response, the media ensures that the information is attended to, but, at the same time, causes the audience to misframe it in a manner that is detrimental to effective deliberation. The continued lack of widespread public and political response to climate change is driven by many disparate elements, but the framing of this state of affairs in the rhetoric of crisis is one core cause. The commensuralisation problem that emerges from the overuse of crisis rhetoric is also especially damaging for an issue like climate change. Climate change is not one more crisis among many, it is the most pressing crisis yet faced by humanity. Sadly, the means and methods of public discourse as they stand are for now inadequate to tackle a problem of its scale.

A further area in which alarmist discourse has had a detrimental effect is on the study of emerging technology. Much recent work examining society and technology in the same frame takes the media's alarmist discourse as its starting point (though the chain of causation is bidirectional). Thus, we have warnings about an imminent singularity when humanity and computers will merge (Kurzweil, 2005), an impending AI apocalypse (Bostrom, 2017), and the end of work for vast swathes of the world population (Bastani, 2019). Regarding the contemporary world, we apparently live under a pernicious regime of 'surveillance capitalism' wherein our desires and intentions are moulded by technology companies for profit (Zuboff, 2019), while at the same time "relentless advances in science technology are set to transform the way we live

together, with consequences for politics that are profound and frightening in equal measure" (Susskind, 2018, p.i). From this cross section we can see that the rhetoric of crisis has infiltrated scholarship dealing with the effects of technology.

These claims are united by their use of crisis rhetoric of the sort that characterises much contemporary media and reportage. Each of these claims may come true, but various other less dramatic outcomes and diagnoses are just as likely. Nevertheless, these scholars centre their work around hypotheses that predict or describe serious negative (or positive) outcomes for humanity, deploying alarmist rhetoric and mirroring and reinforcing the highly charged and imbued-with-crisis methods of the media. The ubiquity of crisis rhetoric in general discourse creates the impression that such extreme outcomes are likely and thus require sustained study. This approach skews the authors' thinking in the direction of sensationalist conclusions. Instead, such alarmist outcomes are often merely reflections of the manufactured and instrumentalised sense of crisis that pervades public discourse. By taking such a world view as a valid starting point, scholars beg the question as to whether such a world is likely. This is not to say that the potentially catastrophic effects of technology do not merit study, but rather that the treatment of such possible effects should be carried out in a less sensationalist manner.

In general, the discourse surrounding emerging technology reflects a broader trend towards presentism in social discourse. This occurs when the present is conceptualised as radically different and significantly more likely to tend towards catastrophic outcomes than the past. This lack of historicity is, itself, driven by the crisis mentality—if we are confronted with endless new and unforeseen crises then there is little value in looking back: they must be solved here and now. Correctly historicising the present can perhaps, then, serve as a corrective for the overuse of crisis rhetoric. By situating our current era upon a trajectory that reveals its sameness as opposed to its apparent newness, we can begin to properly assess those states of affairs that are actual instances of crisis and those that are merely instrumentalised uses of an empty rhetoric. Yet, this type of theoretical approach already requires the ability to see the crisis of crises for what it is and wriggle free of its pernicious grip. In order to do this, we will need to take concrete steps: first, to empirically identify the effects of crisis rhetoric; second, to investigate the extent of its effects and mechanisms; and third, to implement practical measures aimed to limit its effects. It is to this task that we now turn.

Section 5—Confronting the Crisis of Crises

The crisis of crises represents a serious challenge for public discourse. Various platforms, from print journalism to social media, rely on crisis rhetoric to capture attention—attention required to generate revenue. The internet, by removing traditional gatekeepers and intensifying the competition for attention, has pushed the use of crisis rhetoric into overdrive. As a result, the public misconceptualises the nature of the urgent states of affairs they are confronted with: their relative importance is effaced and their systemic nature is concealed. Even more pressing is the exploitation of crisis rhetoric by duplicitous political actors to capitalise on the emotive nature of system 1 cognition in order to mislead the public. Given these effects it seems imperative that steps be taken to identify, operationalise and attempt to combat the proliferation of crisis rhetoric.

The primary aim of this paper has been to engage in the first of these tasks—identification—by drawing attention to the proliferation of crisis rhetoric, exploring its potential mechanism of action and examining its outcomes. However, in order to make this work more concrete, it will be essential to engage in further empirical investigation. This is beyond the scope of this article. What follows is merely a rough idea of what such an investigation would entail. The central claim of this paper is that exposure to information presented using the rhetoric of crisis has effects on how that information is processed. This claim can be tested by taking two groups of subjects and exposing them to the same information describing a fictional event. One group is given the information in a dispassionate and balanced manner; the other group is presented the same information using crisis rhetoric. The two groups can then be asked to fill out a questionnaire about the information. The questions can be coded on a scale of intuitive/rational or system 1/system 2. This basic experiment can be used to investigate what effect crisis rhetoric has on how individuals conceptualise the information presented. This outline serves merely to show that the speculative claims presented in the paper are amenable to empirical investigation. The final sections of this paper deal with the third pressing task: attempting to mitigate the proliferation and effects of crisis rhetoric.

Due to its effective and central role in the media economy, it seems unlikely that the use of crisis rhetoric will diminish organically. In the contemporary, saturated media landscape, no one outlet is incentivised to abandon this problematic but effective framing device. State or platform-

wide regulation would be required to coerce publishers to reduce their reliance on this problematic framing device. Yet any potential state or corporate regulation implemented to curb the use of crisis rhetoric faces serious hurdles. In part, this is because crisis rhetoric is, itself, a vague, 'family resemblance' type concept: specific instances are alike in that they generate a sense of crisis, but the individual features of each instance differ. This makes it extremely difficult to police effectively. Furthermore, top down measures, specifically that give governments the power to define what may or may not be published, violate the central free speech tenets of liberal democracy. Thus, approaches utilising specifically state enforced regulatory measures are difficult to implement, and fundamentally problematic.

Another potential way to limit the use of crisis rhetoric is via consumer pressure on media companies or platforms to limit its use. For example, clickbait is an example of one type of crisis rhetoric that has received pushback from media consumers. The use of clickbait is on the rise across all media types, and it demonstrably increases user engagement and attention capture (Rony, Hassan and Yousuf, 2017; Blom and Hansen, 2015). Yet despite, or perhaps because of, its effectiveness, there is evidence that internet users are aware of clickbait and are unhappy with its use. For example, Facebook has taken steps to reduce its prevalence in response to user complaints (Facebook, 2016). However, clickbait is unlike other uses of crisis rhetoric insofar as it relies on a false sense of crisis that is quickly revealed to be contrived, unlike the various real and urgent states of affairs to which much crisis rhetoric refers. Thus, clickbait is perhaps seen as an illegitimate, or unfulfilling use of the rhetoric of crisis, whereas actual urgent states of affairs are not. Additionally, the demand led element of crisis rhetoric, which similarly underpins the effectiveness of clickbait, means that even if a subset of consumers reject crisis rhetoric, the majority will continue to expect and seek out information so conceptualised. As a result, it is unlikely that crisis rhetoric *in general* will becomes the focus of a similar user-driven pushback campaign.

Despite the grim outlook for state regulation and consumer driven reform, one promising avenue by which to mitigate the effects of the crisis of crises is that of educating media consumers to be aware of crisis rhetoric, its uses and effects. By explicitly naming crisis rhetoric as a cynical and effective tool designed to capture attention, we can empower media consumers to reconceptualise the information communicated, defuse the sense of pervasive crisis and avoid the type of cognition it encourages. For example, in relation to fake news, under pressure from various

governments and advocacy groups, Facebook has begun to educate users about its dangers and uses (Facebook, n.d.). If such an initiative were also utilised to educate news consumers to spot the instrumentalised use of crisis rhetoric, it could potentially help alleviate the demand for, or effectiveness of, such conceptualisations.

However, even if education about crisis rhetoric becomes widespread, potentially being included in a childhood media literacy class, the phenomena would still continue to have effects. This is due to the hard-wired motivating effects of crisis rhetoric coupled with its reference to actual states of affairs. Even if one is forewarned about the use of crisis rhetoric, it is extremely difficult to switch off an automatic system 1 reaction, especially one that is linked to actual events in the world, such as immigration or climate change. Because system 1 cognitive responses are the default form of human cognition, merely educating users about the prevalence and use of crisis rhetoric will not be sufficient to reshape cognitive engagement. Indeed, given the hierarchy inherent in system 1/system 2 processes, whereby system 1 takes priority, once a stress mitigation routine is initiated, system 2 is largely unable to intervene, at least in the moment. Nevertheless, education, specifically early education about the methods used by the media to exploit cognitive biases, is one concrete step that can draw attention to crisis rhetoric. This should aim to provide guidance on why such rhetoric is effective and how its use does not necessarily relate the reality of the states of affairs it describes. Additionally, the empirical work alluded to above can provide concrete data about how such rhetoric influences thought processes and can inform the content of the educational material.

As we have seen, the crisis of crises can perhaps be mitigated by the development of targeted critical thinking skills using education. This can be made possible by establishing a set of criteria with which to identify, analyse and dismantle or argue against crisis rhetoric (the history of rhetoric can provide a useful starting point for this endeavour). One highly specific area where spreading awareness of the effects of crisis rhetoric is both straightforward and potentially highly effective is in the context of academic research. By popularising the concept of the crisis of crises and its effects on research and public discourse, as this paper sets out to do, editors, publishers and journal referees can incorporate standards to mitigate its effects into their general gatekeeping. We can encourage editors and referees to be vigilant and to take necessary action to address those who appear to be utilising this problematic mode of expression.

Until a problem is identified, it is impossible to resolve. Thus, my aim here has been to name crisis rhetoric and examine its effects. It has serious effects on public discourse, causing audiences to engage in, and seek out, simplistic framing of what are highly complex issues and to ignore the systemic nature and relative importance of such issues. As a result, investigating and mitigating the effects that crisis rhetoric has on public discourse is of urgent importance.

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