

# Dismantling the Crisis of Journalism: Outline of an Analytical Approach

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Today, the word “crisis” is prominently used to address changes in journalism, the media, economy, and society. However, due to a dispersed and diluted use of the term, a differentiated analysis of the concept is required, particularly for journalism education. Taking this challenge as a starting point, this article provides a conceptual analysis of crises in order to arrive at a pedagogical perspective of addressing the crises of journalism in a more informed and diverse way. Having discussed the spatio-socio-temporal dimensions of the concept, the functions of crises are then discussed from the point of view of change, continuity, metacriticism, and ethics. These perspectives underscore the need to raise journalists’ and journalism students’ awareness of their own role as defining their position through crisis discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

“Crisis” has become a widespread term used to address the recent changes in communications, media, and journalism. In scholarly literature, the crisis of journalism is widely discussed in terms of the political economy (see Barnett, 2002; McChesney, 2003; Kaye & Quinn, 2010); professionalism and journalistic identity (Peters & Broersma, 2013; Reinardy, 2011); and journalistic quality (Franklin & Carlson, 2011; McDonald, 2007). In the framework of late modern society, these accounts have been accompanied and fueled by ideas of “post-journalism” (Altheide & Snow, 1991) and “post-industrial journalism” (Anderson, Bell, & Shirky, 2012).

Considering the frequency of the term’s use in the context of media, journalism, and mass communication today, the meanings and functions of the term crisis are too infrequently questioned. Crisis is often defined in a narrow or haphazard way, without fixing its meaning or the

motivation behind its use. A “crisis” may even be used to denote a crisis in or beyond the journalistic field itself. The metaphorical flexibility of the term makes its semantic references ambiguous. By referring to a crisis, a communicator often has his or her issue legitimized. A crisis is something that requires attention and consideration. Besides this political dimension, the concept of a crisis has meanings that, according to Koselleck (2006), have etymologically imposed “choices between stark alternatives: right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death” (p. 358). The concept has taken on the meaning of historical assessments and judgments; medical diagnosis; theological entreaties; and political struggles (Koselleck, 2006). Due to these layers of meaning, the concept’s flexibility may explain its prevalence; however, it has also resulted in imprecise, vague, and unclear uses of the word. As Koselleck (2006) declares in his conceptual analysis of the term, “The concept of crisis, which once had the

**Keywords:** crisis, change of journalism, professionalism, metadiscourse, metacriticism

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power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment” (p. 399).

With this proliferated discourse on crisis in the media and its allied fields, the theoretical and practical need to redefine journalism has increased. In this article, I intend to scrutinize the concept of a crisis<sup>1</sup> of journalism to develop a critical approach towards greater understanding of the concept. Drawing on various fields of study to triangulate different ontologies of crisis, I will analyze the different meanings to determine perspectives and relevant dimensions of crisis for an educational treatment of the term. To delimit the discussion, I will focus on a single type of journalism thought to be in crisis: arts and culture journalism (see, e.g., Jaakkola, 2014). Discussions on the multiple meanings of crises are often deemed central to understanding the current state of journalism and its metacriticism. Discussions around the idea of crises may provide students with a tool for further examining of the field. By establishing a critical relationship with the concept of crisis as both a cultural object and a rhetorical device, journalism education can nurture its critical self-awareness.

### AIM AND METHOD

In general, the cultural discourse around the idea of a crisis is deeply rooted in Western thinking (Bennett, 2001). A number of scholars have argued that the concept of crisis has lost its meaning as a final or transitional stage and has become a structural category (see, e.g., Drotner, 1999; Ekelund, 2002). Koselleck (2006) went so far as to define crisis as the “structural signature of modernity” (p. 374), acknowledging the diagnostic and predicative meaning that underlies modern society’s critical awareness. The recurrence of crises, particularly over the last few years in response to various incidents, ranging from 9/11 to global economic recession, has turned an exception into the norm. This has led Agamben (2005) to designate the modern

“state of exception” as the “dominant paradigm of government” (p. 2) of global politics. It has also led Zizek (2010) to assess the idea of a crisis as having been naturalized into a “way of life” (p. 2). In an age of “crisisism” and uncertainties of a “risk society” (Beck, 1992), accompanied by the intellectual rise of postmodern thinking that emphasizes disruptions and discontinuities, the idea of a crisis has become an established mode of discussing social reality.

The term crisis “takes hold of old experiences and transforms them metaphorically in ways that create new expectations” (Koselleck, 2006, p. 374), which makes crisis “a key concept in all the human and social sciences” (p. 399). An analytical and critical perspective on the concept of crisis may be the key to understanding the structural dynamics of journalism and its institutional connections with related systems. One central goal of teaching journalism is to establish and enhance a critical attitude towards sources and topics that are characteristic of qualified journalism. Criticality, which can be understood as distancing oneself from the established ways of seeing things, can be developed by reflective approaches that are based on transformative core concepts. These conceptual tools can be described as potential threshold concepts, which Meyer and Land (2003) define as concepts that “open up new and a previously inaccessible way of thinking about something” (p. 1). Threshold concepts thus “represent a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress” (p. 1).

My intention is not to take a position on the question of whether there is a crisis in journalism and media. Rather, I want to examine the central dimensions of the concept to gain insights into how the concept could be more effectively used as a resource for understanding change and events in the field of media. I am neither primarily interested in crisis as an object of journalism, or as an event in the source-field of journalism. My purpose is to ask how educators

could approach crises in a way that recognizes its multidimensionality. To address crisis in a clearly demarcated area of journalism, I chose to the object of inquiry the field of arts and culture journalism, which is a specialized form of general-public journalism. I selected cultural journalism because it has developed a significant volume of crisis discourse during recent decades (see, e.g., Berger, 1998; Elkins, 2003; Rubinstein, 2006; for an overview over the “crisis discourse,” see Jaakkola, 2014). Without going into detail about the eventual consequences of crisis in that specific field, I consider arts and culture journalism as an epistemological object reflecting the primary issue of interest—the phenomenon of a crisis.

Although crisis can be used to describe a change, one always has to consider what attributes are being attracted: why is the specific case denoted as a crisis, by whom, and for what purposes? Considering different understandings of the diversified field of journalism and mass communication with increasingly blurred boundaries and overlaps, how (or on what basis) is a case in crisis identified and delimited? What are the specific characteristics (*differentiae specifica*) that define the ontological object of a crisis? Based on these questions, I will start from different definitions of what makes a crisis in order to capture the most central dimensions of the concept. Then, I will discuss these dimensions and synthesize the findings into analytical suggestions that could be used in pedagogy in journalism education.

### DEFINING A CRISIS

Although it is relevant in many fields of scholarly inquiry, the concept of a crisis has been primarily explored in mass communication research, including the subfields of the study of journalism and Public Relations or strategic communication. In these research fields, the idea of a crisis appears differently in terms of agents reacting to what is recognized as a crisis. In journalism, crisis is often regarded as a sign of newsworthiness and is an impetus for journalistic action. In

the field of strategic communication, organizations do their best to minimize the risk of a crisis and, if one occurs, any negative consequences. The crisis may be located *in* journalism and mass media, which becomes an interesting object of inquiry for media sociology. All of these different fields of study approach and define the idea of crisis differently; a triangulation of definitions might help us to better understand the different aspects of a crisis.

In crisis communication research, a crisis is typically defined as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2012, p. 2; Coombs, 2010, p. 19). A crisis is viewed as an event that has a fundamental and potentially harmful effect on an organization’s performance. In studies on conflict journalism, crises are typically considered *events* or *occasions* in line with the terms *catastrophe*, *emergency*, or *disaster* (Dombrowsky, 1998; Porfiriev, 1998). Carr (as cited in Dombrowsky, 1998, p. 24) defines a disaster as a consequence of a catastrophe, such as an earthquake. It implies the collapse of cultural protection. A disaster is a situation where the “functional adequacy of cultural protections” fails, or when advanced measures, intended to avoid a harmful events, still resulted in a failure (Dombrowsky, 1998, p. 26).

Analyzing the concept of disaster as an event, Dombrowsky (1998) distinguishes between three frequently occurring types of definitions that he calls “event concepts”: the stage or phase model concept; lack-of-capacity-type concept; and the systemic catalyst concept. The event is the most common way of understanding a disaster, as well as a crisis, as it occurs in terms of time, space, and to varying degrees of severity. The stage model concept is often a variant of the event concept but has an emphasis on a broader time scheme. It looks at activities before and after an event, such as in the pre-emergency phase, the actual emergency phase, and the post-emergency

phase. The lack-of-capacity type refers to a ratio between resources and demands, where a disaster is defined as an agent or event too overwhelming in relation to the available resources. The systemic catalyst type of disaster defines disasters as outcomes of autodynamically colliding interactions of complex systems. Crises are often defined synonymically. Crucial for understanding the definition in question is to ask if conflicts are *outside* the journalistic field or within it. Disasters and crises are typically understood to be events or phases in the political, economic, or cultural fields. These may include sports or arts, or may exist in an organizational environment from the perspective of a single organization attempting to maintain its reputation. This definition of a crisis as an event, which typically comes up when addressing crises in the context of journalism, is closely connected with crises located in journalism, but they are not the focus when addressing the innate crises of the production field of journalism.

When defining crises as something that is in or affecting the journalistic field, it has to be regarded as partially constructed by those involved in the field. Etymologically, according to the Oxford English dictionary, the term crisis is derived from Latin from a Greek root (which comes from the Greek noun *krisis*, “decision, event, turning point”; and the Greek verb *kri-nein*, “to decide”). The term has a medical background and refers to a turning point in a disease, after which the patient’s state either improves or deteriorates (Béland, 2003, p. 28; Koselleck, 2006). The concept thus describes an alleged status quo of journalism as a stage in a sequence of processes, which establishes journalism in a timely context. In the process of transformation, the old system can no longer be maintained. This implies a need for change. If a change was not needed, the event could be described as a failure.

Besides events or occasions, the concept of a crisis can be defined as a social condition, a phenomenon, an action, a result of social processes, or as a social consequence or construction

(Porfiriev, 1998, p. 59). When we talk about the crisis of journalism, specifically within the context of journalism education where agents are involved in socially constructing meanings of journalism, the definitions of a crisis move towards a constructivist direction. As the etymology of the term reveals (i.e., medical origin), the concept is not neutral but presupposes the identification of normative accounts: an evaluation or an assessment of a situation to determine whether a turning point exists, and in which direction the development will proceed. Labeling a critical incident or a specific point in a process as a crisis requires a degree of judgment from the communicator. Models elaborated within the disciplinary framework of crisis management and crisis communication have targeted the identification, description, analysis, and prevention of incidents outside of journalism and communicators addressing journalism. They conceptualize the changes in the organizational environment as crises and focus on organizations’ crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2010). Therefore, to examine crises in journalism we require a metadiscursive framework for addressing changes and incidents that are defined as crises by communicators. This is an aspect that is often ignored by studies that address crises, such as crisis communication and management, as well as studies on journalistic emergency coverage. It is a perspective worth examining in the educational context.

Coombs (2010, p. 19) suggests that how stakeholders view an event has ramifications for whether or not that event becomes a crisis. This implies a distinction that is less often maintained while addressing crises. There is the socially constructed idea of an event as a crisis and crisis in discourse on the one hand, and the actual “real-world” change on the other hand. When these two aspects are closely interconnected, due to the socially constructed nature of reality, it is not always easy to distinguish between them. However, if social reality can be observed as distinct fields of action, causal relations may also be observable. An analytical distinction may be

useful between the discursively constructed discourse-imminent crisis or the representation of a crisis, and a perceivable change in an environment identified in discourse as a “crisis.” This distinction may be useful to locate the nature of the crisis being examined in this article. The crisis under study is the perception of an unpredictable event by the stakeholders, who may feel that their fundamental expectancies are threatened and are thus involved in defining an incident, a process, or another kind of phenomenon as a crisis.

When examining a crisis understood this way, several aspects need to be considered: the identification, description, and interpretation of what a crisis is and how it is socially constructed in a struggle of definitional power. A crisis analysis should consist of the identification of an incident that meets the common criteria of a crisis, as discussed above. This incident needs to be embedded and critically analyzed in its temporal and social contexts. The recognition of the temporal and social structures presupposes a theoretical understanding of how the social field of journalism is constituted and how it relates to other fields of social engagement in society. To identify the relevant stakeholders of a crisis and disclose their motives and interests in the struggle, the social structure of the crisis can be restructured and its potential impacts assessed. Addressing crises in the classroom should include the following factors: identification of the critical incident; the temporal and socio-spatial locus; stakeholders; the fields involved and the agents’ interests; and potential impacts on different fields.

We can suggest that a crisis involves temporal, spatial, social, and critical dimensions that

require consideration, as indicated in Table 1. I will propose aspects that relate to these four dimensions: timeliness, a theoretical locus, a social locus, and ethics.

I will start with the descriptive use: change as either a single event or a process. One crucial question concerns the locus of the change. As crisis is a normative concept that does not exist in a vacuum; it is always used by someone. We have to consider the social locus of the communicator or agents in question. This underlines the importance of examining the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic uses of the term in a social context. A crisis is used in a socio-cultural and political context to support and promote specific ends. The concept of a crisis as a vehicle in a symbolic struggle leads to the function of a crisis in meta-criticism. The public use of the term crisis always requires a certain degree of ethical accountability.

## DIMENSIONS OF A CRISIS

### Crisis and change

At a denotative level, crisis implies a change in the ontological object under scrutiny. Change here refers to an act, process, alteration, or modification through which something becomes different. However, if juxtaposed with the term change, the term crisis adds a connotative layer to the denotative term, making it a normative, perceiver-bound concept. However, the normativity is different, for example, from sensationalized and scandal kinship concepts defining media uproars. A scandal is typically defined as a general surprise, shock, or outrage. It occurs as a result of behaviors or actions that are considered unacceptable or outside the moral code of society

Table 1  
*Dimensions of a Crisis*

Dimension	Focus	Core concept	Pedagogical need
Temporal	Essence: what?	Continuity	Contextualization of changes
Spatial	Location: where?	Fields	Understanding field structure
Social	Power: who?	Hegemony in fields	Identifying agents and their interests
Ethical	Critique: how?	Ethical accountability	Consideration of ethical responsibilities

(Markovits & Silverstein, 1988). Like a scandal, which is typically not self-inflicted but used to refer to incidents caused by a third party, a crisis does not imply moral normativity. Instead, it focuses on deviations from what is considered normal, typical, or familiar. The “Murdoch scandal” or the “Watergate scandal” implies that a scandal is more short-lived and less deep in its structural impact than a crisis. Therefore, crises may also be harder to recognize and demarcate than sensations or scandals. Using sensitivity in the case-specific normativity that a crisis involves, when something is defined as a crisis, one should ask what constitutes the center of that normativity.

As a term denoting change, crisis is often regarded as differing from an incident in that it has a more serious impact. Coombs (2012, p. 3), considering crises in organizational communications, defines the seriousness of a crisis as the potential to produce a harmful effect to a whole organization, whereas an incident is a localized disruption that can be fixed without harming the larger organizational routine. A crisis can imply a constitutional or structural change. In contemporary mediatised society, the severity of the crisis is determined by the level of disruption of routines and the attention that the crisis is able to draw, which may multiply the effects of that crisis. The moment when change is termed crisis marks a crucial point in the emergence of a crisis; crises benefit from public visibility.

When compared with the terms transition, tendency, trend, or migration (i.e., digital migration), the term crisis may describe a state of art that is related to a larger process, but does not directly imply any clear time scope. A crisis can be a recently emerged or a long incubated state. In crisis management, it is common to underscore that a crisis is unpredictable but not unexpected (Coombs, 2012, p. 3). Organizations are expected to be prepared for different crises that may befall them. However, this managerially driven idea of organizational performance as controlling crises needs to be critically considered

when discussing crises in social reality. When compared to other terms denoting change, a crisis always involves an uncontrollable element. The term is used to describe changes that disrupt stable, desirable, or beneficial states. Crises are unfavorable changes that extend beyond the control of those who define them. Raising awareness in journalism students as to the uses of the term crisis is an essential task in journalism education.

Advocates of the crises discourse in cultural journalism are often unable to define what exactly is meant by a crisis. If we look at the pamphlets published under the theme *crisis* during the last decade we cannot find a single common denominator. Crisis alternately refers to popularized and commercialized content (see, e.g., Rubinstein, 2006); the diversification and generalization of artistic discourse (Elkins, 2003); deteriorated working conditions; and professional apathy (see, e.g., Berger, 1998). Simultaneously, recent journalism research has identified an expansion in cultural coverage in newspapers and organizational development that has lifted both the status of culture in the journalistic hierarchy of media organizations, as well as the more inclusive concept of culture underlying journalistic activities (Kristensen, 2010; Kristensen & From, 2012). The use and denotation of the term crisis depends, to a large extent, on who is talking and in which timeframe.

Consequently, the term crisis should not be adopted to directly denote a change but mediated through the actors involved in defining an incident, as in studies of crisis communication and journalism. Changes defined as crises need to be evidence-based to be justifiable as crises in the meaning defined above (i.e., having a profound impact). The analysis of such a crisis assesses the different parameters and attains information that can be used to understand critical changes. Pedagogically, crisis is a fruitful concept from which to learn multi-perspectivism. Students can be shown how information can be interpreted in different ways when situated in different contexts. This implies that even seemingly neutral accounts

of a change are not innocent truths but need to be contrasted with possible normative biases.

### **Locus of crises**

After we mention that there is a crisis, the question of the socio-spatial location of the alleged change arises. *Where* is the crisis? When addressing journalism, the question leads us into the ontology of journalism and its structural elements, as well as to the question of the nature of the crisis. Domrowsky (1998, p. 21) notes that there is no distinction between the term *disaster* and its effects. Disasters are not events that cause effects; rather, it is the effects that are being called disasters. Crisis is, therefore, a construct that helps one to understand a bundle of different events that are interpreted as belonging together. Recent contributions to sociological disaster research (see, e.g., Quarantelli, 1998; Boin, 2005) have suggested that the primacy of external agents as the source of disasters (such as nature) should be rejected. Rather, the origins of a disaster, like that of a crisis, should be seen as upsetting human relations and social vulnerability. By following this kind of thought, we can argue that crises “both reveal elemental processes of the social order and are explained by them” (Hewitt, 1998, p. 77). The rejection of the primacy of external factors does not, however, mean ignorance of them—we cannot, for example, ignore the impact of the economic downturn when examining the media. Rather, it allows us to focus on social conditions that shape a phenomenon or process labeled as a crisis.

We have to ask if the crisis dwells in the journalistic field or in the source-fields and how they are interconnected. Pedagogically, this requires basic knowledge about the structures of the institution of journalism from the learner. The prerequisite for locating crises is to recognize the ontology of the social structure of journalism and its surrounding fields. The social ontology of journalism is complicated because theorization is minimal. Bourdieu’s (1979) conceptualization of social reality as fields of action is a useful

framework but it has been less applied to examine the interrelations of different fields. In an era of mediatization, these fields have become increasingly intertwined. The relevance of the question of the locus of change corresponds with scholarly questions as to where and how the media is located in an era of digital technology and ubiquitous consumption (Deuze, 2012). The era of ubiquitous communication technology has led scholars to deconstruct the very idea of mass media. Couldry (2009) aptly discusses “the myth of the mediated centre” in society, by which he means “the claim that ‘the media’ are our privileged access point to society’s centre or core, the claim that what’s ‘going on’ in the wider world is accessible first through a door marked ‘media’” (p. 440).

Journalism in arts and culture is particularly delicate in this respect, as the social structure is complicated by the hyper-complexity of the mediation involved. Art comes into being through mediating discourse, of which the media is a part. It is sometimes almost impossible to isolate the area of (original or primary) change whether it is in art or in a mediating structure. Are the experts in artistic disciplines writing reviews for general-interest media as freelancer representative of the media? Is their ignorance, as postulated by many crisis-discourse promoters, a crisis of the media or journalism? If certain types of art are not covered by the press, is it a crisis for the art form, its practitioners, for the media, or for their respective audiences?

Nielsen (2014) suggests that instead of subsuming all changes of Western journalism under a single umbrella term of crisis, journalism research should remain sensitive towards the specificities of different countries and cultures. For example, as the crisis discourse of arts criticism (Berger, 1998; Elkins, 2003; Rubinstein, 2006) is predominantly American-based, it cannot directly be adopted to a European context. Based on different models of journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), scholars should be careful not to generalize the crisis to different systems with

their own specific cultural characteristics. Instead, they should treat these changes separately according to national specifications. Additionally, considering the crises of journalism, Nielsen (2014) distinguishes crises as being economic, professional, and symbolic: as journalism is dependent on external finances, economic changes are closely connected to societal economic recessions. Professional changes are related to shifts in values and perceptions of self-identity. The lack of journalistic legitimacy among the audiences is a symptom of a symbolic crisis. These crises are not synchronous in different geographical locations; however, different societies are undergoing transformations in asynchronous order. The economic crisis that has American newspapers cannot, without reservation, be juxtaposed with the developments in Europe.

### **Crisis and time**

What is understood as a crisis in journalistic work is typically a conception of a single occurrence with a beginning and an end. As in journalism, crises are narratively constructed in discourse. Processes are presented in a sequence of connected events, set into a constructed framework of meanings, and then dramatized. Delineating a process in terms of time implies choice. When the alleged crisis is placed in a temporal context, we have to consider to what extent we should see the crisis as either a single occurrence or an ongoing process marked with continuities.

A crisis is elastic in time; it intersects with universal historical conditions, providing both a prognosis and diagnosis. In its meaning as a “turning point,” the idea of a crisis suggests a speculation of forthcoming developments. As a diagnosis, the idea of a crisis is retrospective, summarizing developments to form an assessment. Prognostic and diagnostic dimensions are often connected. Using the concept requires awareness and knowledge of the past, the present, and the future. Communicators often refer to a crisis as having an undefinable length and apply these concepts in times of crisis or eras of crises. Besides, time is

not the subjectively the same for all people who objectively exist in the same time, as described by Ernst Bloch (1991) with the concept of simultaneous “non-contemporaneities.” Bloch (p. 97) writes that people, as members of different classes and agents of different ideologies, carry different elements of time with them, and earlier elements do not always fit into more modern ones, causing contradictions, which may be interpreted as “crises.”

In crisis communication research, crisis events receive the most scholarly attention, overshadowing pre- and post-crisis stages as an object of analysis (Heath, 2010, p. 8). Like journalism, it too has been criticized for its limited timespan and focus on disconnected occurrences. However, journalism educators are expected to deliver a contextualized, historically embedded view of crises. Journalism educators could better focus on processes built on continuities instead of pointing out short-term changes, disruptions, and discontinuities. To an individual who learns a profession, the history of a particular medium or technology is not something that forms a reflective surface for understanding contemporary issues. An individual should first learn background information before attempting to understand occurrences in the contemporary mediascape.

The temporal awareness of crises can be enhanced by carefully examining past events and reconstructing event timelines. Contextualization of the contemporary state is imperative to demarcate the crisis process. The question remains, to what extent should different developments be regarded as parallel, interconnected, or contrary? Given that a crisis is a construct that is established and maintained in social structures, there is a need to understand the range of different meanings and functions of the term.

### **Crisis and metacriticism**

As argued by Coombs (2012, p. 2), when considering crises in organizational environments, crises are perceptual. The perceptions of stakeholders (i.e., persons or groups that are (potentially)



affected by an organization) help to define an event as a crisis. Understanding the applications of the concept presupposes the identification of agents involved in the discursive struggle where the concept is used to promote certain interests. This way, journalism students may have insights on how crises are related to and embedded in social structures.

When something is characterized as a crisis, we partly deal with metadiscourse. Metadiscourse, discourse on the discourse that journalism is created by, is marked through the representation of social reality where the choice of the term “crisis” is a deliberate one and used to describe perceptions of change, occurrence, or phenomena. Drotner (1999) explored media panics concerning new media. She argued that the morally charged reactions present “generational, cultural and existential power struggles through which adults seek to negotiate definitions of character forming (*Bildung*) in order to balance fundamental dilemmas of modernity” (p. 593). Or, as Mulhern (2000, p. 167) provocatively notes about *Kulturkritik*, “‘Culture’ (good) must repeatedly discover ‘civilization’ (bad) and its approaching catastrophe, which is what confirms its own identity and mission.”

The term crisis is often used as an entry point in these ongoing negotiations and is marked by (post-)modern uncertainty. In public debates, as seen in journalism, negativity is a feature that adds to the news value of an issue and arouses the journalistic interest through unpredictability and non-routine (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Also, a topic may gain increased attention if it is defined as a crisis. In contrast to the terms change or scandal, the term crisis is something that needs to be fixed—something needs to be done to improve the defect. The idea of a crisis is not just compatible with journalistic news values. According to Agamben (2005), a crisis is also a powerful instrument of political power. It is defined through its function of legitimating rules and decisions, and it obliges citizens to act. In crises, given that issues concern a large portion of the population, there

underlies a clear need for public discussion and management.

As an attention-creator, the concept of crisis relates to a kinship concept of the term criticism, as reflected in the German intellectual tradition of cultural criticism. This meaning underlies the term “decision” in the sense of reaching a verdict or a judgment (Koselleck, 2006, p. 359). Criticism, the activity of making careful, trained judgments by describing, analyzing, and evaluating cultural objects, can be understood as a tool for considered improvement. Crisis can be applied to serve as an instrument for development and improvement. Accordingly, Dombrowsky (1998, p. 21) relates the concept of disaster to problem-solving. He points to the negative effects of solution-awareness, which is the outcome of internal dynamics of self-preserving organizations. Instead of focusing on vital problems that should be handled at large, when a crisis is identified, reality is divided into smaller parts that organizational capabilities can handle. In this case, solutions define the problem and, through deduction, reality as well.

In other words, crisis is a concept that relates to attempts to represent journalism and its status in public discourse. Journalism education is actively involved in metacriticism, which is also exercised in terms of discourse and characterized by the idea of crises. Being involved in definitional struggles may make it difficult to recognize fields of hegemonic power. The crisis discourse, having become a prevalent discourse with established modes of address and convinced supporters, eludes being recognized as mere discourse. Newcomers in a field, as peripheral members of a community, may be more aware of the central definitional struggles that are occurring. Journalism educators could encourage students to recognize conflictual interests that are attached to definitions of the term “crisis.” This way, the social power structures of the professional field would become visible and eventually accessible.

### **Crisis and ethics**

Having considered crisis in its social contexts, it is evident that defining something as a crisis is more than a discourse. The crisis discourse has consequences that are real. While journalists are often in a powerful position in society (i.e., by being able to speak in public), journalists and journalism students are expected to retain self-awareness in terms of their definitional power. They are presupposed to subscribe to self-reflective professionalism where the use of language is based on informed decisions.

As definers of crises, journalists' need for self-awareness is highly relevant in emergency situations. Defining incidents as crises may arouse panic and lead to unwanted public consequences. To maintain and guarantee public order and safety in a society, journalists may be more inclined not to draw attention to crises unless necessary. This avoids the triggers that would lead to harmful activities. Therefore, the use of the term crisis should be in tandem with perceivable social actions in the social environment. Using the term involves a strong ethical component. It presupposes that the value-attracting attributes of the term are being used to describe the severity of an occurrence and not as a simple attention-seeking measure. This assessment of the severity of an event is, of course, a subjective matter. It should be subjected to critical public examination.

Crisis are not always incident-like. They can be much longer processes or cultural transformations. Botma (2008, 2013) and Wasserman (2004) studied the role of art journalism in post-Apartheid South Africa as part of the democratic transformation of a society. According to them, cultural journalists have been expected to show ethical responsibility in defining the development of situations during times of societal crises. In times of turmoil and insecurity, constructing meaning out of events or occurrences is highly important. By taking crises seriously, journalists can, as meaning-creators, counter-act negative developments and pave the way for a more active

and diverse dialogue between different groups and cultures in a society.

Many would agree that traditional journalism training is widely concerned with the ethical dimensions of journalism. Ethical conduct distinguishes journalism and journalistic professionalism from all other forms of mass communication. However, when it comes to exercising power in the field, journalism educators should also be aware of the ethical foundations of the profession and how it represents itself. What kinds of journalism are students encouraged to produce, in terms of exercising social power in transformative times? Are journalists expected to be active agents of change or merely reflective individuals? Who are they serving in their activities? Journalists should be able to justify their relationship with societal change just as they defend the goals of democracy and their democratic roles. These questions bind journalism educators to the dimensions discussed above.

### **DISCUSSION**

The concept of a crisis is a productive rhetorical instrument because of its multi-discursive uses and multitude of social functions. The dimensions of a crisis, as discussed above, shed light on the relationship between the journalistic field and an alleged crisis in journalism. When discussing the crisis in media and journalism, we should examine the essence of the alleged critical change in terms of its definition, timeliness, and social impacts. An analytical outlook at crises would thus identify changes deemed to be crises (description); the time frame of the change (temporality); the locus of the change in terms of the (journalistic) field (social constructivism) and one's own position; and the ethical ramifications of the use of the term crisis (critical self-awareness).

Every time a crisis allegedly enters the social scene, it has spurred public debate on social and cultural norms that serve to reflect, negotiate, and revise these very norms. Crisis is thus a concept that enables us to grasp the essence of

journalistic professionalism. The social construction of the concept is connected to norms and values that function as cultural protectors of professionalism. An inspection of different crises in (meta)discourse provides students with the possibility for recognizing what norms and values are at stake. A crisis or awareness of the different meanings attached to the concept may be used as threshold concepts to understand the social structures of professional journalism. Crisis awareness presupposes two important competencies that should be mentioned in the educational context. They unite the temporal, spatio-social, and ethical code of conduct: a capacity for metareflection and an awareness of continuities. Metareflection is a position where communicators are able to see his or her rhetorical role from a distance and place it into a socially anchored, localized perspective. The awareness of continuities means that contextual knowledge is cumulative.

We can think of journalism in a society as a meaning-creating activity that aims at constructing autonomy. As defined by Bourdieu (1979), as part of the structuration process of a field, relative autonomy means relative independence from the center of power and from the heteronomous pole of a field. Through the mediating structural logics of a field, the economically-bound pressures of heteronomy are kept at a distance by the autonomous principles of hierarchization. As a metacritical tool for identifying problems and shortages that need attention, the term crisis can function in the discourse as a means of supporting the autonomous principle of hierarchization. As discussed above, a crisis can divert attention to issues that are favorable for those seeking autonomy.

In no way should a crisis be interpreted as a proof of factual changes but as a product created by self-interested agents. Therefore, in acknowledging its socially constructed nature, it is appropriate to understand crisis as an autonomy-creating concept. More widely, journalism can be understood to be a discursively maintained sociological construct, the value of which is

publicly created and maintained by subscribing to discourses, representations, and articulations. Or, more generally expressed, cultures upholding these elements support its relative autonomy from all external, heteronomous constraints. The value and agency of journalism and journalists is precisely formed by creating symbolic distance from art as well as other genres of mass communication such as PR, marketing, and citizen communication. Crisis serves as a concept that can be actively harnessed to promote power issues, enhance autonomy, and detach journalistic agents from heteronomous influences in a symbolic struggle for power. Understanding the functions of a crisis may contribute to a wider understanding of journalism's role and power in society.

## CONCLUSION

Rather than presenting an exhaustive etymological analysis of the concept, which has been already conducted by Koselleck (2006), my intention in this article was to outline a set of pedagogically informed dimensions for examining crisis in the context of journalism. The idea of a crisis should not make the field of journalism seem intimidating or discouraging. One of the fundamental functions of journalism education in society is to rethink and to constructively renew the profession, instead of lapsing into conformism. By critically examining the concept of crises from relevant dimensions, my purpose was to suggest frames of examination that are different from the unfounded use of the term in order to designate events in the source- and object-fields of journalists.

Journalism students should understand crisis as a socially constructed and embedded concept used in discourse about struggles in the profession. By proposing two normative and two descriptive approaches to illuminate the concept in temporal, spatial, social, and ethical dimensions, the article established a framework that could serve as a starting point for discussing crises in the classroom. To summarize, the

following points should be taken into account whenever labeling a change as a crisis:

1. The concept of crisis is proportional and invested with a normativity that is connected to the positioning of the agent when addressing the issue in a power struggle that requires identification.
2. Crisis is connected with criticizing, evaluating, and finding a solution to a problem.
3. Crisis should be connected to processes and continuities, not only as short-term single occurrences and disruptions.
4. Crisis discourse may be independent of the actual changes; actual, measurable changes and metadiscourse should be separated from each other.

Journalism educators should be careful in using the concept before adopting it in their own vocabulary. They should remain sensitive toward its multiple meanings and functional uses to deliver a picture of the trade that is faithful to reality. Journalism schools are actively involved in exploring journalism from the crisis perspective. The idea of a crisis is increasingly becoming an established framework for approaching the essence and history of journalism. In this context, reconsidering the conceptual essence and use of the term becomes more important than ever. Without a scholarly, informed pedagogical apparatus, journalism education will continue to produce low-level empirical findings about disarticulated “false alarms” without accumulating systematic knowledge. In a crisis of the profession, journalistic academics’ and practitioners’ own objects of study are at stake. Therefore, teaching journalism involves recognizing that journalists are involved in the metadiscussions that are defining the state of journalism. Increasing a metacritical awareness of language underlying teaching and studying means becoming increasingly informed about the societal role of journalism now and in the future. In this respect, crisis plays a key role that should be scrutinized on a metalevel in its own right.

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