The mediation of humanitarianism: Towards a research framework

Shani Orgad and Bruna Seu

Abstract

The role of mediated narratives and images of distant suffering in cultivating moral response has provoked lively debate within and outside academia. In particular, since the mid-1990s, in the light of "uncivil wars" and the "crisis of humanitarianism", studies have sought to address the apparent gap between the mediation of humanitarianism – the intense visibility of humanitarian disasters and distant suffering in the globally mediated space – and the lack of commensurate response - action to alleviate that suffering, specifically by western publics. The paper examines existing research in this area, identifying two central strands, namely philosophically-oriented accounts and empirical studies of text, audience and production. The discussion evaluates their contributions, limitations and lacunas. Based on this critical review, we suggest a research framework that simultaneously builds on and departs from existing work and can help to expand and strengthen a programme of research on the mediation of humanitarianism. This framework highlights the importance of: (1) studying mediated humanitarianism as a multi-sited dialectical process; (2) moving away from prescriptive normativity to studying how the mediation of humanitarianism is experienced, affected and negotiated; and (3) "undoing" despair as the motivation and consequent impulse of critique of the mediation of humanitarianism.

Introduction

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith [1976 (1759)] poignantly reflects on the limits of the spectator's moral imagination when encountering the suffering of distant others. "A man of humanity in Europe", Smith [1976 (1759): 136] argues, would be far more disturbed by "the most frivolous disaster which could befall himself" than by a large-scale disaster with devastating consequences for far away strangers; "If he was to lose his little finger to-morrow, he would not sleep to-night;

but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren". More than 250 years later, Smith's [1976 (1759)] critique of the western spectator's "self-love" (137) and indifference to the suffering of distant strangers, continues to reverberate in contemporary debate and critical thinking. But the problem of people's response (or lack of it) to distant suffering has also gained important new dimensions, and been fundamentally complicated since the 18th century.

Modern sensibilities of responding to the suffering of distant others were already developing in the 18th century (Calhoun, 2008). For example, in 1755 the Lisbon earthquake provoked what were then unprecedented compassionate reaction and flow of charitable actions and material aid from across Europe (Orgad, 2012). However, the actual capacity to act at a distance was still limited in the 18th century. It has expanded fundamentally in scale and range since, and the ability to respond has potentially accelerated, sometimes being immediate. This has been enabled by new transportation and communications technologies – specifically the invention of photography and, later, television and the internet, the wealth accumulated by the more developed world, and the consolidation of a range of organizations which have been created to deliver services on a global scale, such as NGOs and UN agencies (Calhoun, 2008). However, as the capability and possibility to respond to distant suffering have become more widespread, the complexity of and the limits to the moral demand to act at a distance have become increasingly exposed. Of particular significance in this context are two developments, namely humanitarianism and mediation.

Humanitarianism is founded on a recognition of the fundamental dignity and value of an essential humanity common to all people (Rieff, 2002: 332). It refers to a commitment to compassion and assistance beyond borders and a belief in transnational action as "related in some way to the transcendent and the growing organization and governance of activities designed to protect and improve humanity" (Barnett, 2011: 10). This commitment has informed the traditional humanitarian relief principles of neutrality and impartiality (Barnett and Weiss, 2008;

2

Rieff, 2002). However, from the mid-1990s, the conviction that humanitarian aid should be bound by its original principles if it is to be morally coherent, appropriate and effective, has been questioned. Many of the wars that have occurred since the 1990s (e.g. Kosovo, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Sudan, Afghanistan) have targeted civilian populations, and practised on them extreme violence including ethnic cleansing and genocide, "according to no rules except those of destruction itself" (Linfield, 2012, drawing on Keane). These tragic "uncivil wars" (Keane, 1996) or "new wars" (Kaldor, 2001), and their consequent major humanitarian operations, have revealed the limitations and shortcomings of the traditional humanitarian stance (Rieff, 2002). In particular, the deep entanglement of relief agencies, militaries and western governments has cast widespread doubt on humanitarian intervention and the traditional paradigm of relief work, predicated on neutrality, impartiality, purity and the universal right to relief based on human need (Barnett and Weiss, 2008; Hoffman and Weiss, 2006; Rieff, 2002). It has exposed the limits and failures entailed in humanitarian work (Linfield, 2010a), and the precariousness of the humanitarian idea (Rieff, 2002: 332). These "uncivil wars" have been seen as signalling a deep "moral meltdown" (Rieff, 2002, cited in Linfield, 2010a: 41) of humanitarianism, and a severe erosion of the capacity to act in solidarity. "The humanitarian world emerged saddened and chastened from the 1990s" (Rieff, 2002: 303) and has been experiencing a deep "identity crisis" since (Barnett and Weiss, 2008).

Barnett (2011: 10) notes a central distinction between two branches of humanitarianism that have dominated thought and practice and which "for much of humanitarianism's history… had parallel lives". The first, the "chemical" branch, refers to an emergency branch that focuses on symptoms. It has reigned supreme and "its definition of humanitarianism was the industry standard" (Barnett, 2011: 10). The second, the "alchemical" branch, adds the ambition of removing the root causes of suffering. Those in the latter branch tend "to avoid the discourse of humanitarianism in favour of the discourses of relief and development" (Barnett, 2011: 10). Since the 1990s "these two branches crossed paths in relief and reconstruction operations and struggled over the meaning of humanitarianism" (Barnett, 2011: 11). Nevertheless, and notwithstanding efforts to dissolve this

3

distinction (Slim, 2010), it is the former branch, embodied in the imaginary of the humanitarian emergency (Calhoun, 2008), e.g. disasters, catastrophes and wars, that has come to be associated with humanitarianism and to dominate its definition. The flow of images of humanitarian disasters that circulate in the news, internet and entertainment media reinforces the "chemical" version of humanitarianism (Calhoun, 2008) and is the focus of this paper.

Mediation, in which increasingly pervasive technological intermediaries have "been interposed to transcend the limitations of time and space" (Cathcart and Gumpert, 1983: 271, cited in Livingstone, 2009: 3), propels the projection of distant suffering on to the global stage. With the global expansion of communication technologies, and an increasingly intense, interconnected, extensive and porous communication environment, humanitarianism (and its crisis) has been rendered visible globally. The media and humanitarian organizations are key intermediaries in the mediation of distant suffering, and the global production and dissemination of images and stories of disasters and atrocities. Humanitarian organizations increasingly depend on, and use the media and their individual means of communication to promote their causes. The media – both "old" (e.g. newspaper and television news) and "new" (e.g. the blogosphere, social media, citizen journalism) – play a primary role in making humanitarian disasters visible and in framing and narrating their significance, and the urgency of their alleviation.

The intersection between mediation and humanitarianism has provoked lively debate, particularly since the mid-1990s, in light of the huge challenges to humanitarianism and the transformations in the humanitarian field. Debate has focused on the role of narratives and images of distant suffering in provoking moral responses and cultivating care, compassion, responsibility for and action aimed at alleviating the suffering of distant strangers. The question that has driven scholarship on this topic is how and to what extent the *mediation* of humanitarianism and, specifically, the *knowledge* produced by humanitarian *messages*, translate (or fail to translate) into a moral *response* and *action.* This work is underpinned by a concern with the *gap* between the representation of suffering, the knowledge it presents and

4

the action it is supposed, but often fails to elicit (Cohen, 2001; Rieff, 2002). Why does the western spectator continue to "snore with the most profound security" to use Smith's provocative simile, despite the wide availability of information about distant suffering, and the live dissemination of news about humanitarian emergencies in the current global, intensely-mediated environment?[1] What factors and/or interventions might help to reduce or bridge the gap between knowing about suffering and acting in relation to it?

This paper does not seek to answer these questions.[2] Rather, it examines how existing research addresses them, and considers the answers provided so far, their strengths and shortcomings, and the lacunas that remain unaddressed. On the basis of this critical review, we suggest ways in which research could/should move forward. The first section of the paper identifies the central strands in the study of mediation of humanitarianism, namely philosophically-oriented accounts and empirical studies of text, audience and production, and evaluates their contributions, limitations and lacunas. The second section, which also concludes the paper, brings together the threads in the critical review in the first section to propose a research framework pivoted on three propositions: (1) studying mediated humanitarianism as a multi-faceted, multi-sited dialectical process; (2) moving away from prescriptive normativity to studying how the mediation of humanitarianism is experienced, affected and negotiated; and (3) "undoing" despair as the motivation for and consequent impulse of critiques of the mediation of humanitarianism.

The objective is to propose a research framework that would advance ways of studying and understanding the role and consequences of mediating humanitarianism. The proposed approach is not advocated as "better" than others; nor is it intended to provide a totalizing, exhaustive or prescriptive model for research. Rather, it is hoped that the proposed framework, which simultaneously draws on and departs from existing research, will provide a way to develop this important research area, making it relevant and useful beyond academic debate – an effort that seems particularly urgent in the context of growing criticism of the isolation of academic social analysis from public life.

This paper does not provide an exhaustive review of the research field. Indeed, one of the challenges (which simultaneously is a strength) of the literature on the relationship between knowledge of humanitarian suffering and the response to that knowledge, is that it spans several disciplinary fields such as experimental psychology, social psychology, moral philosophy, sociology, political science, media and cultural studies and linguistics. The aim is to provide a selective, informed and critical account of how the mediation of humanitarianism has been studied, in order to complement, ground and expand current research. This effort involves the thorny task of demarcation, which, inevitably, excludes some accounts. In particular, while there are important overlaps in and productive links between discussions on the mediation of *humanitarianism* and of *development*, we include only those studies that examine the implications of mediation of distant suffering in relation to response and transnational assistance action in the context of humanitarianism as defined above. This means that much of the rich work on media, mediation and development and the developing world (largely informed by postcolonial critique) is not considered unless it is connected to humanitarianism, e.g. if there is an interest in the role of media representations for cultivating compassion, solidarity and alleviation of suffering beyond borders.

Strands and trajectories – strengths, limitations and gaps

Research on the mediation of humanitarianism can be divided into two types. The first includes accounts that are rooted in *moral philosophy,* which explore dilemmas and questions raised by the process of mediation of distant suffering and make normative proposals about how these challenges should be addressed. The second comprises *empirical studies*, which often are informed by normative frameworks developed within the first type, and which examine the effects and implications of mediated stories and images of human suffering, on the cultivation of solidarity and promotion of action to alleviate suffering.

In what follows we provide a brief review of some of the most central works in these two groups in order to highlight their contributions and identify how they might be developed, and some of their limitations addressed.

Philosophically-oriented accounts

Debate on the relationship between spectators and far away suffering is not new. Nor is the idea of acting beyond borders, and beyond one's own community or nation, with concern for all humanity (Barnett, 2011; Calhoun, 2008; Smith [1976 (1759)]). However, there is a new aspect to the relationship between spectator and distant sufferers that has emerged from the process of mediation of distant suffering globally – specifically by global media and NGOs – and how it informs and shapes spectators' moral responses and sensibilities. Drawing on moral philosophy, several theoretical accounts explore the paradoxes raised by global media and communication technologies, and the difficulties they pose for the relationship between spectator and sufferer. Most of these are normative accounts that make particular propositions regarding how these paradoxes and challenges *ought* to be tackled.

In a short, but important essay, Bauman (2001: 2) frames the "moral problem of our globalising world", introduced by mediation, which has shrunk time and space, as the creation of an "abysmal gap between the suffering we see and our ability to help the sufferers". Bauman (2001: 2) explains that, for most of human history, there was a match between the suffering that people saw and their ability to act effectively; thus, moral responsibility and the capacity to act were congruent. Mediation has introduced a fundamentally new situation:

> While our hands have not grown any longer, we have acquired "artificial eyes" which enable us to see what our own eyes never would. The challenges to our moral conscience exceed many times over the conscience's ability to cope and stand up to challenge. To restore the lost moral balance we would need "artificial hands" stretching as far as our artificial eyes are able to. (Bauman, 2001: 2)

Studies of mediation of/and humanitarianism seek to expose the role of mediation in creating this "abysmal gap" and to explore ways in which it could be reduced and moral balance restored. To adapt Bauman's metaphor, the interest in most analyses would seem to be looking for ways to provide viewers with "artificial hands", i.e. ways in which witnessing the suffering through the (artificial eyes provided by) media could enable, encourage and potentially be translated into moral action to alleviate the suffering of far-away strangers.

Boltanski's (1999) *Distant Suffering* is probably the most influential of these philosophically-oriented accounts. Developing the idea of the spectator in Smith's [1976 (1759)] moral theory, and drawing on (while simultaneously departing from) the philosophical work of Arendt [1990 (1965)] in *On Revolution* and Taylor's (1989) *Sources of the Self*, Boltanski defines the problem introduced by mediation as the fundamental gap between sufferer and spectator. The viewer is "sheltered", and "not in the same situation as the unfortunate; he [sic.] is not by his [sic.] side during his [sic.] agony or torture" (Boltanski, 1999: 153).

In the current mediated environment, Boltanski (1999) asks, what possibilities are available for engaging the spectator, and for the spectator to engage in caring for the far-away unfortunate? In contrast to Arendt, who regards pity as diffuse, top-down sentiment and calls for compassion to be that which acknowledges the possibility of a shared human condition, Boltanski argues for the potential of pity as a political sentiment, which might provoke outrage, indignation and action. Boltanski argues that the ways in which the spectacle of suffering is mediated constitute specific forms of emotional commitment in response to distant suffering. He traces three such forms or "topics" – ways of being concerned and affected on encountering spectacles of far away suffering. These topics are denunciation, sentiment and the aesthetic, this last, Boltanski argues, being a critical reaction to the first two.

Distant Suffering (1999) largely set the terms of the debate on mediation of distant suffering, specifically in relation to humanitarianism. The backdrop is the 1990s'

crisis of humanitarianism, which Boltanski theorizes as a crisis of pity in western societies (with particular reference to France). His book, which was published at the end of a decade that had high hopes, but witnessed deep failures in relation to humanitarianism, places the problem of mediation *at the heart* of the concern with and for humanitarianism. *Distant Suffering* highlights the urgent need to understand the specific role of mediation in the "moral meltdown" (Rieff, 2002, cited in Linfield, 2010a: 41) and possible ways of dealing with this "meltdown". *Distant Suffering* has contributed also to propelling a wider reappraisal of the cultural histories of such sentiments as "pity" and "compassion", and charting their significance in public life (Wilkinson and Kleinman, forthcoming).

Boltanski's seminal account inspired a series of empirical explorations of the roles and practice of the media and NGOs in eliciting and cultivating compassion, and mobilizing spectators to action to alleviate sufferers' misfortunes (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2006; Höijer, 2004; Illouz, 2003a; Nash, 2008; Scott, 2011). His book provides some useful analytical vocabulary, especially in distinguishing the three topics of suffering to account for the "work" and consequences of mediation in cultivating (or failing to cultivate) moral sensibilities and moral action. The importance of this contribution is demonstrated in our discussion of empirical studies in the next section.

Despite its positive contributions that go beyond those described above, the huge influence of *Distant Suffering* (1999) on research on the mediation of humanitarianism has also constrained scholars. Perhaps its most limiting aspect in the context of the present discussion is its framing of the debate (following Kant and Smith) around the *spectator*. The figure of the spectator can be traced back to Kant's *der Weltbetrachter*, through which the philosopher sought to highlight the special role played by the observer of distant events and the importance of his[3] sympathetic response to these events (Sliwinski, 2011). For Kant, "the spectator's emotional reaction to distant events serves as a carrier of 'moral character'" (Sliwinski, 2011: 21). Arendt developed this understanding of the distant spectator's judgement as being based on a position of common human understanding. However, since the 1970s, and influenced by Guy Debord's (1994) *The Society of the Spectacle* in

9

particular, "the spectator had become a figure of much critical derision" (Sliwinski, 2011: 28). It has become the figure of a passive voyeur, separated from the capacity to act, and deprived of active participation in political life (Sliwinski, 2011, drawing on Rancière, 2009). The spectator has become the antithesis of knowing, "presumably held in thrall before an illusion, in a state of ignorance about the process of image production and the reality that it conceals" (Sliwinski, 2011: 28, drawing on Rancière, 2009).

This largely negative image of the (white male) spectator[4] has left a significant imprint on discussions of the mediation of distant suffering and, specifically, how the viewer's position *vis a vis* the mediated messages that s/he encounters is understood. The concept of spectator has proven useful for highlighting the intensely visual, increasingly spectacular and commodified environment within which distant suffering is mediated and encountered, primarily by western audiences. It highlights the "fathomless distance" (Cohen, 2001: 169) between the viewer in his or her zone of safety in the west, and the sufferer in the zone of danger, whose suffering is transmitted as a spectacle, a commodity to be consumed.

At the same time, the concept of spectator has three important shortcomings. First, it leaves out a variety of alternative ways of understanding the *representation of suffering.* Images and narratives of suffering may take on other forms and make other claims than spectacle. For example, Sliwinski's (2011) study of the aesthetics of human rights, and Linfield's (2010b) account of photography and the development of human rights ideals, usefully show that the spectacle is *one* dimension of a field of representation of violence and suffering that is far more diverse and complex than allowed by a view of the representation of suffering as spectacle.

Second, the notion of the spectator reduces the *experience of receiving representations of suffering, to spectatorship.* In spectatorship (of fiction) "the representation of pain…is not supposed to excite the spectator to humanitarian service but to clarify through representation what is possible in life. The drama offers terror without danger, pity without duty" (Peters, 2001: 721).

Thus, we are left lamenting the loss of the moral and political potential of the mediation of suffering in an encounter that is essentially a voyeuristic gaze at the pain of distant others that evokes a response of contemplation and pleasure rather than a demand for the viewer's aid and duty (based on Peters, 2001).

There is value in expanding the ways and terms to account for the experience of engaging with mediated messages of distant suffering. For instance, contra the notion of spectator who, as discussed earlier, is seen as separated from the capacity to act, the concept of witnessing[5] emphasizes the continuities of modern and historical experience of viewing suffering, implying an inherent moral response and demand for action (Ellis, 1992; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009; Peters, 2001). It is removed from the negative connotations of spectatorship, and offers a more dialectical, complex and, possibly, more optimistic framework for exploring the experience and implications of encountering mediated suffering. Thus, it might prove useful to inform the discussion by exploring the tensions between witnessing and spectatorship, and by expanding the conceptual vocabulary even further, beyond spectating and witnessing, to account for the possibilities that may be opened up or closed down by the mediation of distant suffering.[6]

A third (and related) problem with the concept of the spectator, which Sliwinski (2011: 30) traces back to Kant's "mistake", is that it "assume(s) that the community of human understanding generated by spectators' collective judgements would be a uniform landscape". "When world events capture distant spectators' attention, what is starkly evident – and deeply important to reflect upon – is the great *diversity* of affective responses [on which political expressions and actions are based]" (Sliwinski, 2011: 3, italics added). The encounter with images of suffering gives rise to responses whose diversity neither moral philosophy nor textual analyses are capable of capturing. Thus, even if, as Boltanski (1999: 53) argues, there are structural forms of and "stable facilitating paths" to engagement with distant suffering, their typologies should be always in tension with the diversity of ways in which human beings respond to distant suffering. It is important for research to challenge the

11

singularity and universal validity of the spectator's particular judgements – an argument we develop in proposing a research framework.

The spectator's moral response to mediated humanitarian messages in both the philosophically-oriented literature and many of the empirical studies it informs, is treated largely in a normative fashion. The concern is over how the spectator *should* respond, what counts as a *desirable* and *appropriate* moral response. Silverstone's (2007) *Media and Morality* constitutes a central point of reference in this normative literature. Although not specifically focused on distant suffering or humanitarianism, it is concerned essentially with the consequences of mediation in the contemporary globalized "mediapolis", for our relationship, in the west, with the distant other. *Media and Morality* offers three noteworthy insights into the study of mediation of humanitarianism.

First, drawing on Kant and Derrida, Silverstone (2007) develops the moral idea of unconditional hospitality to envisage a more inclusive, generous and moral media space. He challenges the claim that the viewer's relation to the distant other necessarily should depend on identification and a sense of reciprocity, and that hospitality is and should be conditional. Rather, Silverstone emphasizes that the relation to the distant other should be predicated on acceptance and recognition of the other's difference on his or her own terms – recognition rooted in cosmopolitanism and universal ethics. Silverstone (2007), thus, encourages researchers to look beyond the creation of identification with sufferers, as something that media representations can and should achieve; he underscores the possibilities that lie within a "cooler" engagement (what he calls "proper distance") with distant suffering, based on empathy rather than sympathy (see also Sennett, 2012).

Silverstone's account has inspired many studies, particularly in relation to the mediation of distant suffering, that argue for the need to develop media practices and thinking that are underpinned by the cosmopolitan idea of "common humanity" and unconditional hospitality (Chouliaraki, 2012; Lokman, 2011; Ong, 2011; Orgad,

2012). For example, Chouliaraki (2012), Cottle (2009) and Nash (2008) argue in line with Silverstone, that the failure to represent victims of humanitarian disasters as human beings in their difference, and to encourage a message of an unconditional obligation to help distant strangers beyond borders, has deep connections with and is partly responsible for the broader crisis of pity and erosion of solidarity.

Second, *Media and Morality*'s holistic approach to mediation, which stresses the links between how we relate to the other and the infrastructure and conditions of the global mediated environment, provides a base for linking what, to date, have been largely separate fields of enquiry: textual and visual study of representation of distant suffering, and its production - specifically the structural and political economic conditions underpinning the production of mediated messages. We develop this further in the second section in proposing some directions for future empirical research.

Third, Silverstone's holistic view of media, mediation and morality suggests that while distant suffering might be one context where the media's moral work is pronounced, because it spotlights the relationship between the viewer here and the sufferer there, it must be concurrently connected to the broader structures of people's morality. Silverstone insists on a view of morality as inscribed in people's everyday lives, and stresses the need to connect its exploration to the ways in which the media in their multiple platforms, contexts, forms and genres, continuously shape and enact morality. This contribution of Silverstone's account informs the framework proposed in the second part of this paper as a potentially fruitful context for research on mediation and humanitarianism.

At the same time, the explicitly normative stance adopted by Silverstone, which is characteristic of the broader moral philosophy literature, is constraining. Arguably, normativity is inherent to any discussion of humanitarianism and human suffering. However, the limitation of Silverstone's and other accounts that adopt an exclusively normative focus, is that they foreground a concern with how people *ought* to respond to mediated messages, rather than investigating how they *do* respond. They

13

draw, often exclusively, on philosophical norms, to make claims about people's actual and desirable responses to mediated distant suffering. Alternatively, some other accounts, whose theoretical and methodological orientations are sociological and/or psychological (and which are discussed later), examine empirically the way people experience and relate to mediated distant suffering, and draw their arguments on this basis.

Silverstone and others advocate cosmopolitanism as a desirable ethical threshold against which the work of media and mediation should be evaluated, and to which they (particularly news media) should aspire. However, endorsing cosmopolitanism as the primary and often exclusive, desirable normativity is risky and unhelpful. Calhoun (2007), for instance, points to the "tyranny" of the cosmopolitan imaginary and the danger of an inverted tendency to treat nationalism as the binary opposition of cosmopolitanism and to dismiss its appeal and significance for people's sense of belonging and democratic public life. Thus, a response to humanitarian need that is grounded in one's national belonging and articulated within a national framework (e.g. "I help distant others because we are a humanitarian people") might be seen, according to the cosmopolitan normativity, as inappropriate and undesirable. Similarly, evoking national sentiments in appealing for the public's help for distant sufferers (e.g. by NGOs or the media), is likely to be dismissed as parochial and "wrong", by those who embrace cosmopolitanism as a guiding normative idea.

This favouring of cosmopolitanism is particularly problematic in the context of empirical study of the mediation of humanitarianism. The empirical reality of mediated accounts and images of distant suffering, the ways in which it is envisaged by media and NGO producers, and the experiences and processes of the reception of such accounts, demonstrate a much greater diversity of ethical positions, dispositions and responses. Dismissing these diverse responses as "inappropriate" or "undesirable" since they are seen as not fulfilling the "cosmopolitanizing potential" (Chouliaraki, 2011) of the mediation of suffering, risks excluding the rich and complex nature of these responses in the name of what they "ought to be" (rather than what they are). Our point is not to suggest that cosmopolitanism should be

14

rejected or replaced; as a normative position it is vital for inspiring critical discussion of the mediation of suffering. Rather, following critics such as Robertson (2010) and Cottle (2009), we suggest that the existing emphasis on cosmopolitanism should be complemented and qualified by empirical research, which documents and critically analyses the *different* communicative structures and paths that can help sustain the bonds of solidarity. This is the focus of the next section.

Empirical research

Most of the empirical studies on the mediation of humanitarianism focus on the symbolic (textual and visual) construction of violence and suffering by mediated images and narratives. Studies of production and audience reception in this context are scarce and their contribution to informing the debate very limited. There is limited dialogue between studies of these three sites of mediation, namely text, audience and production.

TEXT

Employing Critical Discourse Analysis and visual analysis, content analysis, thematic analysis and framing analysis, studies in this strand investigate a variety of types of representations, mediated forms and genres of distant suffering including news coverage of humanitarian disasters (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2006; Cottle, 2009; Franks, 2013; Gaddy and Tanjong, 1986; Hanusch, 2012; Moeller, 1999, 2006; Pantti et al., 2007; Robertson, 2010; Seaton, 2005; Tierney et al., 2006), NGO appeals and campaigns (Chouliaraki, 2012; Nash, 2008; Vestergaard, 2008) and their interaction with media narratives and products (Nash, 2008; Richey and Ponte, 2011); celebrity (Chouliaraki, 2010; Driessens et al., 2012; Goodman and Barnes, 2011; Littler, 2008; Narine, 2010; Richey and Ponte, 2011;) and films (Chouliaraki, 2012; Narine, 2010).

These analyses reveal the visual and textual patterns, formulas, strategies, modes and conventions employed by media and NGO depictions of distant suffering. Many focus on how sufferers are depicted in scenes of suffering, and how specific ways of presenting and framing suffering position the western viewer in particular asymmetric power relations to, and degrees of distance from, the sufferers. On the

basis of these analyses, authors argue about representations' capacity to shape spectators' understanding and judgements of distant suffering, and the extent to which images and narratives cultivate and/or inhibit humanitarian commitment in the form of compassion, assistance beyond borders, and a sense of solidarity and obligation to act.

For example, Chouliaraki's (2006: 187) cross-national Critical Discourse Analysis of broadcast news reports of suffering proposes a typology of a "hierarchy of distant suffering" in the news. At the top of the hierarchy is "ecstatic news" - embodied by the example of coverage of the 9/11 attacks, in the middle is "emergency news" and at the bottom "adventure news". Chouliaraki argues that the three types of news cultivate in the spectator distinct moral dispositions. Ecstatic news, at the top of the hierarchy, invites "reflexive identification" by the spectator with the sufferers' misfortune, while the bottom of the hierarchy is characterized by representational practices that dehumanize and symbolically annihilate the sufferers, and "fail[s] to engage the spectators in an emotional and reflexive way with the [sufferers'] misfortunes" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 106).

Moeller's (1999) *Compassion Fatigue* is motivated by a similar concern with the inadequacies and failures of news representation of distant suffering to elicit the viewer's compassion. In trying to explain why Americans have been overtaken by a compassion fatigue stupor, Moeller (1999) compares four sets of case studies of mainstream American news coverage of disease, famine, death and war. She argues that the diminishing capacity to mobilize compassion and humanitarian forms of response is a result of the highly formulaic and repetitive, sensationalized and "Americanized"[7] news media coverage of distant mass suffering, which feeds this compassion fatigue.

Chouliaraki's (2006), Moeller's (1999) and others' textual analyses of media representations (e.g. Cottle, 2009; Moeller, 2006; Scott, 2011; Seaton, 2005) helpfully document patterns and trends, identifying certain "regimes of meanings" (in the Foucauldian sense) and mapping representational practices that constitute

proposals (following Boltanski, 1999) to viewers to engage with and commit (or not) to helping alleviate the suffering encountered via the media. These studies highlight the systematic and consistent exclusions and biases in the mediation of distant suffering and how they are implicated in and entwined with cultural, political-economic and organizational interests. A particularly valuable contribution of this research is its critical attention to the biases and patterns in the selection of stories of humanitarian disasters and suffering. In particular, research shows that news coverage is characterized by "structured silences" (Cottle, 2009: 115), rather than random processes of selection and filtering (Cohen, 2001).

A consequence of these biases, Moeller (1999: 313) contends, is that media coverage of suffering "can become a crutch, simplifying a crisis beyond recognition, and certainly beyond understanding". However, studies point also to ways in which representations can be morally positive and "effective", for example, by "humanizing" sufferers and showing them to be active agents rather than passive, dependent and needy victims (Chouliaraki, 2006; Tester, 2001). These observations underscore how particular choices of depicting suffering are inscribed in and, in turn, reproduce the power relations and injustices that they may seek to redress. Such analyses of texts and images may help also to inform media and NGO professionals about the choices they make in communicating their messages and the visual and discursive politics of those choices.

At the same time, there is a fundamental shortcoming in many of these accounts, which Ong (2009: 451) describes as "the perils of making dangerous assumptions. When one deduces the effects of A [text] to B [audiences] from a close reading of A rather than a dialogue with B, one commits what John Thompson (1990) once called a 'fallacy of internalism'". Based on critiques of media coverage of suffering, frequent claims are made about audiences' "compassion fatigue" and lack of engagement or response, or about the ways in which certain types of coverage and depiction of sufferers successfully (or not) elicit compassion, cultivate moral sensibilities and mobilize people to act. However, we can learn only so much from using media representations as the raw material for understanding how the

mediation of humanitarianism impacts on viewers' understanding and knowledge. Investigating how representations shape and inform knowledge and action exclusively on the basis of textual and visual analysis, is limiting, and can be dangerously misleading. It also introduces the risk of reinforcing a mechanistic and over-simplistic view of the relationship between media texts and reception, as being a stimulus-reaction - a view that audience research has shown to be reductive and misleading (see Livingstone, 1990).

The limited ability of textual analyses to account for how messages shape and impact on knowledge and action is illustrated vividly through consideration of the concept of compassion fatigue that has haunted explanations of audiences' responses to mediated messages about human suffering. Compassion fatigue is a psychological theory to explain audiences' apathetic response to mediated images of human suffering, resulting from repeated exposure to information on suffering, delivered by the media in formulaic ways. The public is tired, indifferent and apathetic, so the argument goes; the ways that the media and NGOs communicate suffering, reproduce and enhance this audience "malaise". Researchers of media texts extrapolate from evidence of *coverage* of suffering to its *effect* on audiences: repetitive and formulaic depiction equates with viewer compassion fatigue.

This is methodologically flawed. Furthermore, the aptness of the metaphor and validity of the thesis have been criticized roundly (see Cohen, 2001; Cottle, 2009). The term "compassion fatigue" has its origins in mental health where it is used to denote a form of secondary trauma involving health professionals who, after daily exposure to traumatized patients, developed similar symptoms and experienced "burn out". Thus "compassion fatigue" originally referred to heightened, untenable sensitivity to symptoms of trauma. However, in migrating to the mediation context, its meaning has changed and become synonymous with desensitization, habituation and indifference – the opposite of its meaning in the medical context. In its new meaning, one of the main limitations of the concept is that it collapses an enormously diverse range of responses into a single homogenous, static, passive and negative state of "fatigue".

Nevertheless, even those who tend to be critical of the term compassion fatigue (Chouliaraki, 2006; Cohen, 2001; Cottle, 2009; Tester, 2001),[8] fail to provide convincing explanations for the seeming discrepancy between an implicit or direct call in the media and NGO communications for compassion and action, and viewers' lack of commensurate response. Evidence beyond the text and beyond the notion of compassion fatigue is needed. Audience research would appear vital to complement, expand and substantiate text-based analyses, and to interrogate the social and psychological processes and factors underpinning people's understanding of and feelings related to mediated distant suffering.

AUDIENCE

Empirical work is focusing increasingly on how audiences respond to mediated messages about distant suffering (Cohen and Seu, 2002; Glennie et al., 2012; Höijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2012; Ong, 2011; Park, 2009; Seu, 2011a, 2011b, 2010, 2003; Scott, 2011). However, the number and scale of these studies are still small and their impact on discussion of the mediation of humanitarianism is limited. As Livingstone (2010: 569) notes in a more general context, "curiously, it remains easy to presume that one knows what other people think or feel". It is striking that, despite the rich and prominent tradition of audience research within media and communication studies, debate hitherto on the mediation of humanitarianism (and distant suffering more generally) is informed largely by text-based suppositions about the effects of messages and the process of mediation, rather than empirical evidence showing how they are received and negotiated.

Kinnick et al. (1996) conducted a pioneering survey of "compassion fatigue" among American news viewers. They show that people selectively avoid particular issues in the news, and argue that the nature of media coverage of "society's problems" may contribute to viewers' emotional fatigue. However, this study involved a telephone survey, which rather limits the ability to explain people's reception of news about distant suffering. Some more recent studies (discussed below) show that compassion fatigue is a rather narrow and reductive explanation of audiences' responses. These

studies reveal a far more complex, dynamic, context-specific and indeterminate picture.

One of the most influential studies of audiences' reactions to images of suffering on television news was conducted by Höijer (2004). Boltanski's topics of suffering inform Höijer's analysis of audiences' responses; however, rather than simply corroborating the validity of these topics, her study throws light on how they are translated in practice, in the specificity of viewers' engagement with the mediation of suffering. For instance, it shows how the "dominant victim code" of "deserving victims" - women, children and the elderly, all of whom are shown to be innocent, helpless, weak and passive - is not only accepted by audiences, but that this code is a *condition* for respondents' engagement with and feelings of compassion towards distant sufferers. This would seem to contradict the received wisdom in contemporary debates on the representation of suffering (influenced by Boltanski) that depicting sufferers as having agency (rather than passive and helpless) is key to their humanization and, therefore, to audiences' sense of agency and ability to care for distant sufferers (see e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006; Tester, 2001). More broadly, Höijer's (2004) work casts critical doubt on the largely pessimistic, sometimes cynical tone of many text-based studies that view audiences as narcissistic and/or indifferent spectators suffering from compassion fatigue, and of the media as "show business" inducing in spectators an "anaesthetic effect" (Tester, 1994: 107, cited in Höijer, 2004: 528).

Seu's (forthcoming, 2011a, 2011b, 2010, 2003) work focuses on audiences' responses to messages about human rights abuses, in the media and in NGO appeals - an important yet understudied genre in the study of the mediation of humanitarianism [see also Dalton et al.'s (2008) study of reception of humanitarian appeals in New Zealand]. Most current research focuses on televised news representation, reinforcing the (taken-for-granted, but empirically ungrounded) assumption that television news plays the most important role in the mediation of suffering. Seu's study is a useful reminder that we should expand the focus on television to include investigation of the ways in which *different* mediated forms,

media and genres feed audiences' moral imaginations and inform their moral judgements.

Seu's work is also helpful in moving the debate beyond compassion fatigue to concern (following Cohen, 2001) over the vocabularies of denial used by audiences to disengage from distant suffering and morally justify this denial. Seu (2003, 2010, forthcoming) and Cohen and Seu (2002) highlight how individuals' moral narratives (imbricated in their biographies and range of psychosocial factors) shape their responses to humanitarian messages (and humanitarianism more generally) in diverse, often contradictory ways. In so doing, this work demonstrates how forms of *mediated social suffering* (e.g. media and NGO representations of human rights abuses) evoke *individual* lives (e.g. biographical experiences), and how individuals' personal accounts are inextricably embedded in and shaped by broader interpretive repertoires and by social discourses and contexts, such as consumerism, for example.[9]

Furthermore, Seu's audience studies calls into question Boltanski's (1999: 53) "stable facilitating paths" to being affected and concerned by distant suffering. It shows that there is nothing stable and little that is predictable in the relation between representation and audience responses. Although Seu's research findings show that viewers tend to assume the position of spectators insofar as they often choose to remain emotionally removed from the strangers in the mediated scene of suffering, they illustrate also that this is not an automatic, predictable or untroubled choice. For example, people might rationalize that what happens in "countries like that" (Seu, 2012) is not their moral responsibility, but nevertheless respond generously to humanitarian appeals. The notion of spectator and its theorization captures only a fragment of the many conflictual, ambivalent and contradictory positions and experiences evoked in audiences by the mediation of humanitarianism.

Unlike Seu, whose entry point to studying the mediation of humanitarianism is the psychological dynamics and ideological operations of denial, Ong (2012) and Kyriakidou (2012) position their interest in the reception of mediated messages of

distant suffering within the morality of mediation as developed by Silverstone's theoretical framework. Drawing on the anthropological concept of "lay moralities", Ong (2011) examines the moral judgements that underpin expressions of compassion and disgust, in the context of Filipino audiences' viewing of televised suffering. Ong is particularly interested in how viewers' responses to suffering are shaped by their direct experience with the media, and their evaluation of how the media mediate suffering. A similar study of Greek audiences' responses to televised suffering (Kyriakidou, 2012) focuses on media witnessing and media remembering as central *practices* in audiences' relations to and experiences of mediated distant suffering. The strengths of both Ong's (2011) and Kyriakidou's (2012) studies lie in their examination of arguments made in the philosophical literature and textual analyses of the effects of mediation of distant suffering within *concrete empirical situations of audiences' practice*, in specific socio-historical and cultural contexts.

Ong's (2009, 2011) research, although limited in scale, extends the agenda. Rather than prescribing a uniform, moral framework of cosmopolitanism for all audiences, Ong provides a grounded analysis of lay moralities. The focus of his analysis is not on "people's 'violations' of philosophical norms", but on the actual "consequences of media production consumption in a particular culture" (Ong, 2011: 20).

Analysis grounded in audience research can be a productive and, we would argue, vital contribution to the overly normative (cosmopolitan) framework in the literature. Specifically, situating people's diverse moralities and moral responses in particular accounts and practices, places and times, challenges implicit ideas of "good" and "bad" representations and of desirable and undesirable ethical responses.[10] It importantly reminds and warns us that while it may sometimes be useful to question the moral virtue of feelings that are generated among people, we should be extremely cautious of assuming that they are liable to be gratuitous, inauthentic, insufficient or inappropriate. Instead, we should focus on exploring the varied ways in which those feelings serve to express and shape people's "lay moralities" and moral behaviours (based on Wilkinson and Kleinman, forthcoming).

Accounting for the diversity of people's responses to the mediation of distant suffering invites a revisiting of the hegemonic status of cosmopolitanism as the ethical "gold standard" for how distant suffering *should* be mediated and how people *ought* to respond. Instead of evaluating the successes or failures of texts according to their "cosmpolitanizing potential" (Chouliaraki, 2011) and the extent to which this potential is or is not realized in audiences' responses (Höijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2012), research would benefit from considering cosmopolitanism as part of the *empirical* rather than the normative object that it analyses (Robertson, 2010; Orgad, 2012). This approach is akin to what Illouz (2003b), drawing on Held (1980), calls "immanent critique", or the analysis of media representations for what they offer, for their underpinning presuppositions and claims, and for how readers think, feel and act in relation to them (Orgad, 2012).

As already mentioned, audience research on the mediation of humanitarianism is relatively scarce, small-scale and focused mostly on television news viewing, the locus of which is the privileged westerner (Ong, 2011). More empirical evidence is needed to support claims about the effects and consequences of images and accounts of humanitarianism, and to develop understanding of people's relations and responses to mediated images, situated in their everyday lives and lay moralities, and in particular social, cultural and political contexts, beyond and outside the west. Livingstone (2010: 568, based on Hartley, 2006) observes that "when claims are taken for granted about what audiences do or think or understand—claims which are often homogenizing, dismissive, or patronizing—the very act of going out to speak with them can be critical". Indeed, speaking with audiences is one of the most urgent and critical tasks in the study of mediation and humanitarianism, required to inform debate, media and NGO practice and policy, by developing "a more complex and illuminating picture of interpretative activity in context" (ibid.).

PRODUCTION
Of the three "moments" of mediation, namely production, text and reception, it would seem that the production of humanitarian messages by media and NGO

sectors has received the least attention. The academic literature on the process of producing messages about distant suffering and the assumptions, structures, influences, intentions and expectations that their producers bring to the task, is slight. This neglect mirrors a broader bias against media production/industry studies in the field of media and communications research. The reasons for it are presumably similar to those that account for the wider bias, namely, the difficulty of gaining access to the sites of media production, and the theoretical and methodological traditions that have shaped the field of media and communications research which leans towards studying texts and audiences (Havens, Lotz & Tinic, 2009).

An important distinction is between the two key industries involved in mediating distant suffering, namely media and NGOs. While NGOs and the media interact with, and mutually reinforce each other in mediating and propelling the imaginary of humanitarianism (Calhoun, 2008; Cottle and Nolan 2007), their characteristics as industries, their roles and their remits, and the processes of production in which they are involved, are distinct. Yet in analyses of humanitarian narratives and images, the two are often conflated and treated, often implicitly, interchangeably. While most textual and/or visual studies focus on *either* media texts (commonly news) *or* NGO communications (campaigns or appeals), the claims made tend to be stretched to apply to both NGOs and news media and to the consequences of the process of mediation of distant suffering more generally.

For example, Tester (2001) discusses telethons and their direct calls for action as an exemplar of a "morally effective" media effort, while Chouliaraki (2006) discusses direct news appeals that are accompanied by phone numbers and bank transfer details to enable donation, as examples of "good practice" of news reporting to promote public action. These may be useful as examples of media programmes that generate compassion and action (although empirical audience research is needed to show that this is the case). However, in highlighting direct calls for action in the media (e.g. in telethons in collaboration with NGOs) as effective, it is the *uncommon* practice of news that is being acknowledged. The primary goal of the news is to

report situations and to inform,[11] while the goal of NGOs is to elicit direct response and mobilize action. One of the news media's central roles in public life is gatekeeping, a process that determines what information about suffering is to be selected, and what the content and nature of the message should be (Joye, 2010; Moeller, 2006). In contrast, NGOs often critique the selection processes and biased criteria of news reporting of humanitarian issues, and seek to expose "orphaned disasters" (a term coined by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan) that the media neglect to report, demanding that they be attended to and acted upon.[12]

In failing to distinguish between the media role of informer and educator and NGOs' roles as campaigners appealing for public action, the literature collapses empirically separate and different categories. The implication is that the media (specifically news media) and NGOs are evaluated and critiqued for their capacity to effectively deliver the humanitarian promise of representations of suffering, to elicit compassion, solidarity and *action.* For example, in his analysis of news coverage of the 2008/9 war and humanitarian disaster in Gaza, Campbell (2009: 7) suggests that the international media can and should align itself with the global human rights movement, "in a shared logic about the relationship between vision, ethics and politics". Seductive as this cosmopolitan vision of the media might be, it unhelpfully confuses the roles of news media and humanitarian/human rights organizations. If "the notion of a 'responsibility to act' lies at the heart of the humanitarian impulse" (Foley, 2008, cited in Linfield, 2010: 43), then it would be useful to ask how do the messages designed by NGOs, rather than the media, convey and enact this notion? It might be more productive and would be grounded in the realities of news professionals' practice, to focus critical examination of the news media on the question of their capacity to inform and educate viewers about humanitarianism. In what follows, we adopt this distinction to examine work on production of mediated humanitarianism by these two industries.

NGOs: Benthall's (1993) study is one of very few accounts of the dilemmas faced by NGOs when communicating distant suffering. It examines the ways that UK-based humanitarian agencies have to adapt to a "media regime" (1993: 3), and the

organizational, moral and political problems they face. Benthall highlights the increasing competition between as well as within NGOs, especially between short-term fundraising and long-term education goals, and how it shapes professional practice and the messages designed. Lidchi's (1993) ethnographic study of Oxfam is another early study of the production side of NGO work. It helpfully ties concern over the politics of representation and depiction of poverty and suffering, to the financial, political and logistical structures, struggles and pressures experienced by NGOs as *organizations*. Both Benthall's (1993) and Lidchi's (1993) studies illustrate the value of investigation that explores the realities within which texts and images are produced in order to develop an effective critique of and constructive intervention in the practices and frameworks of NGOs.

Benthall's (1993) and Lidchi's (1993) studies were published before the huge transformations and humanitarianism's "identity crisis" in the mid-1990s, which have shaped the work of NGOs (including communications and fundraising) in fundamental ways. The financial reality in which NGOs operate, and growing criticism and scepticism in the west and the developing world about foreign aid and humanitarian intervention, have produced radical changes to NGOs' communication practices. Some textual analyses reflect on the effect of these transformations on humanitarian communication, especially its "corporatization" (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2012; Richey and Ponte, 2011; Vastergaard, 2009) and "Bono-ization" (Cooper, 2008). However, the ability of these studies to account for the professional, institutional and personal tensions that underlie NGO work is limited. We need a better understanding of the conditions under which NGO communication is produced, the worldviews and moral frameworks that guide NGO communicators', advocates' and fundraisers' thinking and practice, the pressures, constraints and possibilities they face and the effect of all these on the messages produced, and NGOs' changing role as the moral arbiters of humanitarianism.

NGOs and humanitarian organizations are engaged in urgent, thoughtful, self-critique of their goals, stances and practices (Barnett and Weiss, 2008; Linfield, 2010; Orgad and Vella, 2012). Many humanitarian and development NGOs are re-thinking

communication and fundraising from the bottom up. For example, Oxfam UK, in collaboration with Bond (Darnton with Kirk, 2011), have produced a series of publications drawing on Lakoff's idea of frames and calling for the NGO sector to reform its global poverty communications (and thus fundraising) paradigms and practices. They suggest that some of the public's disengagement with humanitarian causes and issues of global poverty among UK public is due to the approaches and cultural frames used by NGOs and the emphases in their messages on urgency, short-term solutions, small donations, donor power and grateful recipients.

In light of such re-evaluation, research into the processes of production could provide useful insights and promote better understanding of the problems related to the mediation of humanitarianism. It could inform practice and policy from the position of a critical observer who understands and is sensitive to the dilemmas, challenges and possibilities faced by practitioners. It should take the form of a critical dialogue on the conditions and structures of production rather than critique of the final product (the mediated messages NGOs produce), based on philosophically-oriented normative criteria.

Dogra's (2012) study, which combines analysis of NGO campaigns, their production and their reception (although this last is a very small part of the study), demonstrates the potential of this dialogic approach. By integrating detailed content and visual analysis of the images NGOs produce with information from interviews with NGO communications professionals at different levels, Dogra seeks to establish a link between the NGO representations and the institutional dimensions that shape them. She shows, for example, that an important concern for NGO producers is internal coherence in their organizations' messages - an aspect which is ignored in much text-based analyses of humanitarian messages. Based on her interviews with NGO practitioners involved in the planning, design and execution of representations of global poverty, Dogra discusses how increasing managerialism and demand from legal frameworks are shaping NGO messages in fundamental ways. Her appreciation of the practical, legal, organizational as well as the cultural, financial and political contexts of production, allows Dogra to make some practical recommendations for

NGO policy and practice, and elaborate a theoretical critique of the politics of representing distant suffering. We need more empirically-based studies of this kind in order to develop an informed critique of humanitarianism and its mediation.

Another understudied, but important aspect of NGO production of representations of suffering is interaction with the media. Benthall (1993) and Cottle and Nolan (2007), are the only studies we found on this topic.[13] Cottle and Nolan (2007) examine how communication strategies designed to raise awareness, funds and support, have been assimilated in the current, pervasive and competitive mediated environment. They draw on accounts of communications managers working inside the world's major humnitarian agencies (Red Cross, Oxfam, Save the Children, World Vision, CARE, Medicins sans Frontieres). In the increasingly crowded and competitive humanitarian agency field, NGOs are seeking to "brand" themselves in the media; they use celebrities and produce regionalized and personalized "media packages" to court the media; and they devote time and resources to defending themselves from media scandals. Cottle and Nolan (2007) contend that humanitarian agencies increasingly have become embroiled in the practices and predilections of global media and that consequently their communication aims are being compromised, their organizational integrity impugned, and the ethics of global humanitarianism, which historically these agencies have promoted, imperilled. Cottle and Nolan's study is small scale and only scratches the surface of the fundamental relationship between the two industries involved in the mediation of humanitarianism. As Cottle (2009: 147) acknowledges, "We have yet to explore in detail, how organized sources within the field of humanitarian action seek to further their aims and goals in interaction with the news media, the sorts of communication strategies that they deploy and the difficulties and dilemmas that they encounter and must seek to overcome".

Media: Unlike research on NGO production, the literature on media and, particularly, journalism production, is vast. The rich research on war, conflict and disaster reporting, documents the practices and priorities of global and national reporting, and critically explores the range of challenges faced by journalists in the process of

producing news (see Cottle, 2009). Various studies discuss the changing conditions of news production of modern warfare. For example, Tumber and Webster (2006) highlight the growing centrality of communication as war technology and the role of news media in the "information war". There are also some influential, non-academic accounts, such as Polman's (2010) *War Games*, in which the author indicts journalists for not calling humanitarian organizations to account for their failures. Some express belief in the possibility and significance of a more supportive relationship between aid agencies and the media (e.g. Clarke, 2012). However, among all the studies that focus on war correspondence, and the processes and structures of news production in war and conflict situations, the links to more specific aspects of humanitarianism are rather weak. Specifically, more empirical investigation is needed into the interaction between journalists and aid organizations in zones of humanitarian crises, and the ways it shapes and conditions the extent and nature of news portrayal of these disasters (Cottle, 2009).

New media and social media and citizen journalism in particular, are transforming journalism and NGO work in potentially significant ways. For example, studies on the use of social media such as Twitter and Facebook in the context of humanitarian disasters, e.g. in the Sichuan 2008 earthquake (Li and Rao, 2010), the Japan 2011 earthquake (Hjorth and Kim, 2011), and the 2011 Haiti earthquake (Chouliaraki, 2012; Muralidharan et al. 2011), point to interesting transformations in the reporting and mediation of distant suffering, that have potentially important consequences for the capacity and meanings of citizens' action at a distance. Another example is the Kony 2012 case, which uncovered many potential opportunities and challenges provided by the new media landscape for the communication of humanitarian causes (e.g. see Madianou, 2012). However, research in this area is scarce and largely anecdotal; current debate seems to revolve around dystopian and utopian deterministic accounts of the impact of new media on humanitarianism. Production studies can reduce this unhelpful polarization by accounting rigorously for the implications of increasing use of new and social media in the humanitarian communication field.

Mediation and humanitarianism – towards a research framework

Drawing on the discussion so far, in this final section, we propose a research framework, which builds on and at the same time extends existing research. We highlight new directions and emphases that could contribute to advancing our understanding of the relationship between mediation and humanitarianism, and suggest ways to address some of the current challenges.

Mediation of humanitarianism: Studying a multi-sited, multi-faceted dialectical process

To establish a stronger base for the study of mediation of humanitarianism, Silverstone's (2007) theorization of mediation and morality and his insistence on a "holistic" approach to studying the relation between the two is very constructive. Research should enhance our understanding of the links between moments of mediation and their dialectical relations, and promote dialogue among dispersed studies and areas of enquiry - representation (primarily), audience and production. To borrow Marcus's (1995) famous concept of a "multi-sited ethnography", we suggest a multi-sited programme of study of the mediation of humanitarianism, which investigates the many sites of production, reproduction, circulation and negotiation of humanitarianism as discourse, meaning, ideology and practice. As the study of mediated humanitarianism moves towards more diverse, complex and multi-sited research, we should ask what important aspects have been sidelined by the focus on the text. While textual and visual analyses are valid and important methodologies, they do not constitute a sufficient basis upon which to mount a broad, rigorous programme of research.

Silverstone (2007) insists on a view of morality as inscribed in people's everyday lives. Indeed, perhaps the most pressing task of research on the mediation of humanitarianism is to *connect its investigation to the realm of everyday life*, in order to understand and evaluate the *influence* of this mediation. Specifically, as we hope has been demonstrated in our review of existing research, there is a need to

30

establish a stronger base for the study of audience reception and of media and NGO production of humanitarianism.

The voices of the audience

We have argued that scholarship on the mediation of humanitarianism is dominated by taken-for-granted claims about what audiences do, or think or understand. These claims, as Livingstone (2010) observes in a more general context, are often homogenizing, dismissive or patronizing. The voices of the audience have to enter and inform this discussion, and the textual studies that dominate this debate must connect and communicate with these voices that audience studies present. We do not claim that representation studies are necessarily in binary tension with audience studies; representations provide audiences with a menu of possible responses or "proposals" as Boltanski (1999) describes them. However, studying only representations excludes investigation of the contradictions and paradoxes that permeate their reception. Research needs to address the interrelations between audiences and texts: How do people actively make sense of structured texts about distant suffering? How do texts guide and restrict their interpretations? (based on Livingstone, 1990: 26). As Livingstone (2010: 569) eloquently argues:

> to undermine the authority of text analysts is not to deny the role of media forms and texts. To recognize local processes of meaning making is not to deny the political-economic might of media conglomerates. To see media influence as contingent is not to deny its existence. To recognize the shaping role of diverse lifeworlds is not to deny the social structures that, in turn, shape those lifeworlds.

A crucial role for audience research is to provide evidence of audience responses to inform a debate presently focused on suppositions about the goals and effects of media representations of distant suffering. Another fundamental role of audience research is to challenge the singularity and universal validity of the spectator's particular judgements, both within philosophical writings and, crucially, in empirical

works, and allow an expanded and more complex and nuanced understanding of audiences and how their morality is shaped by and in turn shapes humanitarianism.

The institutional context of production

We need also to study the role of the production of messages – mediated imagery and narratives – by the media and NGOs. If, as many scholar argue, suffering is increasingly being constructed as a commodity in the contemporary media space, and humanitarianism is competing in the marketplace of ideas, we need to understand the industries that produce suffering and humanitarianism symbolically – i.e. the media (in their multiple platforms, forms and genres) and NGOs, and the ways in which they interact. The question of the mediation of distant suffering must be contextualized within the institutional and professional frameworks in which it is produced. Exploring the processes of production in these industries is crucial in order to account for the conditions within which they operate, the moral frameworks that underpin their thinking and practice, and the professional cultures that inform and shape the texts they produce.

Thus, research on the mediation of humanitarianism will be more firmly based if it invests in studying the reception and production of mediated distant suffering. Importantly, this is not an argument for naïve empiricism; the purpose is not to provide the "full picture" of how people and professionals *really* feel, think and act. Rather, it is about taking seriously the notion that the influence of the representations of distant suffering is contingent, by empirically investigating the many factors, processes and conditions upon which it depends.

Such a programme of research investigating the various sites of mediation and their interrelations requires an interdisciplinary approach. It invites contemplation and exploration of the relations between public texts and individuals (both audience members and producers) and of how the meanings of humanitarianism are shaped by media, NGOs, cultural and political discourses, and people's lifeworlds. Of course, this requires multiple studies; no single study can fully account for the multiple sites of mediation. However, any research into the mediation of humanitarianism will

32

contribute to and help to strengthen the field as a whole, by engaging with and responding to what we know and need to know about the different moments and aspects of this mediation. An interdisciplinary interrogation could potentially reveal vistas and viewpoints that are concealed by the epistemological and methodological normativities of individual disciplines.

Moving away from prescriptive normativity

A strong normative orientation governs much current research on the mediation of humanitarianism. In particular, audiences' response to mediated distant suffering is framed (especially by philosophical accounts and textual analyses) as a "problem":[14] compassion fatigue, desensitization, voyeurism, failure to engage and so on. Cosmopolitanism, which is tied to the humanitarian idea, is the ideal yardstick against which both producers and audiences are measured. Despite the strengths of this normativity (and of normative communication research more generally, see Nyre, 2009), it has, as we have argued, constrained research. Researchers may appear to be "preaching", to be judgemental or condescending about both media and NGO practitioners and members of the public and their (producers' and audiences') failure to "act in the right way", i.e., the cosmopolitan way.

We do not suggest that researchers should defend either audiences or producers, but rather that they should also investigate - systematically and rigorously - how things *are* rather than only discussing how things *ought* to be. This "bottom-up" empirical rather than "top-down" normatively-driven approach should be applied to both audiences and producers. It would direct research enquiry to what makes certain ways of understanding humanitarianism (and its related notions, e.g. the distant other, solidarity, responsibility, action) meaningful and potent or not. Discourses and representations must be efficacious and accomplish certain things (Illouz, 2007). Understanding how structures of feeling and ways of understanding the world and "everyday moralities" make certain relations and responses to distant suffering meaningful, possible and realizable, cannot be achieved merely by analysing the "proposals" being proffered to the spectator (Boltanski, 1999) in public discourse, theoretical accounts of notions of humanity, or abstract norms about

social suffering and moral action. We need to investigate not just which social arrangements and structures are, in some abstract sense, "good" or "right", but what endows them with force and value for specific people in specific times and places (based on Calhoun, 2002: 153).

After the despair

The starting (and sometimes the end) point of many studies of representations of distant suffering, is what Cohen (2001) describes as the "despair of representation": a recognition of the impossibility adequately to represent social suffering, that our efforts to represent suffering are doomed to fail, that there is no form, medium or language that appears adequate to the task (Wilkinson and Kleinman, forthcoming). Concern with the various inadequacies of representation has animated and dominated much of the research to date.

Scholars' despair over representation is usually inseparable from their despair about the spectator and the precariousness of his/her judgement: while spectators' ability to witness events at a distance has increased, it has had little effect on the frequency or severity of suffering. The claim coming out of the literature is that spectators are not delivering the promise of humanitarianism, of solidarity with distant others, and commitment to helping across borders.

This gloom is reminiscent of the normative (predominantly negative) views pre the 1980s of women's consumption of supposedly "trashy" genres of soap opera and romance, as insignificant activity and escapism of "cultural dopes". Audience studies, such as Radway's (1988), Ang's (1996) and Livingstone's (1990) among others, challenged these views and called for these genres and their consumption to be taken seriously, and for consideration of their social, cultural, political, personal and psychological significance as well as their limits. Similarly, a more diverse study of the mediation of humanitarianism focusing on reception, production and text and their interrelations, perhaps might promote a shift - from despair towards acknowledgement and better understanding of the diversity of possible responses, feelings and moral dispositions in the face of mediated distant suffering.

Moving away from the normative approach and exploring the mediation of humanitarianism as a complex, multi-sited dialectical process, and the ways it is produced, experienced, affected and negotiated, might inform a different kind of research, driven not by hopelessness about distant suffering, but by the desire to explain and address what enables and inhibits understanding, response and action. We hope that this discussion and the framework proposed, which simultaneously draws on and departs from existing research, will prompt post-despair research that is relevant and useful within and beyond academia. The latter effort is ever more pressing in the current context in which it is demanded that academic research (re)connects with public life and brings its analysis to bear on society.

Conclusion

Humanitarianism is deeply intertwined with mediated images and accounts of the suffering it seeks to alleviate. Thus, any discussion of humanitarianism, and how its "identity crisis" (Barnett and Weiss, 2008) might be tackled should engage seriously with mediation, in and across its three fundamental sites of text, reception and production. While many writers recognize the significance of the globalized mediated environment within which humanitarian crises, issues and events are covered and constructed (by the media and NGOs), the role and consequences of mediation remain largely assumed rather than empirically investigated. Drawing on the existing work in the field, this paper calls for more systematic, detailed and diverse investigation of the role and consequences of mediation for humanitarianism. Instead of a banal recognition that "the media and NGO communications are important", we contend that mediation must be at the core of work on humanitarianism.

Notes

[1] Humanitarian emergencies, constructed as sudden, unpredictable and demanding urgent response, receive high visibility in the media. However, "the continuous stream of reporting on gradually worsening conditions receives limited visibility" and "doesn't make the cut for headlines – let alone half-hour broadcast news programs" (Calhoun, 2008: 4). Research has consistently documented the biases and selectivity of news coverage of distant suffering, especially when the latter does not meet the "emergency imaginary" criteria (e.g. Franks, 2013; Joye, 2010; Moeller, 2006). The argument in this paper focuses on the visibility of humanitarian disasters in the global media space, on television, newspapers and the internet and in NGO communications.

[2] This paper is an introduction to reporting on the empirical project conducted to address these questions, involving large-scale audience research, focus groups and individual interviews with members of the UK public, and with communications, fundraising and advocacy practitioners in humanitarian organizations.

[3] The implied spectator in moral philosophical accounts is white and male, which is another limitation of the concept. Research shows consistently that reception of media and cultural texts is gendered, as is their encoding by their producers.

[4] See previous note on the male spectator.

[5] The majority of the writing on "media witnessing" focuses on witnessing performed by and through the media; we draw on this work by considering audience experience as witnessing.

[6] Certainly, witnessing and spectating are not binary dichotomies. As Peters (2001) and others observe, in the 24-hour media environment, the demand for action, which is inherent in the historical experience of witnessing suffering, becomes blurred; "because it is spatially remote, our duty to action is unreal" (Peters, 2001: 722). This blurring is manifest in the accounts of some writers who use spectating and witnessing interchangeably.

[7] By this Moeller (1999: 2) refers to the tendency for news always to connect the suffering reported to the American public's own backyard.

[8] Tester (2001) seeks to advance our understanding of why and how particular representations of suffering and misery move us, and how we are likely to react (Tester, 2001: 1). He heavily relies on Kinnick et al.'s (1996) study of American respondents to show how media texts can spur compassion and what types of moral action might ensue.

[9] This observation draws on Kleinman, et al., 1997: xxvii, cited in Joye, 2012: 4.

[10] See also Zelizer (2010) who argues that moralities are always articulated from particular places and times. Zelizer however takes a completely relativistic stance, unwilling to propose singular or universal principles that constitute definitive moral judgements on the many photographs she collected.

[11] In some situations, calls for audience action in the news go against professional journalistic principles of objectivity and impartiality. Martin Bell's "journalism of attachment" is a much-cited example that evokes this issue.

[12] That said, of course NGOs, too, act as gatekeepers (see Orgad and Vella, 2012).

[13] Some authors such as Rieff (2002) comment on NGO-media relations, however their observations are not based on empirical investigation of these relations.

[14] Even quantitative psychological research seems to adopt this tone.

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