

Audiences in the face of distant suffering: An introduction to the special issue

The beginning of the 21st century has seen an abundance of humanitarian disasters that affected the lives of millions of people worldwide. Some of these disruptive instances of large-scale human suffering evolved into highly mediatized global events such as the 2004 Tsunami in South-East Asia or the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Others --- such as the devastating Second Congo War (1998-2003) --- remained largely invisible on the agenda of international media. Although the unsettling observation that the suffering of some is more newsworthy than that of others has traditionally attracted the interest of media scholars, questions of audience reception and interpretation of these media representations of suffering, however, have for a long time received only limited academic attention.

Only since around the turn of the century have there been more sustained efforts within social sciences to tackle questions about what representations of distant suffering do to audiences and what audiences do to them. A rich and diverse body of work has since emerged on the public perception of mediated distant suffering and its socio-political significance. In particular, current discussions have centred around issues of morality in the production, mediation and reception of distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999; Moeller, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Silverstone, 2007; Joye, 2013; Cottle, 2014). This shift of focus towards the ethical implications of representing the suffering other is an expression of what Ong (2014) has identified as the *moral-ethical turn* in the social sciences.

At the same time, this mostly theoretical literature has not yet been sufficiently matched with substantial and rigorous empirical efforts. In particular, it has been argued that the strand of research suffers from a striking lack of studies that put their empirical focus on audiences faced with mediated distant suffering. Several authors have therefore called for

more scholarly work on audiences' reactions to and interpretations of mediated suffering (Höijer, 2004; Seu, 2010; Ong, 2014; Scott, 2014; Kyriakidou, 2015). In addition to the need for more empirical engagement with audiences vis-à-vis humanitarian disasters, there have also been recent calls to more profoundly theorize and research the implications of digital media for witnessing mediated suffering (Cottle, 2014); to depart from overly (news) media-centric analyses by incorporating the production and reception of humanitarian communication (Orgad and Seu, 2014); and to engage in more integrated interdisciplinary research efforts (Joye, 2013).

This special issue answers a number of these calls by providing the reader with a selection of some of the most recent and innovative scholarship in the interdisciplinary field of mediated suffering. The selection of contributions is characterized by a diversity of research approaches and questions, with each article bringing a unique and important insight into the equation. Bringing together scholars from Belgium, Finland, The Netherlands and the UK, the contributions cover both humanitarian campaigns and news representations, as well as digital media and traditional media outlets. The selection of articles further acknowledges and embraces the complex nature of audience reception as it explores a broad range of aspects (psychological, technological, social, and cultural) that affect people's interpretations of and (mediated) engagement with distant societies and suffering. While purposefully placing its focus on audience interpretation and reception, this special issue also pays attention to relevant issues of production as related to media representations of distant suffering.

Themes represented in the special issue

Opening the special issue are four articles by Jonathan Corpus Ong, Mervi Pantti, Martin Scott, and Irene Bruna Seu that present findings from studies that empirically engage with the audience and that highlight the different modalities of the relationship between the spectator and the sufferer. These contributions discuss central notions of global solidarity, cosmopolitanism and audience reception of distant suffering by observing different genres and modes of mediation.

Drawing on ethnographic audience research in disaster-prone Philippines, Jonathan Corpus Ong explores diverse audience practices of engaging with proximal and distant suffering through the framework of classed moralities and media ethics. Ong demonstrates how media audiences in the global South are implicated in moral dilemmas of bearing witness to proximal and distant suffering and how these moralities shape their judgments towards sufferers and the media that represent them.

Also looking into audience practices and the moral implications involved is the study by Mervi Pantti. She focuses on a particular form of audience agency that takes place in times of disaster: user-created videos on social media that aim to raise funds for the victims. The article discusses the moral space that grassroots humanitarianism through user-created appeals offers for showing solidarity towards distant others.

The potential of social media and the internet as channels for directing humanitarian communication is also central to Martin Scott's article. While the internet is often celebrated as a mechanism to promote forms of digital cosmopolitanism, Scott problematizes this assumption by questioning these seemingly abundant affordances. Empirically drawing on focus groups, he looks into the actual use of these digital opportunities by the public and into the social processes that govern the decision to act on issues related to global suffering and international development.

Similar to Scott's study in terms of methodology and focus on humanitarian communication, Irene Bruna Seu demonstrates how audiences critically engage with such forms of communication by focusing on the diverse and often conflicting responses to the portrayal of children in humanitarian campaigns. The suffering child as a generic signifier of pure and innocent victimhood can evoke emotional responses of empathetic concern and a desire to help. At the same time, Seu shows that the formulaic and excessive use of children can lead the focus of concern away from the suffering towards (a criticism of) representational practices in humanitarian communication.

Further exploring the theme of representational practices are the two contributions by Laura Ahva and Maria Hellman, and Stijn Joye that emphasize the perspective of the producer. Both articles discuss the potential of established and emerging journalistic practices in bridging the gap between audiences and the distant other. By means of focus group interviews in Sweden and Finland, Ahva and Hellman investigate how factors of authenticity, affectivity, and ethics play a role in the ways in which citizen or amateur imagery engage or disengage the distant audience. Issues of distance and proximity are also central to Joye's contribution. From a discourse analytical perspective, Joye examines the discursive modes of domestication that news media apply to invite and engage their domestic audiences to care for or relate with distant others in need.

The necessity of more empirical work on audiences of mediated distant suffering from an interdisciplinary perspective is the vantage point of Johannes von Engelhardt's article. His theoretical intervention encourages scholars to look beyond media studies when theorizing and studying audiences of distant suffering. Specifically, he argues that the field of moral psychology offers valuable insights and conceptual tools that are currently underused in researching the spectatorship of mediated humanitarian disaster.

Concluding the special issue, is an afterword by leading scholar in the field, Lillie Chouliaraki. Underwriting both the importance and the challenges of studying the relationships between the mediation and reception of distant suffering, her critical engagement with the special issue's individual articles addresses a series of key epistemological, conceptual, and sociological challenges of interdisciplinary research in this emerging field.

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