

THE DISTANT AUDIENCE?



**A multi-method study about people's reactions
towards mediated distant suffering – by Eline Huiberts**

The distant audience?

A multi-method study about people's reactions towards mediated distant suffering

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Preface

The first time I heard about the concept of distant suffering was when I was doing my master's degree in 'Journalism and Media' in Rotterdam in 2012-2013, in the Netherlands. Johannes von Engelhardt gave a seminar about the 'representation of conflict, famine and genocide' and I was sold. I have always been interested into extraordinary versions of ourselves as human beings which led me to study cultural anthropology. During that time, I specialized in conflict studies because it allowed me to study ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. In contrast, the subject of distant suffering, is a study about ordinary people who are confronted with *other ordinary* human beings who are suffering, at a distance and we do not know how to respond. I was hooked on this impossible question of people in relation to *distant* suffering straight away. A year later in 2013 I got an email from Stijn Joye with the subject title that said: '*Interested in doing a four-year PhD?*'. You might imagine how my (rather nerd- and fan-like) response was to this (or not). I was *over the moon*.

Now, we are four years later and I know this without a shadow of doubt: Stijn Joye is the best supervisor in the whole world. So, while the first person I am grateful to is Johannes because he introduced me to the topic, the person to which I am MOST indebted to is Stijn. I am thankful for the four years of inspiration, for the trust and confidence, the guidance, the reassurances and ALL the smileys in all the emails. All of it helped me smile, encouraged me throughout the entire research project, and gave me confidence, even during difficult or stressful times. Without Stijn, this dissertation would be a poor excuse of a thesis indeed.

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During my stay in Ghent of three-and-a-half years I have met many people who made my stay much more friendly and fun. Sara De Vuyst who was always ready for a climb and/or a beer. Tannekin, we have been through so much, you are the best and our tea-breaks will be missed. Anne van Balen, although you had to move back, I was so happy you were there the first couple of months. Marjanne, thanks for the leisure times and spontaneous meet-ups.

During my stay I was also a member of the research group 'Centre for Cinema and Media Studies'. Writing a PhD can make you feel as if you are living on an island, but the CIMS group members reminded me that I was part of an academic *team*. So thank you Sofie Van Bauwel, Sofia Caldeira, Sander De Ridder, Olivier Driessens, Nikitas Fessas, Robert King, Emiljano Kaziaj, Burcu Korkmazer, Charl Linde, Elbie Lombard, Elke Mahieu, Reuben Martens, David Morton, David Ongenaert, Lennart Soberon, Jono Van Belle, Florian Vanlee, Susan Vertoont, Lies Van De Vijver, Gertjan Willems. Eduard Cuelenaere deserves special mention, he helped me by taking a theoretical detour for my research so I did not have to. Special thanks to Elke Mahieu and David Ongenaert, who took the time to proofread some of the early drafts of my last chapters (at a very late stage).

I was also member of the Centre for Journalism Studies (CJS) and I was happy that this somewhat smaller (but growing) team is equally enthusiastic about doing and talking academics as CIMS. So thanks Annelore Deprez, Frederik De Grove, Sara De Vuyst, Tom Evens, Jingwen Qi, Karin Raeymaekers, Joyce Stroobant, Kristin Van Damme, Sarah Van Leuven and Chris Wiersma. Special thanks here to Kristin Van Damme, another person who has always made me feel welcome here in Ghent. Chris, thank you for the welcome introduction and all the practical info when I first arrived here!

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To end with the biggest cliché, I want to especially thank my family. All my sisters helped in one way or another, whether by a short visit in Ghent, or me going to their places for a drink and good conversation. By name I should mention Arthur my brother, we shared in our suffering when we were working during Christmas and Irene, with whom I have had so

many inspiring study sessions over the last years. Judith, with whom I spend hours calling on the phone which made an entire evening spent well. Of course I want to thank my parents for always encouraging me, for believing in me and trusting me to do what I think is best.

Most importantly, I am grateful to my twin sister Tamar. Words cannot describe how important it has been and how grateful I am that Tamar was and is there for me. I could always count on a good conversation when I needed it, with a cigarette (until a year ago) and a beer or a wine (which is also basically how I decided to delve into the study of mediated distant suffering in the first place and Tamar has proof of that). She heard all my sorrows when I was sad and was happy for me when things were going well. If ever I was stuck on something, and I did not know how to advance a certain text, I called Tamar. Also, I was never lost for a couch to crash on in the Netherlands, I could go there for three weeks in a row and she still didn't mind. I will never, ever take Tamar for granted and I feel privileged to have her as my sister and my best friend.

Introduction

Introduction

*[T]oday when eating our evening meal we see famished or massacred
bodies paraded before our eyes in our home
(Boltanski, 1999: 12)*

Watching distant suffering, contradictions and considerations

Whenever we see or hear about disasters striking some country far-away, affecting a lot of people, resulting in many deaths and people who are suffering, who are in dire need of help, we do not always know how to respond. We do not even know how to *feel*, or *if* we feel anything towards those who are suffering. Sometimes we donate money, but sometimes we just do nothing at all because there is no one who will know, and no one to point out that we might have done something unethical. It is conflicting to the ideals, norms and ethics that many of us in Western democracies have been taught: we are supposed to be involved, engaged and moved by human beings who are suffering no matter how far-away they may live. We are supposed to care, be shocked, motivated to do something or at least to cry out against injustices done or inequalities maintained throughout the world that can cause or at least exacerbate the suffering. Our Western ethics dictate us to consider all human beings as equal, thus equal in deserving our sympathy, empathy, care and compassion. Yet, it seems that we are far more easily capable of caring about our family and friends than people who we do not even know about and have never met in real life. Is this terrible or wrong of us? Ought we not to care about everyone, everywhere equally? But, are we as human beings even *capable* of caring about everyone? What if we are not capable of being emotionally moved or involved by images of distant suffering, could we still be able to engage with the distant victims, albeit based on *moral* principles and moral obligations to help those in need? Or are the victims too far away so that we can easily discard our moral culpabilities and potential emotional sentiments, or at least mitigate them. One could, however, state the opposite as well, maybe we can be morally and emotionally engaged with the victims. In short, can, will, or do we care about the distant suffering or is the audience too distant?

There are many possible moral and emotional reactions towards mediated distant suffering and because there is no such thing as one 'correct' way of responding, there is often conflict between how people ought to react and how people actually react (Abelson, 2005; Basil, Ridgway & Basil, 2006; Smith, 1998). This results in an internal emotional and moral

struggle and this struggle is further complicated because the audience is so distant from the victim (Paharia et al. 2009). People are kept up to date of the news, both local and global, on a daily basis. Much of the news we consume is commonly defined as bad news, news from distant places about war and conflict, natural disasters like earthquakes, water floods or famine (Cottle, 2014; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle, 2012; Joye, 2010). We are constantly confronted with such images, on traditional news, like television or the radio, and via social media or through newsfeeds of an online website or a phone app (Couldry, 2008; Crawford, 2010; Molyneux, 2017). Central to these kinds of news stories are the victims, the sufferers: crying children looking for their parents, people who are panicking, people who are afraid, dying or already perished. When Boltanski in 1999 wrote about the confrontation with 'famished or massacred bodies' (see quote above) he also mentioned the 'unease that this spectacle infallibly provokes' (1999: 12). This 'unease' that Boltanski refers to, is what is central to this study which explores audience reactions to mediated distant suffering. Drawing on Boltanski, we will further differentiate between a moral and an emotional unease which are inextricably connected with one another.

The first, the moral unease, that people can experience from watching mediated distant suffering are because the images are heavily morally loaded; demanding the audience to consider their own moral role. The portrayal of the suffering could demand the audience to do something to alleviate the suffering, yet on the other hand, one can wonder whether something can actually be done, or even whether one *should* do something about it. Singer (1972) argued in his essay 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality' that if someone has the capacity to help and relieve suffering - however proximate or distant, directly or indirectly - one ought to do so. According to Singer's (1972: 230) proposed code of ethics, all people in affluent countries like Belgium, ought to do *something* when one is informed of any human suffering and he states that one is unethical if he/she/they do not act. Smith (1998) agrees with Singer's moral reasoning but raises the questions about people's capacity of caring and what this is based on. For him 'care' and the 'ethics of care' are 'not enough for an ethics capable of engaging the problems of the modern world' (Smith, 1998: 35). In other words, as a Western audience, we may not be capable to increase our scope of care to include the entire modern world. Rather than a scope of care based on emotional sentiment, Smith (1998: 15) calls for an ethics of care based on moral values that are based on 'an egalitarian theory of justice'. Still, we can wonder how capable we, as a Western audience, are to be morally –or

emotionally- concerned with all global suffering. Cohen (2001) described this impossible dilemma in his book 'Sates of Denial' and argues that in order to cope with the overwhelming flow of information on human suffering, we become selective in caring while denying other (stories of) suffering in various ways, and thus become (intentionally) oblivious for the rest. For example, a person may sometimes conclude to be morally responsible to do something, but in other occasions deny her or his moral obligations altogether while others may appoint some instances of moral responsibility but do nothing which may lead to feelings of guilt (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994).

Secondly, we refer to an element of emotional unease as moral reasoning is strongly interrelated with, and influenced by, people's emotional/affective state (Haidt, 2001; Loewenstein & Small 2007; von Engelhard, 2015). The emotional reactions that are elicited by the mediated suffering can range from angered or sad, powerless or frustrated, guilty or entirely desensitized or fatigued *et cetera*. Just as moral responses, there are no clear-cut one-way emotional responses. It has been argued that the overload of images of distant suffering has left us desensitized, eventually leading to a presence of compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999). On the other hand, it is argued that depending on the kinds of message, one can be emotionally moved in diverse ways. Höijer (2004: 521), for example, described that some victims are considered as more 'ideal' and hence eliciting stronger feelings (e.g. women or children) whereas other victims are perceived as less deserving of people's empathy. This diversity in emotional responses can be conflicting with someone's moral ideals. If one does not easily empathize with far-away victims does this mean that he/she is a terrible person, or that he/she is simply not capable to be emotionally involved with someone that far away? And if someone is emotionally moved, will that person follow her or his moral ideals to do something about the suffering? Or will people who are emotionally moved and who show compassion only 'peek outside the window of our enclosed tower, to imagine what might be experienced by those below, and do nothing' as Shepherd (2003: 445) contends? In addition, while there is a lot of information about how we should respond, there is still a lot of uncertainty about the way that audiences actually respond. Academic research on this topic is still quite young.

Development of the field, a post-humanitarian age

During the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century, more and more attention was paid to the mediation and reception of distant suffering. Much of these academic accounts were morally based or based on textual analysis and focused on how texts can or should engage an audience with the distant suffering (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Franks, 2013; Hanusch, 2012; Joye, 2010; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle, 2012; Silverstone, 2007). Lately, we have witnessed a rise in empirical audience research with more focus on the audience perception of and reaction to mediated distant suffering (Correa, Scherman & Arriagada, 2016; Höijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2014; Maier, Slovic & Mayorga, 2016; McIntire & Sobel, 2017; Scott, 2014a; Seu, 2010; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014).

Much of the empirical studies carried out in the last two decades have been influenced by what is often referred to as the post-humanitarian age. Coined as such by Chouliaraki (2013), she argued that humanitarianism has started to focus more on the Western audience rather than on the distant victims. Humanitarianism is less about global solidarity and shared humanity, but instead focused on the emotions and reflections of the Western spectator where the 'encounter between the Western spectator and vulnerable other [...] is reduced to an often narcissistic self-reflection that involves people like 'us'.' (Chouliaraki, 2013: 4). Chouliaraki's description of an ironic and skeptic audience, highlighting the narcissistic spectator, clearly resonates in much of the recently emerging audience studies although these studies also tend to nuance and complicate this image of the audience somewhat. Kyriakidou (2014: 1488), for example, observes a moral hierarchy in remembering disasters and in the affective (emotional) narrative amongst the audience and as she argues that '[t]his gravitation toward the self and the emphasis on the spectacular construct the events as iconic in memory but obscure the moral relationship between the spectator and the sufferer.' While this points towards a self-centered audience, Kyriakidou does add that the audience is also capable of a cosmopolitan connectivity, though mainly through a nationalist discourse. Von Engelhardt and Jansz, in their turn, state that a post-humanitarian message can indeed typically celebrate a Western audience vis-à-vis distant suffering (2014: 480). Yet, they add that this message is nonetheless 'successful in creating a sense of personal moral responsibility' (2014: 481).

There is often a normative weight in these empirical findings about a narcissistic spectator in the post-humanitarian age, implying an ideal of cosmopolitan solidarity that is not lived up to in real life. In this dissertation, the emphasis is less on the ironic spectator or a

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cosmopolitan ideal and more about people's attempt at engaging with the distant suffering. Thus we aim to refrain from a normative tone throughout this project and maintain a moral relative perspective.

Introducing the topic

The central topic of this doctoral dissertation concerns audiences' reactions to mediated distant suffering as a result from a natural disaster. Following this short recap of our main goal, we can discern several key concepts which we shall now elaborate on: distant suffering, disasters and the media, the audience, and audience engagement.

Distant suffering

Suffering, for this doctoral dissertation, will be described as 'the individual experience of pain, loss or psychological distress' (Joye, 2013: 107). Added to this is that suffering can occur individually but also includes 'collective forms of suffering' as well as 'acts of misfortune that are inflicted upon (a collectivity of) people' while taking into account that the suffering is 'outside of human control or will of the sufferer' (Joye, 2013: 107), such as natural disasters. In other words, suffering is anything related to pain and distress and is considered to be a consequence of events or acts outside the control of the victim or collectivity of victims. This conceptualization of suffering acknowledges that people or groups of people experience pain or distress, in several forms, that is out of their own control and which they cannot solve themselves.

This dissertation is focused on the *mediated* distance between the audience and the suffering meaning that media will always be the intermediaries between victim and spectator (Boltanski, 1999; Silverstone, 2007; Joye, 2013). For the current dissertation, the concept of distance is further developed to a broader definition and does not only include physical/geographical distance which is inherently part of any mediated distance (Joye, 2013; Silverstone, 2007). It also includes a more abstract understanding or notion of *psychological* distance which can be regarded as an umbrella term and includes *inter alia* cultural, social, geographical and even temporal notions of distance between victim and spectator which will be discussed more extensively in chapter 2 (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Indeed, while we also take into account physical distance between spectator and victim, we focus on the *perceived* distance: distance that is not necessarily objectively measurable, but concerns events that are

perceived as distant or proximate based on the experience of the audience in how far he/she/they feel(s) removed from the suffering (Boltanski, 1999; Paharia et al., 2009; Silverstone, 2007)

To summarize, we focus on audience reactions to suffering –pain and distress- of an individual or collective who has/have no control, agency or resources to solve the suffering him/herself/themselves. In addition, this suffering is viewed and perceived at a distance, whether psychological, geographically, socially, culturally or temporally distant and is mediated to a Western audience.

Disasters and the media

The concept of ‘disaster’ is a term relating to ‘any event that has negative consequences’ of which Cottle (2014: 8) notes:

Entangled within the catch-all term ‘disasters’, [...] are thorny issues of agency and intentionality, differences between latent and manifest disasters, between rapid onset events and slow-burn processes, and implicit judgments that have to be made about disaster thresholds and referents – whether in respect of scale of negative impacts, size of the social collectivities involved or the degree of system disruption caused.

The emphasis in the above definition is on levels of agency, control and influence in any event: What or who causes disasters, who is able to prevent disasters or who can help relief the suffering after a disaster? Who has agency in solving any negative or positive outcomes, is of importance in people’s moral perception of distant suffering (for more about this see chapter 1 and below)?

For this research we focus on disaster-related suffering in non-Western areas viewed by people in a Western setting.¹ We have only focused on suffering caused by *natural* disasters because this evokes the most unequivocal moral and emotional response. With politically induced suffering (e.g. war, conflict) or human-made disasters (e.g. plane crash, nuclear disaster) the audience can more easily mitigate or deny their own moral roles and

¹ Even though we do not like to re-assert the dichotomy of ‘the West and the rest’ (cf. Hall, 1992), it is entirely the difference by the audiences as ‘Western’ who may or may not consider themselves different from the non-Western ‘other’ (see for example Joye, 2010; Kyriakidou, 2008) that can add to a perceived psychological distance that is of interest to this study (Eyal & Liberman, 2010; Paharia et al., 2009; Silverstone, 2007).

responsibilities in the developments of events (Pantti & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). For example in case of a more complicated disastrous event like the refugee crisis in Syria (see also Holmes & Castañeda, 2016) with a host of (inter)national political actors and stakeholders in a global and socially dynamic setting, things are complicated: What are the responsibilities and obligations of whom? Who ought to intervene, prevent or help the suffering, or take care of refugees? Since we aim to examine the moral and emotional reactions to distant suffering, we have aimed to study distant suffering in a mediated setting that is less politically, socially and morally complicated.

Cottle (2014) has proposed to conceptualize disasters in a *global* age and has argued that media are now able to communicate the scale of global disaster with a speed and scale of coverage that is unprecedented. Currently, media not only report on disasters but increasingly constitute an active role in the development of disasters to the extent that it results in a media environment which is 'not only deeply entwined within wider society but, inevitably, becomes infused within contemporary disasters' (Cottle, 2014: 6). Indeed, in our mediatized environment, media can play a (pro) active role in representing and (de)constructing disasters and suffering (Franks, 2008; Hanusch, 2012; Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Rozenholtz, 2012; Joye, 2010). While disasters happen independently of media, for the overall majority of audience members, the only way of hearing about disaster is through the media. Thus, for our research which is aimed at the *audience* towards *mediated* disasters, these concepts are always interrelated with one another.

To summarize, we consider disasters inextricably linked with media and our mediatized environment. Not all disasters are equally represented and for the Western audience, it is especially those disasters that are actively represented and constructed by media that matter to them and, as a consequence, matter most to our research.

Audience reception – a critical realist perspective

The audience in this research project is conceptualized according to the tradition of audience reception studies (Hall, 2001; Press & Livingstone, 2006) which we will elaborate on in chapter 1. People are considered as active users and consumers of both online and offline media (Jensen, 2012). They are able to negotiate meaning, decline or accept dominant modes of discourse and create their own meaning and opinions. The tradition of audience reception is often associated with only qualitative research because this allows the researcher to

acknowledge and take into account our socially constructed environment (Ang, 1996; Livingstone, 1998; McQuail, 2010). While we recognize the social, dynamic, subjective and contingent construction of reality and the need for doing qualitative research to expose this, we will add a more quantitative language to these traditions. We believe that quantitative research can add to the bigger picture of the audience in relation to distant suffering (more about this will follow in chapters 1 and 3) (Porpora, 2015; Schrøder et al., 2003).

In order to gain more insight and understanding of audience's reactions to distant suffering we have chosen a critical realist point of view (Bhaskar, 1975 in Harvey, 2002; Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen & Karlsson, 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Jensen, 2012; Porpora, 2015; Schrøder et al., 2003). The ontological and epistemological approach of critical realism allows us to acknowledge 'both an external world independently of human consciousness, and at the same time a dimension which includes our socially determined knowledge about reality' (Danermark, et al., 2001: 6). The critical realist perspective is a paradigm with an ontological and epistemological language that seeks to bridge divides between often considered incompatible paradigms (such as social constructivism versus positivism) as the critical realist paradigm acknowledges both an external reality independent of our thought and social interactivities (thus more in accordance with positivist thoughts) and one that is socially constructed (which is in accordance with social constructivism) (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Porpora, 2015; Shannon-Baker, 2015). Because of this dual acceptance of ontological and epistemological thought, it celebrates a qualitative approach as well as methods more commonly associated with positivist traditions such as a survey and experimental methods (Dobson, 2001; Harvey, 2002). More about this discussion can be found in chapters 1 and 3. The advantage of this approach to our study is that we can study the audience both qualitatively (by doing focus groups) and quantitatively (by doing a survey) while acknowledging the complexities, limits *and* the advantages of both methods in a socially constructed environment.

Engaging with the distant suffering

There are many words, concepts and description for our (lack of) engagement with distant victims. We can be caring, compassionate, solidary, engaged or involved. We can be empathizing, sympathizing, fatigued or desensitized. There is a lot of semantic confusion in previous literature in describing people's relation with the distant sufferers and often,

concepts are used interchangeably with one another. Yet, for the purpose of clarity and to prevent further confusion, we have used many of these words interchangeably but consistently in the following way: we use 'involvement' and 'engagement' as neutral, general terms referring to people's relation to the distant suffering. The terms of 'care' and 'compassion' are positively loaded references to people's engagement or involvement to others while 'desensitized', 'fatigued', 'unengaged', 'uninvolved' and 'pity' are negative loaded descriptions or assume a hierarchical relation between the audience and the sufferer. Lastly, we differentiate between *sympathetic* reactions which are the more rationally loaded processes of compassion and care while *empathetic* responses are referred to in relation to more emotional processes related to compassion (von Engelhardt, 2015).

Main goals and research questions:

The main goal of this doctoral dissertation is to gain more insight into the reactions of a contemporary Western audience to the media portrayal of distant suffering on both a qualitative and quantitative dimension. A secondary goal has been to display and explore the benefits of applying mixed methods in the field of audience research and to move the research agenda on mediated suffering further, both in terms of theoretical and methodological objectives and discussions. Thus, our main question is:

How do people in Flanders react to mediated distant suffering?

With 'react' we refer to people's thoughts, feelings, and behavior towards distant victims, hence investigating the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions. We have four sub-questions that all relate to the main question in different ways.

First, in this study, we acknowledge the rapid changes in our contemporary post-broadcast media landscape where traditional news media such as television and newspapers are widely complemented with online and social media (Prior, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). New technological advances and affordances on Facebook can potentially promote a more intimate relation between the audience and the distant suffering. Therefore, our second sub-question is: 'How do audiences relate with the distant suffering in a post-broadcast era?'

Second, our object of study is inherently defined by its label or adjective of 'distant', hence positioning it within the field of *international* news reporting from which we know that

Western audiences are less interested in (Hachten, 1998; Philo, 2004). To counter this, previous research has hinted at the profound impact of the widely used journalistic practice of 'domestication' in international news reporting (Joye 2015) as a way to invite the Western audience to care about the distant suffering by making it more relevant, comprehensible and appealing to them (Gurevitch, Levy & Roeh, 1991; Höijer, 2004). Although these domesticating strategies have been studied from the perspective of the journalist, it is yet unknown how they resonate amongst an audience. Thus, the second sub-question is: 'How do domesticating strategies play a role in people's perception of or reaction to images of distant suffering?'

The third and fourth sub-question are focused on the possibilities and results of developing and carrying out a survey in the field of audience-related research on mediated distant suffering. So far, most audience research has used qualitative methods such as focus groups, diaries or in-depth interviews. Although this is important for the qualitative and nuanced view on people's reactions to distant suffering, we cannot generalize such findings to a wider scale or larger population. Our last aim was to develop and conduct a survey that would allow us to draw a more general picture of people's attitudes towards mediated distant suffering. We thus set forward two final research questions, one methodological: 'How can reactions and responses of a Western audience be studied on a wider (representative) scale?' and one overarching question 'what are the reactions of the general Flemish population to mediated distant suffering?'

Structure of research and dissertation:

This dissertation consists of four parts: (1) a theoretical part, (2) a methodological one, (3) the empirical section and (4) the conclusion. In the first part we will start with two theoretical chapters, followed by the methodological section consisting of two chapters where we discuss and consider our ontological, epistemological and methodological possibilities, and our final position. The empirical part, part 3, has three chapters showing the results of the focus groups and survey that we carried out. In our conclusion we will refer back to the main issues and questions that we presented in this introduction and discuss the main findings, shortcomings of our dissertation as well as possible future directions to advance the current research.

There are five chapters, namely chapters 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7, that have been published, or are currently under review or revision in an academic journal which holds some implications for the general 'flow' of this doctoral dissertation. For one, because the published articles all

have a theoretical introduction, there is theoretical overlap in some of the chapters. The articles have also been published in different academic journals, leading to different reference styles which may differ from the generally used style in the rest of the dissertation.

In chapter 1 we present an in-depth overview of the scholarly field of mediated distant suffering. This starts with a more profound exploration of the *moral* considerations that have been made in the academic environment regarding the representation, mediation and reception of distant suffering. Such normative starting points have paved the way for the first wave of *empirical* research about the representation of distant suffering, where scholars have started to expose the discursive practices undertaken by media producers in representing distant suffering. These textual empirical accounts have also regularly taken a normative direction too, often departing from cosmopolitan ideals and/or a skeptic post-humanitarian point of view. We will argue why we choose to refrain from such a normatively informed empirical endeavor in our own study of the audience and why borrowing concepts from social psychology is most apt to do this.

The second chapter was published in 2015 in *Networking Knowledge Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network*, and was written during the first phase of theoretical exploration. Thus, it presents the overall theoretical and moral discussions but is more explicit in identifying the major gap at that time: a shortage of *audience* related empirical research. The article was published just before some important empirical studies were published by other academics (cf. Kyriakidou, 2015; Ong, 2015; Scott, 2015) who were the first to step in and fill this knowledge gap. Moving forward, the chapter/article ventures into unexplored territory by considering the advantages of doing interdisciplinary research. The chapter ends with an exploration of how the construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), which is a theory embedded in the discipline of social psychology, can be used to conceptualize and further study the notion of *distance* in relation to the reception of distant suffering.

Chapter 3, published in 2015 in *International Journal of Communication*, is a chapter where we explore to great extent which ontological, epistemological and methodological directions our research can go. This chapter is not exclusively theory-driven and could be considered to be our first *empirical* chapter as it is based on theoretical writings as well as on the findings of eleven in-depth expert interviews with internationally acclaimed scholars who are authorities in the field of mediated distant suffering and/or audience research. We interviewed Lillie Chouliaraki, Simon Cottle, Suzanne Franks, Maria Kyriakidou, Johan Lindell,

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Kaarina Nikunen, Jonathan Ong, Shani Orgad, Kim Schrøder, Martin Scott and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen. We have considered taking up this chapter into the empirical part of the dissertation as it was our first empirical step in the applied inductive approach to research the audience (see also chapter 4). However, we decided to present the chapter as an introduction to the methodological part of the dissertation. The main reason for this, is that the central argument of the article is not about the results of the in-depth interviews as such (despite the valuable information gained from it), but about the ontological, epistemological and multi-methodological limits, advantages and possibilities of doing empirical audience research in the field of mediated distant suffering. Therefore, it functions as the ideal introduction to the final methodological decisions that were made in chapter 4.

While the third chapter calls for building bridges and filling gaps, chapter 4 presents the proverbial 'mortar and bricks' that we eventually have used in empirically building up our audience study. This chapter is a meticulous report of the methods that we have used and the more practical steps in our preparation of the focus groups. In addition, it provides the reader with a summary of the reflections and decisions that we made to develop a refined, reliable and valid survey.

Chapter 5 is the first chapter of the empirical part of this dissertation and is currently under revision with *Television & New Media*. In this chapter, we start with a discussion about news consumption in a post-broadcast era. This is followed by a theoretical framework where we will use distance, actuality and scale as concepts to further analyze the audience's way of responding to mediated distant suffering in a post-broadcast environment, hence addressing the first sub-question of the dissertation.

The sixth chapter is published in *Media, Culture & Society* in 2017 and is also based on the data from our focus groups. We discuss and presented how domesticating strategies from the production side (see Joye, 2015) resonate amongst the audience. This chapter is thus aimed at answering our second sub-question (see above).

The final empirical chapter, chapter 7, is submitted to the *International Communication Gazette* in December 2017 and we still await the response. This chapter presents the results of the survey that we carried out in May 2017 during the hunger crisis in east Africa. In this chapter we extensively report on how we developed the constructs to use and measure people's moral and emotional reactions to mediated distant suffering. We used several statistical analyses, namely an exploratory factor analysis, several regression analyses,

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a k-means cluster analysis, and several chi-square analyses. We will thoroughly explain and discuss the findings gained from these analyses.

In the conclusive part of this dissertation we will remind the reader of the initially posed issues and questions, address all sub-questions and refer back to our main question of how the audience reacts to mediated distant suffering.

Theoretical chapters

Chapter 1 – The moral audience

In order to understand the design and subsequent outcome of the current study and the directions it has gone into, we first need to conceptualize how we approach the audience in relation to distant suffering. Before doing this, we will briefly address the academic field of mediated distant suffering and the main directions that were taken before the recent emergence of empirical audience studies. The literature review is by no means exhaustive, covering all moral, theoretical and empirical works that have been published. Rather, it is a representation of the main, most predominant arguments that have been put forward in the development of the field and which have added to the general tone and discussion about (mediation of) distant suffering.

The academic field of mediated distant suffering

In the last few decades, mediated distant suffering has received a lot of scholarly attention, leading to a diverse body of knowledge. Orgad and Seu (2014: 10) have differentiated between two main groups of academic research into the issue of distant suffering: one strand of research that is mostly interested in *moral philosophy*, which undertakes a more normative road to the mediation of distant suffering and another strand that is mainly focused on *empirical studies*. The current dissertation positions itself clearly in the second strand of research but in order to understand the motivation and overall approach of the current project, both strands are discussed. In addition, we have split up the empirical studies into to other groups: One group represents the *textual* empirical research while the other group constitutes of *audience* related empirical research.

Moral philosophies

As briefly discussed in the introduction, Singer (1972) pointed out that an audience, if being made aware of distant suffering through media, is morally obliged to respond to the perceived suffering. His conclusions have been pointing towards an important change in ethics based on global processes of justice where the better-off, affluent countries have a moral responsibility to help: ‘from the moral point of view, the development of the world into a ‘global village’ had made an important, though unrecognized, difference to our situation’ (Singer, 1972: 232). Singer (1972: 232) added that distance is of no importance in moral reasoning: ‘The fact that

a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we *shall* assist him, but this does not show that we *ought* to help him rather than another who happens to be further away'. Singer promotes a morality based on a shared humanity, no matter how far-away or close-by (1972: 232). Abelson (2005) has directly responded to much of Singer's moral reasoning and put forwards that not everything that happens far-away (such as giving aid to far-away suffering) is certain to be beneficial which complicates appointing moral responsibility. After all, if one is uncertain about whether he/she can help, is that person morally responsible? Indeed, his main thesis is a direct 'appeal to uncertainty of benefits' (2005: 32) and he points out that the uncertainty of any action mitigates a moral responsibility to act. Another argument against appointing any moral responsibility is based on the 'just world theory' which holds that people believe that everything what happens, is determined to happen no matter what is done, and 'people get what they deserve' (Correia et al., 2012: 747).

Long after Singer's thesis, another influential philosopher, Boltanski wrote his seminal work about the 'politics of pity' (1993, translated in 1999). Boltanski notes that distance *should* not matter, but really does and therefore he writes that he 'cannot follow Peter Singer when he claims that nearness or distance make no moral difference' (1999: 15). Distance is a not to underestimate factor in observing/witnessing distant suffering and attributing moral responsibility, according to Boltanski (1999: 16): 'One effect of distance is surely that moral responsibility [...] becomes more uncertain and therefore difficult to establish when the causal chain is lengthened'. He proposed to think about a *politics* of pity, which refers to a politicized and therefore active constitution of pity based on an egalitarian notion of a shared humanity and resulting solidarity. There are three ways of engagement in Boltanski's argued politics of pity which are (1) a mode of denunciation, where the suffering of the victim is denounced, (2) a mode of sentiment, where the affective reactions towards the victim and the suffering are pivotal, and (3) the aesthetic mode, where the media are attributed the greatest role in establishing an emotional connection between victim and spectator (Boltanski, 1999). For Boltanski, an important part of these politics of pity entails that the act of the individual is overruled by the politics of pity from the collective: 'a *politics of pity*, like any other politics, cannot do without the constitution of groups.' (1999: 18 emphasis in original). While public speech may be easy, 'costing nothing' (1999: 19), it is 'communicated from one person to

another and is expressed in public in front of others' (1999: 20) by which groups and (distant) causes can be publicly singled out and be developed collectively.

In 1999, Moeller published her book about 'Compassion Fatigue, How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death'. While this is also an important *empirical* contribution to the field of mediated distant suffering –she examines several case studies of international disasters to explore media's role in mediating distant suffering- she also makes a moral point by emphasizing the (American) spectator's desensitized state towards distant suffering. She presupposes that the public 'collapse[s] in a compassion fatigue stupor' (1999: 2), and 'it is at the base of many of the complaints about the public's short attention span, the media's peripatetic journalism, the public's boredom with international news, the media's preoccupation with crisis coverage' (1999: 2). In other words, compassion fatigue results in a passive audience, devoid of empathy and compassion towards the suffering because of the repeated and similar images of suffering that leaves 'us', a Western audience, numb and disengaged. This notion of compassion fatigue has been put under scrutiny. It is argued that her thesis is based on presuppositions of an audience rather than ascertained by structural empirical analysis of the spectator in relation to the news media and humanitarian organizations (Cottle, 2009; Höijer, 2004; Orgad & Seu, 2014).

Further scrutinizing the notion of distance, Silverstone's (2007: 47) moral account on distant suffering uses the concept of 'proper distance' which refers to:

the importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation and responsibility, as well as understanding.

Part of the concept of proper distance is the notion of a shared identity and a moral responsibility towards others. Silverstone (2007) underscores the importance of the role of the media in (failing to) creating and maintaining a proper distance which results in a polarization of distance where 'the unfamiliar is either pushed beyond strangeness, beyond humanity' (p. 172) which removes 'us', the Western audience, from any (moral) action towards the distant other or any care or compassion. Distance in this sense complicates any sense of familiarity with those who live far-away, which even results in the dehumanization of the distant sufferer.

A last moral argument we point out are Cohen's (2001) suggestions about people's 'states of denial'. He notes that the overload of images of distant suffering leads an audience to become 'tired of the truth' (2001: 187) as there is no way of caring about and engaging with all the suffering. Consequently, audiences become *selective* in caring about others leading to 'selective oblivion' of the suffering (Cohen 2001: 188). Those who are farthest away are cared least about because the audience believes there is 'nothing, nothing after all can be done about problems like these or people like this' (Cohen 2001: 195).

The contrast between Singer's categorical imperative to help others no matter how far or close by, the pragmatic discourse of Abelson (2005), people using 'just world theories' to distance themselves from any moral imperatives (Correia et al., 2012), Cohen's demonstration of people's selective oblivion (Cohen, 2001: 188) and the mindset of a compassion fatigue where the audience is tired of caring for distant others (Moeller, 1999) all point to the impossibility of a 'right answer' to moral reactions to distant suffering. In this respect, Scanlon (1998) refers to *moral relativism* and underwrites the idea that 'there is no single ultimate standard for the moral appraisal of actions, a standard uniquely appropriate for all agents and all moral judges; rather, there are many such standards' (1998: 328/329). In other words, there is no 'right' moral reasoning or attribution or moral code of conduct in response to distant, or even close suffering. The moral codes of conduct are dependent on the person, the situation as well as the cultural and social environment that this person has based his or her own moral reasoning upon.

What all these moral assertions have in common is a rather bleak, skeptical view on the Western audience: Either we, as an audience, are too passive, unethical according to global justices, and compassion fatigued, or we deny the (discourse of) suffering to mitigate our own moral responsibility and involvement. In addition, the media are appointed a crucial role in the construction of the normative frameworks that people build upon to construct their own moral codes of conduct. The above morally constructed academic endeavors and other work as well (see for example Linklater, 2007; Peters, 2001; Sontag, 2003; Tester 2001; Wilkinson, 2005) resonate strongly in much of the empirical textual accounts about the mediation and representation of distant suffering that will be discussed below.

Textual empirical research: entering a post-humanitarian age

The reporting on international disasters both by humanitarian organizations (Chouliaraki 2010; Cottle & Nolan 2007; Franks, 2013; Nair 2012; Nikunen 2015; Madianou 2013; Pantti 2015) as well as news media (Cottle 2014; Ekström 2012; Hanusch 2012; Houston et al., 2012; Joye 2010) has been a point of heavy academic interest.

The mediation of distant suffering by *humanitarian organizations* has been extensively covered. Research in this area has spanned from visual analysis in context of conflict and humanitarian disasters (Nair, 2012) to close inspection of grass humanitarianism on YouTube (Pantti, 2015). In addition, Franks (2013) has observed more closely where humanitarianism on the one hand and news reporting on the other hand meet each other, and she has exposed the politics involved with reporting disasters. More notably for this line of research, Madianou (2013) looked into online humanitarian campaigns and the potential of social media and social networking sites (SNS) to engage the audience in distant disaster events. Her conclusion is that social media on their own may not be reaching their full potential but she does suggest that ‘polymedia’ events, events that are covered by multiple media-platforms on broadcast and post-broadcast media, can ‘potentially play a role in cultivating cosmopolitan sensibilities by inviting audiences to make sense of the decentralized narratives that unfold in the polymedia environment’ (Madianou, 2013: 264). Research on humanitarian communication is often embedded in or deepened by what Chouliaraki (2013) has called ‘the age of post-humanitarianism’ (see also Brockington, 2014; Madianou, 2013; Orgad & Seu, 2014; Scott, 2014b, 2015) which refers to the ‘marketization of humanitarian practice’ (Chouliaraki, 2013 p. 6). It is a form of humanitarianism that is oriented to the Western spectator rather than to the distant victim. Charity, caring and other acts of ‘doing well’ are based on and motivated by short-term emotional relief of the Western spectator, rather than a global solidarity and (global) moralities (Chouliaraki, 2013). Interestingly, in almost all studies, the implied audience is most conspicuous in its absence (Chouliaraki 2006, 2013; Nair, 2012; Franks, 2013; Moeller, 1999; Nash, 2008; Vestergaard, 2008). Nair (2012: 121), for example, relates to the audience ‘by extension’ of the textual analysis, which is the most explicit reference to the actual existence of the audience we could find in these textual analysis.

Likewise, the strand of research concerning news media and the representation of suffering generally takes the perspective of the content producer or tends to exclusively focus on the text, the content and the articulated discursive representations. Based on a critical

discourse analysis, Joye (2010) for example, writes about how news media maintain a notion of the Other in relation to the Western audience. Joye reveals a 'very Euro- and ethnocentric vision of news media in their coverage of global suffering' (2010: 591), resulting in a hierarchy of global suffering where some disasters are more attended to by the media than others (2009). He further emphasizes the maintenance of 'the socio-cultural difference of 'us' and 'them'' (2010: 586) where the 'us' refers to a Western (Belgian) audience. While relevant in its own right, Joye does not empirically engage with that Western (Belgian) audience. Similar comments can be made about other works in this particular field of inquiry. Based on textual analyses, scholars have underscored the importance of media in (de)constructing disasters and suffering for a Western audience (Cottle, 2014; Joye, 2010; Tester, 2001). Others have pointed to the selective nature of disaster representation by the media (Chouliaraki, 2006; Houston et al., 2012).

One of the most notable empirical works on the representation of distant suffering is Chouliaraki's *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006). By doing an extensive critical discourse analysis of several case studies she presents three recurring modes of discourse used by the media in representing global disasters. These typologies of Western news discourse are called adventure, emergency and ecstatic news and they correspond to three regimes of pity, ways in which the audience are positioned vis-à-vis the distant sufferer. The mode of *adventure news* represents disasters as contingent and isolated events, thus failing 'to make an ethical demand on spectators to respond to the suffering they report' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 97). *Ecstatic news* refers to the 'extraordinary class of reports on suffering that manages to bring the globe together in acts of simultaneous watching' (Chouliaraki 2006: 94). While this kind of news is able to establish a sense of shared cosmopolitan citizenship, it does emphasize a distinctly Western-based kind of togetherness, of which the events of 9/11 are most exemplary (Chouliaraki, 2006: 157). The most important kind of news for our research is the mode of *emergency news*, which is a discourse based on a cosmopolitan solidarity, global citizenship and global cooperation. This kind of news personalizes and humanizes far-away victims, shows victims as active agents while at the same time offering the spectator solutions and ways to help, thus establishing a sense of global cooperation which brings the victim closer to the spectator (Chouliaraki, 2006: 130).

These news regimes are theoretically driven by insights from the discourse analysis, yet fail to be empirically tested by means of audience research. In addition and although Chouliaraki's findings are based on empirical research, her rhetoric is not entirely void of

normative directions, especially because her work is based within a project of cosmopolitan ethics (see for example Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Hannerz, 1990) where she seeks to find ‘the conditions under which it is possible for the media to cultivate an ideal identity for the spectator as a citizen of the world – literally a cosmo-politan.’ (2006: 2). While the search for a cosmopolitan ethics is worthwhile, the normative, moral academic discourses point towards how people *should* respond, thus, foregoing the notion that audiences may never be able to become the cosmopolitan, solidary global citizen that is hoped for. Indeed, it has been argued that current media advanced further into a *communitarian* society with its emphasis on existing closed-off networks of friends and family, rather than a cosmopolitan environment where people engage with others outside of their own network (cf. Scott, 2015).

The empirical studies of the *representation* of distant suffering mainly imply how the audience most *likely would* respond. In addition, there is a strong post-humanitarian narrative visible, especially in later textual analyses which emphasize a narcissistic audience more interested in their own emotional responses than in the victims depicted by the media (cf. Chouliaraki, 2013; Madianou, 2013; Nikunen, 2015). Such a normative point of view may influence expectations about the way that the audience relates with distant suffering, especially when a cosmopolitan ideal is kept in mind. Orgad and Seu (2014: 17) have rightly pointed out that ‘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’. In other words, more knowledge about how people *actually* respond is needed. In response to this and other calls for more empirical audience research (see for example Ong, 2012; Joye, 2013; von Engelhardt, 2015), there has been a significant rise in empirical audience studies to fill this gap.

The appearance of the audience: a growing field of interest

Pioneer in the field of audience in relation to mediated distant suffering was Höijer (2004) who, building on Boltanski’s (1999) three modes of pity (see above), conducted a study with focus groups, telephone interviews and in-depth interviews. She describes four forms of compassion of the audience which are: ‘tender-hearted compassion, blame-filled compassion, shame-filled compassion and powerlessness-filled compassion’ (Höijer, 2004: 523). In addition, she points towards people *distantiating* themselves from compassion (often as a result of guilt and/or shame or because of a sense of powerlessness) (Höijer, 2004: 524).

Lastly, Høijer (2004: 526) noticed a gendered bias in compassion because she found that women tended to display more compassion than men, and because men are regularly considered as less deserving of compassion and empathy than women. Later, Seu (2010) built on Cohen's (2001) notions of denial of suffering and found three strategies of denial that people use to cope with and deny human right appeals in humanitarian messages. Her findings suggest that an audience is media-savvy and critical towards the media coverage of disasters, is prone to deny the truthfulness of the mediator or the message, or denies its own sense of agency in helping to relief the suffering.

Another noteworthy scholar who has done extensive empirical audience research is Kyriakidou (2011) who has focused on the audience's moral agency in regard to mediated suffering. She found several kinds of witnessing towards distant suffering which she called *affective witnessing*, *ecstatic witnessing*, *politicized witnessing* and *detached witnessing* (Kyriakidou, 2014). In addition, she points towards a moral hierarchy in remembering disasters. According to this hierarchy, events at the bottom of the hierarchy are remembered in terms of the standardized images that exist of typical disastrous events, for example the characteristic standard images of a water flood or famine and these events can hence become *de-vented* in the banality of typical and easily recognizable narratives (Kyriakidou 2014: 1490). Other events are remembered as *iconic* events in that they are remembered in relation to the audience's own emotional state of mind at the time of the disaster, rather than based on the suffering of the victims. A last kind of remembering she points out is based on people's '*cosmopolitan engagement with the sufferers*' (Kyriakidou, 2014: 1490). This form of engagement and remembering is the most morally and outwardly engaged because 'otherness is recognized and acknowledged but overcome in the construction of the victims as subjects of moral concern and solidarity' (Kyriakidou, 2014: 1490). In other words, it is the cosmopolitan kind of remembering where moral engagement is based on a global sense of togetherness, humanity and solidarity and, therefore, it 'tops the moral hierarchy of remembering distant suffering' (Kyriakidou, 2014: 1490).

Scott (2014a; 2014b; 2015) has also added to more empirical knowledge of the audience and further examined online and offline news consumption of distant suffering as well as the role of celebrities in both mediation and reception of distant suffering. Drawing on two phases of focus groups as well as a diary study, he has found that especially documentaries and other kinds of 'non-news factual television programming offers spectators

a more proximate, active and complex mediated experience of distant suffering than television news' (2014a: 3). Scott also studied the potential of cyber-utopian narratives, the kind of academic narratives that 'assert that new technologies have particular (universal) affordances which facilitate forms of online communication that lead to understanding, openness, connection, immediacy and action vis-à-vis distant suffering' (2015: 638). Working further on Seu's (2010) findings of strategies of denial, Scott finds people constructing justifications for non-engagement (i.e. strategies to deny their lack of engagement) based on discursive practices and resources that pre-date the post-broadcast internet era (2015: 637). In other words, people's lack of moral engagement with distant suffering has not changed for the better with the coming of new online affordances as was hoped.

An altogether different contribution to the field is Ong's (2015) fieldwork done in the Philippines to uncover more about the role of an important but often overlooked actor in our field of inquiry, that of the sufferer. Ong built a theoretical framework centering around the anthropological notion of 'lay moralities' -the attribution of moral responsibility in people's daily lives- in context of media ethics. Using this framework, Ong exposes a multi-dimensional and socially dynamic picture about a diverse audience across different classes in the Philippines. Distant suffering is less about a dichotomous relation between spectator and victim, and more about the social construction of these two roles, in a setting where sometimes it is unclear who is the victim and who is the spectator. The notion of distance is deepened and qualified in Ong's study because it is based on economic and social constructions in the same country, rather than cultural differences and distances between a Western audience and the global South. This sense of differently perceived and socially constructed distance and proximity is also underscored in another study by Correa, Scherman and Arriagada (2016) who observed a Chilean audience in their response to two separate disasters which both happened in Chile at different sites. They found that while distance/proximity is of importance to people's reaction to distant suffering, this is equally influenced by the context and the type of disaster (Correa et al., 2016: 519).

All of the above studies have mainly been based on extensive qualitative inquiries involving focus groups, diaries, in-depth interviews and telephone interviews. An important exception to these mainly qualitative empirical works is that of von Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) who used the video of Joseph Kony -which went viral on social media- as a case study, to explore people's sense of moral responsibility towards the victims by means of a

quantitative survey. Von Engelhardt and Jansz inquired about people's emotional responses and attitudes as well as the public's sense of moral responsibility and found a significant relationship between the time that an audience spends watching the mini-documentary and their sense of moral responsibility. This sense of moral responsibility collapses when seeing more than 15 minutes (von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014: 479). Interestingly, unlike Höijer in 2004, they do not find a significant gendered difference. Their findings do underscore the age of post-humanitarianism since the video itself emphasizes a Western audience to which the audience is most drawn: 'the post-humanitarian moral message of Kony 2012 is embedded in the notion of a new 'we', a Western audience of technologically-savvy young individuals, both willing and capable of fixing single, clearly identified humanitarian issues' (von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014: 480). This spectator who is more interested in, and addressed by, a discourse surrounding the Western 'us', rather than a discourse surrounding the distant other is clearly in line with the post-humanitarian discourse. Yet, von Engelhardt and Jansz add that the video *is* capable of establishing a sense of individual moral responsibility amongst the audience (2014: 480).

Another notable study outside the realm of qualitative audience research was done by Maier, Slovic and Maryorga (2016) who used an experimental setting to study news readers' responses to distant suffering. Their study is heavily influenced by concepts of social psychology, focusing on the affective reactions –emotions- of the audience. Setting up one story, presented in different ways for their respondents to read, they found that personalized stories lead to stronger empathetic responses than news told with only factual information (2016: 1011). Their main question was 'why do some news stories of mass violence arouse public concern while others are met with seeming indifference?' (2016: 1022). They concluded that 'personification elicited significantly stronger reader interest, concern, and sympathy for the victims of the distant crisis in Africa' (2016: 1023). In addition, the number of victims or casualties alone made less of an impression on the audience while photos did significantly contribute to a higher emotional response (Maier et al., 2016: 1025). Their work demonstrates that the different tools and narratives used by media professionals lead to differing and dynamic ways of responding to distant suffering. More interesting for this dissertation, their study underwrites the value of conducting interdisciplinary research to gain new insights into the audience in relation to distant suffering.

Most notably, all empirical audience studies emphasize the complex, ambiguous, sometimes contradictory reactions, roles and perceptions of the audience in relation to the distant suffering. The bleak, sometimes rather skeptic expectations of the spectator found in textual research (cf. Chouliaraki, 2013; Madianou, 2013; Nikunen, 2015) occasionally resonates in the empirical audience research (cf. Kyriakidou, 2014; Scott, 2015; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014) but all conclusions are more polished in its nuances, subtleness, and complex and dynamic gradations of an audience in relation to mediated distant suffering.

Moving forward to a moral relativist study of the audience

What is an audience to do in the light of suffering? As illustrated above, answers to this simple question are ample and diverse. Instead of wondering how an audience *should* react, or *could* react, we focus on how an audience *actually* reacts and thus contribute to the growing body of empirical evidence that reveals people's willingness or unwillingness to be involved with the suffering distant other. We take up a moral relativist approach to the mediation and reception of distant suffering: It is less about what an audience is supposed to do and more about what an audience actually does and what people are capable of. We have taken this moral relativist point of view based on the cultural relativist point of view from the discipline of cultural anthropology (Abu-Lughod, 2002). In this context, emphasis is put on the premises that each person is entitled to his/her own moral and cultural norms and values, where "it's not my business to judge or interfere, only to try to understand" (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 786).

Rather than asking how far our scope of care should reach (cf. Abelson, 2005; Smith, 1998), we ask how far the scope of care can reach. By taking this moral relative point of view, we intend to refrain from normative conclusions or expectations in relation to the audience. It must be stressed that this relativist point of view does not imply an entirely neutral or 'objective' view. Indeed, much like the anthropological traditions and relativist point of view (see above), we acknowledge our own role and opinions in studying to the moral audience. Throughout the remainder of this study there is an clear cosmopolitan ideal present although these cosmopolitan hopes for the audience are also constantly downplayed by a more post-humanitarian and thus sceptic expectation of the audience. The tension between idealistic hopes and realistic, sceptic expectations have set the tone during the execution of the empirical study, the interpretation of the data as well as how it has finally been presented.

In order to consider the possible forms of moral and emotional engagement of an audience, we will now widen the theoretical and methodological discussion and turn to an interdisciplinary clarification of how we regard the audience. First, a more general approach of the audience will be explained after which we will demonstrate why a social psychological approach to studying the audience in the context of mediated distant suffering is most fitting to discover more about people's moral and emotional points of view.

Studying the audience from an interdisciplinary perspective

The development of the study of the audience is a clear interdisciplinary endeavor which finds its genesis in both social sciences and humanities (Livingstone 1998; Schrøder et al., 2003, Jensen 2002; Giles 2003). In such an interdisciplinary environment, there are multiple paradigms with their accompanying ontological and epistemological languages from which to depart to study the audience. In this doctoral dissertation, we will adopt the epistemological language of audience reception studies. Just as scholars from audience reception studies, we seek to study and present how 'meaning, in media as well as in face-to-face interaction [...], is generated according to the communicative repertoires, or codes, of the encoder(s) and interpreted according to the communicative repertoires of the decoder(s)' (Schrøder et al., 2003: 122). In other words, we study the audience in their social construction of reality and the dynamics involved in meaning making processes by the audience in relation to their social mediatized environment. More specifically, we follow the tradition of audience reception in that we focus on the process of 'decoding' of the message by the audience which has been described as the: 'audience interpretation of specific media discourses' which 'accounts for the bulk of previous qualitative reception studies' (Jensen, 2002: 162).

While audience reception studies mostly use qualitative methods (as is apparent in the above quote), we will add a quantitative epistemological language. There has never been a clear rejection in the tradition of audience reception towards doing quantitative studies but there has been a lot of criticism on quantitative methods mainly because of their association with positivist traditions. In agreement with the traditions of audience reception studies, we decline a positivist point of view towards the audience in the sense that we do not intend to present an 'objective' empirical report of reactions of an audience. Notwithstanding, this choice does not imply a rejection of *quantitative* methods as such given our objective to apply them as a complementary method to qualitative research. We follow Schrøder et al. 2003

when they advocate for a critical realist approach where quantitative and qualitative methods are not considered as mutually exclusive but in fact complementary in that they can provide ‘different kinds of “partial pictures” of the worlds of audiences’ (Schrøder et al., 2003: 20). In addition, we conceptualized the audience based on some of the central notions within the study of social psychology (see also chapter 2). In short, the discipline of social psychology is mainly interested in the ‘person and the situation’ (see Ross & Nisbett’s, 1991), as well as ‘tripod’ of people’s thought (cognition), feeling (affect) and behavior within any given (social) situation (Ross & Nisbett, 1991: 8). The dynamic between these three processes (cognition, affect and behavior) in context with the individual’s surrounding offers an ideal way to structurally investigate the audience’s moral thinking and affective attitude towards distant suffering as will become apparent in the next section.

A more elaborate ontological, epistemological and methodological discussion about the multi-methodological and interdisciplinary approach towards the audience can be found in chapters 3 and 4 where we consider the different research paradigms within the field of social sciences and humanities and explain the rationale behind the use of multiple methods to answer our research questions. To study moral behavior we will look into the audiences’ moral cognitions and feelings towards the distant suffering.

Reasoning our way to moral responsibility

It has been argued that following the *cognitive* deliberations of people, any moral behavior is only possible if a person can and consequently *will* attribute him/herself any sense of moral responsibility (Alicke, 2000; Fisscher, Nijhof & Steensma, 2003; Paharia et al., 2009). Indeed, a person can only consider him/herself as responsible for something if he/she is in control of the cause or outcome of an event, either by preventing it from happening or stopping it from happening (Alicke, 2000; Basil, Ridgway & Basil, 2006; Fincham & Roberts, 1985; Fisscher, et al., 2003). In addition, a person must, following her/his own moral deliberations, consider her/himself as having a sense of moral agency about the event and thus consider to be in control of the event happening and consider her/himself morally obliged to commit to the outcome of the event and influence it in a positive manner. It is this ‘attributive concept’ combined with an affirmative answer to the question ‘who has caused this?’ or ‘who ought to take care of this?’ (Fisscher et al., 2003: 210) that leads to a sense of moral responsibility to act. There are numerous challenging factors in these moral deliberations that can prevent

someone from attributing any moral responsibility. For one, ethical or moral deliberations are embedded in a particular social cultural environment and will differ according to that social, cultural environment (Jones, 1991: 368). People's personal experiences, social background, political preferences, religious upbringing et cetera all play a major role in this (Alicke, 2000). In addition, even if someone considers him/herself as morally responsible, this does not mean that a person will in fact *act* upon his or her deliberations (cf. Tenbrunsel et al., 2010).

One aspect which is of importance for this doctoral dissertation is the complicating factor of *distance*. As already discussed, *distance* entails more than just physical distance and is also about cultural distance and temporal distance. All these manifestations of distance have in common that a person is further removed from events where people are suffering. Distance is an important factor in diminishing any sense of moral agency towards the suffering because it can increase the chain of events between someone's actions and the result (Paharia et al., 2009). This diminishes a sense of agency and leads to less attributed moral responsibility: 'Acting indirectly through another can hide the fact that one has caused harm, hide the fact that one knowingly chose to cause harm, and hide the extent of one's control over the harmful outcome (Paharia et al., 2009: 141). Indeed, having impact on any positive results when donating money to a *small* organization with concrete and close-by goals seems far more easy (and is certainly more easily attributable) than influencing and taking credit for outcomes from donations to and actions by big (inter)national organizations where millions of people may have contributed to a cause in a country far-away. Besides a mitigated sense of moral agency, the moral responsibility that may still be attributed, can be far more easily denied or refuted (Alicke, 2000; Fincham & Roberts, 1985). One of the possible outcomes of denying, refuting or mitigating one's own moral responsibility can be feelings of guilt. Guilt can be considered as 'an emotional state in which the individual holds the belief or knowledge that he or she has violated some social custom, ethical or moral principle, or legal regulation' (Heidenreich 1968, in Basil et al. 2006: 1036). These feelings of guilt arise because one has violated his or her own moral codes of conduct which leads to a 'lower individual self-esteem' (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994). To summarize, moral reasoning can lead someone to consider oneself morally responsible to do something but only if there is a sense of moral agency and culpability towards the event. This agency and culpability is far more easily denied, refuted or mitigated in case of *distant* events although such denial can also lead to feelings of guilt.

Intuitive motivations to moral responsibility

So far, this moral discussion has focused on the *cognitive* side of moral responsibility. However it is contested that moral responsibility, the attribution of moral responsibility, and the moral behavior are more likely to be the result of moral *intuition* and is mainly based on *affective* - that is, emotional- dynamics rather than on a person's rational/cognitive deliberations (Haidt, 2001; Loewenstein & Small, 2006; von Engelhardt, 2015; Monin, Pizarro & Beer, 2007; Nichols & Knobe, 2007; Nahmias et al., 2005). Feelings of empathy towards victims, or being able to imagine and feel the pain of others are said to be much stronger indicators of people engaging with and getting involved with the distant suffering and being moral responsible than only 'cool' thoughtful deliberations about moral agency and responsibility (Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Haidt, 2001; Hoffman, 2001). Leading scholar of this argument, Haidt (2001) described moral intuition as a process where the proverbial 'emotional dog' bites its own 'rational tail' in that moral decisions (and resulting behavior) is made on the basis of someone's emotions and only *afterwards* explained as the outcome of moral deliberation and reason. Loewenstein and Small (2007) have compared the social psychological processes involved with moral responsibility to the metaphor of 'The Scarecrow and the Tin Man'. They differentiate between reactions from the Scarecrow as 'sympathy' which is 'caring but immature' and the Tin Man's reaction which they call 'deliberation,' and is 'rational but uncaring' (Loewenstein & Small, 2007: 112). What both these moral psychological accounts (Haidt, 2001; Loewenstein & Small, 2007) have in common and which is commonly accepted currently, is that moral responsibility is neither entirely rational nor entirely emotional (Haidt, 2001; Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Monin et al., 2007; Nichols & Knobe, 2007; Nahmias et al., 2005; von Engelhardt, 2015).

In this doctoral dissertation, we argue that the conceptual differences articulated by the moral (psychological) scholars are more semantic than anything else. Most agree that any form of engagement with distant suffering, whether we call this 'moral responsible', 'emotionally involved', 'empathetic' or 'sympathetic', is based *both* on emotional processes and cognitive processes. Thus, we argue that the social psychological processes involved with overall moral *engagement* with the distant suffering are to be situated on a continuum, where some involved processes are more on the side of rational thought and deliberation while other processes lie on the emotional side of the spectrum. Thus, accepting the notion of empathy as 'involv[ing] understanding another's affective state (cognitive component of empathy) or

an actual vicarious emotional experience (affective component of empathy)' (Davis, 1996 in Turner & Stets, 2006: 554). This definition includes a cognitive and an affective part of empathy but it is considered to be more on the emotional side. We consider 'sympathy' as its more rational version because sympathy does 'not so much involve experiencing the emotions of another as an effort to understand the difficulties faced by another and to emit supportive and caring responses' (Turner and Stets, 2006: 554). Whereas empathy is thus based on really crawling into the skin of the sufferers and sharing their emotional experience, sympathy is based on an *understanding* of the dire circumstances that a victim goes through, without the person truly *feeling* something during the process of understanding. To conclude, we acknowledge people attributing moral responsibility as a consequence of cognitive, rational deliberations (see above) as well as from sympathetic and empathetic processes in reaction to images of distant suffering.

It must be stressed that this rather 'schematic' description is not exhaustive, nor do these concepts cover all bases and processes involved in people's moral and emotional response to distant suffering. Yet, the advantage of differentiating in the moral cognitive processes on the one hand, and affective/emotional processes on the other, is that we can conceptualize how people may react towards distant suffering as well as structurally and schematically analyze and interpret their reactions. This approach is, however, also limited as it is unable to truly interpret, describe and represent the complex reactions, thoughts and feelings of the audience. More in-depth and qualitative research could be more appropriate to investigate this more thoroughly. Since our goal is to uncover reactions to distant suffering on a greater scale, it is more appropriate to include a more structural, minimalist approach here.

To summarize, the cognitive, reasoned part of moral responsibility revolves around a reasoned attribution of moral responsibility and involves a sense of moral agency towards the suffering. Along with these cognitive deliberations, even if moral responsibilities are denied, feelings of guilt may still indicate people's ethical and moral involvement towards the distant other. At the same time, emotionally triggered reactions can be of influence in a sense of moral responsibility towards the distant other. Especially empathetic responses can indicate that a person actively attempts to feel what the victim feels, which can increase a person's moral engagement with the suffering.

Being engaged with the distant suffering

In the post-humanitarian age, a recurring theme in most earlier works is the emphasis on the ‘narcissistic’ and self-involved humanitarian who is more motivated by his/her own ego and more interested in his/her emotions than by a global humanitarian solidarity and care. This leaves the impression of a disengaged audience, so much involved with him/herself that there is no care towards distant others. We agree that there can be too much emphasis on the emotional responses of a Western audience, especially if humanitarian organizations *only* point towards the Western audiences and entirely ignore the far-away victim in their messages. Yet, nowadays, people’s emotional response towards images of distant suffering are all too easily discarded as narcissistic, ironic and post-humanitarian. When someone emphasizes his or her emotional reaction to images of distant suffering one is quickly labeled as narcissistic while non-emotional reactions are considered being numb or desensitized towards the suffering. But are those who are un-moved also uncaring and only critical? And those who are emotionally moved always narcissistic? Is it not possible to be un-empathetic, thus lacking an emotional bond or feeling towards the distant suffering, but still consider oneself morally engaged? In addition, can those who are emotionally moved genuinely care about the fate of those who they see suffering in distant places?

These are just some of the questions that qualify dominant dichotomous reasoning and that are central to this dissertation. It is a project that aims to expose the negative, perhaps uncaring audience, but even so wants to show the *potential* of the audience towards the distant others. To do so, we have developed a theoretical framework that represents some key concepts and processes that are involved in people’s moral engagement with the distant suffering. Moral agency is of vital importance for an audience to attribute him/herself a moral role in relation to mediated distant suffering. In addition, there are emotional sentiments involved in people’s moral engagement of which empathy is most evident in helping people to be more morally engaged.

In the next chapter, we will delve deeper in the potential of doing interdisciplinary research in exposing audience responses towards mediated distant suffering. We will look further at the ‘tripod’ in social psychology: The cognitive, affective and behavioral processes, how these are involved in perceiving and processing *distance* and how this is related to mediated distant suffering. While this chapter, published in 2014, is slightly outdated when it comes to the overview of research about mediated distant suffering, the exploration *after* the

Chapter 1 – The moral audience

introductory part is still relevant today because it looks at the overall advantages and possibilities of doing interdisciplinary research for the advancement of understanding audience reception of distant suffering.

Chapter 2 – “Bring in the audience!” Exploring an interdisciplinary approach to investigating audience reactions to mediated distant suffering.

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Abstract

Scholarly work on audience reactions to mediated distant suffering tends to focus on the moral, ethical and/or emotional aspects involved (Höijer 2001; Chouliaraki 2006; Scott 2014) while there is also a bias in foregrounding negative reactions such as denial, skepticism or indifference (Moeller 1999; Seu 2010). Hence, more complex and qualified aspects of audience reception risk staying under-explored in future scholarly work. This article acknowledges the complex nature and identifies a broad range of aspects (psychological, cultural, sociological,...) that can influence people’s attitude towards distant societies and suffering. The objective is to provide an overview of the different processes and aspects that can be integrated in research on audience reactions to images of distant suffering, by exploring different disciplines within social sciences (cultural anthropology, sociology and social psychology). Such an interdisciplinary theoretical basis is quintessential in understanding the audience and its complex relation to distant suffering. In this respect, the presented article responds to the call for more empirical and theoretical audience research in the field of mediated suffering (Joye 2013; Ong 2014; Orgad & Seu 2014).

Introduction

Over the last decade, the issue of distant suffering has gained increased attention by scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds. These scholars have contributed to the expansion of this young line of thought, although questions and issues remain un(der)explored. Overlooking the current field of research, the discussion has significantly revolved around moral issues, especially on the production, mediation and reception of distant suffering

(Boltanski 1999; Moeller 1999; Peters 2001; Chouliaraki 2006; Silverstone 2007; Ekström 2012; Nair 2012), how distant suffering is produced and represented by different media (Joye 2010; Cottle 2014), and, to a limited extent, empirical research on how audiences actually respond (Höjjer 2004; Kyriakidou 2011; Seu 2010; Scott 2014). Simultaneously with the increasing academic interest in and preoccupation with the subject, a call to further expand the debate is becoming louder as well (Cottle 2009, Joye 2013; Ong 2014; Orgad & Seu 2014). New suggested lines of research include a broadening of the predominantly (news) media-centric analysis to incorporate the production and reception of humanitarian communication by NGOs (Orgad & Seu 2014); more empirical research on how audiences respond (Ong 2014); and the need for more integrated interdisciplinary research (Joye 2013; Cottle 2014). Following this, the aim of this article is to further open up current scholarly research on mediated distant suffering by examining the value and use of an interdisciplinary approach to studying audience reception of distant suffering. After a brief overview of the scholarly discussion so far, we will examine several disciplines within social sciences and some basic theories of which we believe they can contribute to moving the field forward. Within the framework of this article, we will develop one particular discipline in depth, that is social psychology, which we set forth as a field of thought that can substantially contribute to new epistemological and methodological insights in the study of audience reception in the face of mediated distant suffering. It is our thought that before we can structurally begin with an empirical exploration of the audience in relation to distant suffering, we first need to explore how different disciplines within social sciences and humanities can inform new and relevant research questions.

Overviewing the debate on mediated suffering and audiences

While distant suffering and the mediation thereof has only recently attracted the attention of an increasing number of scholars and disciplines (for a more extended overview, see Orgad & Seu 2014), it is no new subject of discussion within social sciences. An early pioneer in the field is Singer (1972) with his critical account about global moral responsibility (especially of a Western society) to relief distant suffering. Jumping ahead several decades, another seminal work that contributed heavily to the current discussion is Boltanski's (1999) work on the notion of the 'politics of pity', stressing the importance of representational practices of suffering and the different articulations of pity. During the same period, Moeller's (1999)

description of ‘compassion fatigue’ comprehensively described the feelings of indifference and desensitization that mediated suffering can inflict upon a Western audience. Partly based on Boltanski’s accounts and also in response to Moeller’s ideas, Höijer (2004) qualified some of these theoretical assumptions. Höijer’s empirical research showed that audiences are still compassionate towards the suffering of others although a compassionate response is gender-related and depending on different kinds of mediated suffering. In the early 2000’s, the academic discussion gained momentum and the likes of Tester (2001) and Chouliaraki (2006; 2008) stressed the related concept of cosmopolitanism as it refers to a shared humanity in a global setting that could (or ought to) engage people and motivate them to be compassionate and solidary in order to act on the suffering of a distant other. Other voices were raised as well, as Cohen (2001) and Seu (2010) point towards the sceptic, critical viewer who is both selective in caring (Cohen 2001, 187) as critical towards possibilities that are offered to alleviate the suffering (Seu 2010). Currently, there is a growing body of literature and research that is more aimed at (empirically) exploring the audience in relation to mediated distant suffering. Kyriakidou (2014), for example, demonstrated that audiences remember disasters and suffering-related events in a very hierarchical manner, resulting in different modes of moral and emotional attachment of the viewer towards the suffering. In addition, Scott (2014) concluded, drawing on focus groups and a diary-study, that viewers can become indifferent due to images of suffering they see on the news, while non-news related narratives can still elicit emotional responses and a deeper attachment to the suffering. Despite a growing amount of empirical evidence, we argue that these empirical studies are, as valuable as they are, lacking a sense of coherence or structure as they are scattered over different disciplines and still leave many aspects untouched or out of the equation. . Let us now turn to some of these items that are yet to be thoroughly explored.

Advancing research on audiences and mediated suffering

The majority of the discussion on audience reception so far has occurred on theoretical grounds and has started from moral, ethical and emotional points of view, indicating that an audience can be, or ought to be either emotionally attached, involved and compassionate (Tester 2001; Höijer 2004; Chouliaraki 2006), or critical and sceptical (Cohen 2001; Seu 2010), outright indifferent (Moeller 1999) or rather rational in a sense of acting as moral agents who are reasoning their way through life (Seu 2010). In addition, as Ong (2012) notes, this (largely

theoretical) discussion concerns itself with a ‘uniform’ paradigmatic Western-oriented audience, thereby ignoring possible and critical differences amongst the (global) audience. One of the few empirical articles acknowledging these differences is the one by Höijer (2004) where she describes gender-related differences in audience reactions to distant suffering. Yet, gender is only one of many factors that can be taken into account. Ethnicity, age, political preferences, someone’s financial welfare are but a few other personal factors that result in different reactions from a public (cf. Kyriakidou 2011). In addition, contextual factors could be taken into account as well; one can for instance wonder whether our current actions towards distant suffering would be the same if we were not experiencing an economic crisis. Further, Joye (2013) points towards the current Eurocentric nature of our field of study and calls for a widening of our field to include more non-Western points of view in order to de-Westernise of the on-going research.

In an inclusive effort to map out the field of mediated distant suffering, Orgad and Seu (2014) have pointed towards several important gaps in the literature that are in urgent need of further investigation. Most notably, they refer to the exclusion of mediated messages by NGOs as well as to the scarcity of empirical research on the audience. They conclude that we “should also investigate – systematically and rigorously – how things *are* rather than only discussing how things *ought* to be” (Orgad & Seu 2014, 28 – original emphasis), hence moving away from a merely normative discussion. Another recent contribution comes from Ong (2014, 179) who raises ethical questions regarding the investigation of text, production and reception of distant suffering that still “lacks a nuanced account of the relationship between televised representations of suffering and the audiences that encounter these in their everyday lives”. Though still focusing on moral issues, he suggests new ways to study just what Orgad and Seu call for as well; how does an audience *actually* receive and consume images of distant suffering? Using Livingstone’s (2009 in Ong 2014, 188) described theory of “mediation” as a method and perspective, Ong urges us not to overlook the dialectic process between audience and media as he believes that “conversation” and “mutual shaping” ought to be central in all discussions (Ong 2014, 188). Besides bearing these dialectics in mind, Ong asserts that adopting a more audience-driven perspective would reveal and recognize the diversity amongst the audience, raising questions about the value of the current debate where such differences have hardly been discussed (cf. *supra*).

These calls to empirically engage more with the audience and open up the existing research on mediated suffering and the audience can also be seen as part of a wider effort to broaden the field in terms of disciplinary boundaries. Due to the diverse realities and nature of human suffering, several scholars such as Kleinman (1988), Graubard (1996) and Wilkinson (2005) are opposed to constraining the debate on suffering to a single discipline of study and therefore highly appraise the value of interdisciplinary study. Drawing on in-depth interviews with internationally acclaimed scholars in the field of media and distant suffering, Joye (2013) posed the question as to whether we ought to regard mediated distant suffering as an “emerging independent discipline”, an “interdisciplinary field” or as a “subfield of an established discipline”. Most of the interviewed scholars agree that the subject of interest should neither be considered as a “field” nor as a “discipline on its own” but rather as an “emerging interdisciplinary *area* of research” that has increased in interest linearly with the emergence of distant suffering throughout media and society (Joye 2013). Despite this scholarly acknowledgement of the value of interdisciplinary research, Joye (2013) finds that most are uncomfortable to thread away from their own area of expertise and beyond their own disciplines, thus rendering an interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge and insights rather difficult. A possible pitfall of these insular discussions is the neglect of relevant questions and topics that could potentially contribute to a better understanding of the audience in the face of distant suffering. Therefore, a truly interdisciplinary approach can offer us more perspectives to investigate audience reception of distant suffering more thoroughly.

Accordingly, we argue that there is a need for the acknowledgement of an intricate, multifaceted and sometimes contradictory spectator given the many different issues and factors, both contextual and personal, at play in observing the attitudes and actions of the audience when confronted with distant misfortune. Once the intricacy of the spectator is acknowledged, the value of an interdisciplinary, yet integrated, approach to studying audiences becomes even more apparent. Looking through the lenses of cultural anthropologists, for example, could place cultures and identities of an audience more central. A more sociological perspective can point towards new questions related to developments stemming from technological developments such as how online (inter)actions or the use of mobile phones can change the perception of an audience. Having said that, we need to acknowledge that this article does not aim to create a comprehensive theoretical overview of all possible disciplines and theories to be explored. The objective of this article is to inform

and broaden the current media-centric debate by identifying relevant insights from related disciplines within social sciences, eventually to come to an interdisciplinary approach to the study of mediated suffering and its audience. Let us now turn to the different challenges and opportunities that this approach of interdisciplinary research represents by looking into some disciplines that could advance the current media-centric research.

Exploration of disciplines

Research on suffering displays a variety of disciplinary interests and contributions, mostly rooted within social sciences but also humanities (Wilkinson 2005, Joye 2013). Suffering has been theorized and studied by sociology, political science, economics, media studies, arts and literature, anthropology, theology, law and ethics. In this article, we foreground three areas of research and will discuss them in terms of their respective contributions to the on-going debate: cultural anthropological, sociology of new media, and, in more detail, social psychology.

Cultural anthropology

An important perspective that seems to be surpassed or outright forgotten in current research is that of the victim, the sufferer who is central to the questions at hand. Cultural anthropology urges us to re-appraise the role that is played by distant people and communities and investigate how these relate with the domestic audience. It offers the possibility to learn more about distant suffering from the point of view of the victims themselves. Their experience of suffering is critical to understand the concept of distant suffering. As will become apparent, from a cultural anthropological point of view it is the *relation* between viewers and the sufferer that deserves our attention.

Indeed, one of the major contributions of the anthropological school of thought to social sciences in general, has been the continued emphasis on the importance of the formation of identities within a wider social context (Hall 1990; Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Hall & Du Gay 2003; Nagel 2003). Hall, for example, noted how cultural identity is not only built and constructed by shared experiences and similarities but that “there are also critical points of deep and *significant* difference which constitute ‘what we really are’” (Hall in Rutherford 1990, 225). Correspondingly, cultural anthropologists focus on the ways how different societies, both Western and non-Western, *relate with each other*. At the same time, focusing

on both Western and non-Western cultures, habits and behaviour, functions as a critique towards ourselves by using other cultures and ideas as a mirror (Milton 1996; Marcus & Fischer 1999; Abu-Lughod in Moore & Sanders 2014). Another major influence was Appadurai’s (1990) description of globalizing processes where he describes how media, economy, ideologies, ethnicities and technologies vastly change people’s perception on a global scale. His analysis of the process of globalization shows how seemingly separate nations and cultures, are deeply embedded in a globalizing atmosphere (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998), echoing the notion of cosmopolitanism. Perspectives, changes and developments thus happen within this context and must be approached as such. Related to our central research question, to find out how the audience relates to and perceives distant suffering is not only dependent on the audience in its Western context but must also be seen in relation to the far-away groups of people. We can learn how an audience can relate to and identifies with distant suffering as well how those who suffer at a distance relate to the audience if we study both groups.

Besides this more epistemological insight, cultural anthropology can also inform the further development of the methodological toolkit for studying an audience. A classic example of the value of an ethnographic approach is Barth’s (1969) contribution to the study of ethnicity. Drawing on a multitude of ethnographic studies he concluded how ethnic boundaries are not only maintained by overall consensus of shared traits within a community but that there are as many differences in traits *within* a community as *between* communities. His findings, resulting from multiple extensive fieldtrips doing ethnographic research, have heavily influenced many other scholars in the field of social psychology, sociology, political science and conflict studies (cf. Tajfel 1978; Giddens 1985; Fearon & Laitin 1996; Axelrod 1997). For the research on audiences and mediated suffering, ethnographic research can serve to discern more long-term attitudes, thoughts and feelings of an audience instead of only taking snap-shots of spectators’ reaction to images of distant suffering.

In short, cultural anthropology concerns itself with the different flows of culture that are crossing boundaries on international, national and communal scale, resulting in the notion of an ever changing community where modes of thought, codes of conduct and behaviour are not fixed but continually change over time. From this perspective, we can learn more on how a Western audience relates to the distant sufferer as well as on how the sufferer relates to the ‘distant audience’. Rather than only observing a Western audience, the perspectives and insights of the distant sufferer are brought to our attention. This way, we can also take a step

towards the de-Westernisation of our field of research. The importance of the victims’ perspective, or at least of those who live in distant societies, is becoming even more important with the rise of the internet and the abundant use of mobile phones in developing countries. This brings us to the next, more sociological and rather technological perspective on audience and distant suffering.

Sociology of new media

Aside its obvious link to the discipline of media and communication sciences, the study of new media can also be considered to be part of the sociological discipline as the amount of literature and research on new technological advances within the field of sociology is steadily growing. Technological advances, namely the internet but also the use of mobile phones, have brought societies closer while also creating a more relative notion of ‘distance’. One discussion connected to the possibilities of the internet is that of the possible renewal and revitalization of an active, indeed, *interactive* public sphere (cf. Habermas 1974) with all its possible consequences. The discussion has been revitalized along with the growth of digital connectivity and online activity (Iosifidis 2010; Goode 2010; van Os 2007; Dahlgren 2005). The internet does not only have the potential of bringing audience closer to the sufferer, nor it is not confined to a more active audience. It is argued that internet and mobile phones have the potential to better inform and activate a Western audience as well as to emancipate, inform and activate people in developing countries (Agarwal, Kumar, Nanavati, & Rajput 2010; Aker & Mbiti 2010; Wasserman 2011).

It is, for instance, argued that digital communication can lead to a change in the construction of collective identities, replacing national with transnational as the basis for identity formation, thereby facilitating possibilities of transnational collective action (Lance Bennett, Breunig & Givens 2008; Richardson & Brantmeier 2012; Castells 2007). In addition, the rise in the use of mobile phones and increase in online connectivity can result in an increased economic development, education and collective political participation in developing countries (Katz 2008; Agerwal et al. 2010; Wasserman 2011). Nevertheless, more pessimistic voices in this discussion note the still existing inequalities, in particular the digital divide and the inequality of connectivity between Western nations and developing nations (Dahlberg 2005; Gerhards & Schäfers 2010). Questions have been raised as to the extent to which online activity and participation actually resonate in active social participation offline

(Twenge 2013). Others refute the ideas of more agency for people and instead point to the mere continuation of existing hegemonic structures and the persistence of dominant discourses, only enhanced with the advance of the internet (Marmura 2008; Neumayer & Raffl 2008).

It is the increased interconnectivity and the construction of online collectives that result in interesting new questions for our study of the audience. The interactive and public nature of the internet could create a public sphere that transgresses both geographic and cultural boundaries (Uricchio 2004), resulting in a *transnational* rather than a national public sphere (Bohman 2004; Burgess, Foth & Klæbe 2006). It offers both to victims as to the audience possibilities to start a cross-cultural dialogue (Burgess et al. 2006). While in the case of a disaster such boundaries may be difficult to overcome, a general cross-cultural dialogue could lead to a discourse of the cosmopolitan shared citizenship and to an increased solidarity or sense of agency when confronted with distant disastrous events as an audience. Although the scholarly discussion on the impact on the (transnational) public sphere of internet and other connective devices such as the mobile phone is growing, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to online possibilities within the field of research that is central to this article. As the internet impacts our (Western) lives, it also influences our experience of distance and proximity, our sense of agency, and, possibly, our scope of solidarity. On the other hand, we need to bear in mind the possibility of an increasingly passive audience, staying in the online confines of a Western dominated hegemonic, commercialized atmosphere, potentially leading to spectators who care less and less about distant events, perhaps eventually cumulating in a digital form of compassion fatigue (cf. supra, Moeller 1999).

Both cultural anthropological and sociological points of view so far have resulted in general but impertinent questions regarding the viewer’s reception of distant suffering. While some of these general questions have already (slightly) been touched upon in earlier research, it still shows the many facets of audience responses that are in need of exploration. How extended and wide-ranging our subject of research is or could be conceived to be, becomes even more apparent when we highlight one particular discipline. In the next section we will take a more extended look at the discipline of social psychology as a new point of reference.

The case of social psychology

In the field of audience studies there is a long tradition of studying audiences in relation to media from a more social psychological point of view (cf. Livingstone 1998; Bryant & Zillmann 1991). Consequently, it is remarkable how little this interdisciplinary approach has been applied to the study of audiences in the face of mediated suffering. There are some studies hinting into the direction of social psychology, although limited to the reception of humanitarian communication. Seu’s account on the denial of suffering by the audience (2010) is a good example of this emerging strand of research. However, if we - as media and communication scholars - are to reach new depths of discussion, we must step away from our comfort zones entirely and thread into other areas of expertise to explore existing theories from different disciplines and approach the subject from different angles. In what follows, let us explore some basic social psychological concepts and theories in order to identify new ontological, methodological or epistemological insights to study audience’s reception of distant suffering.

Basic concepts

Contemporary social psychology focuses mostly on how a person’s thoughts (cognition), feelings (affect) and behaviour influence each other and how these are influenced by the social context (Vaughan & Hogg 2010, p. 26). More precisely, lending Ross and Nisbett’s explanation about social psychology, there are three distinguishing principles that can be viewed as “the tripod on which social psychology rests” (Ross & Nisbett 1991, p. 8). First, social psychology distinguishes itself as a separate discipline by examining an individual in the context of his/her situation; social psychology thus stresses both the *person and the situation* (Ross & Nisbett 1991). A second aspect that is taken into account is an actor’s *construal* of a situation; how a person acts in a given situation is depending on the particular traits, thoughts, and feelings of that person during that specific situation. In other words, behaviour is depending on a person’s interpretation and consequential construction of the situation (Ross & Nisbett 1991). Third, social psychologists consider the person and the situation to be in a constant state of tension; “individual psyches, as well as collectivities ranging from the informal social group to the nation, must be understood as systems in a state of tension” (Ross & Nisbett 1991, p. 13). In other words; similar to the cultural anthropologist’s interest in the relation between

audience and sufferers, so are social psychologists drawn to the *dialectic* of an individual to its given situation which is central to social psychology.

Basic theories

The range of fundamental social phenomena that are studied from a social psychological perspective is wide: going from identity formation, conformity and obedience, social relationships and attachment, anti-social and pro-social behaviour to prejudice and stereotyping, social justification and altruist versus selfish (or preservative) behaviour (for an extended overview see Van Lange, Kruglanski & Higgins 2012). It is clear that many of these concepts are relevant to inquiries into the relation between audiences and mediated suffering. For now, two concepts that are central to the social psychologists school of thought will be described more thoroughly; identity and social relationships. We believe that social psychology can inform our understanding of the way in which an audience identifies with, and relates to the distant victims.

First, similar to the cultural anthropological discipline, the construction and consolidation of identities – both collective and individual - are central to social psychology. While cultural anthropologists take different cultures as a starting point, social psychologists focus on a (Western) individual within its (direct) social context. The ‘social identity theory’ (SIT) is one of the ‘grand’ theories stemming from social psychology (Ellemers & Haslam in van Lange et al. 2012). Starting from the notion of people’s tendency to define themselves by comparing themselves to others, this theory stresses how groups are formed and maintained not only by inclusion of some, but also by exclusion of others who are considered not to meet up to the in-group standards. This theory has become an important starting point, reaching far beyond the discipline of social psychology and is widely used throughout social sciences, including the field of sociology, anthropology, history, gender studies and communication sciences. The importance of (collective) identity for a study of suffering becomes very evident through Oveis, Horberg & Keltner’s (2010) work on compassion in relation to perceived “self-other similarity”. They describe how compassion and empathy are more likely felt towards people with a perceived similarity. In other words, people’s compassion was elicited more likely towards a person belonging to the in-group as this is the group that a person identifies most strongly with. The strength of in-group relationships thus has consequences for our capacity to feel empathy and compassion towards those who are closest to us (cf. Loewenstein

& Small 2007; Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas 2010; Oveis et al. 2010; Trope & Liberman 2010). Questions about people’s compassion and care in relation to distance (and proximity) have been asked in our field of study as well (cf. Höijer 2004; Chouliaraki 2005; 2008; Silverstone 2007). From this social psychological point of view, compassion may less likely to be felt towards socially different people, including those who are portrayed as such in mediated messages of distant suffering.

A second key issue stemming from social psychology that deserves our attention is the formation and consolidation of social relationships (both collective and individual). Clark and Mills (2012), for example, posited the ‘social exchange theory’, noting that people’s motivation to give to others is dependent on the kind of relationship they have with each other. In case of close and familiar relationships (communal relationship), people are more often inclined to give benefits (in any form), are motivated by emotional and empathetic feelings, and are less likely to expect anything in return (Clark & Mills in Van Lange et al. 2012). On the other hand, in an ‘exchange relationship’, a relationship of an individual with someone outside of the ‘in-group’, there is the expectation to get something in return (Clark & Mills in Van Lange et al. 2012). It must be stressed that their study was aimed at exploring social and communal exchange in Western contexts so we cannot directly distil how this relates to the spectators’ relation with distant, non-Western sufferers. Still, it is obvious how people are motivated differently, depending on the kind of relation that a person has with the other. Building further on these findings, Newman and Cain (2014) explored how people experience the act of donating to charity organisations. They found that acts of altruism, such as donating to charity, are often not experienced as ‘altruistic’; people rather experience it, simultaneously, as an altruistic *and* as a selfish, non-altruistic act that serves their self-interest. Interestingly, this “tainted altruism” was judged more negatively by participants than behaviour that was motivated entirely by selfish reasons (Newman & Cain 2014, 653).

In conclusion for these two key concepts and their relevance to a study on audience reactions to distant suffering, we can point to some general findings. Spectators’ concern towards and reactions to distant suffering are, as we can see from these points of view, not straightforward and they depend on the way people identify with and relate to distant events and distant groups of people. It shows us the diverse and sometimes contrasting thoughts, feelings and behaviours that people can hold about themselves and towards others. Therefore, we can expect that viewers of mediated distant suffering experience conflicting

emotions and thoughts. For a more holistic, full understanding of an audience then, these social psychological insights into the conflicting and complicated nature that drives these processes must be taken into account.

As a final point of discussion, let us now scrutinize a central element of the notion of distant suffering, that is ‘distance’, from a social psychological point of view. For this, we dwell on Trope and Liberman’s (2010) “construal level theory” (CLT) that echoes many of the central ideas of social psychology (cf. *supra*).

Case study: construal level theory and distant suffering

Trope and Liberman (2010) distinguish two levels of ‘construals’, that is, the way a person interprets and reacts to a given situation. The construal level theory (CLT) first refers to high level construals as being “relatively abstract, coherent, and superordinate mental representations, compared with low-level construals” (Trope & Liberman 2010, 441). High level construals involve more abstract, cognitive lines of thought, and are more related with *intentions* rather than real actions. In return, low level construals are more concrete, strongly associated with an individual’s emotional state, and are more likely to result in specific pragmatic thoughts and actions. As Trope and Liberman argue: “each action (e.g., study for an exam) has a superordinate, abstract level, which answers the question of why the action is performed (e.g., do well) and a subordinate, concrete level, which provides the details of how the action is to be performed (e.g., read a textbook)” (2010, 441). In their example, the intention of “do well” is the use of a high level construal in interpreting the situation while “study for an exam” is the low level construal that is more concrete and clearly more pragmatic in order to fulfil the intention. Psychological distance must be seen as an umbrella term describing various types of distance such as spatial distance, social distance and temporal distance that all lead to higher perceived distance and thus the use of higher construals (Trope & Liberman 2010). To relate this to our current investigation, we will now explore how distance (temporal, social and spatial) can, according to the CLT, affect people’s perception and reaction to mediated distant suffering. In other words, how does the *distance* between spectator and victim influence audiences’ perception of mediated suffering?

To examine how *spatial* distance influences people’s perception of others, Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope and Liberman (2006) invited participants to watch a video that was said to take place at a spatially proximate location while other participants were told that the

video took place in a more distant (cross-Atlantic) setting. Their findings suggest, in line with CLT, that more distant events are described in more abstract terms, while a proximate experience results in a more pragmatic way of talking about the presented images. Additionally, they discovered that participants could identify more easily with people in the proximate video (Fujita et al. 2006, 281). Their findings further point towards two important insights for studies on audiences’ viewing experience of distant suffering.

First, given that distant events are generally interpreted in more high level, abstract construals, we can assume that distant suffering will be perceived and processed in more abstract terms. Indeed, Eyal and Liberman (2010) found that psychological distance “changes people’s moral judgements and value-laden plans by changing the way they mentally represent situations in terms of moral rules and values”. They describe how people are more likely to judge psychologically distant events and actions by their moral and ethical standards and less by emotional, hence low-level construal levels.

Second, as low-level construals are less likely to be used, we could question the extent to which people are capable of being emotionally affected by images of distant suffering. This leads to the conclusion that compassion, care and empathy are not so easily elicited by images of distant suffering as is generally expected and assumed. Indeed, it is not only *spatial* distance but *social* distance that potentially causes people to be less likely emotionally involved. It is argued that people are inclined to apply high level construals when thinking of out-groups (i.e. socially distant), regarding such out-groups as homogenous and structurally the same (Fujita et al. 2006; Trope, Liberman & Stephan in Kruglanski & Higgins 2007). Referring to mediated distant suffering, the inherent psychological distance at both spatial and social levels would - according to CLT - induce spectators to use high level construals and thus prompt moral judgements and intentions while excluding more emotional responses.

Until now, spatial and social psychological distance have shown to have implications for an audiences’ perception of and reaction to distant suffering. CLT, however, also stresses the importance of *temporal* distance. Trope and Liberman (in Van Lange et al. 2012, 451) argue that when people are asked to predict their future behaviour, they are more optimistic in setting their goals and intentions because they use high-level construals. More proximate future behaviour is based on low level construals and is more pragmatic, involving short-term subordinate goals that are associated with more emotional motivations. In addition, people’s predictions about long-term future plans and goals (i.e. temporally distant) are less likely to

be accurate. Coming back to our object of inquiry, while distant events such as disasters and other causes of distant suffering are thus assessed with high-level construals so that moral judgements and intentions are made, do people eventually act out their morally proper intentions? Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni and Bazerman (2010) clarify this in their study about ethical behaviour. They point towards the difference between intentions and actual behaviour and claim that we are “not as ethical as we think we are” (Tenbrunsel et al. 2010, 153). In terms of CLT, they argue that people “are overly optimistic, predicting they can complete tasks and accomplish their goals more quickly than they actually do” (Tenbrunsel et al. 2010, 158). So, when confronted with images of distant suffering, audiences are overly optimistic and self-enhancing about their future ethical behaviour but tend to neglect the more short-term low-level construals (i.e. affective state, concrete information, practical issues) which are essential in actually carrying out these moral intentions. For instance, donating money to a charity organization is considered to be a superordinate goal (high level construal) that is based on morally correct grounds but is intended to be conducted *in the future* while near-future behaviour is more influenced by low-level, concrete construals (e.g. specific situational and practical circumstances such as *how* to donate, how much, to whom and when). This way, a spectator may have the intention to donate money to a charity organization after seeing images of distant suffering but whether such intentions will eventually be carried out or not remains unsure and questionable unless the spectators carry out their intentions *as soon as* they have watched the images.

In short, according to CLT, psychological distance - spatial, social and temporal - can have a profound effect on how people perceive actions and events in distant places and how they react to them. Psychological distance can result into thinking in high-level construals by using abstract and general terms, and leading to superordinate and morally appropriate goals. However, such high-level construals are less associated with the more affective, emotional experience that is generally linked to mediated images of a suffering other. Social psychology qualifies this and demonstrates that distant events and actions are less likely to induce emotional response which may have implications for people’s capacity to be emotionally, compassionate and empathetic towards distant suffering – and our (academic) assessment of this capacity. In addition, based on temporal distance, it is questionable whether people’s moral intentions will be carried out unless words are immediately accompanied with deeds.

Conclusion

In this article we have strived to open up the current discussion on the topic of audience’s reaction to and perception of mediated images of distant suffering. Following the growing interest in this topic, it is vital to gain a more holistic and complete understanding of the audience in a context of mediated distant suffering. In the current field of research, the theoretical and empirical focus has mainly been on production and mediation of distant suffering as well as on ethical, moral questions concerning both audience reception and production of mediated suffering. To further develop as an emerging strand of research, we argue that there is a need to engage with the audience on a more empirical level as well as to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. In order to delineate the topic of audience reception of distant suffering, we must first expand and explore different theoretical and disciplinary points of view to avoid overlooking pertinent questions and insights. A more interdisciplinary approach serves to broaden the current debate by setting out new questions about the audience while simultaneously offering possibilities to de-Westernise our field of research.

In this article we explored several disciplines more closely in order to identify how these disciplines could contribute to the study of audiences in the context of mediated distant suffering. From a cultural anthropological point of view, we are reminded of the importance of the victim who is displayed by the media. It is critical that we do not disregard them as mere background. In addition, sociological reflections on developments of the internet and the use of mobile phone have demonstrated the importance of acknowledging distance between groups and cultures which has implications for the ways in which audiences perceive distant suffering. By a more detailed examination of several theories within the field of social psychology, it became obvious how we could examine an audience in the context of their surroundings, and in recognition of the many different personal traits and contextual factors that can lead to different reactions of spectators. Distance, for instance, can result in very different cognitive and affective viewers’ reactions to mediated distant suffering.

For future research on mediated suffering and the audience, it is quintessential to broaden the horizon and bring new epistemological, ontological and methodological ideas to the fore. This article underwrites the call to open up the debates by demonstrating how treading on unknown territory can be valuable to identify new (theoretical, methodological and empirical) insights into and possibilities for research on the audience reception of and reaction to mediated distant suffering.

Methodological chapters

Chapter 3 – Building bridges, filling gaps: Toward an integrative interdisciplinary and mixed method approach for future audience research in relation to the mediation of distant suffering

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Abstract

Based on extensive literature research and eleven expert interviews with academics familiar with the field of audience studies and mediation of distant suffering, this article provides a meta-discussion of the different paradigms and methodologies that can be used for further empirical audience research. It is argued that the ‘middle-way’ paradigms such as critical realism, grounded theory or pragmatism can productively serve as the basis for a common epistemic language in interdisciplinary research. A mixed methodological approach may serve well for a broad and holistic approach for the study of the audience. It is further argued that future empirical research of media users in relation to distant suffering could benefit from an interdisciplinary, mixed method approach.

Keywords:

paradigms, interdisciplinary research, mixed methods, audience research, distant suffering, expert interviews

Within the field of communication sciences the possibilities for doing empirical audience research are seemingly endless. There is a plethora of theoretical and methodological perspectives, both originating from social sciences and humanities, which can be borrowed from and applied to the investigation of audiences. Therefore, audience research has been inspired by disciplines ranging from experimental to social psychology, from cultural

² The writing of this article would not have been possible without the academic experts who shared their thoughts and expertise with me. Their contributions are sincerely appreciated and gratefully acknowledged.

anthropology to moral philosophy, and from political science to sociology. In such an interdisciplinary research field as audience studies there is a constant search for compatibility between disciplines to find out how different ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions and perceptions can be mutually inclusive (Chouliaraki, 2015; Wang, 2014). To clarify, in this article Höijer's (2008, p. 276) description of ontology is used which she describes as "the implicit and unproven assumptions about reality, [...] and taken-for-granted assumptions about some social reality." Traditionally, different disciplines can be aligned with different paradigms, each with its own associated ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions about the social nature of society. As Guba and Lincoln (2005) and Kuhn (1970) have argued, paradigms such as positivism and social constructivism, located on opposite ends of the paradigmatic scale, can seem to be too different in their basic ontological assumptions to easily commensurate. Of course in reality, far more academic research operates in gray areas and these will be discussed in further detail later in this article.

One outcome of these meta-theoretical and meta-methodological discussions within social sciences is that in the last few decades, a growing number of scholars have developed mixed methods to identify common ground in different academic ontological, epistemological and methodological traditions by searching for more pragmatic, 'middle-way' approaches for a holistic understanding of society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Harvey, 2002). Paradigms such as 'grounded theory,' 'critical realism,' and 'pragmatism' for instance, all seek to reconcile different methods and basic ontological assumptions (Dobson, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2002). The advantage of a mixed method approach for audience research is that one can both gain qualitative insights and acknowledge the diversity of media users, while at the same time more can be said about trends and regularities in a general, demographically representative population.

The question that is central to this article is how to further develop the study of audience in relation to distant suffering with the help of multiple disciplines and mixed methods. The reason to place the study of audience and distant suffering central is because it is a socially relevant and topical issue that has gained increasingly scholarly interest in the last few years, but is in urgent need of more (disciplinary and methodological) reflection as to which direction it can go from here. Recently much has been hypothesized on how media about distant suffering impacts western media users, but these debates have often taken place on theoretical, ethical and moral grounds while others have focused on media-content

(Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Cohen, 2001; Joye, 2010; Moeller, 1999). The last few years have seen a growing body of empirical audience research in relation to distant suffering (Höijer, 2004; Ong, 2015; Pantti, 2015; Scott, 2014; Seu, 2015). This turn toward empirical data is a clear sign that the subject of audience in relation to distant suffering is maturing into a broad, interdisciplinary field of scholarly interest (Joye, 2013).

So far however, most empirical research that has been conducted has been of a more qualitative nature. Quantitative knowledge about people's reaction to mediated distant suffering is scarce while the same goes for the application of mixed methods designs. Considering the previously mentioned spectrum of different ontological standpoints toward empirical audience research, it is important to reflect on the range of possible paradigmatic approaches and methodological possibilities that could be appropriated for a better understanding of audiences in the face of mediated distant suffering. Therefore, the aim of this article is to (theoretically and methodologically) reflect on the current state of the art of audience research and mediated distant suffering and consider which direction this young body of research can further develop in. This article is directed at academics who are interested in a more general meta-theoretical discussion about audience research as well as academics that are interested in studying audience and mediated suffering.

In the first part of this article, it is argued that for broad interdisciplinary audience research to work, it is essential not to assume paradigms that might be considered to be on the far sides of on the paradigmatic scale and instead search for bridges by looking into middle-way paradigms that are more open to re-interpretation of ontologies and less traditionally aligned with specific methodologies. In the second part of this article these issues will be addressed in the context of audience studies and mediated distant suffering.

Expert interviews

This article draws on an extensive literature review and on eleven expert interviews with scholars from different disciplines sharing research interests in audiences and/or mediated suffering. Academic experts were asked to reflect on the empirical study of the audience and the directions the study of the audience in relation to distant suffering could take in the future (for an overview of interviewees, see Table 3.1). To gain a broad spectrum of ideas and opinions while at the same time guaranteeing a sound, in-depth discussion of the broader

themes and the case study, experts were selected on grounds of their extensive knowledge on the mediation of distant suffering and/or audience research, including a variety in relevant (mixed-) methodological expertise. By questioning researchers who are specialized in the mediation of distant suffering as well as experts in doing audience research, it was possible to gain a better understanding whether the opinions of the experts differ greatly, or whether there is more or less consensus as to how and in what direction future research of audience and distant suffering can develop.

In the table below it will show that most experts are more confined to doing qualitative research, and some are less specialized in doing audience studies which could lead to a more biased result in the general discussion. Yet, during the rest of the article it will become apparent that even the more qualitative researchers who may be based outside of audience studies are equally enthusiastic about doing more mixed methodological and interdisciplinary audience research. An explanation for this may be similar to the explanations Joye (2013) has found during earlier interviews with academic experts in the same field. He found that there can be discomfort amongst academics to work outside of one's own discipline and methods and he describes the—sometimes very pragmatic—challenges and risks that makes academics cautious about moving outside one's own disciplinary field (Joye, 2013, p. 115). However he also finds that despite these risks and challenges, most experts agree that sharing (methodological) knowledge across disciplines is vital for the further expansion of the research on mediation of distant suffering and they would do so more easily, if not for these risks and challenges (Joye, 2013, p. 116).

Each scholar is presented with one of their key publications that generally reflect their expertise in their own field of interest (and if applicable, to the field of mediation of distant suffering). Three main questions were central during the interviews: Firstly, how the experts view the commensurability of different paradigms, secondly, what they think about the use (and increasing popularity) of mixed methods and middle-way paradigms in the context of audience research and finally, what their ideas are on future research of audiences in relation to mediated distant suffering in light of these meta-theoretical, multi-methodological developments.

Table 3.1 Overview of Interviewees (in alphabetical order)

Interviewee	Position and affiliation	Date of interview	Setting
Lilie Chouliaraki	Professor of Media and Communication, London School of Economics and Political Science (UK)	9/12/2014	In person
Chouliaraki (2006). <i>The spectatorship of suffering</i> . London: Sage Publications Limited.			
Simon Cottle	Professor of Media and Communication, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University (Wales)	9/12/2014	In person
Cottle, S. (2014). Rethinking media and disasters in a global age: What's changed and why it matters. <i>Media, War & Conflict</i> , 7(1), 3-22.			
Suzanne Franks	Professor of Journalism, City University London (UK)	13/11/2014	In person
Franks, S. (2013). <i>Reporting disasters: Famine, aid, politics and the media</i> . London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd.			
Maria Kyriakidou	PhD in Media and Communications, University of East Anglia (UK)	15/11/2014	In person

Kyriakidou, M. (2014). Distant Suffering in Audience Memory: The Moral Hierarchy of Remembering. <i>International Journal of Communication</i> , 8, 1474-1494.			
Johan Lindell	Lecturer of Cultural Politics, Communications and Media, Karlstad University (Sweden)	14/11/2014	In person
Lindell, J. E. (2012). Beyond 'Distant suffering' and pity-compelled cosmopolitanism – Examining the relation between the consumption of ordinary news, general media consumption and cosmopolitan outlooks in Scandinavia. <i>Observatorio (OBS*)</i> , 6(1), 47.			
Kaarina Nikunen	Professor of Journalism, University of Jyväskylä (Finland)	13/11/2014	In person
Nikunen, K. (2014). Hopes of hospitality: Media, refugee crisis and the politics of a place. <i>International Journal of Cultural Studies</i> .			
Jonathan Ong	PhD in Sociology, University of Leicester (UK)	10/12/2014	In person
Ong, J. C. (2015). <i>The Poverty of Television: The Mediation of Suffering in Class-divided Philippines</i> . London, UK: Anthem Press.			
Shani Orgad	Associate Professor in Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science (UK)	11/12/2014	In person
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Kim Schrøder	Professor at The Department of Communication, Business, and Information Technologies, Roskilde University (Denmark)	15/12/2014	Skype
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Martin Scott	Lecturer in Media and International Development, University of East Anglia (UK)	17/12/2014	Skype
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Karin Wahl-Jorgensen	Professor at Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University (UK)	9/12/2014	In person
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The (In)commensurability of Different Paradigms

The first issue that was discussed during the interviews concerned the interdisciplinary and multi-methodological nature of audience studies in general. It is the diversity of the paradigms in a field that is as interdisciplinary as that of communication sciences (including, or perhaps *especially*, audience studies) that was discussed. After all, depending on the kind of paradigmatic (and ontological) background(s) one adopts, there are differing assumptions

about the legitimacy of theories, the unit of analysis (small groups of people, by focus groups, or a large unit of analysis with broad surveys), the role of the researcher (i.e. the level of subjectivity or objectivity), and the extent to which any obtained result is generalizable or not (Höijer, 2008). Discussion about the methodological consequences of these questions will follow below, after the paradigmatic perspectives are discussed. When there is ambivalence about the paradigmatic perspective and associated theories, the cross-fertilization of different disciplines can become problematic. In a young, growing empirical field such as audience research on mediated distant suffering, similar ambivalences can be considered. For example, as one considers the mainly qualitative nature of the current research so far: is this due to the field simply not having arrived yet at a more quantitative turn? Or is this qualitative road taken because it is believed that the moral and emotional responses of the audience are too complex to be studied by quantitative means?

Classic Paradigms and Middle Way Paradigms

Two 'classic' paradigms are *positivism* and *social constructionism* of which the more radical version of positivism is often presented as the antithesis of the most radical version of social constructionism (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Höijer, 2008). Classic social science disciplines such as sociology and psychology are often (though certainly not always) associated with the positivist paradigm and with quantitative methods and experimental studies (Alise & Teddlie, 2010; Höijer, 2008). On the other hand, the constructivist point of view is more often (again, not exclusively) linked with qualitative research and is traditionally aligned with methods such as in-depth interviews, focus groups and the likes. Disciplines from the humanities are often affiliated with the social constructionist paradigm with its emphasis on uniqueness, ambivalence and subjectivity (Höijer, 2008). Earlier, the incommensurability or incompatibility of these paradigms and their methodological traditions were often discussed (Kuhn, 1970; McIntyre, 1977) but the last few decades show a growing interest in middle-way paradigms that seek to make different theories from different paradigms compatible while doing interdisciplinary research (Bryman, Becker & Sempik, 2007; Shannon-Baker, 2015).

One such paradigm is the *critical realist* point of view that most explicitly advocates an ontological middle-ground (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Jensen, 2012). The critical realist paradigm (Bhaskar, 1975 as cited in Harvey, 2002) is seen to integrate the more positivist position of an objective and external level of empirical analysis whilst also recognizing that meaning is

constructed by, and embedded within a social and cultural environment, rendering it still plural and to a certain extent unpredictable (Dobson, 2001; Harvey, 2002). The *grounded theory* perspective advocates the development of theory through posing open-ended research questions with open-ended data. This paradigm applies quantitative *and* qualitative methods in order to obtain as much data as possible for the further development of theories (Oliver, 2011; Rennie, 2000). Grounded theory, albeit originating from a constructivist tradition is often seen as a pioneer in bridging seemingly dichotomous ontological and methodological assumptions (Oliver, 2011). A final paradigm worthy of consideration is the more methodological '*pragmatic approach.*' This paradigm is less concerned with meta-theoretical questions and stresses advantages of mixed method approaches (Onwuegbuzie, 2002; Morgan, 2014; Shannon-Baker, 2015).

As these three paradigms are more intermediate on the paradigmatic scale, it has often led to the combination of one paradigm with the other for research (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Schrøder et al., 2003; Shannon-Baker, 2015). Oliver (2011) argues for the ontological and methodological integration of grounded theory with the critical realist paradigm. Proctor (1998) in his turn underscores the fruitful use of a combined pragmatist and critical realist perspective as they both "admit that all knowledges are partial and a certain degree of relativism is thus unavoidable" (p. 352).

Challenges for Interdisciplinary Research

While introducing the issue of (in)commensurability during the interviews, most experts were very open to the use of multiple methods and the idea of combining different academic perspectives and paradigms in interdisciplinary research. Suzanne Franks summarized the advantage of using multiple perspectives as follows: "You get to cover a lot of ground, and if you are aware of the pitfalls in various areas I think that it is a very good idea in principle" (personal interview, November 13, 2014). Shani Orgad, who as a (media) sociologist has done extensive—mainly qualitative—interdisciplinary research with social psychologist Irene Bruna Seu (e.g., Orgad & Seu, 2014; Seu & Orgad, 2014), said how she and her colleague could "spot different things in the same pool of data" which resulted in new insights they perhaps would not have identified otherwise" (personal interview, December 11, 2014). Simon Cottle was positive about using different perspectives and theories too (personal interview, December 9, 2014). He said it would be

foolhardy to simply go about researching audiences informed by only one approach or rooted within only one theoretical framework because we know that different approaches and approaches often have something useful to say and to contribute. They help to sensitize us to the multiple dimensions and complexities involved and can qualify today's unfortunate tendency to overly theoreticist research or research that is sometimes willfully blind to discomfoting empirical complexities. (personal interview, December 9, 2014)

The upside of using different perspectives on the same subject can thus be that a more holistic and broad understanding of a subject can be reached.

There are, as Franks rightly noted, potentially pitfalls and disadvantages to integrating different disciplines and perspectives in one research design. Orgad noted during the interview that interdisciplinary research should not be “fetishized” for its own sake because this type of research poses various challenges. She continued with an example of how she and her colleague may have very different *interpretations* and *priorities* in relation to objects of analysis. What becomes clear from Orgad’s comment is that in contrast with a study within one discipline, there is less clarity as to what the subject of analysis is and *how* it ought to be studied. There is always the problem of never being able to study *everything*. It appears that someone who is doing interdisciplinary research on his/her own would face such challenges even more. As mixed method audience researcher Kim Schrøder noted: “There is this constant frustration that you would like to have a firmer footing in the fields that you search into” (personal interview, December 15, 2014). By doing interdisciplinary research, one knows and applies a lot of information—for example about the many *kinds* of reactions people can have to distant suffering—but the use of so many different perspectives may lead to a more superficial knowledge and hence a superficial analysis—one might miss *other kinds* of reactions to distant suffering, or have little *explanatory* information.

Besides risking superficial analyses, some approaches may not complement each other and lead to contradictive and less productive theoretical and methodological frameworks. Jonathan Ong argued: “I would say you need to be very careful and very judicious when you bring different points of view together because some of these are not natural bed-fellows” (personal interview, December 10, 2014). There are many different motives for study,

different outcomes, ethics, or interpretations. In other words, there may be entirely different points of view that are difficult to reconcile. During the same interview, Ong argued that if one aims at reconciling views as different as that of, for example, critical theorists and media effect scholars in one study, one may alienate all instead of build bridges. For example, from a strictly social constructionist approach, it may be difficult to accept a study that shows the general effects of humanitarian broadcasting messages of distant suffering on a general audience: The latter study would measure media *effects*, accept quantitative findings and generalize these to the greater part of a population and thus ignore the dynamic, unique, diverse and ambivalent nature of society that a social constructionist assumes. Aiming to bridge such diverging points of view would be futile.

Although there are challenges on the road toward interdisciplinary research, and some different paradigms may be less reconcilable, there are still possibilities. Martin Scott summarized the challenges—and possibilities—of using multiple perspectives accurately when he commented that “no audience research is ideal. There is no perfect answer, there’s need for compromises between interdisciplinary, epistemological positions et cetera” (personal interview, December 11, 2014). When Guba and Lincoln (2005) wondered whether elements of paradigms can be brought together in research that “represents the best of both worlds,” (p. 201) their answer is “a cautious yes” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 201, italics in original) and the interviewed experts echoed this. Such commensurability is however only possible with paradigms that share certain traits and assumptions so they “fit comfortably together” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 201). More specifically, to do mixed methodological and/or interdisciplinary research about audience reactions to distant suffering the disciplines and/or methods that are used need to have similar ontological and epistemological assumptions. A grounded theoretical approach can be combined with pragmatic or critical realist approaches but a classic social constructivist point of view will be difficult to reconcile with a true positivist point of view.

The Search for Bridges

So despite possible incompatible points of views, there are approaches that are more appropriate for a shared epistemic language in which both qualitative and quantitative traditions can be applied. This is especially interesting since so far a lot of the empirical audience studies concerned with mediated distant suffering have been carried out

qualitatively, often from a constructivist point of view (e.g., Kyriakidou, 2014; Ong, 2015; Scott, 2014). There are some quantitative studies too (e.g., Lindell, 2012; McKinley & Fahmy, 2011; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014) but these studies are far less dominantly apparent in the current academic debate (for an overview of the debate, see Joye & von Engelhardt, 2015). One problem of this qualitative direction so far, is that little can be said about viewers' thoughts on distant suffering at a greater, demographically representative scale. Yet, one cannot simply go about and study the audience by doing surveys, building on previous research without considering the qualitative—often constructivist—nature of this previous research. In addition, one can wonder whether this qualitative predominance is perhaps a conscious choice because of the morally and emotionally sensitive nature of the topic. Therefore, during the interviews a second major subject that was addressed was their thoughts about the future methodology of the study of audience and if future research could benefit from both qualitative *and* quantitative approaches and if so, how.

Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Qualitative and quantitative research have often been presented and discussed in congruence with the mutual exclusive nature of the classic paradigms (Feilzer, 2010). Several issues play a role in this quantitative versus qualitative debate of which three are explicitly put forward here.

First, there is the previously mentioned argument of *incompatibility*. Those who favor quantitative research, with its connotation toward a certain 'claim' of truth due to the survey and experiment related studies, can disagree with the relativist, interpretative theories and methods from constructivist (and qualitative) traditions and *vice versa* (Feilzer, 2010; Ruddock, 2001). Second, there is the often assumed difference in ontological and epistemological assumptions about the *level of analysis* of research (Della Porta & Keating, 2008; Höijer, 2008). From a positivist point of view if one is interested in how the majority of a population thinks about victims of distant suffering one can use a large-scale survey. On the other hand, from a constructivist point of view, social behavior is regarded as diverse and ambiguous and it may not be possible to 'measure' people's diverse, unpredictable and overall complex feelings and reactions toward mediated distant suffering on such a large scale. From this point of view, qualitative research such as in-depth interviews, focus groups and ethnographic fieldwork are the more obvious choice of method. Following from this is a third

difficulty, that of *generalizability* (Höijer, 2008). The generalization of survey results assumes a certain level of reliability and validity of a large unit of analysis that, from a strictly constructivist point of view, is impossible to measure since all situations are unique and interdependent of social and cultural context. As Ang (1991, p. 164 as cited in Höijer, 2008, p. 282) asserted: “In a sense, generalizations are necessarily violations to the concrete specificity of all unique micro-situations.” Put into context, generalized findings about audiences’ reactions to mediated distant suffering are, from a constructionist point of view, a violation—or at least a negligence—of all the diverse and unique ways that people can think about, and react to distant suffering.

In reality the dichotomy of the above discussion is far less apparent and both qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods are generally valued (for an overview of the diversity of approaches and paradigms used in social and behavioral sciences see Alise & Teddlie, 2010 and in communication sciences see Bryant & Miron, 2004).

Methodological Bridges

In this article, it is argued that mixed methods can serve as a methodological bridge, able to respond to both the merits and demerits of qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative research, such as experiments or surveys can be seen as an artificial—possibly unrealistic—representation of a situation, while qualitative research is difficult to generalize to a greater population (Yardley & Bishop, 2008). A study that combines qualitative and quantitative methods can help to decrease the ‘artificial’ nature of quantitative research by complementing it with qualitative research. Proponents of mixed methods approaches often emphasize the complimentary nature of qualitative and quantitatively gained data and the similarities between qualitative and quantitative methods (Brannen, 2005; Feilzer, 2010; Omwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Omwuegbuzie and Leech for example, point out that “both involve the use of observations to address research questions” (2005, p. 379). Brannen argues that “both may be concerned with people’s views and actions” (2005, p. 175).

During the interviews, most experts shared the opinion of the benefits of doing mixed methods. Indeed, Lilie Chouliaraki mentioned that “I think, it is not only possible to reconcile quantitative and qualitative, I think that sometimes, depending on the research questions it is also necessary to do so” (personal interview, December 9, 2014). The majority believed that the interdisciplinary field inherently asks for a mixed method approach although this would,

as Chouliaraki rightly notes, also be dependent on the *kind* of research questions. The main argument heard from the interviewees, was that within interdisciplinary research certain creativity in applying methods from different disciplines is expected and that methodological approaches can be tailored to answer one's research question in the best and complete way possible. If someone is interested in general demographic knowledge about, for example the audience's donation behavior, but also interested in more in-depth knowledge about people's motivations to donate, a mixed method approach can serve well.

Some experts suggested a deductive approach, to look for trends amongst a wider audience through a survey after which specific explanatory questions could be asked during qualitative research. Kaarina Nikunen for example opted: "I think that more general data from a survey could afterwards be explored more thoroughly by qualitative studies such as ethnographic fieldwork or in-depth interviews" (personal interview, November 13, 2014). Orgad noted: "If you can produce a quantitative snapshot of the public's views, the information can indicate general tendencies. Then qualitative research allows you to go in-depth and go into the complexities of these tendencies so as to make sense of these trends" (personal interview, December, 11, 2014). Conversely, Schrøder suggested an inductive approach saying that doing qualitative research first can serve as a way to discover more dominant modes of discourse and a certain vernacular amongst viewers that afterwards could be tested amongst a broader sample of an audience (personal interview, December 15, 2014).

To be clear, such multi-methodological approaches are certainly not seen as the more legitimate methodology for research, nor are the examples of middle-way paradigms unique in their use of mixed methods. The use of mixed methods has been widely celebrated and used across various academic disciplines and paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The point is that when it fits the research question, the use of mixed methods ought to be practiced and paradigms such as critical realism, grounded theory or pragmatism can offer an interesting epistemic language by which further methodological bridges can be built.

Theoretical Bridges

Besides considering methodological bridges, it became evident during the interviews that theoretical frameworks are useful for a better delineation of research and for bridging ontological, epistemological and methodological divides. Theories often align with specific schools of thought, but they are not necessarily bound to them and can move more fluidly

and flexibly across the paradigmatic continuum. Therefore, theories can contribute to the cross-fertilization of different ideas in various areas of research. Chouliaraki said, different theories can be regarded as “heuristic devices” for the purpose of finding direction in research (personal interview, December 9, 2014). In the article by Huiberts and Joye (2015) several theories have been used in this way when they describe that the ‘construal level theory,’ a theory based in social psychology (which has been used to analyze social behavior in relation to (psychological) distance and has been applied in both experimental and social psychology) can serve well to learn about people’s relation to the mediation of *distant* events and peoples, including distant suffering. While this theory has been used in experimental studies by psychologists (e.g., Fujita et al., 2006), based on positivist traditions, it could be used as a theoretical basis for both qualitative and quantitative studies.

That being said, it is important to keep an open mind and not delineate too much as that would risk becoming too closed-off to other (new) possibilities, theories and hypotheses and results. In addition, singling out one theory and apply it in too many different fields of research can also be unfavorable. It can lead to a theory that is stripped from its original meaning. During the interview with Maria Kyriakidou she used cosmopolitanism to exemplify this and she said:

While a theoretical paradigm such as cosmopolitanism, can be useful as a theoretical framework, it has been used in so many different ways by so many different scholars from different traditions, it is now more critically regarded because the meaning of the concept has become increasingly difficult to pin-point. (personal interview, November 15, 2014)

There is indeed the risk of theories—in this case cosmopolitanism—being over-used, over-defined in so many ways by so many disciplines, that they can become an ‘empty signifier’ (for an extended discussion see: Kyriakidou, 2009; Lindell and Lin, 2014). Still, the term cosmopolitanism has been subject of academic debate and this example of a critical, yet interdisciplinary academic dialogue can also be celebrated. It shows that borrowing different theories from different schools of thought can lead to the increase of a shared academic vocabulary and interest. Thus, theories can keep the interdisciplinary academic dialogue going.

Searching for the Gaps

So far, a rather meta-theoretical discussion has been central to this article. It is argued that multiple methods and theories in an interdisciplinary field such as communication sciences, in context of the ‘softer’ paradigmatic approaches can productively serve a holistic understanding of an audience well. The third subject that was central during the interview has been how, in light of these meta-theoretical discussions, research on audience and mediation of distant suffering can evolve in the future and how we, as academics can further expand our empirical quest. Before discussing the results of this final question a brief overview of the most recent developments in the literature concerning audience and the mediation of distant suffering will be given.

Audiences and Distant Suffering

The study of media users in relation to distant suffering has been inspired by different theories from different disciplines, both from the humanities and social sciences. Kyriakidou (2014, p. 1474) for example writes about people’s “moral hierarchy of remembering” and uses different concepts from social psychology. Von Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) in their turn apply ideas from a moral psychological standpoint in order to gain better empirical understanding of media users. Ong (2014) asks ethical questions regarding mediated distant suffering and proposes the use of mediation theory as a framework for further enquiry.

Lately, criticism has been leveled at the qualitative bias (Huiberts & Joye, 2015; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014). One problem with the predominance of qualitative studies is that it provides little insight into general, structural trends and regularities on a greater scale. In addition, there are calls for more recognition of the diversity of media users; ethnicity, age, religion, political preference, represent but a few aspects that are (as of yet) under-researched (Huiberts & Joye, 2015; Ong, 2014). As such, there is a need to take the study of audience in relation to distant suffering out of its mainly qualitative shell and explore how different theories from other, less straightforward disciplines, can be used to further gain a broad and integrated understanding of media users. For one, von Engelhardt (2015) draws on concepts from moral (experimental) psychology to further expand current empirical knowledge. He does remark that “including experimental designs as well as longitudinal survey studies” can certainly be “thorny endeavors” particularly with regards to handling sensitive topics related to ethical and moral questions (von Engelhardt 2015, p. 705).

Chouliaraki (2015) described the challenges for interdisciplinary research as the “challenge of combining different theoretical and methodological languages in studies on reception of mediated suffering with a view to producing *epistemic gains*” (italics in original) by which she means the “insightful and enhancing re-descriptions of reality, in ways that make a difference to how we perceive and act on the world” (Chouliaraki 2015, p. 709). There is, in other words, need for a common epistemic *language*—across quantitative and qualitative demarcations—on which further research can be based. This does not mean that all research ought to assume the same ontological, methodological or epistemological perspectives from one paradigm. Rather it is important to understand and acknowledge the different ontological languages that exist within different paradigms and find ways to communicate these ontologies and their corresponding paradigms appropriately.

Social and Moral Psychology

Since 2014, there has been a remarkable rise in disciplinary diversity in the field of audience studies and distant suffering, and more daring empirical ventures for future research on audience and distant suffering have been taken (Kyriakidou, 2014; Pantti, 2015; Scott, 2014). During the interviews, a recurring subject was to include moral or social psychological theories for further advancement of the field. Kyriakidou said it will be interesting to see how affective and moral dispositions of people play a role in their social relation with the distant suffering (personal interview, November 15, 2014). Ong too underscored interesting findings from a social psychological point of view and opted to explore “these different types of moral reasoning from an anthropological point of view as this allows to observe people in time and different social contexts” (personal interview, December 10, 2014). Recently, both qualitative in-depth academic endeavors, inspired by ethnographic approaches (Ong, 2015) and quantitative studies (von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014), have already led to interesting new insights and questions. Ong (2015) used concepts from moral anthropology and social psychology to include the victim in the discussion about mediated distant suffering by doing ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. Von Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) have inquired into people’s sense of moral responsibilities by using a survey that is partly based on social psychological concepts. Moreover, von Engelhardt and Jansz (2015) have argued to introduce the field of moral psychology and Kyriakidou discussed the field of discursive social psychology to further explain people’s “moral hierarchy of remembering” (2014, p. 1474).

New Media

Another dominant subject of discussion during the interview was to include new media, such as social media, user-generated content and digital news, more, and more thoroughly. Text-oriented researchers and journalism scholars have already explored to a greater extent how new media can play a role in the mediation of distant suffering (e.g., Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle, 2012). Yet, empirical audience research has, so far, still often been preoccupied by audiences in relation with traditional media (Seu, 2010; Scott, 2014) although this is also rapidly changing (Pantti, 2015; Scott, 2015; von Engelhardt and Jansz, 2014). As the field is advancing, so is the interest clearly moving toward the integration of new media into more 'classic' audience research (see also Livingstone, 2004; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2013).

Possibilities on- and offline in old and new media pose questions about the audience's perspective- and perception of and reaction to images of distant suffering. Cottle raised questions about the differentiation of different types of media which can "invite or encourage different responses as well as their interpretations, interactions and overlapping flows in today's more complex media ecology" (personal interview, December 9, 2014). Franks noted that new media can lead to more two-way communication which could also change the role of a journalist in reporting disasters (personal interview, November 13, 2014). She continued to say that as the journalist is now "just as much the receiver as supplier of information" it could change how dominant modes of discourse can develop, including how distant suffering is perceived, framed and reacted to.

One should be cautious to regard new media as heralding an entirely new age. When Karin Wahl-Jorgensen talked about the developments of new media and the many possibilities for research of media users, she said to be "cautious not to overstate that" (personal interview, December 9, 2014). She argued that optimistic ideas about the democratization and equal access to information for example, need to be treated with caution (personal interview, December 9, 2014). Indeed, not everyone has equal access to new media and even those who have access may not be as influential in their contribution to content as they might think (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Goode, 2010). Johan Lindell stated that, "Online media users may be gate-keepers in more or less limited social networks. However, mainstream media tend to remain the dominant source of news" (personal interview, November 14, 2014). Scott too was skeptical and warned about optimistic ideas about new media possibilities since one

might question whether media users will take advantage of these opportunities (personal interview, December 17, 2014). Whether increased visibility and a greater sense of interconnectedness toward the distant suffering leads to more equally perceived responsibility and actions is still the question. Even if media users can be more actively involved, ethical questions can be raised concerning the reliability and moral considerations of ‘citizen journalists’ and other user-generated content (Lewis, Kaufhold & Lasorsa, 2009; Singer & Ashman, 2009).

New media pose many new possibilities and methodologies (e.g., big data, crowd sourcing, social network analysis) for further research which lead to new questions about media users which is beyond the scope of this article (for an overview, see Halfpenny & Procter 2015). For now, it is stressed that questions need to be raised about the view, attitude and reactions to viewing of mediated distant suffering in particular and also methodological questions about *how* these issues can be studied. For example questions about people’s view toward distant suffering in an increasingly interconnected, globalizing society or questions about people’s reaction to distant suffering, both off- and online. This constitutes a large grey area that calls for more exploration. Echoing our previous discussion of methodological bridges, Jensen (2012) proposes that the online environment can lend itself for further integrated, complementary methodological approaches. Traditional qualitative research, such as digital ethnographic fieldwork, or telephone interviews could for example be complemented by quantitative explorations in the form of surveys (Jensen, 2012, p. 289). Keeping in mind the previous questions about the audience in the face of (globalized) mediated distant suffering, multiple research questions can be formed and carried out in context of a more integrated interdisciplinary mixed method approach.

Further Broadening of the Field

All experts had in common that the field of research on audience and mediated suffering could benefit by opening up the field of interest entirely. From a grounded-theoretical perspective, an inductive approach is advocated. That is to say, new theories and hypotheses can be derived from open-ended data and additional theories and hypothesis can be included in a later stage to either refute existing theories and discussions, or expand and complement initial ideas and theories (Oliver, 2011; Rennie, 2000). It was remarkable how this grounded tradition was widely advocated amongst the experts during the interview.

It was often recognized that while existing theories and discussions about media users and distant suffering (e.g., compassion vs. compassion *fatigue* debate, moral or ethical questions regarding cosmopolitanism and solidarity, media discourse of suffering in relation to donation, audience in relation to new media,... see Orgad & Seu, 2014) are very valuable, the current field needs further expansion by opening up to new ideas. Wahl-Jorgensen emphasized how especially interdisciplinary research allows this further expansion because it avoids approaching questions within too distinctive areas of research so that we can “start looking for ways that all of these areas are interlinked in various very significant ways” (Personal interview, December 9, 2014).

Interdisciplinary and mixed methodological research could, for example be done by designing a survey which is partly based on results of focus groups (e.g., focused on people’s moral and emotional responses to distant suffering, theoretically based in communication sciences) and partly based on a social psychological standardized personality test (e.g., the Moral Foundations Questionnaire designed by Graham et al., 2011). Such a survey would be a tailored-made questionnaire with specific questions about people’s general responses to distant suffering which can be linked with more general social demographic and (moral) personal traits throughout society.

Another option could be to apply a broadly defined research framework where both new and traditional media are studied in relation to people’s moral, ethical dispositions toward distant suffering. Nikunen argued that cultural distance could be taken into account so that suffering closer at home, yet culturally distant can be kept in mind (personal interview, November 13, 2014). Lindell suggested it would be interesting to “study the dialectic relationship between discourse and audiences or citizens, and not confine ourselves epistemologically and methodologically in just one of these realms” (personal interview, November 14, 2014). Chouliaraki (2015, 710) has made a similar statement when she wrote about the relationship between media-text and audience; “we still need to insist more on theorizing the interaction between the two.”

Conclusion

In interdisciplinary research, including audience research, there is a wide range of disciplines, theories and methods that inspire and drive research efforts. In this article, questions have been asked about how, and to what extent the plethora of differing points of view are

compatible and can be used for further cross-fertilization of disciplines while keeping eye on the same subject, that of audience and mediated distant suffering. Expert interviews were held to ascertain the level of consensus about interdisciplinary, mixed method research and future directions in this area. During the interviews, three different developments in the empirical study of the audience were most dominantly discussed. First, the inclusion of multiple disciplines from different paradigms in audience research, second, the advantages and disadvantages of multi-methodological approaches, and third, the possible directions that future research can take.

Experts agreed on a more open-ended paradigmatic empirical approach toward future research. At the same time it was stressed by some experts that interdisciplinary research may, at some times, be too superficial in its approaches, only scraping a surface, without specialized, in-depth knowledge. Interdisciplinary research finds itself on thin ice, balancing between superficiality and integration, between alienating and connecting different disciplines. To prevent ambivalence regarding future empirical research about media users in relation to mediated distant suffering it is important to be aware of the different paradigms with different ontological assumptions and know what direction future research can take.

So far, most research on audience and distant suffering has been done qualitatively which is difficult to apply on a general, demographically representative population. It is argued in this article that middle-way paradigms and mixed method approaches can serve as an epistemic and as a practical language by which many further questions can be explored. These paradigms emphasize the advantages of an on-going ontological dialogue between disciplines and the search for ontological, methodological and theoretical bridges.

Whether by an inductive or a deductive approach, most experts agreed it would be beneficial to integrate theories from different disciplines and use multiple methods in future research of media users and mediated distant suffering. It was opted that future research can be expanded by theories and methods and concepts from various disciplines. One can for instance combine qualitative studies that are predominantly based on theories from disciplines in the humanities, with a quantitative study, inspired by theories and methods from social psychology or sociology. This would lead to results that are applicable on a greater, demographically generalizable scale without ignoring socially constructed, contextual in-depth explanations and results. Recently, theories from moral and social psychology have already been integrated.

During the interviews interesting questions were raised about the role of new media. New media can potentially change the role of the media user and therefore results in new questions about people's relation toward distant suffering. Such changes makes demands to be more creative in future research (methodologically and theoretically) even more appropriate and relevant.

The empirical academic exploration of audience related to distant suffering has grown in the past and will expand even more in the future. With middle-way paradigms such as critical realism, grounded theory and/or pragmatism as background, using mixed methodological approaches and by asking open-ended questions, future research can integrate past and future knowledge and clarify much, both at a generalizable level, by quantitative studies, and in-depth, by qualitative studies and it seems that currently, academics are on the same page about this.

Chapter 4 – Methodological decisions made

In the previous chapter, the major paradigmatic and methodological considerations have been presented and were discussed with experts in the field. Before that, a more theoretical road was taken into the development of scholarly work on mediated distant suffering, the moral audience and some social psychological concepts that could advance the research agenda. Now that the conceptual, ontological, epistemological and methodological considerations have been made, it is time to present the final methodological decisions after which we will continue with the chapters that show the results of the empirical audience studies.

The critical realist paradigm in practice

So far we only presented a hypothetical idea of the critical realist paradigm, with its emphasis on the combination and complementarity of quantitative and qualitative approaches. This chapter will show how the qualitative research, especially the focus groups, has helped in developing a survey.

During the first phase of this process we initially considered in which direction the research ought to go. On the one hand, a more deductive approach could be appropriate, where first a survey would be held with some general demographic questions as well as more inquiries about the general attitude that people hold on humanitarianism, news about distant suffering and their donation behavior. Subsequently, we would conduct focus groups to refine and qualify the more general findings obtained from the survey. On the other hand, we considered that a survey at the beginning of the project would probably turn out to be superficial to the extent that it would reveal little new information and more likely confirm what we already suspect from previous research. Having said that, we do believe that either way, a more inductive or deductive approach, would have led to valuable information. If only because this kind of research had never been done in Flanders, nor on the kind of scale that we planned to do.

Eventually, we opted for an extended inductive approach by first exploring the field of mediated distant suffering through expert interviews (see chapter 3), then examining people in a more natural environment by organizing discussions in focus groups and thus find out what key issues are most discussed and/or considered most important by participants when watching and reacting to distant suffering. Not only could we develop a far more refined and empirically informed survey this way, with questions more precisely directed at people's

sentiments and attitudes towards the mediation of distant suffering, it also gave us, as Kim Schrøder already suggested during the expert interview we had (see chapter 3), the ‘vernacular’ to phrase the questions in such a way that they were most easily recognized by people who take the survey.

Either possibilities would have been apt and according to a critical realist perspective, where the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative research is celebrated (Porpora, 2015; Danermark et al., 2001; Schrøder et al., 2003). Now, more specifically, we can show the complementarity of both methodological approaches and our chosen inductive approach by showing how the findings of the focus groups have led to a more thorough and refined survey.

The audience

As discussed in chapter 1, we consider the audience to be an active, critical and capable consumer of the news. In addition, it was pointed out in chapters 1 and 2 that we will follow the epistemological language from the tradition of media reception as well as some key notions and ideas from social psychology.

For one, we follow Stuart Hall’s (2001) ideas about the audience in that he underscores the power and impact of media in our daily lives *and* the audiences’ critical, active, perceptive and dynamic relation with media. His described non-linear process of encoding and decoding shows a perceptive audience that is capable of accepting, denying or modifying any mediated message (Hall, 2001). There is a dynamic and dialectic relation between the audience and the media within their daily lives in context of their socially constructed reality.

Second, as discussed earlier, we will not confine ourselves to the qualitative methodological traditions. Rather, we will add a more quantitative language to it so as to enrich the data obtained during this study and to be able to say something meaningful about the observed relation for a broader population, in this case Flanders.

The quantitative language in our research project should not be confused by the epistemological approach adopted by those who work in the traditions of *effect* studies. In traditions of effect studies, audiences are more often seen as commercial and/or functional consumers of media, prone to agenda setting, marketing and/or media priming (Jensen, 2002). In addition, interest goes towards direct behavioral change of an audience as well as the audience’s functional motivations for media use (cf. Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rosengren et al., 1985) and the direct cultivation of the audience (cf. Gerbner, 1969). Unlike audience

reception studies, effect studies imply a far more linear relation between the media and the audience. Effect studies forego the nuances and dynamics of the social construction of reality, including the audience in relation to media.

Social psychology of the audience

Livingstone (1998: 12) has long argued for a better integration of concepts from social psychology in media studies and audience studies:

From the vantage point of a familiarity with both research traditions, I suggest that while much social psychological research on the media is deserving of the critique leveled at it, there is much social psychology concerned with people's relation to the social world more generally which could, and should be productively related to the analysis of the media and, in particular, the media audience.

Social psychology within the social sciences is open to the notions of a socially constructed society and individual and dynamic meaning-making processes, but also positive towards the use of experimental and quantitative methods (Livingstone, 1998). Until recently, the discipline of social psychology has long underestimated the impact and role of media in our daily lives but now there is more dialogue between the discipline of social psychology and communication sciences (Jensen, 2012; Livingstone, 1998). Nonetheless, as discussed in chapters 1 and 2, social psychology offers helpful guidance to extrapolate and structurally observe people's feelings, thoughts and behavior, how they relate to one another *and* how they relate in context of the social environment.

Doing focus groups

The main advantage of doing focus groups is that participants are interviewed within a setting where they are invited to consider, share, explicate and discuss their opinions, thoughts and feelings and motivations in a safe and open environment (Kitzinger, 1994; Lunt & Livingstone, 1996; Morgan, 1996). Distant suffering is a morally sensitive topic of conversation and we believe that focus groups generates an environment where differences of opinions are celebrated and discussed freely and can give 'insights into the sources of complex behaviors and motivations of people' (Morgan, 1996: 139).

Focus groups can be described as ‘a form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between research participants in order to generate data’ (Kitzinger 1994: 299). The use of focus groups has been popular in the field of audience studies and more so in relation to distant suffering (Höijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2014, 2015; Scott, 2014a; Seu, 2010). It is often argued that it is ‘through the interaction of discussion that commonsense discourses are more vividly articulated, negotiated, and illustrated’ (Billig, 2002 in Kyriakidou, 2014a: 1478). Usually, focus groups consists of six to eight people and can last between 30 minutes up to two hours (Kitzinger 1994; Lunt & Livingstone 1996). During the focus groups, questions –or a list of prepared topics- are up for discussion amongst the participants. Sometimes an incentive in the form of pictures, a film, cards or anything else can be presented to further promote and encourage talk amongst the participants.

The use of focus groups differs from in-depth interviews or ethnographic fieldwork in numerous significant ways. The advantage of focus groups compared to in-depth interviews is the interactive nature of focus groups so that participants are encouraged to dwell on, and discuss their opinions with their peers, which may result in more interesting and natural occurring utterances and discourses. On the other hand, discussions amongst peers may lead to more politically correct answers in contrast to the more private setting of an in-depth interview (Smithson, 2000). Still, even politically correct answers would be an interesting finding during focus groups (Morgan, 1996, Kitzinger 1994). Indeed, it will become apparent in the empirical chapters that the focus groups were clearly inviting people to be honest and while there is no way to prevent people from being politically correct language, there was clearly room for honest discussion and opinions.

Carrying out the focus groups

Eventually, we carried out ten focus groups with a total of 51 participants (for information about the composition of the focus groups, see attachment 1). People were recruited through the snowballing method, with students at Ghent University functioning as intermediaries to recruit the participants (see Bloor et al., 2001). An incentive for participating in the focus groups was given in the form of gift certificates worth of five euro. We selected participants based on gender, age and educational level. Initially, we also aimed at recruiting the audience based on ethnic background for an ethnically diverse audience. Yet, this attempt was unsuccessful, mainly because the network within which the students worked proved

insufficient for finding enough participants. Since we have not been able to take into account a more ethnically and culturally diverse set of opinions we would suggest future research to more specifically aim at researching this group to complement the current findings.

We kept each focus group homogenous in age and educational level to create an open and safe environment where participants could easily identify with one another and express their own opinions (Kitzinger, 1994). In addition, the homogeneity within the focus groups but eventual *diversity* between the focus groups is ideal for the exploratory data we aimed to acquire. The advantage of the diversity between focus groups is that we were able to question and discuss the thoughts and feelings of people different in age, gender and educational level. Although this is not representative of the entire Flemish population and we most certainly have missed some important issues due to a lack of diversity in our representation (i.e. immigrants, the elderly, young people, *et cetera*) which we will discuss in our concluding chapter, it does serve the qualitative, exploratory aim we had.

Inspired by Seu (2010), we had prepared a topic list which was ‘loosely designed around the principle research questions’ (Seu 2010: 444)³. Central to the focus groups were people’s opinions, thoughts and feelings to mediated distant suffering in general and more specifically how the use of social media can potentially play a role in the perception of and interactions with news about distant suffering in addition to more traditional means of media consumption. Overall, the aim was less about confirming hypotheses and more about hypothesis building.

We opted for a two-part focus group. In the first part of the focus group we asked participants about their general thoughts and feelings towards ‘bad news in distant places’ (which was the lay term for the concept of distant suffering). The expectation was that this question was specific enough to spark a discussion about distant suffering as well as their own role in watching distant suffering and their responses.

In a second part of the focus groups we showed a short video clip about the earthquake in Nepal that happened almost a year before the start of the focus groups. The reason for choosing this video item as an incentive for discussion is that it strongly reminds of Chouliaraki’s (2006) described mode of emergency news (see also chapter 1). As briefly discussed earlier, according to Chouliaraki’s discourse analysis of international disaster news,

³ See attachment 2 for the topic list

the category of emergency news is most successful in establishing a global interconnected relationship between victim and spectator based on cosmopolitan ethics, leading to a global sense of solidarity and cooperation between the audience and the represented sufferers. It stresses the agency of both victim and spectator and can promote global action and cooperation to help based on a cosmopolitan solidarity (Chouliaraki, 2006: 136).

The particular video clip we have selected contains a narrative that is very close to this description: It begins with a short presentation of the chaos and panic happening during and just after the earthquake, followed by images of Nepalese people rescuing victims from the debris of the buildings, a short interview with a Nepalese witness, and by footage of a police officer trying to help by policing the chaotic traffic. This is followed by before/after images of a famous tower in Kathmandu that collapsed because of the earthquake after which comes a short interview with a Belgian witness who stayed in a children's home in Kathmandu. The narrative is closed by mentioning that international help is needed. There are clear ways of humanizing and personalizing the stories and victims of the earthquake as well as ways to help (by international aid).

The third part of the focus groups, after discussing the video clip, we showed participants screenshots of how Facebook offered ways of (re)acting to the events of the earthquake (with a donate button, a safety check option, news from small aid organization and news feeds to stay up to date).⁴ We have chosen to use Facebook as the exemplary social medium because it was most likely at the time that all participants at least *knew* about this social medium, and most likely they would even *use* it regularly. After showing these images we asked participants how much they knew about these affordances and how they have, or would have used them in the event of the disaster.

All focus groups were transcribed ad verbatim and transcripts are available upon request. After this, the transcripts have been coded and analyzed with the help of the qualitative analysis software NVivo following the principles of grounded theoretical traditions by first coding openly and then axially (Thomas, 2006). After this a third step of selective coding was carried out for a more clear overview of the most important findings and a structured presentation and report (Boeije, 2010). The data from the focus groups were considerably valuable and are discussed in chapters 5 and 6 of the dissertation. In addition to

⁴ See attachment 3 and 4 (for the Dutch and the English version)

existing theoretical and empirical academic work, the findings also informed the design of a wide-scale survey.

Doing a survey

The goal of the survey was to ascertain more large-scale, generalizable information about people's thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards mediated distant suffering. While, as Ang (1991: 135) has rightly noted, such large-scale empirical endeavors necessarily 'violate' any approximation of truth and a socially constructed reality, it does contribute to a more broader picture of the public at large and thus adds another piece of the puzzle of the audience in relation to distant suffering. It also serves as a way to further advance the field of audience studies vis-à-vis distant suffering because the survey can be replicated and used by other scholars in the future. Developing a valid and reliable survey can serve future comparative research (i.e. cross-national), experimental research (i.e. using the developed scales to measure people's attitude towards news about distant suffering in different settings or contexts) as well as more *ad hoc* studies in case of an emergent disaster.

Developing the constructs

To measure the attitudes and considerations of a Western audience in Flanders, we formulated and developed several constructs. With constructs we mean a series of questions that relate to a single topic and can be answered by a person by means of a scale (usually ranging from 1 – 5) (cf. Arlt, Hoppe & Wolling, 2011; Steenbergen, 1996). These constructs are: (1) connectedness, (2) agency, (3) sympathy, (4) priority and (5) empathy. These will be extensively discussed and evaluated in chapter 7. The development of these final constructs in the survey followed several re-evaluative steps which we will further explain in this chapter.

First, we developed *theoretical* constructs of 'distance', 'moral responsibility', 'denial' (cf. Seu, 2010), and 'just-world theory' (cf. von Engelhard & Jansz, 2014) by drawing on the findings from the literature review. These theoretical constructs were not to last, but functioned as a basis from which we could develop our *final* and statistically reliable and valid constructs. For example, an initial scale measuring 'perceived distance' towards the suffering was based on Cameron and Payne's (2011: 15) proposed construct to measure perceived distance but we later removed some of the items/questions that were part of this construct as they were awkwardly phrased or did not yield with the first exploratory analysis (see

below). Moral responsibility was measured by directly asking people about their perceived moral responsibility (von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014) and feelings of guilt (Burnett & Lunsford, 1994). Statements relating to ‘denial’ and statements about moral agency (e.g. ‘I think I can help the victims’ and ‘I believe there is nothing that can be done to help’), were formulated based on findings by Seu (2010) and other empirical audience research (i.e. Kyriakidou, 2015; Scott, 2014) to develop the theoretical construct of ‘moral agency’.

Second, these theoretically and conceptually based constructs were phrased in words that were found to be regularly used during the focus groups. Based on the findings of the focus groups, we added two more constructs, namely ‘empathy’ and ‘sympathy’ (see also chapter 7). Eventually, we developed six *hypothetical* constructs; distance, moral responsibility, moral agency, ‘just-world theory’, empathy and sympathy.

Finalizing the online survey

As a third step into developing the survey, we added questions about people’s news consumption behavior and overall use of media (both on- and offline). These questions were added so that we would be able to contextualize the findings related to the identified constructs with people’s news consumption behavior and preferences.

A fourth step into the process was to present the survey to ten people who were asked to fill in the questions while evaluating and interpreting the questions and statements out-loud (De Grove, Cauberghe & Van Looy., 2014). During these initial try-outs of the survey some questions were considered to be unclear, wrongly formulated or misunderstood so they were either rephrased or cut out. Remarkably, all statements about ‘just world beliefs’ such as ‘people owe it to themselves if bad things happen’ or ‘people are rewarded and punished in the way they deserve’ (see also von Engelhardt & Jansz 2014, Lipkus 1991; Correia et al., 2012) were considered to be too unequivocal and therefore left out.

Fifth, a second try-out was carried out by conducting a small-scale online survey (N=130 after data cleaning), followed by selected statistical analyses to refine the survey⁵. Outliers, questions that were answered unequivocally and questions that were still considered as awkwardly phrased were cut out. A first exploratory factor analysis (a statistical analysis technique which helps to look for constructs by grouping statements of a survey based on

⁵ This version of the survey can be looked into upon request.

similarity of answers (Arlt et al., 2011; Bobo, 1991) was done to explore how the statements and the belonging hypothetical constructs held. Questions that complicated the outcomes of this exploratory factor analysis too much (i.e. lowering the eigenvalue to less than the minimally required 1.0) were left out as well (Bobo, 1991).

After this first exploratory factor analysis, we compiled a final version of the survey, consisting of three parts: (1) demographics, (2) media and news consumption, and (3) statements pertaining to people's thoughts, feelings and attitude towards mediated distant suffering. As part of the latter, we included a 2.43 minute long news clip from VRT, the Flemish public broadcaster. The video covers the famine in Africa and was originally aired on 13 March 2017. The narrative starts with the news anchor informing the viewers that they can donate to a nationally coordinated aid organization (Consortium 12-12), followed by images of the dire need for help and an urgent call to action from the UN, and it ends by showing the struggles and difficulties of the sufferers. The entire discourse of the news item strongly reminded us of what Chouliaraki (2006) has identified as emergency news (see above).

The online survey was presented during the period of 8 till 10 May 2017 to a population of 450 people in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking Northern part of Belgium, with the help of a database that is managed by the Belgian research agency iVox who also helped cleaning the data and weighing the results on the basis of representativeness in age and gender of the Flemish population. The research panel of iVox consists of over 150.000 respondents which they have recruited through multiple channels and with multiple incentives⁶. Because of the large research panel and the efficient completion of the survey after continued weighing, correcting and resending invitations to fill in surveys based on shortcomings, the maximum weighing factor (based on age and gender) was 1,05⁷.

It is important to acknowledge the topical nature of our study as it was carried out in the same period as the unfolding humanitarian food crisis that struck Middle- and East-Africa, mainly Yemen, North-East Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan. Thus, we were able to observe people's opinions and attitudes regarding their reaction to and perception of mediated distant suffering in a period of said events, hence eliminating for example the issue of temporal distance (see chapter 2) in watching distant suffering.

⁶ More information about sampling procedure can be given upon request.

⁷ For some basic descriptive statistics, see attachment 1. More descriptive information can be given upon request.

Empirical chapters

Chapter 5 – Watching disaster news on- and offline

A focus group study on audiences experiencing news about far-away disasters and distant suffering in a post-broadcast society

Under revision at *Television and New Media*.

Abstract

In a post-broadcast society with both on- and offline news media widely available, there are many ways for an audience to (actively) consume news about distant suffering. This focus group study looks into the combined use of broadcast media (television) and a post-broadcast platform (Facebook) for watching disaster news. It is hypothesized that the interactive possibilities offered online to watch and experience the news, combined with watching news on television, can help in fostering a closer relation between a Western audience and the distant suffering. Informed by concepts from social- and moral psychology, our findings show that personal narratives on social media have the potential to incite a more personal connection between the audience and the distant sufferer, but also that this potential was not to be overestimated.

Keywords:

Distant suffering, Disasters, News, Facebook, Audience, Focus groups

Introduction

In April of 2015, an earthquake shocked the world when it hit Nepal hard. Thousands were wounded, hundreds died. Historical sites were ruined and famous buildings collapsed. The earthquake gained a lot of attention worldwide not only because of its scale, but arguably mainly due to its epicentre being located in the middle of the capital city of Kathmandu and its historical surroundings, a popular location for Western tourists. In response to the many local, national and international concerns, Facebook made available a ‘safety-check’ so that those who could have been at the site of the earthquake (e.g. tourists, local citizens, expats et cetera) could mark themselves as ‘safe’ for their friends and family online.⁸ Two days later

⁸ See: <https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/10102050030813611>

when the damage of the earthquake became more visible, Facebook released another added application on their social network site: a donation button. This button was presented as “an easy way to donate” in order to “support Nepal Earthquake survivors”. This was the first time that both these functions were used and implemented on such a wide scale.⁹ Additionally, the presented case is exemplar for our contemporary mediascape where disasters are not only reported and consumed through traditional (offline) news media but where people retrieve news online and, arguably, can be more involved and engaged by means of interacting through post-broadcast media platforms such as Facebook (Karnowski et al. 2017; Prior 2007). In the case of Nepal, people, both tourists and local citizens, could mark themselves as “safe”, spectators could watch live feeds and interact through online donations, thus there were plenty of potential online interactions between spectators and victims. Spectators from all over the world could follow the developments live on social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter and people were subsequently invited to respond to these developments.

This study will be an exploration of how post-broadcast media, Facebook in particular, can influence the way that the audience experiences watching news about distant suffering. In doing so, we aim to contribute to two academic fields of interest. First, we set forth that the interactive affordances of post-broadcast media in combination with watching news on television can facilitate a closer relation between the audience and the distant suffering. As such, we hope to further and deepen the emerging body of literature about audiences in relation to the mediation of distant suffering (see for example Kyriakidou 2017; Huiberts & Joye 2017; Scott 2015). Second, the study expands the more general discussion about people’s news consumption on social media. It is recognized that we ought to move beyond a classic triangulation of mediation-production-reception and should look into the (inter)active ways of post-broadcast media which can possibly lead to a different way of experiencing watching the news (Houston et al. 2015; Picone et al. 2015; Vis 2013). The media landscape is rapidly changing and people can potentially actively contribute to dominant modes of discourse, personally seek out how, when, where, ... they consume the news, and set out their own agenda (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2015; Prior 2007). Given the combined on- and offline news consumption and the potential interaction on social media, our research question thus investigates whether the contemporary landscape of post-broadcast media has implications

⁹ See: <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2015/04/support-nepal-earthquake-survivors-an-easy-way-to-donate-facebook-to-match-up-to-2-million/>

for audiences' involvement with and understanding of the distant suffering. Can we identify the extent to which social media users' involvement with such news differs from their viewership of broadcast news, particularly with regard to shifts in audiences' moral and practical responses to distant suffering?

Audiences and the mediation of distant suffering

In previous research, attention was often paid to the media coverage of distant suffering and to moral and ethical considerations about the reception of said news (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006; Cottle 2014; Joye 2010; Moeller 1999). Recently, these studies have been complemented with empirical evidence about the audience (Ahva and Hellman 2015; Kyriakidou 2015; Kyriakidou 2017; Scott 2015; Seu 2015; von Engelhardt and Jansz 2014; Huiberts & Joye 2017). There has been a growing interest in audience reactions to distant suffering in the context of post-broadcast media. Von Engelhardt and Jansz (2014), for example, looked more closely at online possibilities when they studied audience responses to the online viral video about Joseph Kony in 2012, a video with a strong moral appeal towards its viewers. They found that the post-humanitarian narrative of the video “has been successful in creating a sense of personal moral responsibility” (von Engelhardt and Jansz 2014, 481). Madianou (2013) has also looked into strategies of humanitarian campaigns in social media. Her work, though focused on the production site of post-broadcast media, demonstrates the possibilities and affordances of social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter, in reaching out to an audience. The focus of von Engelhardt and Jansz' (2014) research as well as that of Madianou (2013) was mainly on the (post-)humanitarian potential of online media. An important difference between focusing on humanitarian media rather than on news media is that a humanitarian message inherently appeals to people's morality due to their particular production context and specific objectives. News media on the other hand are supposed to be informative, rather than normative. Scott (2015) has studied this area more thoroughly, by investigating how people actually make use of online opportunities for engaging with news about distant suffering. His findings do not underscore the potential of online news media which led him to conclude that lack of care, inaction and non-engagement of the audience towards the victim is still based on “the nature and acceptability of pre-existing discursive resources” (Scott 2015, 637). This means that the arguments used by the audience to explain or justify their non-engagement and lack of interest towards the distant suffering are similar

to the arguments that were uttered well before the post-broadcast era and have thus not changed accordingly.

Media users in the current media landscape

It is cautiously acknowledged in recent studies that media users can play an increasingly important part in the production of news although scepticism about this is equally present (Picone et al. 2015; Goode 2009; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Couldry 2008). The more optimistic point of view underscores possibilities of citizen journalism (Bruns 2008), which could impact processes of agenda setting and gatekeeping (Goode 2009; Meraz and Papacharissi 2013), interaction with and response to news media all the way towards an increasingly democratic media environment (Couldry 2008; Dahlgren 2005; Iosifidis 2011; van Os et al. 2007). Pessimistic voices stress the maintenance of inequalities, and the news media's interdependency to traditional media and institutions, possibly reinforcing existing dominant modes of discourse (Gerhards and Schäfer 2010; Goode 2009).

Whether or not the potentials of online media come true depends largely on the actual use of the interactive affordances by citizens. Social media have been seen to be increasingly used by internet users to stay informed, share news and to actively participate in the production of news content (Purcell et al. 2010). However, other scholars have demonstrated that television is still the main source for news information (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2015; Digimeter 2017¹⁰) even if this source is increasingly complemented by online resources (Nielsen and Schrøder 2014; Picone et al. 2015). People are thus “checking, sharing, clicking and linking” their way through the news (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2014, 664) but there is little evidence so far that people are indeed fully making use of the interactive potential.

Relating with distant suffering: distance, actuality and scale

There are many online possibilities for engaging and interacting with the news and with far-away victims who are portrayed by news media. At least in theory, distances can be bridged or reduced by the click of a mouse and the audience can directly communicate with people on the other side of the world. To explore how the audience relate with the victim when facing

¹⁰ Available at: <http://www.imec-int.com/nl/digimeter>

mediated distant suffering, this study is inspired by three concepts from the discipline of moral psychology which were proposed by von Engelhardt in his 2015 work; distance, actuality and scale. In the following sections we will discuss what each of these concepts mean to the audience related to the suffering in a post-broadcast era and more specifically, in an environment where the audience as well as the victim make use of Facebook.

Distance

With distance, we refer not only to geographical distance, but also to the perceived *psychological* distance which includes socio-cultural distances (cf. Liberman et al. 2007). It is said that a decreased perceived cultural and/or geographical distance is of importance in “fostering compassionate responses to suffering” (Loewenstein and Small 2007). Geographical and thereby physical space cannot be decreased in the case of mediated events, but *social* distance (see also Fujita et al. 2006, Huiberts & Joye 2015) could if people experience themselves living in a shared online community, namely Facebook. It is possible for those who live far away to directly reach out to a distant audience without going through traditional gatekeepers such as professional journalists or traditional media (see also Madianou 2013). Since all involved groups, the sufferer *and* the spectator, share the same online community and are able to directly communicate with one another, could this decrease the perceived distance between them?

On the other hand, the gap between both remains huge, especially when also considering the *experience* of suffering. Indeed, von Engelhardt notes that to an individual who has not physically experienced the actual suffering now or previously, the mediated suffering may simply be too “*incomprehensible*” (2015, 700 emphasis in original). He writes; “it might be that this lack of *experiential overlap* is an obstacle to empathetic responses towards distant victims that is greater than those created by geographical distance and perceived cultural or ethnic dissimilarity” (von Engelhardt 2015, 700 emphasis in original).

The sense of being part of a shared online community echoes an often heard ideal of a cosmopolitan community where people engage with one another at a global level (cf. Chouliaraki 2006; Kyriakidou 2009; Ong 2009). However, rather than facilitating a cosmopolitan society, Facebook might maintain a communitarian environment (Scott 2015). That is, a community which is less based on increased diversity and expansion of global social

networks but more on a “bounded sense of belonging” (Scott 2015, 638 emphasis in original) which could prevent people from reaching out to distant others.

Actuality

The second notion concerns actuality or the sense of urgency, most evidently following the fact that “witnessing suffering through the mass media differs from witnessing unmediated suffering in that the sufferer and the spectator do not share the same physical space” (von Engelhardt 2015, 701). In other words, it is the lack of simultaneously sharing a physical space that diminishes a sense of actuality of the people and events depicted. The events and victims remain an abstraction, the audience cannot ascertain the authenticity of the events that are mediated so that one can wonder if “these distant and strange events are actually and truly happening in this world” (von Engelhardt 2015, 701).

While on social network sites such as Facebook there is no shared *physical* space, the shared online space could still promote a sense of actuality by the inclusion of live footage and non-professional, unedited images. Especially unedited live reporting by citizen journalists on the scene can help in inciting a stronger sense of actuality as such personal and unedited content on one’s timeline can lead to a more intimate and *authentic* experience or imagining of what is happening (Crawford 2010; Ahva and Hellman 2015; Houston et al. 2015; Goggin 2010). The continuous and intense contact between the sufferers and the audience could foster a sense of directness, authenticity and actuality that broadcast media alone are less capable of.

To engage with victims’ personal stories or with live footage on social media is only likely if media users actually do encounter or seek out live and/or unedited news features about distant suffering on their personal timelines on Facebook. Earlier research has shown an increase in the use of social network sites as an addition to traditional news media consumption (Lee and Ma 2011; Schrøder 2014; Picone et al. 2015). Drawing on national data from the US, Kim, Chen and Gil de Zúñiga (2013) found that media users do in fact ‘stumble upon’ news when surfing online. Nielsen and Schrøder pointed out that social media are becoming increasingly important for news consumption although they admit that their data, based on a cross-country comparative survey in eight countries, do “challenge the assumption that social media necessarily lead to more engaged forms of news media use” (2014, 484).

Scale

Concerning scale, people may be less emotionally and morally tuned towards large-scale atrocities in contrast to events featuring a so-called “*identified victim*” (von Engelhardt 2015, 703 emphasis in original). Earlier research proves that people can find it difficult to understand or comprehend large-scale suffering to its full extent (Small, Loewenstein and Slovic 2007). Large-scale suffering is found to lead to a ‘psychic numbing’, referring to the idea that emotional responses diminish when the number of victims increases (Slovic 2007, 79). It is unclear what underlying social psychological mechanisms explain this state of numbing, it is hypothesized that people may be protecting themselves from an emotional overload because of the scale of the suffering, but it is also argued that people are simply unable to be emotionally involved with such numbers of victims at such a distance (for more about this discussion, see Cameron and Payne 2011; Mayer, Slovic and Mayorga 2016).

Nevertheless, if caring about and engaging with mass suffering is not possible, the depiction of one victim, for example by a human interest kind of frame, can be helpful for spectators to learn about the scale and depth of the suffering (Valkenburg et al. 1999). Both broadcast media as well as post-broadcast media regularly make use of a human interest frame to engage the audience and help in understanding the development of disastrous events. Henceforth, being confronted with individual stories of victims may lead to a more profound *understanding* of at least the *depth* of the suffering which may spur people’s engagement with the suffering.

Methodology

To better understand how people actually perceive their relation to distant suffering, ten focus groups were carried out (n=51, see attachment 1) in January and February of 2016. Participants were sampled through the process of snowballing and were divided in groups based on age, gender, and educational level (Boeije 2010; Kyriakidou 2014). The focus groups were homogenous in age and educational level to promote and encourage open and honest dialogue amongst peers (Kitzinger 1994). These focus groups are not necessarily representative, lacking in diversity amongst the participants in the focus groups as well as in the general demographics selected (i.e. ignoring ethnicity, social status or class, ...). Still, the goal of this explorative study is not to generalize and confirm hypotheses, but rather to gain

new insights and incite new hypotheses. We will reflect more on this towards the end of this article.

There was a carefully prepared topic list for the focus groups (cf. Seu 2010). Participants were first asked open questions regarding their news consumption habits and how they inform themselves on bad news from distant countries, both online and offline. Consequently, they were shown a short video clip of a news item from a well-known news broadcaster in Belgium about the earthquake in Nepal, which can be categorized as a typical natural disaster, presented as an ‘emergent’ event (see also Chouliaraki 2006) with many victims and not prone to (global) political interests. After discussing the video clip, the participants were asked about Facebook’s affordances like the safety check or the donation button. They were then informed about the active role that Facebook adopted in mediating news about this distant event and about the means to interact with people far-away. To conclude, we inquired our participants about which media they thought were most effective in engaging them with distant disastrous events and suffering.

Data obtained from the focus groups were analysed using NVivo11 and followed a grounded theoretical approach of coding openly, axially and selectively to develop new theory and hypotheses (Oliver 2011; Boeije 2010). The result of this was a ‘coding-tree’, giving a meticulous overview of both differences and similarities between different participants and different focus groups (Boeije 2010).

Seeking out the news about distant places?

Results revealed little evidence of the more productive, pro-active, post-broadcast media user as described in some academic literature (see for example Broersma and Graham 2010; Hermida 2010; Schrøder 2014; Vis 2013). Moreover, most participants agreed they were not very active in seeking out news about distant places either online or via traditional media.

Facebook was neither sought out as the most primary (i.e. most important) source for the news nor were participants inclined to contribute to the news process by sharing or commenting. It was often said by participants that mobile devices, phone applications as well as their Facebook timelines would be the initial (rather than primary) way of hearing about bad news in distant places, either by ‘push-messages’ or because of shared news stories online. In addition, many explained that they appreciated being able to consume news on social media such as Facebook because it gave them the opportunity to actively select the

news they were interested in and dismiss what they were less interested in. Bettie's (40, focus group 10) idea about watching the news was exemplary for this line of thought:¹¹

I will initially read news on social media [Twitter and Facebook]. There are so many things that are nonsense but I will click on some of the news items that I think are relevant. I will later also check elsewhere which information is correct. Nowadays, you have to check all the news.

Thus, social media play an increasingly important role in introducing people to topics in the news. Yet, it was mostly immediately said that much of the news encountered on Facebook originated from well-established mainstream media sources such as “De Standaard” and “Het Laatste Nieuws” (two well-known newspapers) and were not necessarily related to events in distant places. Most of the online encountered news came from traditional, professional news outlets, rather than alternative, or non-professional, user generated news sources.

Interestingly, most participants were very self-reflective in assessing their relationship to the media and they would often talk about how mainstream media play a major role in their daily lives and in formulating their own opinions. Discussions would relate to the (level of) subjectivity of news media on television, why Western events get more exposure on the news than non-Western events, the level of sensationalism, how traditional media may be commercially motivated, and how the participants themselves are influenced by these possible biases and news frames. In other words, they would reflect on their own dependency on mainstream, traditional news for keeping themselves informed. Gerda (54, focus group 2) for example stated:

there are countries that may be far more affected [by disasters], but that you never hear about. Japan or somewhere like that. But we never get to see images about that, do we?

The critical look towards news media as gatekeepers and agenda-setters that prioritize news in near-by places over news in distant countries was regularly mentioned as an influential factor to the way they perceive news from distant places. When talking about disaster news, Carry (22, focus group 6) for instance argued:

¹¹ All quotes in this article are translated from Dutch and all names have been changed to protect and respect the privacy of the participants.

They [news media] play a major role [in our lives]. For example, the Paris attacks were on the news all the time with updates every five minutes. That day, there were other attacks in Jakarta or somewhere and that was only a short two-minute item on the news and that was it. And yes, that was it for me too then.

In the above two quotes of Carry (22) and Gerda (54), a certain moral discomfort for not seeking other information may already have become visible. Indeed, many people explained they would often struggle over not being more active in seeking out other information about events in distant places, while simultaneously realizing that it was impossible to stay abreast of all events worldwide. They argued that they had to prioritize what kind of news events they are interested in and that distance and proximity played a major role in this evaluation. Francois' (53, focus group 9) following statement was exemplary for this. After he explained to be less interested in far-away news since it would not have any impact on his own life, he stated: "it is pretty selfish but it is, I think, the truth".

Younger participants seemed to be more curious to retrieve information from alternative news sources. In-depth online news articles, documentaries were mentioned, in addition to their use of international news sources such as CNN or BBC in comparison to older participants who relied more heavily on local media. Surprisingly, not Facebook but the websites of news agencies or qualitative journalism initiatives attracted their attention the most. As Gert's (24, focus group 1) efforts show:

Sometimes I will take the trouble of going to a website like Al-Jazeera, which is like the CNN of Turkey or the Middle East I suppose? They focus more on Middle-Eastern news. But I don't do that all the time you know.

In conclusion, Facebook could introduce news events to our participants, but to stay informed on a structural and regular basis, they most heavily relied on traditional media, especially television. Young people were slightly more interested in global news media such as CNN or BBC but eventually it is the traditional, local news media that are most often preferred to stay informed about worldwide events. While our participants stated to be aware of their own dependence on televised news media and were quite critical towards themselves and said media, this critical positioning by the audience appeared to us as rather superficial and short-lived. That is, the interviews did not provide evidence of an in-depth contestation of the

hierarchical portrayal of distant suffering nor did the participants actively look for alternative, less mainstream news information. Joye (2009) has described a “hierarchy of distant suffering” as displayed by news media in Belgium, where Western suffering was found to be presented as being “comprehensible and close” in contrast to non-Western suffering which is regularly framed as “no cause for concern of action” (Joye 2009, 45). In their reasoning, our participants resonated this typology of suffering as it went hand-in-hand with a moral discomfort, which we will go into now.

Distance: ‘a Western culture’

Distance was not to be underestimated in the way participants experienced news about distant suffering both online and offline, in the way they watched to and responded to the video about the Nepal earthquake, and when they were asked their opinion and/or experience about the online possibilities to interact. It was especially the incomprehensibility that von Engelhardt (2015, 700) noted that made the distance an obstacle that seemed to be impossible to overcome. People used their feelings of incomprehensibility to explain and even justify their lack of interest in and engagement with distant events. For example, when Sara (55, focus group 4) considered how she felt about disaster news in distant places she said:

You don't really dwell on what you know, you really would had to experience it yourself I suppose.

As this quote shows, it is truly the lack of experience that hampers true engagement. The participants in the focus groups *did* put effort in the understanding of -or empathizing with- the suffering they saw on the video but they also expressed the limits of their capacity to do so. For many, the suffering in Nepal was regularly described as simply being too distant, both culturally and physically. Besides, many were inclined to prioritize events happening close-by over events happening far-away. After seeing the video, many expressed they had forgotten the events in Nepal (which had happened over a year earlier). Although most felt guilty over forgetting it, they explained this to be because it was too far away and therefore too intangible to really dwell on. A frequently mentioned event that the participants used to illustrate this feeling was the 2015 terrorist attack in Paris, which is not more than a three-hour drive away for most participants and took place only three months before our focus groups were held. Many had visited Paris before, knew friends who once or still live there.

Participants would use this event to illustrate and rationalize their particular and favoured interest for and engagement with events happening close-by. Mieke (35, focus group 4) for instance said:

Eventually I will dwell on this [the Paris attacks] longer than something that happens in a far-away exotic country. [...] Paris is a Western culture you know.

The above extract not only shows a preference and priority for news about close-by events, but also explains how it is especially a *socio-cultural* distance that is not easily overcome. Mieke admits to identify more strongly with, care more about and engage more with people who share her Western culture.

The notion of a shared online community such as Facebook where the participants could identify with people *outside of* their Western community was never brought up by the participants, nor was it seen as an affordance of post-broadcast media such as Facebook. When people were asked how they felt about Facebook potentially bringing victims closer to the audience because *all* of them use the same network, this was met with doubt and scepticism. Facebook was more considered to be used for establishing, maintaining and securing an already existing and familiar network of friends and family. Moreover, Facebook was often even declined as a serious news source as many only use it for entertainment purposes. Any news that would be encountered would be dismissed on the grounds of being sensationalist, possibly misleading for commercial purposes or just representing an altogether false reality:

I don't like that network [Facebook] one bit. It's all nasty and I hardly post anything myself anyway. Facebook is impersonal. Really impersonal. It doesn't show reality. (Karim, 20, group 7)

Not one participant expressed to have ever encountered personal stories from non-Western distant witnesses or victims online. Online possibilities for seeking more direct contact with victims in distant places were not sought out. Rather than entering an expanding global, maybe even cosmopolitan, online shared community, people preferred to stay in their own close-by Belgium social circles.

Actuality: the un-polished story that goes viral

Despite such communitarian tendencies online, Facebook *was* considered to be able to draw the victim closer to the viewer albeit less based on a shared identity but more based on a sense of urgency and indeed a sense of *actuality*. For some, personal non-edited narratives of victims on Facebook about distant events were considered to have more impact. Such raw, unedited footage was regarded as more profound and honest and altogether more ‘real’ or authentic than the polished and edited version generally presented by broadcast media. The non-professional images created a personal bond because people felt or could imagine having easily shot the images themselves if had they been there. Not only did this help in establishing a more personal bond between victim and spectator, it also facilitated a sense of urgency about the news. According to Marie (23, focus group 3):

I think the images on Facebook are far more unpolished. Normally, on the news, interviews are practiced and interviewees are calm. In contrast, whatever kind of personal account you read on Facebook, these are pure and basically deal with what that person was thinking at that particular moment. It's so much more unpolished and more pervasive.

And Melanie (31, focus group 8), who talked about unedited footage that she saw about the attacks on 9/11 said:

Somebody just filmed that. That really gave me goose bumps. That was just an ordinary person who was standing there, recording everything with his telephone.

Another aspect of Facebook that participants, especially the younger generation, discussed and which helped them to better understand the actuality of events, was the sharing of news messages on timelines both by themselves and others. Especially when stories were shared repeatedly by online friends it could make a more profound impression, as illustrated by Meredith (23, focus group 3):

To me, it's literally about the repetition. Then you realize that there is much ado about something which makes you realize you might be missing out on something important and then you will try to look it up.

Stories can go ‘viral’ on Facebook and/or other social network sites which can gain a lot of attention and eventually thrive the audience’s sense of actuality and indeed even the scale of an event because of the repeatedly shared images and news stories they would encounter on Facebook.

This kind of repetition and consequential sense of urgency that was experienced online was limited in its effectiveness as our participants eventually indicated that they would assess the suffering as still too far-away and distant. Most ‘viral’ stories that our participants encountered were about stories, victims or events that related to Western events. Viral stories about events in Germany and France were often used as examples to explain Facebook’s greater impact on their own lives while stories from the Middle-East or Africa were used as examples to explain their waning interest towards events of distant suffering. Monica’s (21, focus group 5) explanation is quite typical for this kind of reasoning as she talked about the online viral “Pray For Paris”-campaign, a campaign that many of her online friends shared and talked about on social media¹²:

But then, a couple of days later there was a similar thing for Istanbul and then I only saw like one, maybe two “Pray for Istanbul” photos on my timeline

Still, just as they displayed and experienced a moral discomfort for not being more active in finding alternative news sources or stories in general, they were also aware of this lack of engagement with and moral inaction towards non-Western stories and people.

Scale: the human interest frame

As discussed, personal stories and the human interest frame, both on- and offline, can help the audience to more easily empathize with and eventually better understand the scale –or at least the *depth*- of suffering. Yet, not many people expressed a desire or willingness to seek out (personal) stories of victims in far-away places, nor did people really looked for live footage on their social networks or elsewhere online. In other words, there was hardly any direct, or indirect contact between the victim and the distant spectator.

¹² See <http://time.com/4114288/paris-instagram/>

Some of the affordances on Facebook such as the safety-button, donation button, live-feeds or personal witness accounts may theoretically lead to a more proximate understanding of distant events and people. However, most participants were unfamiliar with these kinds of affordances. When they were introduced to these affordances, participants would react rather sceptic towards the idea that these can facilitate a greater sense of proximity but they were intrigued by the possibilities at the same time. A typical response would be:

Well, I have never heard about these options on Facebook. I like the idea of a safety-button but not that of a donation button. I don't necessarily feel closer to, or more involved with them because of that donation button.

(Sam, 24, focus group 6)

The kind of scepticism that Sam shows was prominent among the participants' reactions. It was regularly based on the assumption that the online affordances would be more relevant to one's own friends and family. In addition, the donation-button was mistrusted because people would not know where their money would go to, a typical response to humanitarian and charity campaigns (Scott 2015; Seu 2010). One such response was:

I would be more inclined to give to people I know, or support small charities rather than support something through a donation button on Facebook. I mean, you don't know where that money goes to right? (Evelien, 23, focus group 5).

These kinds of reactions towards donation in general, where especially bigger organizations are considered to be unreliable, strongly reminded us of what Seu (2010, 442) has identified as "strategies of denial". These strategies of people to mitigate their own sense of moral responsibility have been found in other research as well (Huiberts & Joye 2017; Scott 2014).

Discussion and conclusion

At the beginning of this article it was hypothesized that online possibilities to interact with news media, combined with consuming news via more traditional means, can help a Western audience to be more engaged with the suffering. More specifically for this study, it was posed that Facebook could help in fostering and forging a more direct relationship between spectators and victims. For one, the shared online community could help in decreasing the

social distance while less professional footage coming directly from victims or witnesses at the scene could assist the audience in experiencing an increased sense of actuality. Moreover, the human interest frame, was believed to create a better understanding of the scale of suffering. On the other hand, scholars have stated that television remains the main source of news information (Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2015; Digimeter 2017) calling into question the potential of online possibilities.

Drawing on ten focus groups, we have found little evidence to support the initially posed hypothesis of a more (inter)active, global society and a morally engaged audience, hence confirming findings of some earlier studies (cf. Scott 2015). It became clear that post-broadcast media were often seen as an initial way for news consumption but that traditional media such as television were still seen as the best option for the most reliable, clear and explanatory overview of today's global events. Most participants were critical towards themselves in relying so much on these established forms of media, but they did not often look for other kinds of news sources. Indeed, many regarded Facebook as a sensational, commercial medium for entertainment or social purposes only.

Still, Facebook was perceived as more effective than television news media in establishing a more personal connection between victims and spectators, thus increase a sense of urgency and actuality. Non-professional footage such as videos made by non-professional witnesses at the scene were considered to be more pervasive and personal than the clean and professionally edited news items on television. Stories that go 'viral' online made a profound impact on the audience –especially on the younger members– and were able to establish a sense of urgency. Interestingly, these benefits of Facebook were not seen to be applicable in the case of a non-Western disastrous event such as the earthquake in Nepal. Most examples that the participants mentioned to illustrate their online (personal) engagement with a far-away disaster were related to Western events (e.g. the 9/11 attacks, the attacks in Paris). In addition, many were not aware of Facebook's interactive tools and those who knew about it, did not feel inclined to make use of them.

In conclusion, rather than seeking out contact with people in other (non-)Western countries and building towards a cosmopolitan community, people prefer to stay in their own circle and share their own stories which resonates the communitarian or even narcissistic virtual community (Scott, 2015; Chouliaraki 2013). Nevertheless, the moral discomfort that was so often observed during the focus groups, shows that people were reflective and critical

towards themselves and their lack of engagement with non-Western people and events. Many emphasized being unable to truly comprehend the far-away suffering. Post-broadcast media – especially user-generated media and personal narratives – can help in facilitating a more profound and personal connection and help audiences to gain a better comprehension of the suffering of distant others. Future research can benefit from further exploring how and why such non-professional, non-edited footage of live witnesses is able to help viewers in understanding far-away suffering.

There is a possibility that the reactions found in our focus groups may differ from reactions by other social (minority) groups (i.e. elderly, children, immigrants, refugees, *et cetera*) we have not invited for our study. For example, immigrants with family overseas or refugees coming from conflict areas may react differently to distant news, or make far more use of the advantages of Facebook as a global network. Future research could further explore these groups of people. In addition, this study has presented findings from a qualitative research project that drew on focus groups and is thus limited in generalizing its conclusions to a broader population. It would be interesting to quantitatively investigate how people use online media to stay informed about distant events on a wider scale and how this relates to people's moral or emotional engagement with distant victims.

Chapter 6 – Close, but not close enough? Audience’s reactions to domesticated distant suffering in international news coverage

Eline Huiberts & Stijn Joye

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Abstract

Journalists domesticate news about distant events to bring such events closer to the audience and thus make them more relevant and appealing; however, knowledge about the actual audience’s reactions towards domesticated news is lacking. Central to this study is understanding how an audience makes use of domestication strategies in viewing and reacting to mediated distant suffering. Earlier text-based research has found several ways of domesticating distant suffering that can invite an audience to care (Joye, 2015). Building further on this media-centered study, ten focus groups reveal a two-flow model of domestication, consisting of first-level domestication on the production side by journalists and second-level domestication, in which audience members themselves use strategies of domestication to make sense of distant suffering.

Keywords:

distant suffering; domestication; audience research; social psychology; focus groups; news media

Introduction

Meredith (23): I have difficulty empathizing. It’s terrible of me I think, but personally, I’ve forgotten about it already the next day. Because, well, it’s so far away, and it won’t happen here anyway, so I don’t really feel personally involved. I do think about, like, how they are going to live in the future, with all that poverty and misery. But then I think more about the consequences for them, and well, that disappears, because you’re not

personally involved or included in any kind of help organization or something.1 (Focus group 3, female group, high education level)¹³

The above quote of Meredith, a young Belgian woman who took part in one of the focus groups, was in response to the question of how she felt after seeing a news item about the victims of an earthquake in Nepal that occurred in April 2015, 9 months earlier. Her answer reflects what many of the other participants also expressed: the (often unsuccessful) attempt to empathize with the victim, self-awareness of their own lack of care toward those they see suffering onscreen, and their moral and emotional struggle to deal with this lack of empathy.

In the last few decades, the interdisciplinary study of mediated distant suffering has seen significant growth. Earlier research has often focused on moral and theoretical questions about the scope of care of the predominantly Western spectator for non-Western victims (cf. Boltanski, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Moeller, 1999) or on text-based studies about dominant modes of discourse concerning distant suffering (cf. Chouliaraki, 2006; Joye, 2010). Recently, there has been a growing body of literature concerned with empirical studies about audience reactions to distant suffering (Höijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2014; Scott, 2014, 2015; Seu, 2010, 2015; von Engelhardt and Jansz, 2014). Subscribing our-selves to the latter tradition of research, the main focus of this study was to ascertain how domesticated news of distant suffering can actually invite people in a Western setting to care. The potential of domestication in the context of suffering has previously been investigated, although predominantly from the production side. For instance, based on a critical discourse analysis, previous work has demonstrated several strategies of domestication that can bring distant suffering closer to the spectator, which can potentially lead to an increased sense of care and compassion (Joye, 2015). Although most research on domestication looks at the producers'/journalists' side of the story and/or relies on a textual analysis, this article urges to include the audience into the equation. How do domesticating strategies resonate among an audience? How do people make sense of dominant discourses from the news? After a brief literature review on the practice of domesticating distant suffering, the central concept of care will be operationalized for a more structured and clear empirical analysis of viewers' reactions to distant suffering. This is followed by an analysis of 10 focus groups that were conducted in

¹³ All quotes presented in this article are translated from Dutch, the language that was used during the focus groups. In addition, to protect the privacy of the participants, all names have been changed.

Belgium in 2016. We believe that Belgium, as exemplar for Western democracies in terms of social welfare, state of journalism, and richness of media outlets, can help us to gain more understanding about the perspective of a Western spectator toward the distant suffering.

Domesticating distant suffering

The journalistic practice of domestication generally refers to the framing of a foreign news event within the perceived national or local context of the audience (Clausen, 2004). Although integrating such a local or domestic perspective is nothing new – in 1979, Peterson stated that ‘the majority of foreign news is domestic news about foreign countries, not international news’ (p. 120) – it does appear to thrive in contemporary news reporting (Chang et al., 2012). According to Gurevitch et al. (1991), domesticating international events makes them comprehensible, appealing, and more relevant to local audiences. Although domestication is also defined as ‘the *discursive* adaptation of news from “outside” the nation-state so as to make it resonate with a national audience as it is perceived’ (Olausson, 2014: 711, emphasis added), we can easily understand why most research has chosen to focus on the production side and on the journalists whose discursive practices are investigated through textual analysis (Alasuutari et al., 2013; Joye, 2015; Olausson, 2014). For instance, Alasuutari et al. (2013) examined the range of constructed interconnections between the domestic and the global in news reporting on the Arab Spring and identified four modes of domestication: appealing to emotions, focusing on compatriots involved in the events, reporting on statements and acts by domestic actors, and utilizing the foreign event as a model that can be applied to local politics. Observing the range of constructed interconnections between the domestic and the global in news reporting on climate change, Olausson (2014: 715) has identified three discursive modes of domestication: ‘(1) introverted domestication, which disconnects the domestic from the global; (2) extroverted domestication, which interconnects the domestic and the global; and (3) counter-domestication, a deterritorialized mode of reporting that lacks any domestic epicenter’.

These discursive modes of domesticating international news were first explicitly linked to mediated distant suffering when we uncovered four dominant strategies of domestication employed by news producers to invite the audience to care (Joye, 2015). First, we found that journalists domesticate distant suffering by selecting emotionally narrated stories or eyewitness accounts of compatriots who were affected by the foreign event (*emotional*

domestication). A second domestication method focuses on aid-driven messages and is thus called *aid-driven domestication*. The third method, *familiarizing the unfamiliar*, is done by using certain narratives and styles to create a sense of familiarity and recognition surrounding events that might otherwise be impossible to imagine (i.e. hunger, famine, and earthquakes are difficult to understand or imagine for a Western audience due to the absence of experiential overlap). A fourth strategy is to discursively link the risks and stakes of the foreign event to the home country, a strategy we call '*what are the stakes*'. These four presented modes of domestication of distant suffering are theorized as being possibly effective for bringing distant suffering closer to the audience and inviting them to care.

To care or not to care; that is the question

Within the emerging academic field of distant suffering, concepts such as care, compassion, pity, sympathy, and empathy are regularly (and sometimes interchangeably) mentioned, but less often clearly defined and/or conceptualized. For this article, which draws on audience research in the context of mediated suffering, we argue for a more clear and delineated conceptualization. Future research could build further on the current conceptualization and definitions to guarantee continuity of current and future empirical audience research and research into mediated distant suffering.

Inspired by von Engelhardt (2015) and Huiberts and Joye (2015), we will conceptualize and operationalize the central notions of care and compassion using social psychological and moral psychological concepts. These psychological traditions differentiate between emotional and rational processes that can both lead to a sense of care and compassion. In this study, the two concepts of care and compassion *are* used interchangeably because both are the result of an interplay of emotional (empathetic) processes and rational (sympathetic) processes, which results in a sense of moral responsibility to help. Compassion is generally defined in the field of moral psychology as 'the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help' (Goetz et al., 2010 in von Engelhardt, 2015: 698), which bears many similarities with the definition of 'care'.

From the social psychological tradition, we have learned to take into account how people think (cognition), feel (affect), and behave (Ross and Nisbett, 1991; Vaughan and Hogg, 2010). To make sense of the concept of care in a context of mediated distant suffering and audience reactions toward it, we have chosen to extrapolate this sentiment along the lines of

the abovementioned ‘tripod’ of cognition, affect, and behavior (Huiberts and Joye, 2015; Ross and Nisbett, 1991). More specifically, for this study, the concept of care/compassion is subdivided into *empathy* – which is more related to people’s emotional reactions – and *sympathy*, which is more on the cognitive side of this continuum. However, it is important to acknowledge that these sentiments are neither completely emotionally based nor cognitively reasoned; they are rather a result of a complex and often subconscious interplay between these processes (see also Haidt, 2001; Loewenstein and Small, 2007; von Engelhardt, 2015).

Empathy

Von Engelhardt asserts that experiencing empathy ‘involves understanding another’s affective state (cognitive component of empathy) or an actual vicarious emotional experience (affective component of empathy)’ (Davis, 2006 and Eisenberg, 2000 in von Engelhardt, 2015: 699). Although there are indeed cognitive processes involved in empathetic reactions, in empathy, the focus lies on the affective state of both the sufferer and the spectator. The focus is on the capability of the spectator to crawl into the skin of the sufferer and *feel* what the sufferer feels, what is generally labeled as inciting experiential overlap. Such affective states are at the center of this article, especially that of the spectator and their attempt to emotionally experience the depicted suffering. Proximity, membership in one’s in-group, and a sense of perceived similarity are significant in facilitating empathy toward mediated suffering (Loewenstein and Small, 2007). Domestication of distant suffering, by for instance creating a sense of emotional proximity (e.g. by including someone from the home country into the narrative; see Joye, 2015), is thus an appropriate strategy to incite an affective state of empathy. We expect that viewers are more likely to identify and consequently empathize with suffering if a news item features someone who is more recognizable to the home audience who explains the kind of suffering foreigners experience.

Sympathy

In field of moral psychology, sympathy does ‘not so much involve experiencing the emotions of another as an effort to understand the difficulties faced by another and to emit supportive and caring responses’ (Turner and Stets, 2006, in von Engelhardt, 2015: 699). In contrast with the emotionally based sentiment of empathy, we consider sympathy to be the more rational component of caring. It is less about crawling into the skin of the victim and more about

creating an *understanding* about the difficulties and needs of the victim. It thus leads to a sense of care that requires an action to help. In other words, sympathy involves the kind of reasoning that can, in the end, lead to an idea of one's own *moral* code of conduct in relation to the victim. Domesticating strategies that aim to enhance a sense of understanding might lead spectators to be more sympathetic toward distant suffering. For example, because it can be difficult for a mainly Western audience to imagine what it is like to be starving, news narratives can be adjusted so that such an unfamiliar situation becomes slightly less unfamiliar and facilitate a reaction of sympathy (Huiberts and Joye, 2015). In addition, such understanding could lead to a sense of moral responsibility to help the victims.

Strategies of denial

Besides empathetic or sympathetic reactions, we also expect people to react to the mediated distant suffering by denying or neutralizing the suffering or their sense of moral responsibility toward those suffering (Cohen, 2001; Seu, 2010). Seu (2010) describes three repertoires to strategically neutralize the depicted suffering and the audience's lack of moral or emotional involvement, which she has called 'strategies of denial'. The first strategy is to neutralize the message itself. In this strategy, the message is considered to be manipulative or biased, which makes it more acceptable to dismiss the message as a spectator, as an act of resistance against said manipulation. The second strategy is to criticize the media – 'shoot the messenger' – so that the message itself is neutralized (Seu, 2010: 446). Finally, inaction can be justified by stressing the ineffectiveness of help organizations, which Seu (2010) aptly names the 'babies and bathwater' strategy (p. 439).

From a moral psychological point of view, these reactions remind us of Haidt's (2001: 814) argument that moral judgments are intuitively made rather than rationally, and they are rationalized *after* moral judgments are made, by what he calls 'post hoc constructions'. Haidt (2001) asserts that 'moral intuitions (including moral emotions) come first and directly cause moral judgement' (p. 814). He aptly calls this 'the emotional dog and its rational tail'. We would expect such hindsight rationalization of moral behavior to occur in the way that Seu (2010) has described.

Von Engelhardt (2015) differentiates between empathy, sympathy, and compassion. Seu has described 'strategies of denial', and Haidt (2001) speaks of rationality and intuition, reasoning and emotion. What all three theorists have in common is that they differentiate

between *emotional* (affective) and *reasoned* (cognitive/rational) mental processes and the interaction of these processes leading to (moral) (in)action or compassion/care. We follow this tradition and thus differentiate between empathy (the affective process) and sympathy (a more rational process), which can both lead to a sense of care/ compassion.

Methodology

For this study, we conducted 10 focus groups. A total of 51 people from the Flemish, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium were selected based on gender, education, and age (see attachment 1). The study starts from a critical realistic perspective, which ‘embraces naturalistic explanations in the social sciences without ignoring, at the same time, the fact men and women, unlike natural entities, actively reproduce their social world’ (Harvey, 2002: 163). In addition and more specifically, we follow Stuart Hall’s (2001) tradition within audience reception studies as he describes a non-linear process of exchanging messages that includes the interlinked processes of ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’ within all acts of communication. By adopting this non-linear and dynamic description of media in relation to the audience, we acknowledge the (inter)active and recursive relationship that people in the audience have with the media and media producers. In addition, we take into account the diverse ways in which any message may be related to, or can be interpreted by, its receiver.

During the focus groups, people discussed their news consumption and routines and their experiences with news from distant places. They were shown a news item about the earthquake in Nepal, which was aired on the same day that the earthquake occurred, 25 April 2015, roughly 9 months before the focus groups were held. The news item shows many injured and confused citizens of Kathmandu, collapsing buildings, and total chaos. It also reports the experience of a Belgian citizen who runs an orphanage in Kathmandu, who is interviewed over the phone and testifies to how scared he was when it all happened and how they were all ‘really, really scared’.¹⁴ After this, an Indian citizen is interviewed, and he describes feeling the earthquake, even though it occurred far away. This video was chosen because of its clear strategy of domesticating the distant suffering by including the testimony of a Belgian citizen. It also reminds us of Chouliaraki’s (2006: 119) description of ‘emergency

¹⁴ For the footage of the news item (on the television network Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij VTM nieuws (2015)) that was used during the focus groups, see <http://nieuws.vtm.be/buitenland/138565-honderden-doden-bij-aardbeving-nepal>

news’, the kind of news that can lead to a sense of cosmopolitanism based on a sense of solidarity toward the distant suffering. The articulated discourse of emergency news and the clear strategy of domestication are regarded as clear journalistic choices to invite the audience to care about the foreign event.

After viewing the news item, people were explicitly asked to discuss how they felt toward the suffering, both in terms of emotional reactions and in terms of any (in)action they wanted to carry out. We asked whether people would want to do anything (monetary donation, giving clothes, volunteering, etc.) and why or why not. Their considerations to (not) respond to the distant suffering can indicate how people explain their own moral and emotional struggle in the face of distant suffering that inherently calls for moral (re) action. We also paid attention to how the respondents reacted toward the Belgian eyewitness and whether his Belgian narrative made a difference.

Analysis

During the focus groups sessions, we found that many respondents experienced difficulties empathizing with the Nepali victims. While discussing their efforts to empathize with the victims, it became clear that strategies of domestication are a useful tool for bringing suffering closer, not only for the media but also for the audience. However, more often than not, attempts to empathize or to sympathize with suffering go hand-in-hand with strategies to deny the suffering or to rationalize their own moral inaction or indifference toward it. Let us take a closer look at these reactions of empathy, denial, and sympathy in the context of domesticated suffering.

Empathy: ‘It’s about how he feels it all’

As may already have been noticed at the beginning of this article, the very first thing Meredith (see introductory quote) talks about is her difficulty empathizing with the distant other after she saw the images of the earthquake in Nepal. Meredith’s failed attempt to empathize and her confession that she actually forgets about the suffering ‘the next day’ was described by many participants and often for the same reason: the suffering being too far (both culturally or geographically) and the unlikelihood of the events happening ‘here’ in the group members’ own vicinity.

As mentioned earlier, the *emotional* domestication of distant suffering by journalists – which we can define as first-level domestication on the production side of the news process – can facilitate a sense of emotional proximity (Joye, 2015). We noticed that many of our respondents deployed similar strategies of domestication in an attempt to empathize with the distant suffering. They would, for example, realize after watching the news item that the Flemish man who runs the orphanage helped them to be more moved or concerned by the events. We will refer to these practices or strategies on behalf of the audience as second-level domestication. For example, John (28) admitted,

I do notice from myself that I pay more attention when he (the Flemish man from the orphanage) begins to tell his story [...] because it's his story, it's not some kind of report, it's about how he feels it all. (Focus group 8, mixed group, high education level)

Besides such explicit demands for or appreciation of domestication, a subtler, and perhaps more surprising, domestication strategy was reflected in the manner that most participants remembered the events of Nepal. During the time of the Nepal earthquake, the national Belgium first aid and support team, B-FAST, was sent to the disaster site, but after not being able to land in Kathmandu, it returned to Belgium without ever having helped in Nepal.¹⁵ In 8 out of 10 focus groups, the B-FAST incident was the very first thing group members discussed after being asked what they remembered about the earth-quake in Nepal. Whereas the scholarly literature on domestication mainly situates the relevance of domesticating strategies in the field of news processing or witnessing, our study suggests the value of these strategies in remembering and recalling events. This domesticating strategy is not like any of the four kinds of domestication found on the production side. Rather, it is a second-level domestication that could be seen as the clear *result* of domesticating strategies by news producers. Indeed, the group members' memories about the B-FAST incident clearly resonate with the dominant modes of discourse that were found in the media at the time of the incident.

One way of coping with the realization of a lack of empathy is to strategically emphasize the impossibility of being emotionally moved or involved with *everything* that the

¹⁵ See, for example, <http://www.flanderstoday.eu/current-affairs/week-brief-4-may>.

participants would see on the news, so that they felt compelled to prioritize news based on what events have a greater chance of happening in their home country. Respondents explained that events that happen closer to home, where the stakes are higher, provoke a far more emotional response than suffering that occurs far away. These thoughts are very similar to the discursive modes of domestication that journalists use in reporting on foreign events ('what are the stakes?') and thus are a second manifestation of what we have called second-level domestication by the audience. Most reflective of this was our respondents' comparison of the victims in Nepal with the victims in Paris after the terrorist attacks in November 2015, 3 months before these focus groups were carried out. They could not easily identify with citizens in Nepal, nor imagine what it would be like to experience the devastation of an earthquake. On the other hand, the Paris attacks happened only a 3-hour drive away from the participants and were far more likely to also occur in Belgium (in fact, barely one month after this study, similar attacks did unfortunately occur on the morning of 22 March 2016, when there was an attack in Brussels). For example, Eva (51) explained,

What happened in Paris has a greater impact on me because, well, our daughter had to go to Brussels that day and I was scared [...] It (the news about Paris) moves you more. And don't get me wrong, it's terrible for those people there (in Nepal), but I think, I hope at least, I will never be confronted with an earthquake. (Focus group 2, female group, high education level)

At the same time, they were critical of themselves and aware of their own lack of caring about distant suffering, as Jean (59) said: 'I was shocked by myself, by myself paying more attention to the Flemish guy because he was Flemish, and I was listening to him because he was Flemish' (focus group 9, mixed group, high education level).

There were more participants going through the kind of moral struggle that Jean went through. Many were also self-aware and self-critical of the influence that the media has on the way they perceive, react to, and feel about events on the news. Carry (22) stated,

There was news about Paris every five minutes, and it was always updated. But there were also attacks in Jakarta, but that only lasts two minutes, and

then it stops. And so, it stops for me too, because I'm not looking further into that. (Focus group 6, mixed group, high education level)

People were far more capable of empathizing with mediated suffering when they experienced a more personal connection to the suffering. This personal connection was often based on a sense of cultural similarity, shared experience, or geographical proximity. The proximity of an event and cultural similarity enabled people to better emotionally imagine what the distant sufferer is going through, leading to a sense of shared or overlapping experience. This was most obvious when the participants discussed their reactions to the events in Paris as compared to the events in Nepal. In general, distance makes it difficult to empathize with something or someone. Both cultural and geographical distance makes the mediated event more abstract, less tangible, and more difficult to identify with or to imagine what it must have been like. None of the respondents had experienced an earthquake, and they found it very hard to imagine what it would be like. In response to this ascertainment, viewers used (second-level) emotional domestication strategies to be more emotionally moved by the mediated distant suffering, and these strategies are similar to the first-level strategies employed by media producers. Participants did this by emphasizing the link between the tragedy and their home country (by noticing and listening to the Belgian citizen who was in Nepal) or by considering the risks of a similar event happening in their home country.

Sympathy: 'Mind you, that doesn't mean that you don't empathize'

Even if the more emotionally based feeling of empathy is difficult to invoke through media reports, it could be argued that people can still be caring and compassionate, albeit in a more reasoned way, by sympathizing with the victims. As mentioned before, sympathy (cf. von Engelhardt, 2015) is based on a sense of understanding, an acknowledgement of the difficulties of those suffering, and a moral desire to help those who suffer. Most participants were reluctant to help, donate, or perform any other action to relieve the suffering. They used strategies of denial, as described by Seu (2010) to explain these inactions, (more about this later in this article). However, at the same time, most were self-reflective about their inaction, and some tried to compensate for their lack of action by stressing their concern about the suffering, even though they could not imagine what it was like. For example, Janne (21) stated,

Ah, well, I think it is really hard to empathize because it's so far away. But mind you, that doesn't mean that you don't empathize. I don't know ... But, for example those falling towers, that's probably really important for the local people over there. It would be similar to having church towers falling right here. (Focus group 5, female group, low education level)

Janne tries to understand the suffering of those who live far away by comparing the falling towers in Nepal with falling church towers in her home country, which reflects the domestication strategy of *familiarizing the unfamiliar* that is also seen on the production side (Joye, 2015).

Focus group members also tried to sympathize by relating events in distant places to those in their own nation, which is similar to the strategy of first-level domestication, that is, 'what's at stake for us?' (Joye, 2015: 688). Yet, events such as the earthquake in Nepal have no relation to or consequence for the group members' home country of Belgium. In this case, such a domestication strategy misses the aim of encouraging sympathy and leads to events becoming *more* distant rather than proximate because there are *no stakes* for the home country, and there are no similarities to the situation in the home country. This becomes clear in the following quote by Juliette (25):

It (the earthquake) is the kind of thing that we never experienced. [...] It's terrible, terrible. I think about what that would be like here, if that happened here. And I think how lucky I am for living in a country where everything is flat and nothing moves around. (Focus group 7, mixed group, low education level)

To sympathize with the distant sufferer, the audience thus applied several strategies of second-level domestication, which are again very similar to those used on the production side of the news. Besides looking for an emotional connection, participants tried to familiarize the unfamiliar and consider the consequences of the far-away events to their home country by considering 'what are the stakes for us'. Of these latter two domestication strategies employed by the audience, only the first (familiarizing the unfamiliar) proved to be effective in provoking sympathy with distant suffering. The latter generally only made distant events even more distant and abstract.

Denial: 'It's terrible, BUT ...'

Shepherd (2003: 497) argued that it is impossible to acknowledge *all* moral appeals that are made in daily life – either mediated or in proximate reality – because if people heard all these moral calls, the phone would be ‘ringing off the hook’. Not all moral appeals can be recognized, which could lead to what Cohen (2001: 187) has called ‘selective oblivion’, the act of not paying attention to all the suffering that is mediated in order to cope with an otherwise ‘overload of information’. The question of which moral appeals should, or can, be answered and which are allowed to be ignored is a daily moral struggle, which was also vividly discussed among the participants during the focus groups. As already briefly mentioned, people used tactics similar to Seu’s (2010) earlier described ‘strategies of denial’ to cope with their own lack of empathetic and sympathetic moral reactions toward suffering.

For one, some group members expressed a degree of cynicism toward the message as being ‘one in a dozen’, thereby neutralizing the message. They put forward that the message is too typical and the format so recognizable that they would have trouble being emotionally moved or even interested because they had seen these kinds of messages too often and had become desensitized:

Well, it's awful, but I realize that such a video doesn't shock me at all. It's something I've seen a thousand times already, you know? It's terrible to say, but you'd really have to see it in real life to be really impressed.

(Evelien, 23, focus group 5, female group, low education level)

And Ashu (20) said, ‘To put it bluntly, but “boring”. I’ve already seen this. They might as well have shown a video clip of an earthquake that maybe happened in Nepal like two or three years ago’ (focus group 8, mixed group, high education level).

Second, they would be inclined to ‘shoot the messenger’ which is an interesting contradiction to other statements the respondents made about news reports having more emotional impact if they hit closer to home or are presented on a more personal (and thus domesticated) level (see above). They were very critical about the news item reporting that no Belgians were affected or killed during the event (thus, shooting the messenger). More generally, respondents were critical about the overall news media’s persistent focus on the Belgian relief team B-FAST not being able to start its operations in Nepal. Because this narrative focus on the home country and compatriots abroad is one of the most common ways

of domesticating a foreign event, our results indicate a rather media-savvy audience. They know why the journalists use practices of domestication and what journalists want to achieve with it, and they can identify these strategies of domestication. This media knowledge is present to such an extent that some respondents expressed a degree of cynicism. They found the media tactics too obvious, cheap, unnecessary, and even disrespectful toward the other (local) victims:

It might have been more interesting to have a local person interviewed because personally, it can bother me to see that when something bad has happened, they mention something like ‘there are 200 people killed, but luckily there were no Belgians involved’. [...] I can get a wry sense from that. (Maurits, 20, focus group 1, male group, high education level)

Seu’s third strategy of denial (‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’) was also often used by participants. Many asserted their own lack of agency toward those suffering and expressed a sense of powerlessness that they felt was very frustrating. For example, Karim (20) stated that ‘Poverty will always exist’ (focus group 7, mixed group, low education level). One way of coping with that was to express the ineffectiveness of donating to humanitarian aid organizations because they are seen as untrustworthy, bureaucratic, and possibly even corrupt (a kind of reasoning that is indeed similar to throwing out the ‘baby with the bathwater’ (Seu, 2010: 449)). Sylvia’s (43) commentary about the Belgian national help organization B–FAST is reflective of this: ‘I’m rather cynical about that. I tend to think, what kind of percentage will eventually end up there? If all the money had gone to B–FAST, we wouldn’t have done a thing. I’m really skeptical about that’ (focus group 2, female group, high education level).

Looking closer at the comments of both Maurits (20) (above) and Meredith (23) (introductory quote), we can see that their expressed lack of care toward suffering is related to expressions of being morally uncomfortable about it. Most respondents were able to self-reflect and consequently were self-aware and critical about their disengaged (and sometimes even contradicting) attitude toward victims in far-away places. As Melanie (31) stated,

All these troubled images they announce, the sensitive images, ... I find myself not really dwelling on it. There’s all those dead people, lying there,

slaughtered or something, and I am making my dinner. I mean, my children are there too, then. I can think then, oh that's really awful (to not dwell on it). (Focus group 8, mixed group, high education level)

Aid-driven or emergency driven messages – a way of domesticating the distant suffering by creating a sense of moral responsibility among viewers – did not seem to increase the participants' sense of moral responsibility. Indeed, moral calls were more often dismissed by strategies already identified earlier by Seu in 2010.

Conclusion

Drawing on a focus group study, we demonstrated the relevance and value of incorporating the audience into research on the practice of domestication in international news coverage. Our findings suggest a two-flow model of domestication: first-level domestication that is situated on the production side of the news process and second-level domestication on the reception side. Although the practice of domestication is praised for bringing distant events closer and thus rendering them more relevant and appealing, our study demonstrates that not all strategies of domestication are equally effective. Emotional domestication was more effective than strategies based on moral appeals (i.e. aid-driven messages) or rational considerations of risk (i.e. 'what are the stakes?'). These latter strategies were used more often to explain focus group members' indifference and lack of care thus dismissing moral appeals. Still, sympathy – another more rational reaction toward the victims, in which the aim is to gain a better *understanding* of the experience of those suffering – was elicited by the domestication strategy of 'familiarizing the unfamiliar'.

We propose that a sense of *experiential overlap*, be it imagined or real, more easily facilitates a sense of care. Von Engelhardt (2015: 700) has suggested that a lack of experiential overlap might be 'an obstacle to empathetic responses toward distant victims that is greater than those created by geographical distance and perceived cultural or ethnic dissimilarity'. According to the results of this study, von Engelhardt's emphasis on the importance of experiential overlap is confirmed. Audiences domesticate the distant event and make it relevant and real to themselves by imagining how they would react to the event based on pre-existing perceptions and their own experiences. Indeed, the second-level domestication strategies that were used and proved to be most effective for the audience were those that

aimed to imagine or create a shared experience, either emotionally by narratively focusing on someone from the home country or by familiarizing the unfamiliar (e.g. comparing a collapsed building in Nepal with a collapsed building in Belgium).

The complex and sometimes contradictory (lack of) feelings of empathy, sympathetic expression, and strategies of denial show the moral struggle that participants go through, and there is no singular, easy, or 'right' answer to the way that people ought to, or in fact do, react toward mediated distant suffering. We argue that, in line with Haidt's (2001) explanation, moral judgments are made intuitively and emotionally rather than rationally. Explanations for (lack of) moral engagement that are put forward are stated after they made their moral judgment, rather than before. The explanations of our respondents for either sympathizing or for their indifference or lack of moral involvement remind us of the kind of 'post hoc' reasoning that Haidt (2001: 815) described. The need for an experiential overlap, the emotional strategies of second-level domestication employed by the audience, and the seemingly intuitive moral explanation for a (lack of) moral engagement and sympathy all point toward the idea that the audience's emotional sense of care (or empathy) is of greater importance to people's sense of care toward the distant suffering than the more rational sense of sympathy. Addressing people's *intuitive* sense of morality is likely to be more effective in provoking compassion than a more direct moral appeal, which is more easily dismissed.

To end with a critical note, it can be questioned whether emotional kinds of domestication are effective ways to invite an audience to be more engaged with distant suffering. Such strategies may in fact be just another example of audience members being the 'ironic spectators' about whom Chouliaraki wrote in 2013. These spectators engage with the suffering from a self-centered position; still in the role of the Western viewer, as opposed to participating in a cosmopolitan sense of solidarity, moral responsibility, and care. However, this article has not focused on moral questions of how audiences should react. Rather, it is a study of the 'lay' morality that people use in their daily lives and of how viewers deal with being confronted with the moral question of how far their scope of care should reach. Previous academic work – theoretical and empirical – has been conducted on the scope of care and compassion toward distant suffering, often drawing on text-based or audience-based research. Coming back full circle, future research could dive into morally loaded questions again, now even more equipped because of new empirical knowledge that informs the ever-

continuing moral debate. In terms of methodology and research designs, we see additional value in investigating the audience at a greater scale by means of surveys while other types of media – such as documentaries, film, reality television or online footage – might elicit different responses of an audience. Textual empirical research about mediated suffering in context of online media (Pantti, 2015) and reality television (Cover, 2013; Nikunen, 2015; Price, 2014) already offer new opportunities for audience researchers to further explore.

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Chapter 7 – Who cares for the suffering other? A survey-based study into reactions towards images of distant suffering

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Abstract

A growing number of scholars have empirically engaged with audience reactions towards mediated distant suffering, albeit mainly on a small, qualitative scale. By conducting quantitative research, this study contributes to the knowledge about people's reactions towards distant suffering on a greater scale, representative of a Western audience. Following a critical realist approach, a survey was developed and several independent constructs were found by doing an exploratory factor analysis which represent people's engagement with distant suffering. We also found four clusters based on a k-means cluster analysis that portray typical ways of responding to distant suffering. These clusters have been controlled for people's background, indicators of age, gender, education and people's donation behavior, media use and news interests.

Keywords:

Distant suffering, audience research, moral engagement, emotional engagement, survey, factor analysis, regression analysis, cluster analysis, chi-square analysis

Introduction

Throughout scholarly literature questions about people's reactions towards mediated distant suffering have been raised in different manners. For one, moral questions about how people should, or could react to distant suffering have been essential (Boltanski, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Moeller, 1999; Silverstone, 2007) while others have focused on text-based accounts about media's representation of distant suffering and people's likely responses to these discourses (Chouliaraki, 2006; Yan & Bissell, 2015). Over the last few years more research has been done to empirically ascertain how audiences *actually* respond to images of distant suffering (e.g. Kyriakidou, 2015; Scott, 2015; Huiberts & Joye, 2017; Seu, 2010). Due to the moral and

emotional ambiguous nature of people's reactions towards distant suffering, most of these studies have been performed on a small, qualitative scale drawing on focus groups, in-depth interviews, diaries and the likes. Throughout these empirical reports, new insights have been gained about people's moral attitude, emotional responses and ways of coping with distant suffering.

Less common, however, has been to study people's reaction towards images of distant suffering on a greater scale, that is by means of quantitative methodology. To our knowledge, we found two relevant studies. von Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) explored peoples' moral attitude towards an online video about Ugandan war lord Joseph Kony, asking people about their perceived moral responsibility – an issue which will be further discussed in this article. Lindell (2012) has briefly touched upon (but never actually studied) the subject of mediated distant suffering when he developed a survey about cosmopolitanism and news consumption.

Therefore, the present study draws on a large-scale survey that was conducted in 2017 in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking Northern part of Belgium. The goal was two-fold. First, the aim was to develop a more precise instrument to inquire about people's thoughts and attitudes towards distant suffering which can then be used by other scholars, for instance in a cross-national comparative design. A second objective was to provide empirical evidence to fill the lacuna of knowledge about people's engagement with distant suffering on a greater scale so we can generalize and be able to present findings of people's reactions which represent the opinions and attitudes of larger (Western) communities, in our case Flanders.

Studying the audience: a critical realist perspective

Likely, one of the main reasons for the lack of knowledge on a more generalizable level is the ambiguous nature of the subject of interest and the dominant social constructivist point of view taken in this field of interest (i.e. Kyriakidou, 2015; Ong, 2015; Scott, 2015). Indeed, there are ontological and epistemological tensions between doing quantitative and qualitative research and we need to acknowledge that qualitative in-depth knowledge is treated very differently than quantitatively obtained data gathered from surveys. Whereas the first is often informed by a social constructivist perspective, the latter is mostly (though not always, see also Huiberts, 2016) associated with positivist perspectives and philosophies. From the social constructivist perspective, one is not likely able to correctly 'measure' moral responsibility nor will someone 'count' peoples' emotional response. The socially constructed nature of moral

behavior and emotional response is too ambivalent and dynamic to capture in several questions and statements. Yet, if no research is conducted on a greater scale, it is and will remain difficult to gain a comprehensive insight into people's (re)action towards distant suffering. As Ang (1991: 164) noted, when there are generalizations, these are 'necessary violations to the concrete specificity of all unique micro-situations.' Consequently, the only way to generalize responses towards mediated distant suffering to a greater population, is if these complex concepts are reduced to something less specific, more static and less detailed, hence inherently lacking the nuance normally found in qualitative research.

In a previous study (2015) we discussed these tensions between different ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives with several experts in the field of mediated distant suffering. Based on these expert-interviews, we argue that a critical realist perspective as an approach may be most appropriate to study the audience on a smaller *and* on a wider scale. The paradigm of critical realism is 'seen to integrate the more positivist position of an objective and external level of empirical analysis while recognizing that meaning is constructed by, and embedded within, a social and cultural environment, rendering it still plural and to a certain extent unpredictable' (p. 4329). In other words, it is recognized that concepts such as moral responsibility and emotional response are socially and culturally embedded and not necessarily objectively measurable, but an approximation of these concepts can be used to study social phenomenon at a greater scale. Most experts who we interviewed agreed that quantitative and qualitative research are complementary and very appropriate, depending on the kind of research questions that are asked (Huiberts, 2016). For this study we take a critical realist approach, by which we acknowledge the ambivalent, ambiguous, dynamic and socially constructed nature of our reality while also recognizing that some violation of the truth must be done in order to learn more about people's reactions towards distant suffering on a scale that is representative of Flanders, Belgium.

The audience and distant suffering: a black box of reactions

The critical realist paradigm is seen to integrate multiple methods to answer research questions. Following this, and in order to properly develop constructs for our quantitative survey (i.e. groups of questions that all ask the same question in a slightly different manner), we have looked more closely at earlier, qualitatively-driven research that discussed how people can react to distant suffering.

Seu (2010), for one, studied audience responses and described how people neutralize any moral appeals made by a NGO. She found that people can do so by deconstructing the message itself, by discrediting the messenger (the NGO) as untrustworthy or by emphasizing the ineffectiveness of help through NGOs. These strategies of denial have been found in other small-scale researches as well. Scott (2014) for example found that charity calls by celebrities are oftentimes deconstructed in their effectiveness to help. Regarding our case of Flanders, an own focus group study (Huiberts & Joye, 2017) confirmed the use of all three kinds of denial. One example to describe the neutralization of the message consisting a moral appeal was: ‘Well, it’s awful, but I realize that such a video doesn’t shock me at all. It’s something I’ve seen a thousand times already, you know? It’s terrible to say, but you’d really have to see it in real life to be really impressed’ (Huiberts & Joye, 2017: 10).

Another focus group study, done by Kyriakidou (2015) revealed different ways of *witnessing* distant suffering: affective witnessing, ecstatic witnessing, politicized witnessing and detached witnessing. For the current study, the affective witnessing and detached witnessing are particularly noteworthy. The first type of witnessing, affective witnessing, emphasizes people’s ‘emotional reactions to the events on the screen and their feelings towards the victims’ (Kyriakidou, 2015: 220). An exemplary quote she uses to illustrate this is: ‘The image of a girl, [...] I was shocked at that point, I started crying on the spot!’ (p. 220). She further argues that this kind of witnessing is often said to be in congruence with utterings of frustrations for being unable to act upon or to alleviate the suffering (Kyriakidou, 2015: 220). The second type of witnessing relevant for this study, is the kind that Kyriakidou refers to as witnessing ‘the experience of the suffering of others as something remote or ultimately irrelevant to the viewers’ everyday life’ (Kyriakidou, 2015: 226). This kind of witnessing she calls detached witnessing (Kyriakidou, 2015: 226).

Next to categorizing strategies of denial and ways of witnessing distant suffering, a number of studies have explored the wider range of audience responses in contention to possible moral positions. Our previous study (2017) differentiated between sympathetic responses and empathetic responses. Two interrelated kinds of responses that can both lead to a sense of moral responsibility and care, but are nevertheless different in nature. Supported by other research (von Engelhardt, 2015; Ugazio et al., 2014) as well, our findings point towards the affective nature of empathetic responses in contrast to the cognitive or rational nature of sympathetic responses. Whereas empathy is more about the spectator crawling into

the skin of the victim, thus '[to] *feel* what the sufferer feels' (2017), sympathy is rather about 'an *understanding* about the difficulties and the needs of the victim' (2017). Affective (emotional) and cognitive (rational) reactions are often linked one way or another with morality although there is ongoing discussion about the relation between people's emotional response and/or sense of moral responsibility. Will a lack of emotional response necessarily imply less moral responsibility and *vice versa*? From a social psychological perspective, Haidt (2001:814) discussed peoples' moral motivation and aptly defines the moral decision process as 'the emotional dog and its rational tail'. Haidt (2001: 814) argues that moral judgement is an intuitive ---emotional--- decision which is rationally justified *after* the moral decision is made (p. 814). Loewenstein and Small (2007:112) also described something similar when they mention the 'Scarecrow and the Tin Man' to identify the dialectic nature of both cognitive and emotional sentiments in people's moral decisions. Evidence about how moral responsibility relates to emotionally driven sentiments is, however, still inconclusive.

A final strand of research in the field of audience and distant suffering explores how different *kinds* of media and media interests interfere with the way people respond to mediated suffering. It has been theorized that online social media such as Facebook can enable a more cosmopolitan or global environment which could bring the suffering closer to home. Madianou (2013) evaluated the potential of humanitarian campaigns to effectively work via social network sites but points towards a communitarian, rather than cosmopolitan online social environment. Scott (2015) too cautioned for too optimistic views about social network sites of other online possibilities to enhance a more cosmopolitan environment. His empirical study, consisting of focus group sessions and diaries, points towards the internet playing only a marginal role in people's perspectives towards distant suffering. Scott notes that it is still 'the nature and acceptability of pre-existing discursive recourses and how they are deployed by users to justify their media use' (2015: 637). In other words, it are still the dominant modes of discourse throughout mainstream media, both online and via traditional ways, that are more decisive in people's point of view towards distant suffering. This is in line with our own research (forthcoming) where we found social media to play only a small part in people's perspective and reactions to distant suffering. While social media are often considered to be an important news medium and offer ways to react to distant suffering far more effectively than broadcast media, this potential appears to be not used to its fullest.

What all of these studies have in common is their qualitative approach as they provide in-depth accounts of how people can typically react to mediated distant suffering. Denial, affective or detached witnessing, sympathy and empathy and different kinds of media that are used, are all ways that people have been found to react and respond to distant suffering. It is the objective of the current study to explore whether this rich and diverse range of audience reactions will also manifest itself in a quantitative research setting.

Hypotheses and research questions

Based on the earlier empirical studies outlined above, we found several returning concepts that represent some kind of engagement or non-engagement with the distant suffering. We use the notion of ‘engagement’ as an umbrella term here, covering all kinds of involvement that people can show towards victims. Based on the earlier empirically obtained qualitative data we developed several groups of survey-questions that represent some kind of (non-)engagement with the distant sufferer that we asked the public about. To find reliable and independent ‘engagement-constructs’ we then conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). This statistical analysis technique is developed to find more information about which questions in a survey are answered in very similar ways, thus grouping them in such a way that all questions that are most related to each other are forming one factor, representing one construct while leaving out questions that are unrelated (Thompson, 2004). Our aim has been to find several independent factors which can represent new constructs of engagement of the audience, following our first research question:

Research question 1: What kinds of engagement can be found based on earlier qualitative research that hold true on a greater scale?

Earlier findings of qualitative research have often demonstrated the ambiguous nature of both moral responsibility and emotional involvement with distant suffering. As discussed, we have previously aimed at delineating this to some extent by pointing out differences between sympathetic and empathetic responses. We found that people had more difficulty truly empathizing with victims because of a lack of experiential overlap which makes it more difficult for people to emotionally feel for the victim (Huiberts & Joye, 2017: 12). Other research has also speculated on the link between an emotional response to distant suffering

and a sense of moral responsibility (Haidt, 2001; Loewenstein & Small 2007). Thus, we expect that moral responsibility is likely to be appointed intuitively and emotionally. Our hypothesis is therefore:

Hypothesis 1: Moral responsibility and emotional response towards mediated distant suffering are significantly related to one another.

To answer the above question, we conducted several regression analyses to observe the relations between emotional reaction and moral responsibility. We also related these two with the newly found constructs from the first research question.

Lastly, earlier research generally points towards typical manners in which people tend to react to distant suffering. However, these typical responses have never been systematically described or categorized into possible ‘response profiles’; profiles that represent one or another typical way that a person can react to distant suffering. Therefore, by conducting a cluster analysis we intent to answer the following question:

Research question 2: what kind of typical responses towards distant suffering are there and how are these associated with peoples’ demographic background, media use and media interests?

Methods and operationalization

In cooperation with iVox, a Belgian market research company, we set up a survey to gather data about people reacting to distant suffering. The survey was conducted in Flanders (N=450) and consisted of three parts. The first part lists some general demographic questions while the second part inquires about media use and news interests. The third section started with a video news item that was taken from the news show of public broadcaster VRT. The video concerns the famine in the Horn of Africa, mainly in Yemen, north-east Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan, which was very topical at the moment of the survey in May 2017. The video item was particularly chosen because of its typical ‘emergent’ characteristics (see Chouliaraki 2006), displaying the severity of the drought and famine, portraying helpless victims, and providing interviews with the local inhabitants and local relief workers alongside an international call for help by an official spokesperson of the UN and information about the

(Belgian) relief aid organization ('Consortium 12-12') to invite the viewers to donate.¹⁶ After this brief video item, questions were asked about people's feelings, thoughts and attitudes about the video item and the famine in Africa. As discussed, the questions and statements are informed by earlier empirical qualitative research. We will now first present the results of the analyses and close the article with an extended discussion of the results as well as some suggestions for further research.

Results

Research question 1: Different kinds of engagement

During the exploratory factor analysis we found five new constructs, all representing some kind of engagement (see table 1). The first, we call 'connectedness'. All items of this factor are based on either a physical, a sociocultural or emotional perception of being connected with the distant sufferer. Looking at earlier research of distant suffering, much has been speculated and theorized based on different aspects that may promote or prompt a more emotional, solidary, caring or compassionate response (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2006; Kyriakidou, 2015; Ong, 2015). Distance and proximity (whether socially or geographically), people's identity, sense of responsibility or an emotional connection have been discussed to a greater or lesser extent. The survey data show that there is an overall, seemingly more broadly defined sense of either being very connected, or not connected at all with the victims which include a sense of physical (dis)connection, socio-culturally or emotionally.

The second construct is 'agency'. Seu (2010) already suggested that people have varying ways of deconstructing aid or relief messages by contending that either the media are untrustworthy, or there is nothing to be done in the first place. During the analysis we found that these ways of denial were indeed quite prominent. Additionally, the data allowed to group these ways of denial with other questions that pertain to people's effectiveness to help. The questions in this construct all hint at people's opinion about whether or not their help will have any effect. The construct clearly points towards people's sense of agency. In other words, whether or not they can be active and willing agents in relieving the suffering.

¹⁶ Consortium 12-12 is a Belgian collaboration of multiple humanitarian organizations, meant to mobilize the Belgian public in case of dire catastrophes and humanitarian disasters. See <http://www.1212.be/>.

The third and the fifth factor reveal a clear distinction between people *attempting* to feel with the suffering, thus empathizing (see factor 3) and people’s ability to *actually* empathize (see factor 5). Factor 3 is based on a cognitive ability to be aware of and be understanding about the suffering without actually feeling for the suffering (e.g. ‘After seeing these images I try to imagine the kind of suffering these victims go through’) whereas the fifth factor is more emotionally based and requires a level of experiential overlap (e.g. ‘I have difficulty to imagine the severity of these events happening in Africa during the famine because I have never experienced famine myself.’). Based on these clearly distinctive factors we have decided to label the third construct as ‘sympathetic’ response and the fifth construct as the ‘empathetic’ response.

The final construct is called ‘priority’ because all statements in this construct indicate a tendency of people to prioritize events closer to home, or not.

Table 7.1 Constructs, factor loads, Cronbach’s α , means and standard deviation

	Newly made constructs				
Items	1. Connectedness	2. Agency	3. Sympathy	4. Priority	5. Empathy
‘How do you feel towards the victims socio-culturally?’ (5-point scale going from very close to very far-away)	,836				
‘How do you feel towards the victims in Africa?’	,806				
‘How do you feel towards the victim physically?’	,803				
‘How do you feel towards the victims emotionally’	,752				
‘To what extend do you feel a socio-cultural connection with the victims?’ (5 point scale going from ‘a lot’ to ‘very little’	,708				
‘To what extend to you feel personally involved with the victim?’	,677				
‘To what extend do you feel an emotional connection with the victim?’	,619		,376		

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Reverse coded: 'Donating money is useless' (5-point scale going from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree')		,839			
'If a lot of people would donate to Consortium 12-12 it would definitely help'		,808			
Reverse coded: 'Help in any kind of way (donating, volunteering,...) is useless'		,776			
'I think my helping activities can make a positive difference for the victims'		,749			
Reverse coded: 'The Consortium 12-12 cannot be trusted'	,323	,737			
'I think I can effectively help the victims (in any kind of way)'	,379	,678			
After seeing these images I think 'what would I think about it if I were in the same situation as the victims?'			,864		
After seeing these images I think 'what would I think about it if it were to happen right here?'			,850		
After seeing these images I try to imagine the kind of suffering these victims go through	,328		,716		
Reverse coded: Serious events closer at home (e.g. Belgium or Europe) affect me more than the distant suffering in Africa.				,824	
Reverse coded: News about events close-by stay longer in my mind than news about distant events.				,805	
Reverse coded: Events happening in far-away places (like Africa) are less important to me than events happening close-by.				,769	
Reverse coded: I have difficulty to imagine the severity of these events happening in Africa during the famine					,889

because I have never experienced famine myself.					
Reverse coded: I have difficulty to imagine the severity of these events happening in Africa during the famine because this will not likely happen here in Belgium.					,887
Eigen value	8,36	2.27	1.87	1.44	1.18
Cronbach's α	$\alpha = ,916$	$\alpha = ,893$	$\alpha = ,850$	$\alpha = ,823$	$\alpha = ,804$
Mean ¹⁷ (sd)	-.458 (.729)	.081 (.821)	.440 (.908)	-.051 (.903)	-.487 (1.101)
Note: rotated component matrix, Varimax rotated, KMO = .893, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2 = 5906,579$, $p < .001$)					

Hypothesis 1: Moral responsibility and emotional response towards mediated distant suffering are significantly related to one another

To explore the relation of the different forms of engagement on peoples' sense of moral responsibility and emotional response to the video we conducted two regression analyses. Based on the factor analysis the mean-scores of the items per construct were used for these analyses. In addition we included three single item scales (all ranging from -2 to 2) for further analysis: 'moral responsibility' ('I think I have a moral responsibility to act (either by donating/volunteering/something else...)' - mean = -.064 sd = 1.078), 'emotion' ('I am emotionally moved by these images' - mean = .367 sd = 1.015) and identity ('I have difficulty identifying with the victims shown on the video' - mean = -.149 sd = .905) (for correlation matrix of the constructs and the single item scales see table 7.2). We also controlled for gender, age, donation behavior, education, income, and whether people have children (see table 2). The regression model representing 'emotion' accounts for an adjusted R^2 of 0,440 ($F(13,360) = 21,753$, $p < 0,001$). The regression model representing moral responsibility accounts for an adjusted R^2 of 0,616 ($F(13,360) = 44,531$, $p < 0,001$).

¹⁷ Based on the mean scores of the combined items per construct, ranging from -2 (not engaged at all) to 2 (highly engaged).

Table 7.2 Correlations of constructs and single item scales

		Correlations							
		Connectedness	Agency	Sympathy	Priority	Empathy	Emotion	Identity	Moral responsibility
Connectedness	Pearson Correlation	1	,505**	,556**	,468**	,251**	,546**	,427**	,546**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	450	450	450	450	444	450	450	450
Agency	Pearson Correlation	,505**	1	,382**	,406**	,122*	,419**	,282**	,725**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000		,000	,000	,010	,000	,000	,000
	N	450	450	450	450	444	450	450	450
Sympathy	Pearson Correlation	,556**	,382**	1	,299**	,183**	,574**	,359**	,452**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000		,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	450	450	450	450	444	450	450	450
Priority	Pearson Correlation	,468**	,406**	,299**	1	,308**	,352**	,254**	,318**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000		,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	450	450	450	450	444	450	450	450
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	,251**	,122*	,183**	,308**	1	,129**	,286**	,130**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,010	,000	,000		,006	,000	,006
	N	444	444	444	444	444	444	444	444
Emotion	Pearson Correlation	,546**	,419**	,574**	,352**	,129**	1	,300**	,428**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,006		,000	,000
	N	450	450	450	450	444	450	450	450
Identity	Pearson Correlation	,427**	,282**	,359**	,254**	,286**	,300**	1	,335**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000		,000
	N	450	450	450	450	444	450	450	450
Moral responsibility	Pearson Correlation	,546**	,725**	,452**	,318**	,130**	,428**	,335**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,006	,000	,000	
	N	450	450	450	450	444	450	450	450

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The different models in the regression analyses (see below, table 7.3) show that age, income, education and donation behavior do not significantly correspond with people's score on moral responsibility or emotional response. Having children does have a slight effect on the score of people's emotional reaction ($\beta = .288$, $p < .01$) as does gender (women score slightly higher compared to men: $\beta = .175$, $p < .05$). In addition, connectedness and people's *attempt* to empathize (sympathy) are strong predictors of people's emotional response towards the distant suffering (respectively $\beta = .308$, $p < 0,001$ and $\beta = .341$, $p < .001$). People who prioritize international events are also weakly associated with a more emotional response ($\beta = .126$, $p < .05$).

Moral responsibility scores are heavily influenced by people's sense of connectedness ($\beta = .306$, $p < .001$) but having children has no impact on people's perceived moral responsibility, neither does gender. Sympathy is only weakly associated ($\beta = .142$, $p < .01$).

Interestingly, whereas agency is only (weakly) significantly related to emotional scores ($\beta = .156, p < .05$), this construct is a *strong* predictor of people's indicated sense of moral responsibility ($\beta = .736, p < .001$). The model further proves that while sympathetic scores play a significant part in both people's emotional and moral responsible scores, people's *empathetic* score is of no influence. Thus, even if audience members are unsuccessful in truly imagining what the mediated distant suffering is like, this will not mean that they are not emotionally or morally involved. Finally, people's emotional reaction is of no influence at all on people's perceived moral responsibility, and *vice versa*.

To summarize, connectedness is a strong and positively related predictor of people's emotional response as well as perceived moral responsibility. In addition, emotion is mostly influenced by having children and people's sympathetic responses and women score higher on emotion than men. Moral responsibility on the other hand is mainly influenced by people's perceived agency and the connection of participants with the victims. Based on these findings the hypothesis that emotional response and moral response are significantly related is rejected.

Table 7.3 Summary of results of two OLS regression analyses predicting moral responsibility and emotion

Independent variables	Dependent variables	
	Emotion	Moral responsibility
Female (1 = yes)	.174 (.087) ¹⁸	.015 (.077)*
Age	-.002 (.004)	.005 (.003)
Children (1 = children)	.288 (.101)**	-.037 (.090)
Income	.002 (.021)	-.027 (.018)
Education	-.010 (.030)	.027 (.026)
Donation behavior (1 = donated)	.228 (.254)	.167 (.088)
Connectedness	.308 (.084)***	.306 (.073)***
Agency	.156 (.078)*	.736 (.057)***
Sympathy	.348 (.059)***	.142 (.054)**
Priority	.126 (.056)*	-.084 (.050)
Empathy	-.047 (.040)	-.025 (.035)
Emotion	--	.033 (.046)
Identity	.011 (.053)	.066 (.046)
Moral responsibility	.043 (.060)	--
R-square	.440	.616
Adj. R-square	.420	.603
F (df)	21.753 (13,360)	44.531 (13,360)
N	373	373

* $p < 0,05$ ** $p < 0,01$ *** $p < 0,001$

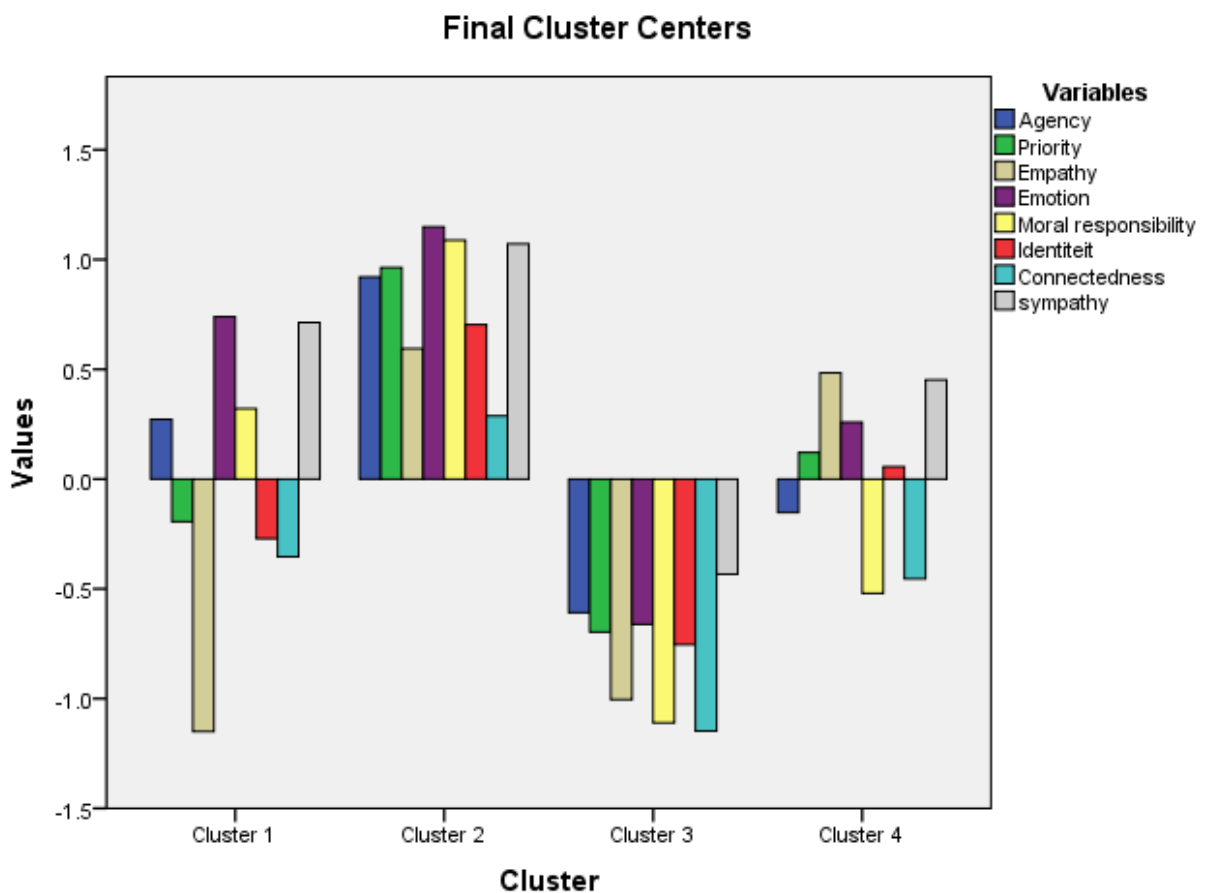
Research question 2: Typical responses, a cluster analysis

To explore typical ways of people's response towards the video, we conducted a cluster-analysis (k-means) (see figure 1). We included the newly created constructs based on the factor analysis (see above) as well as the two single item constructs of 'moral responsibility'

¹⁸ All scores presented are the unstandardized coefficients with standard error.

and ‘emotion’. All of these constructs have a score range from -2 (highly disengaged) to 2 (highly engaged) where 0 is equal to a neutral position. We found four clusters that were most appropriate according to the ANOVA test ($p < 0.000$ on all constructs) and were best interpretable. We named these clusters (1) the moral doubters (N=165, 37%), (2) the highly engaged (N= 80, 18%), (3) the highly disengaged (N= 115, 26%) and (4) the skeptic doubters (N = 84, 19%).

Figure 7.1 Bar graph of k-means cluster analysis



Those who are in the second cluster of ‘the highly engaged’ score high on all constructs and are especially morally and emotionally involved (both of these constructs score more than 1). In addition they sympathize strongly with the victims and the events and have a strong sense of agency. The highly *dis*engaged on the other hand are the negative version of this profile: they score low on empathy and sympathy and score especially low on moral responsibility.

The other two clusters fully display the intrinsic ambivalent nature of people's reaction towards images of distant suffering. The moral doubters score *positive* in their *sympathetic* responses (where they attempt to imagine the severity of the events) but, looking at the negative scores for empathy, they utterly fail in their attempts. Nevertheless, looking at their slightly positive scores on agency and moral responsibility, these people clearly lean towards a sense of agency and moral responsibility (hence the term of moral doubters). The last cluster on the other hand, represents respondents who score slightly negative on both agency and moral responsibility (despite their positive emotional, sympathetic and empathetic engagement). This cluster strongly reminds us about the skeptic viewers described by Seu (2010) where all agency, and hence their moral responsibility, is denied by being skeptic about the reliability of NGOs and the overall value of donating. We therefore call them the skeptic doubters.

Differences in clusters:

Chi-squares were computed to test differences between the clusters in demographics (age, gender, *et cetera*), donation behavior and media use (social media or traditional media use and different news interests such as 'foreign news', 'domestic news', 'entertainment',...). Results are presented in table 4 and show that there are significant differences in the clusters based on gender, donation behavior, and news interests. More specifically the third cluster of highly disengaged respondents is comprised of significantly more men (61%) than women (39%). As to donating behavior, it was evident that in *all* clusters the majority of the groups donated at least once last year but people in the second cluster who are highly engaged donate significantly more (93% of the cluster, $p < 0,000$) compared to the moral doubters (70%), the highly disengaged (60%) and the skeptic doubters (60%). This confirms our assumption that high engagement with the victims is associated with donation behavior.

Surprisingly, we found that people in the second, highly engaged, cluster are significantly more interested in foreign news (70% of this cluster) while those who are labeled as skeptic doubters display significantly less interest in foreign news (40%). Interest in politics also significantly mattered: a mere 19% of the skeptic doubters and 30% of the first cluster of moral doubters were interested in politics. Significantly less compared to the highly engaged, of which 40% were interested in politics and the highly *disengaged* where 32% were interested in politics.

Table 7.4 cluster numbers, χ^2 scores and percentages

Category (χ^2)	Cluster 1 Moral doubters	Cluster 2 Highly engaged	Cluster 3 Highly disengaged	Cluster 4 Skeptic doubters
Gender * (9.699) 1 = female 0 = male	N = 91 (55 %) N = 74 (45 %)	N = 47 (58 %) N = 34 (42 %)	N = 45 (39 %) N = 70, (61 %)	N = 39 (46 %) N = 45 (54 %)
Donation behavior *** (30.936) 1 = donated 0 = not donated	N = 120 (73 %) N = 45 (27 %)	N = 74 (93 %) N = 6 (7 %)	N = 69 (60 %) N = 46 (40%)	N = 49 (58 %) N = 35 (42 %)
Foreign news *** (20.776) 1 = interested 0 = not interested	N = 68 (41%) N = 97 (59 %)	N = 56 (69 %) N = 25 (31 %)	N = 60 (52 %) N = 55 (48 %)	N = 33 (39 %) N = 51 (61 %)
Political news * (9.730) 1 = interested 0 = not interested	N = 44 (27 %) N = 121 (73 %)	N = 32 (40 %) N = 48 (60 %)	N = 37 (32 %) N = 78 (68 %)	N = 16 (19 %) N = 68 (81 %)

* $p < .05$

*** $p < .001$

Discussion of results

The first research question inquired about the kinds of engagement that can be found in the larger population and was informed by earlier qualitative research. Based on the conducted survey we identify five distinguishable and easily interpretable constructs representing some kind of engagement with the distant suffering: connectedness, agency, sympathy, priority and empathy. By retrieving these more broadly defined constructs we have been able to present people's ways of engagement beyond only being emotionally moved or perceived moral responsibility. Indeed, further analysis of this study acknowledges the diverse and less straightforward ways by which these forms of engagement relate to each other as well as to emotional scores and moral responsibility. Some of these forms of engagement are clearly in line with earlier findings from focus groups. Forms of denial, as described by Seu (2010), were also found in this study although they appeared in a more broadly defined construct of

‘agency’. Other recurring themes we found was the clear difference between empathetic and sympathetic responses.

Based on the regression analyses we conducted there was evidence that moral responsibility and emotional attitudes are unrelated which leads us to reject our formulated hypothesis. Rather unexpectedly, people’s *sympathetic* attempts, i.e. the *attempt* to empathize (whether or not successfully), to image the suffering are strongly linked with a high emotional score. In addition, sympathetic attempts were strongly related with peoples’ perceived moral responsibility. Based on our previous focus groups study, we believed that a lack of overlapping experience may influence people’s level of engaging with the victims. Based on this study, however, we can now qualify this by stating that *despite* a lack of experiential overlap, people can still be emotionally and morally involved, albeit more cognitively (i.e. by attempting to *understand*, rather than *feel* the suffering).

By doing a cluster analysis we aimed to answer our second research question: ‘what kind of typical responses towards distant suffering are there and how are they associated with demographic background and media use?’. The cluster analysis led to at least four distinguishable ‘response profiles’ to mediated distant suffering. Two very distinguishable clusters were that of the highly engaged and highly disengaged audience members. A quarter (26%) of the audience was found to be part of the highly disengaged while about 20% was part of the highly engaged group. The majority of the audience belonged to the other two clusters who we have identified as the doubters. These profiles express the less than straightforward ways that most people respond towards distant suffering. People in these clusters are less inclined to have a strong opinion, hence the doubt, and very much lean to either one (moral responsible) or another (skeptical) way. We suspect that people in these two clusters may very well easily change from one ‘doubt-cluster’ to another, but the data is not clear on this.

After checking for differences amongst the clusters we did find some components that are significantly different. For one, there are differences in engagement based on gender, where we find that women are more often part of the highly engaged group than men. We did not find this gendered difference as prominent in the regression analysis although there was some (weak) gendered difference there too (namely in men’s and women’s sense of moral responsibility). An entirely new, but significant factor that we explored during this study, is that people’s news interest is of significance in their engagement with distant suffering.

Those who have a stronger opinion, thus who are part of the highly disengaged or highly engaged groups of people, were *more* interested in foreign news and political news. Less surprisingly, we found that donation behavior is significantly different amongst the clusters, where those who are highly engaged donate far more often than those who are highly disengaged.

Conclusion

There were two aims of this study. First, to find a reliable way of measuring people's engagement with distant suffering on a greater scale, and second, to collect empirical data on a greater scale about the Western audience vis-à-vis mediated distant suffering.

The study has been able to show that there are multiple ways to engage with the victims. It has also been demonstrated that emotional and moral responses to victims are significantly dependent on people's sense of connectedness and their sympathetic responses. Furthermore, we identified four clusters representing different ways in which the audience responds to mediated distant suffering.

The findings of this survey are, however, not exhaustive. Rather, the results are a gross and statistical representation of a far more complicated, nuanced and dynamic way of responding to distant suffering. Yet, although this is only an approximate or rather indirect way of conducting research into audience responses, it has enabled us to draw conclusions about the audience that is representative of a Flemish audience. Information gained from this study can be used for further research to clarify, qualify, as well as problematize and scrutinize the current findings. We suggest that further research could benefit the ongoing conceptualization of people's perceived connectedness with the victim. Another point of interest that is perhaps grossly neglected in earlier research and ought to be studied more extensively is the gendered differences that we found. Höijer (2004) already found differences between men and women in their response towards distant suffering. Possibilities for more in-depth research are one way this can be further qualified and refined, but we also see potential for experimental research to gain more insight in this. A third possibility for further research is to repeat this kind of survey on a far wider scale which can enable comparisons between social groups (e.g. different countries, cultures, ethnicities,...). A last suggestion is to further expand this survey to incorporate more politically loaded questions. The current study has limited itself to distant suffering presented as caused by natural circumstances. We

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believe that politically induced suffering (e.g. suffering caused by conflict, terrorism and war) may trigger different audience responses in addition to manifest expressions of empathy and sympathy for the distant suffering.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The authors declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest

Conclusions

Discussion and conclusion

When confronted with the suffering of someone who is distant – distant in time, in place, in experience – how does one react? In the introduction and the first chapter we considered the possible reactions of an audience to distant suffering which is witnessed through media. We put forward that an audience can be emotionally and/or morally involved with the mediated distant suffering although this is dependent on people's perceived sense of (moral) agency. This sense of agency is in its turn influenced by the distance between spectator and sufferer. Drawing on insights from the field of social psychology, we also discussed that moral responsibility can be an emotional, or intuitive process next to a cognitive deliberation, as two sides of a continuum. The literature review demonstrated that moral responsibility, empathy and sympathy involve affective processes as well as cognitive processes. The advantage of this social psychological approach - taking cognition, affect and behaviour as the conceptual 'tripod' to study the moral audience – is to structurally analyze and observe people's moral and emotional responses and behaviors towards distant suffering.

Throughout the introductory and theoretical chapters we ventured that the current post-humanitarian point of view (cf. Chouliaraki, 2013) may be too focused on normative questions of how an audience should respond. Earlier audience studies in the context of mediated distant suffering seem heavily influenced by this post-humanitarian discourse in their emphasis on the disengaged, emotionally moved but self-absorbed, communitarian rather than cosmopolitan audience. Yet, much of these empirical findings also nuanced the all too critical and sceptic point of view that is so often formulated in moral accounts of mediated distant suffering and in textual analyses of mediated distant suffering. To only withhold a media-savvy, critical, skeptical spectator, or a desensitized or fatigued viewer, or the over-emotional and therefore narcissistic spectator, leaves little room for an engaged or caring audience. In addition, such negative conclusions imply a normativity towards distant suffering that we wish to distance ourselves from. On the contrary, we critically wondered whether someone who is not emotionally moved is also insurmountably disengaged from the distant suffering or whether a person can still be involved, albeit based on cognitive, moral deliberations. Rather than *feeling* with the victims, perhaps people can still *understand* the magnitude of the suffering, or consider oneself to be morally responsible to help. In addition, if someone *is* emotionally moved, does this mean that the spectator is mainly focused on him/herself or can someone be truly and genuinely empathize with the distant suffering,

possibly basing their moral responsibility on this sense of empathy? With these questions in mind, we took a moral relative point of view to study the spectator and focus less on how an audience should respond, and more on how an audience *actually* responds while refraining from normatively judging people's (non)engagement with distant suffering.

Taking this moral relative point of view we had two goals. The first objective was to contribute to the existing body of knowledge with more empirical findings of and insights into how an audience reacts to mediated distant suffering, thus advancing the overall development of the scholarly subject of mediated distant suffering and the role of the Western audiences in this. A second goal was to demonstrate the benefits of using multiple methods in a complementary way. Until now, the majority of audience research was qualitative, consisting of focus groups, interviews and diaries. By developing and conducting a survey, we aimed to add a piece to the puzzle that is the Western audience in relation to distant suffering.

Main findings

In order to answer the key research questions we developed an interdisciplinary and multi-methodological research design, conducting in-depth interviews with academic experts, focus groups and a quantitative wide-scale survey. Differentiating between people's moral considerations and emotional reactions to mediated distant suffering, we looked into the impact of different kinds of (news) media and viewers' strategies of coping with the suffering, in particular their ways of domesticating the distant events. Before we turn to our main question and the main conclusions, we will first look into the four sub-questions we posed in the introduction.

The research in three parts: a post-broadcast era, domesticating strategies, a survey

The first sub-question of this doctoral dissertation is 'How do audiences relate with the distant suffering in a post-broadcast era?'. While we initially argued that social media and online (inter)active news consumption are able to draw the audience closer to the victim, we found no support for this hypothesis. The findings, presented in chapter 5, suggest that distance is still a factor that is not easily overcome, even by social networks, or a shared online global environment. Rather, online media tended to be used to stay in contact with their family and friends, in other words, for users' already familiar environment, thus confirming that current

social media support and promote a *communitarian* environment than a cosmopolitan one. Three ways that social media *were* able to involve the audience more with the distant sufferer was when online stories went viral, when a human interest frame was used or when media footage was less professional and able to show a more 'raw' and personal picture of distant events. In sum, the audience was inclined to be communitarian rather than cosmopolitan. Still, people were able to be personally addressed by post-broadcast media in ways that broadcast media such as television are not capable of, especially the raw un-edited non-professional kind of images impressed media users in such a way that they were better able to grasp the severity of the suffering. We thus suggested that future research can further explore why and how this un-edited footage on online news media and social media can facilitate a better understanding by the media users in the West about the distant suffering.

Our second sub-question was 'How do domesticating strategies play a role in people's perception of or reaction to images of distant suffering?' One way of the audience to empathize and sympathize with distant suffering is by applying strategies of domesticating the news. In chapter 5 we showed that, similar to journalists' domesticating strategies to make foreign events more interesting, appealing and comprehensible to domestic audiences, the audience itself uses domesticating strategies to be more caring. From the four proposed strategies of domestication from the production side (see Joye, 2015), namely emotional domestication, aid-driven domestication, familiarizing the unfamiliar and 'what are the stakes', we found that especially emotional domestication and familiarizing the unfamiliar were used by the audience in more or less successful ways to be more engaged with the distant suffering. People more easily empathized with the distant events and suffering in cases where there was someone of their own in-group involved, a typical way of emotional domestication (e.g. a Flemish eye witness account). Another strategy that the audience followed was to familiarize the unfamiliar by comparing the distant events with events in their own life environment. One person compared the impact of the earthquake and the collapsing towers by imagining it happening to the church towers in her own place (see chapter 6). Of these strategies to increase their level of involvement and care, the first (emotional domestication) was often in congruence with an emotional reaction. However, such emotional reactions were fixed on their own emotional experiences rather than by empathizing; trying to feel what the victims feel. This made us end our study with a critical note, positioning the audience in relation to the notion of the ironic spectator as described by Chouliaraki (2013).

Others actively used strategies of denial, already found in earlier research (Seu, 2010; Kyriakidou, 2014; Scott, 2015; von Engelhardt, 2015), to explain their lack of involvement with the distant suffering. Yet, strategies of denial and justifications of their inaction were often combined with a moral unease that implies they are aware of their lack of care towards the victim. In addition, people who found it difficult to empathize with the victims, *did* regularly attempt to at least *understand* the suffering, albeit on a more cognitive level (i.e. by familiarizing the unfamiliar, see above). We thus see a complex, difficult, and sometimes even contradictory moral struggle amongst the audience to come to terms with their own morality and emotions towards the victims.

The last two questions of this research project were of methodological nature: 'How can reactions and responses of a Western audience be studied on a wider (representative) scale?' And one overarching question; 'what are the reactions of the general Flemish population to mediated distant suffering?' From a methodological perspective, the survey we carried out led to interesting new insights. We were able to identify new concepts to conceptualize people's engagement with mediated distant suffering. For one, we found a more general superordinate concept of 'connectedness' to indicate people's sense of involvement with the distant victim. We also demonstrated the importance of people's sense of agency. Only in case of more (self-perceived) agency were people inclined to be morally involved *and* emotionally involved. We found two clearly distinct constructs that represent two *kinds* of reacting towards distant suffering: empathy and sympathy. By conducting several regression analyses, we looked for the relation between indicated moral responsibility, indication of an emotional reaction and how these two relate with the newly found constructs. Besides the constructs and how they relate to emotional reactions and sense of moral responsibility, the findings from the wide-scale survey themselves hint at four distinct ways or positions of responding to distant suffering. Two of the more obvious profiles were that of 'highly engaged' and 'highly disengaged' members of the Flemish population in our sample. Besides these two, we could discern two doubting groups of which we even suspect it may be one single group of people, who oscillate between being slightly morally involved to being slightly morally disengaged. The highly disengaged group as well as the two 'doubt'-profiles are in line of what we expected from our literature review and the findings of the focus groups. The most surprising profile of this survey was the group of highly engaged people which took

up almost twenty percent of the entire Flemish population. This means that one in five people identify themselves to be morally and emotionally engaged with the distant sufferer.

Overall conclusions

The main question of this research project was: *How do people in Flanders respond to mediated distant suffering?* The overall answer to this question is not surprising and goes: *in many different ways.*

To extrapolate these differing ways of responding to distant suffering, we looked into the different moral and emotional considerations of people. We distinguished audiences' way of domesticating news about distant suffering, presented the relatively unexplored role of emerging social media in viewing news about distant suffering and -based on the survey- we were able to distil and present relatable profiles that identify four main ways of responding to distant suffering; from highly disengaged to, perhaps more interesting, highly *engaged* viewers of news about distant suffering.

We found in the focus groups as well as through the survey evidence of people's attempts to empathize with and feel for the suffering as well as their failure to do so. In addition, the audience often attempts to understand the suffering and consider their own moral role in relation to mediated distant suffering but were also keen on mitigating, refuting or denying any involvement at all. There are those who do not engage with distant suffering at all, there are those who feel powerless, or are desensitized to the extent that they are no longer shocked or moved by images of distant suffering. On the one hand, these findings suggest that we can confirm the existence of the post-humanitarian spectator, interested more in their own feelings and environment than in those who are suffering far-away. On the other hand, we *have* ample evidence pointing towards people who are engaged, or at least try to engage with the suffering. In the two next sections we will further explore both, the post-humanitarian spectator and the engaging/engaged spectator.

The post-humanitarian discourse confirmed: selective caring about the distant victim

Often, people failed at being truly engaged with the suffering. During the focus groups, people expressed that they could not fathom the urgency or magnitude of the suffering. Participants also stated to be desensitized, having seen images of suffering people too often and too regularly. At the same time people who expressed having difficulty to empathize with the

victims and truly engage with the news also showed their moral unease about their lack of (moral) engagement. There was an obvious struggle between what people should *feel* and *think* about distant suffering and how they often *truly* felt and behaved. This was most evident in the often used phrase 'I think it's terrible, BUT'. People often explicitly stressed that they denounced the disaster and the suffering but would add that they could not be caring, moved or involved with *all* news about suffering. This kind of argument resonates strongly with Cohen's (2001) notion of selective caring. Since people are unable to be caring about *all* disastrous events, they have to choose which suffering they will engage with and be concerned about.

Distance, is a complicating factor in this process of people caring for and displaying compassion towards suffering. The selective caring of the audience in the focus groups was generally explained by referring to their incapacity to be caring about everything. In addition, distance removes the spectator from the victim, the suffering, the events and possible helpful actions. The survey pointed to distance mitigating or even removing people's sense of agency towards the suffering, rendering the spectator with a sense of powerlessness that may led them to conclude they are not morally responsible to do something and/or rendered them without emotion, possibly fatigued or hopeless. Indeed, the sense of powerlessness, the lack of agency, was expressed during the focus groups and was confirmed to be an important factor in our survey. Distance also prevented people from truly imagining the suffering of the victim because there is no experiential overlap. Such a lack of experiential overlap problematizes the potential of people really imagining what a victim must feel or go through when a disaster strikes. In other words, distance and the resulting lack of shared experience impede people to truly *empathize*. Lastly, many participants in the focus groups admitted to be more caring and concerned about people close-by than those who live far-away and in the survey we also found that close-by news was regularly prioritized. An often used domesticating strategy of 'what are the stakes', used as a domesticating strategy by the production side of distant suffering, was found to only stress and magnify the distance between the suffering and the spectator in the focus groups, leaving the audience less engaged because they have nothing to lose. This sense of prioritizing people who live close-by was also found in the survey. Of the five constructs identified by the exploratory factor analysis, the construct 'priority' supported the idea that people were more affected by and caring about disastrous events and suffering close at home over events happening far-away.

In conclusion, the manifestation of an uncaring, unengaged, fatigued or desensitized audience confirms the post-humanitarian discourse of an audience that is not cosmopolitan but communitarian, that is more pre-occupied with their nearby surroundings than those who live far-away. The overly emotional spectator was also identified, especially in the easy and often used phrase of 'I think it's terrible, BUT'. It represents the kind of audience that presents itself as emotional, but in the end, not caring. Yet, we have also found evidence contrary to this post-humanitarian way of responding to distant suffering.

Going POST-post-humanitarian: cautiously optimistic observations

Despite some participants' lack of moral and emotional engagement, people generally *attempted* to be engaged which leads us to be cautiously optimistic. People's attempt at moral and emotional engagement was evident when they expressed their own moral doubts and insecurities during the focus groups, when they openly reflected upon being disengaging, uncaring and/or unemotional towards the images of distant suffering combined with a sincere willingness and even a frustration at failing to be caring about distant suffering. It was also apparent in some of their strategies of domesticating the news (most notably when participants aimed to familiarize the unfamiliar), which they applied in order to better understand the suffering and the severity of the situation. The audience's attempt to familiarize the unfamiliar, unravels a willingness to attempt and understand, thus *sympathize* with the victims. This is not so much based on feeling or imaging what the victim feels, but it is about the spectator nonetheless trying to *understand* the victim.

Not just the findings of the focus groups, but also the survey supports a cautiously optimistic stance as a surprisingly big part of the Flemish population seemed to be unequivocally and genuinely moved and identifying themselves to be morally responsible towards the suffering. These highly engaged viewers in Flanders consisted of 18 percent, almost one-fifth of the entire population. Rather than only looking into how people mitigate their own moral role, or criticise the media's role in representing distant suffering, we may want to look more closely into this segment of the audience. For now, we already found a significant relation between this highly engaged group and their sense of agency and connectedness. Clearly, a sense of agency as well as people's experienced connection between themselves and the victims positively encourage any form of engagement. It is

obviously more easy to be involved with distant suffering when one thinks he/she *can* do something to help the victims and alleviate the suffering.

Regarding our survey and the identified profiles, one could argue that our results are biased because of politically correct answers, leading to an overestimation of people's level of engagement. This is most certainly a possibility we should take into account. However, the size of the highly engaged group in combination with the significant group of people who indicate *not* being morally and/or emotionally caring, signifies that perhaps these people answered honestly and are genuinely morally and emotionally caring about the distant suffering. In addition, with the results of the survey we do not claim to know or lay bare the truth. On the contrary, the survey helps in raising new questions and hypotheses.

Shortcomings of current research and future directions

The development of the constructs in the survey, as well as the relatively large group of morally and emotionally engaged viewers, lead to new questions about people's attitude and response towards mediated suffering. In terms of a future research agenda on mediated distant suffering, we suggest to include experimental settings to further study the audience in relation to distant suffering: the constructs can be used as an instrument to explore the level of engagement of an audience. One could manipulate the kind of *suffering* (e.g. distant suffering versus close suffering, or suffering because of a natural disaster versus suffering because of political conflict) to explore differences in moral and emotional engagement. In addition, in the second chapter of this dissertation, we considered using construal level theory (CLT) as a vantage point to research the audience but after deliberation we decided to develop hypotheses through focus groups and develop these further through a survey, which left little possibility to include CLT as part of the research. Now that a sound and consistent survey instrument has been designed and tested, future research could make use of CLT to further explore the audience in relation to distant suffering. This can be done by exploring how different kinds of distances (e.g. cultural, temporal, physical,...) possibly lead to other levels of moral and emotional engagement.

People's sense of agency is another important factor to be further investigated. It was clear throughout this study that people are especially inclined to help or get involved in case they felt they could actually do something to help. This sense of agency has been put forward in earlier research as well, for example in Chouliaraki's (2006) concept of emergency news

where solidarity and care is established by framing suffering in the context of possible solutions which can relieve the suffering (see chapter 1). This sense of agency is under-researched and needs more conceptualization. The same goes for people's sense of connectedness in the most broad sense. As demonstrated by the survey, a sense of connectedness – often hand in hand with a sense of agency - most evidently results in an emotionally and morally caring and involved spectator. By further developing these concepts we will be able to further extrapolate what motivates people to help, be involved and consider oneself morally responsible.

An important shortcoming of this doctoral research is that we have simplified incredibly complicated and difficult questions. We only studied people responding to *emergency news*, and no other kinds of news about distant suffering (i.e. 'ecstatic news' or 'adventure news') and by ignoring other instances of suffering such as man-made suffering and politically induced suffering, we have somewhat downplayed the more realistic scenario where the spectator is part of a wider, more complicated and dynamic social environment where the role of the audience and its relation to distant suffering is unclear.

Another shortcoming is that we have only selected participants based on age, gender and education level for our focus groups, thus excluding other groups of interest to our study (i.e. immigrants, the elderly, children, economic status, political orientation and other minority groups). Our attempts to include ethnic minority groups were not successful. We would therefore suggest that future research can distinctly focus on these groups to complement existing research and create a far more inclusive picture of a culturally and ethnically diverse audience.

We also only differentiated between two psychological processes, cognition and affect, while there is much more at stake in people's reaction towards distant suffering. We have created models predicting people's moral and emotional response while there are much more complicating factors at stake. For one, the dynamics between emotion and cognition are more refined than presented in this dissertation. In addition, cognition and emotion are complicated by the *situation* and this is different for everyone, depending on cultural, social, economic, political or other environmental issues and social background. Lastly, we found that the construct of 'empathy' - which we initially considered to be on the more emotional side of care and compassion - was not necessarily related with people's indicated emotional response to distant suffering. Still, since we did find two distinct ways of engaging with the victim (which

we have called sympathy and empathy) and we believe these are two distinctly different but still interrelated processes, one more cognitive and one more emotional, involved in the sense of care and compassion towards the victim. In the future we will need more empirical work and theoretical conceptualization of these emotional and cognitive processes of people who engage with distant suffering.

Future research will have to expand the current findings and qualify the inevitably simplified conclusions made in this dissertation. In addition, while we have aimed to expand knowledge by simplifying the audience in a predictive model, it can also be expanded by doing the opposite: taking much more time to discover people's news consumption of distant suffering and their reactions. Fieldwork, diaries, interviews and follow-up focus groups would be appropriate in this regard. Indeed, we believe that the current inductive approach – first developing, then confirming hypotheses - can be complimented by a future deductive approach which can qualify the current findings.

Still, we hope that the presented doctoral dissertation has been able to provide the academic field with new insights in the relation between Western audiences and mediated distant suffering, hence paving the way for future empirical audience research. Most importantly, we want to emphasize that we, as academics in a post-humanitarian age, may have to refocus our gaze away from the negative, uninvolved, uncaring or at least self-involved and narcissistic audience, and look more closely at those who are caring and solidary because according to the findings of the presented research, they *do* exist.

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Summaries

English summary

This dissertation explores how the Western audience reacts to mediated distant suffering. Earlier research has often been focused on moral discussions relating to mediated distant suffering (i.e. Boltanski, 1999; Singer, 1972; Silverstone, 2006), or focused on textual empirical studies about the representation of distant suffering (e.g. Chouliaraki, 2006; Joye, 2010; Nair, 2012). By empirically studying the audience, the aim has been to contribute to a growing body of knowledge about the audience vis-à-vis distant suffering (Kyriakidou, 2014, 2015; Scott, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014). A second goal has been to explore the advantages of doing interdisciplinary and multi-methodological research to investigate the audience in relation to distant suffering. Most of the current academic empirical studies in this field have been qualitative, applying methodologies such as focus groups, interviews and ethnographic fieldwork (cf. Kyriakidou, 2008; Ong, 2015; Scott, 2015) although there are some notable exceptions to this (i.e. von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2015; Maier, Slovic & Mayorga, 2016).

It is discussed what the ontological, epistemological and methodological options are, and what the advantages and disadvantages are for doing interdisciplinary and multi-methodological research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2015). Finally, a critical realist perspective was chosen to further advance our research (Jensen, 2012; Porpora, 2015; Schrøder et al., 2003). The critical realist perspective aims to bridge ontological divides by acknowledging both an external reality independent of our social environment and a socially constructed environment that is subject to interpretation (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen & Karlsson, 2002; Harvey, 2002). In addition, we opted for an inductive approach by first conducting exploratory studies (Schrøder et al., 2003) namely expert-interviews and focus groups, which informed a quantitative survey. In addition, we borrowed concepts from social psychology to structurally study people's moral and emotional reactions to mediated distant suffering. More specifically, the tripod of *affect*, *cognition* and *behaviour* was used as a conceptual framework to inquire about the audience's feelings, thoughts and behaviour (Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

Drawing on the focus groups, we learned more about the Western audience in how they relate to distant suffering in a post-broadcast era, where social media such as Facebook are more and more used as a news channel and platform. It was set forth that technological advancements and interactive affordances are able to bring the distant suffering closer to the spectator. Yet, rather than the cosmopolitan use of Facebook where spectator and distant

sufferer reached out towards one another, we found that the audience preferred to stay in their own social circles online, thus confirming the idea of a *communitarian* (Scott, 2015) online social environment. Still, unedited footage from ordinary citizens, especially when they went 'viral', was able to incite a sense of urgency and actuality to the spectators and thus bring the victims in need closer to the audience. This was, however, mostly the case when the distant news was about Western-related events.

Besides the use of (online) news media in post-broadcast era, we also examined how domesticating strategies – often used on the production side to invite the audience to care for the distant suffering (Joye, 2015)- resonated amongst said audience. The audience frequently applied the strategy of emotional domestication as it allowed them to more easily identify and *empathize* with the Belgian eyewitness. Another prevailing strategy was the audience's way of 'familiarizing the unfamiliar' where viewers would compare events happening far-away with hypothetical situations in their own environment to more easily imagine and understand the suffering. People's use of emotional domestication confirms the idea of an audience focused on their own emotions, hence echoing the ironic and narcissistic spectator in line with the post-humanitarian narrative (Chouliaraki, 2013). On the other hand, participants using the 'familiarize the unfamiliar'-strategy did show a willingness and effort to understand and thus *sympathize* (i.e. not necessarily *feel* but rather *understand* the suffering) with the distant sufferers.

Informed by the focus groups, we developed a survey and were able to distil several reliable and valid constructs to measure people's way of engaging with mediated suffering. These constructs are (1) connectedness, (2) agency, (3) sympathy, (4) priority, and (5) empathy. Agency and connectedness were of significant importance in people's sense of moral responsibility and in eliciting an emotional response. Further, we identified four types of reacting to news about distant suffering: the moral doubter, the highly *disengaged*, the skeptic doubter, and the highly engaged. While the first three are in line with the idea of the post-humanitarian spectator, we stress the substantially large group of the highly *engaged* who took up nigh to 20 percent of the entire population. This latter group is both emotionally and morally involved and engaged with the victims. In our concluding chapter we highlight this latter group to be further investigated. This highly engaged group shows that some in the audience *do* care and are perhaps, not so distant from the victim as we initially thought.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Voor deze dissertatie hebben we onderzocht hoe het Westers publiek reageert op beelden van menselijk leed in verre landen, ofwel gemedieerd buitenlands lijden. Eerder onderzoek hierover is vaak gericht op morele vraagstukken over de representatie van buitenlands lijden (i.e. Boltanski, 1999; Singer, 1972; Silverstone, 2006) en dit voornamelijk aan de hand van tekstueel empirisch onderzoek. Door het empirisch bestuderen van het *publiek* willen we bijdragen aan de verdere ontwikkeling van dit opkomend onderzoeksgebied (Kyriakidou, 2014, 2015; Scott, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014). Een tweede doel was het verkennen van de mogelijkheden van het ontwikkelen en uitvoeren van interdisciplinair en multi-methodologisch onderzoek naar de reacties van het publiek tegenover buitenlands leed. Terwijl het meeste onderzoek in deze richting vooral kwalitatief van aard was (cf. Kyriakidou, 2008; Ong, 2015; Scott, 2015), zijn kwantitatieve benaderingen van het onderzoeksthema eerder uitzonderlijk (i.e. von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2015; Maier, Slovic & Mayorga, 2016). Met deze dissertatie wensen we bij te dragen aan de verdere ontwikkeling van deze onderzoekslijn.

Na een reflectie over de ontologische, epistemologische en methodologische mogelijkheden en voor- en nadelen van interdisciplinair en multi-methodologisch onderzoek (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2015), werd in dit proefschrift finaal gekozen voor het kritisch realistisch perspectief als overkoepelend kader (Jensen, 2012; Porpora, 2015; Schrøder et al., 2003). Het kritisch realistisch perspectief heeft als doel om ontologische bruggen te slaan door het erkennen van zowel een externe realiteit die los staat van onze sociale omgeving en anderzijds een sociaal geconstrueerde realiteit die onderhevig is aan subjectieve interpretatie (Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen & Karlsson, 2002; Harvey, 2002). Daarnaast hebben we gekozen voor een inductieve benadering door eerst exploratief onderzoek uit te voeren (Schrøder et al., 2003) aan de hand van diepte-interviews en focusgroepen, waarvan de resultaten een belangrijke voedings- en inspiratiebodem waren voor het ontwikkelen van een kwantitatieve survey en vragenlijst. Verder hebben we concepten vanuit de discipline van sociale psychologie geleend voor het structureel kunnen bestuderen van de emotionele en morele reacties van mensen wanneer ze geconfronteerd worden met berichtgeving over buitenlands lijden. Centraal stonden daarbij de dimensies van *affect*, *cognitie* en *gedrag* die fungeerden als conceptuele basis voor het verder verkennen van de emoties, gedachten en handelingen van het publiek (Ross & Nisbett, 1991).

Op basis van de bevindingen van de focusgroepen verkregen we meer inzicht in de manier waarop een Westers publiek zich verhoudt tot het buitenlands lijden in een zogenaamd *post-broadcast* tijdperk waar sociale media zoals Facebook meer en meer worden gebruikt als nieuwsmedia en platform, dit ter aanvulling van klassieke nieuwsmedia als televisie en krant. Vanuit de academisch literatuur kwamen signalen dat de technologische voordelen en interactieve opties van deze post-broadcast media ervoor konden zorgen dat het Westerse publiek zich meer verbonden zou kunnen voelen met de verre slachtoffers. Dit kosmopolitische ideaalbeeld, waar Facebook gebruikt zou worden door zowel toeschouwer als slachtoffer en zodoende een globale gemeenschap zou creëren, werd echter niet bevestigd door onze studies. Integendeel, het publiek uitte een sterke voorkeur om binnen de eigen bekende en vertrouwde sociale kringen te blijven, ook online. Deze vaststelling sluit aan bij het beeld van een *communitarian* samenleving, een maatschappij waar juist *minder* in plaats van meer sociaal contact wordt gezocht buiten de bestaande sociale connecties en netwerken om. Een belangrijke uitzondering op dit verhaal bleek te liggen in het potentieel van onprofessionele, onbewerkte beelden die online gedeeld en verspreid werden. Bij veel respondenten creëerden deze als meer authentiek gepercipieerde beelden een gevoel van actualiteit en urgentie waarmee ze zich wel dichter bij de slachtoffers voelden, al bleek dit alleen het geval te zijn bij rampen en crisissituaties waarbij een duidelijke link was met het Westen en het eigen thuisland.

Naast het gebruik en de rol van (online) nieuwsmedia in een *post-broadcast* tijdperk focuste dit proefschrift zich op de manier waarop domesticatiestrategieën –regelmatig gebruikt door journalisten om de kijker meer te betrekken bij buitenlandse gebeurtenissen (Joye, 2015)- resoneerden bij het publiek. De studie wees uit dat het publiek regelmatig gebruik maakte van een emotionele domesticatiestrategie waarbij ze zich identificeerden met Belgische ooggetuigen en zich daardoor beter konden *inleven* met het buitenlands leed. Een andere manier van domesticatie die vaak toegepast werd kan samengevat worden als het ‘vertrouwd maken van het onbekende’, waarbij de kijkers de buitenlandse gebeurtenissen vergelijken met een hypothetische situatie in hun eigen omgeving waardoor ze zich een betere voorstelling kunnen maken van het menselijk leed dat zich daar afspeelt. Dat mensen een emotionele domesticatiestrategie toepassen bevestigt het post-humanitaire beeld van een ironische, narcistische toeschouwer die vooral geïnteresseerd is in zijn/haar eigen emoties (Chouliaraki, 2013). Anderzijds wezen de bevindingen wel uit dat het publiek verschillende

pogingen onderneemt om te *sympathiseren*, wat niet noodzakelijk overeenstemt met het zich emotioneel inleven met de slachtoffers, maar wel een poging inhoudt tot het *begrijpen* van het leed van de slachtoffers.

Op basis van de bevindingen van de focusgroepen werd een survey en meetschaal ontwikkeld waarbij vijf valide en betrouwbare constructen werden geïdentificeerd die meten hoe mensen zich verhouden tot het buitenlands lijden: (1) verbondenheid, (2) *agency*, (3) sympathie, (4) prioriteit, en (5) empathie. Vooral *agency* en verbondenheid zijn van significant belang in de manier waarop het grote publiek moreel en emotioneel reageert. Verder wees de survey op vier profielen die typische reacties zijn naar beelden van buitenlands leed toe: de morele twijfelaar, de niet-betrokkene, de sceptische twijfelaar, en de sterk betrokkene. Terwijl de eerste drie profielen vooral aan de verwachtingen van het post-humanitaire narratief voldoen, willen we de aandacht trekken op de laatste groep, de sterk betrokken toeschouwer die bijna 20 procent van de volledige bevolking besloeg. Deze laatste groep voelt zich immers zowel emotioneel als moreel sterk betrokken bij de slachtoffers en hun lot. Als belangrijke conclusie wijzen we er op dat deze groep verder onderzoek nodig heeft. Deze betrokken groep mensen toont namelijk aan dat onderzoek naar publieksreacties op buitenlands lijden niet noodzakelijk een negatief of pessimistisch verhaal hoeft of moet te zijn. Integendeel, een relatief grote groep van de bevolking geeft expliciet aan *wel* te geven om het lot van een onbekende persoon die slachtoffer is van een buitenlandse ramp of crisis die al snel als 'ver van ons bed' wordt gedefinieerd. Terugkoppelend naar de titel van dit proefschrift, staat deze groep wellicht minder ver weg van de slachtoffers dan wij en velen anderen initieel dachten.

Attachments

Attachments

Attachment 1 – Tables

Table 1. characteristics of focus groups

Group	Age	Education	Gender	N
1	20 – 30	Higher educated level	Male	5
2	30 – 55	Higher educated level	Female	4
3	20 – 30	Higher educated level	Female	7
4	30 – 55	Lower educated level	Female	6
5	20 – 30	Lower educated level	Female	3
6	20 – 30	Higher educated level	Mixed	6
7	20 – 30	Lower educated level	Mixed	6
8	20 – 30	Higher educated level	Mixed	6
9	30 – 55	Higher educated level	Mixed	4
10	30 – 55	Lower educated level	Mixed	4

Table 2. Basic descriptive statistics (more information is available upon request)

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Education level	450	1	9	5,75	1,735
Age	450	20,00	64,00	46,7540	12,90414
Gender	450	,00	1,00	,5008	,50056
Income	377	,00	8,00	3,6155	2,37841
Valid N (listwise)	377				

Attachments

Attachment 2 – Topic list for focus groups

First some general questions about bad news in distant places.

Then the video about the earthquake in Nepal

Then present the images of Facebook during the earthquake in Nepal.

Part 1: Open questions

- What do you think about bad news in distant places? (Do you follow this? Do you seek it out? How do you stay informed? *et cetera*).
- What do you specifically know about the earthquake in Nepal last year?
 - How did you hear about it?
 - How did you stay informed?
- What other kinds of disaster news are you familiar with and do you know about?
 - How do you hear about that?
 - (if not mentioned: Syria, Paris, Ebola, ...)
 - Closeness:
 - When is something 'far-away'?
 - Emotion and morality:
 - How do you feel emotionally towards distant news and distant people and suffering/
 - How do you feel morally towards distant suffering?
 - Do different kinds of media play a role in perception of bad news in distant places? If so, in what ways?

Part 2: Presentation of video about news of the earthquake and images of Facebook during the time of the earthquake in Nepal.

- Initial reactions:
 - What are your initial reactions to the images of the televised item? (Cognitive, emotionally, behavioral)
 - What are your initial reactions to the images of the Facebook images and information

- Comparing different media
 - How do you react to the different kinds of media? Do televised images have another impact on seeing and hearing about the earthquake than the news on Facebook?
 - In what ways do different media have more, or less intense impact? (Is Facebook more intense? Or television? Do some media make a more profound impression? How so? Are some media able to bring the victims closer to the viewer than others?)
- Subject to discuss (if not discussed already):
 - Ways of domestication: e.g. does the Flemish eyewitness make a difference in viewing and empathizing with the events/victims?
 - Distance/proximity: Do different media result in different perceived distances of the events and victims?
 - Own background: does your social background (e.g. economic, social, political, education, age, personal experiences *et cetera*) have an influence on how you perceive distant suffering?

Attachment 3 – Final survey (in Dutch)

Introductie

Bedankt dat u de tijd wilt nemen voor het invullen van deze enquête in het kader van onderzoek van Universiteit Gent. Het invullen zal in totaal maximaal 10 minuten duren. Voor ons onderzoek zijn we geïnteresseerd in de manier waarop u naar het nieuws kijkt en hoe u denkt over slecht nieuws uit verre landen. We vragen u zo eerlijk mogelijk antwoord te geven op de vragen. Alle antwoorden zullen anoniem worden verwerkt om uw privacy te waarborgen.

Deel 1. Basisgegevens

Q1 Wat is je nationaliteit?

- Belgisch (1)
- Nederlands (2)
- Anders, namelijk (3) _____

Q2 Waar bent u geboren?

- België (1)
- Nederland (2)
- Anders, namelijk (3) _____

Q3 Hoeveel kinderen heeft u?

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- Meer dan 4 (6)

Q4 Wat is uw huidige situatie?

- Studerend/schoolgaand (1)
- Voltijds werkend (2)
- Deeltijds werkend (3)
- Werkzoekend (4)
- Niet werkend (5)
- Gepensioneerd (6)
- Anders (7)

Q5 Wat is uw maandelijks bruto inkomen?

- 0 - 1000 EUR (1)
- 1001 - 1500 EUR (2)
- 1501 - 2000 EUR (3)
- 2001 - 2500 EUR (4)
- 2501 - 3000 EUR (5)
- 3001 - 3500 EUR (6)
- 3501 - 4000 EUR (7)
- 4001 - 4500 EUR (8)
- Meer dan 4500 EUR (9)
- Weet ik niet (10)
- Wil ik niet zeggen (11)

Deel 2 In dit deel peilen we naar het gebruik van nieuwsmedia in uw dagdagelijkse leven

Q6 Hoe vaak kijkt/luistert/leest u gemiddeld het nieuws?

- Nooit (1)
- Eens per maand (2)
- Een paar keer per maand (3)
- Eens per week (4)
- Een paar keer per week (5)
- Eens per dag (6)
- Een paar keer per dag (7)

Q7 Welke media gebruikt u het MEEST voor het volgen van het nieuws? (Meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)

- Geen (1)
- Televisie (2)
- Krant (3)
- Facebook (4)
- Twitter (5)
- Radio (6)
- Online nieuwswebsites (7)
- Anders, namelijk (8) _____

Q8 Welk nieuwsmedium geniet uw VOORKEUR voor het volgen van nieuws? (Meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)

- Geen (1)
- Televisie (2)
- Krant (3)
- Facebook (4)
- Twitter (5)
- Radio (6)
- Online nieuwswebsites (7)
- Anders, namelijk (8) _____

Q9 Welk nieuwsmedium vindt u over het algemeen het meest BETROUWBAAR?

- Geen (1)
- Televisie (2)
- Krant (3)
- Facebook (4)
- Twitter (5)
- Radio (6)
- Online nieuwswebsites (7)
- Anders, namelijk (8) _____

Q10 In welke thema's bent u het meest geïnteresseerd? (Meerdere antwoorden mogelijk)

- Binnenland (1)
- Buitenland (2)
- Regionaal (3)
- Economie (4)
- Sport (5)
- Politiek (6)
- Entertainment en cultuur (7)
- Geen (8)
- Overig, namelijk (9) _____

Deel 3 Nu volgt een nieuwsfragment (duur 2.43 minuten) over de actuele hongersnood in Afrika. Na het zien van dit korte filmpje worden hier enkele vragen over gesteld. Gelieve ervoor te zorgen dat het geluid van uw pc aanstaat, vervolgens op >> (play) te klikken en aandachtig naar het fragment te luisteren.

Q11 Hebt u dit fragment correct kunnen bekijken?

- Ja (1)
- Nee, ik kon het fragment niet bekijken (technisch probleem) (0)

Q12 Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met de volgende stellingen:

<i>Helemaal niet mee eens (1)</i>	<i>Niet mee eens (2)</i>	<i>Neutraal (3)</i>	<i>Mee eens (4)</i>	<i>Helemaal mee eens (5)</i>
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<i>Na het zien van dit soort beelden probeer ik me in te beelden wat de moeilijkheden zijn die de slachtoffers doormaken (1)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik vind wat er momenteel in Afrika gebeurt heel erg (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ook al zou iemand hier niet geëmotioneerd door raken, kan je de gebeurtenissen toch wel heel erg vinden (3)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik realiseer me na het zien van dit soort beelden dat de slachtoffers veel ellende meemaken (7)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik denk na het zien van dit soort beelden wel: "hoe zou ik het vinden moest het hier gebeuren?" (8)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik denk na het zien van dit soort beelden wel: "hoe zou ik het vinden moest ik daar zijn in dezelfde situatie als de slachtoffers?" (9)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Na het zien van deze beelden beseft ik goed hoe dringend de slachtoffers hulp nodig hebben (10)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q13 Maak de volgende zin af:

Ik maak me geen zorgen over de Hongersnood in Afrika omdat....

	<i>Helemaal niet mee eens (1)</i>	<i>Niet mee eens (2)</i>	<i>Neutraal (3)</i>	<i>Mee eens (4)</i>	<i>Helemaal mee eens (5)</i>	<i>Niet van toepassing</i>
<i>...deze gebeurtenissen geen impact hebben op mij persoonlijk</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>... een hongersnood hier in België niet snel zal plaatsvinden</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>... ik teveel van dit soort beelden heb gezien</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q14 Maak de volgende zin af:

Ik vind het moeilijk om me voor te stellen hoe erg het daar in Afrika is tijdens de Hongersnood omdat... :

	<i>Helemaal niet mee eens (1)</i>	<i>Niet mee eens (2)</i>	<i>Neutraal (3)</i>	<i>Mee eens (4)</i>	<i>Helemaal mee eens (5)</i>	<i>Niet van toepassing</i>
<i>... ik nog nooit een hongersnood heb meegemaakt</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>...er in België niet snel een hongersnood zal zijn</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q15 Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met de volgende stellingen:

	<i>Helemaal niet mee eens (1)</i>	<i>Niet mee eens (2)</i>	<i>Neutraal (3)</i>	<i>Mee eens (4)</i>	<i>Helemaal mee eens (5)</i>
<i>Ik vind het moeilijk om me in te leven met de getoonde slachtoffers in Afrika (1)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik raak geëmotioneerd door het zien van deze beelden (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>De gezichten en persoonlijke verhalen van de slachtoffers raken mij emotioneel (3)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ernstige gebeurtenissen dichtbij (bijvoorbeeld in België of Europa) raken mij meer dan het verre leed in Afrika (4)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Het verhaal en het leed van één slachtoffer raakt me meer dan het massale leed van vele slachtoffers in statistische cijfers (5)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik voel me persoonlijk betrokken met de slachtoffers die op de beelden worden getoond (6)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik kan me moeilijk identificeren met de mensen die ik op de nieuwsbeelden zie (7)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Doordat ik zo vaak dit soort nieuws heb gezien doet het me emotioneel niet meer zoveel (8)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q16 Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met de volgende stellingen:

	<i>Helemaal niet mee eens (1)</i>	<i>Niet mee eens (2)</i>	<i>Neutraal (3)</i>	<i>Mee eens (4)</i>	<i>Helemaal mee eens (5)</i>
<i>Ik vind dat ik een morele verantwoordelijkheid heb om iets te doen (doneren/vrijwilligerswerk/iets anders,...) (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik denk dat ik effectief de slachtoffers zou kunnen helpen (op welke manier dan ook) (4)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik denk dat mijn hulpactie(s) een positief verschil kan maken voor de slachtoffers (5)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik draag zelf een belangrijk deel van de morele verantwoordelijkheid om te helpen (6)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Uiteindelijk dragen mijn medemensen meer morele verantwoordelijkheid dan ik (7)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Uiteindelijk dragen overheden en internationale organisaties meer morele verantwoordelijkheid dan ik (8)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q17 Geef aan in hoeverre je het eens bent met de volgende stellingen:

	<i>Helemaal niet mee eens (1)</i>	<i>Niet mee eens (2)</i>	<i>Neutraal (3)</i>	<i>Mee eens (4)</i>	<i>Helemaal mee eens (5)</i>
<i>Geld doneren heeft geen zin (1)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Hulp op welke manier dan ook (doneren/vrijwilligerswerk,...) heeft geen zin (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Als veel mensen storten op Consortium 12-12* zou dat zeker helpen (3)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Het getoonde leed van de slachtoffers is overdreven (4)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Na het zien van dit soort beelden raak ik ontmoedigd (5)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Het Consortium 12-12* is niet te vertrouwen (6)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Gebeurtenissen in verre landen (zoals Afrika) vind ik minder belangrijk dan gebeurtenissen dichtbij (7)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Nieuws over gebeurtenissen dichtbij blijven langer in mijn gedachten dan nieuws over gebeurtenissen ver weg (10)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>De nieuwsbeelden zijn niet te vertrouwen (11)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Consortium 12-12 is een samenwerkingsverband van vijf menslievende organisaties. Met nieuwsflashes en een oproep tot steun.

Q18 Beantwoord de volgende vragen:

	<i>Heel dichtbij (1)</i>	<i>Dichtbij (2)</i>	<i>Niet dichtbij, niet ver weg (3)</i>	<i>Ver weg (4)</i>	<i>Heel ver weg (5)</i>
<i>Hoe voel je je tegenover de getoonde slachtoffers in Afrika? (1)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Hoe voel je je tegenover de slachtoffers op fysiek vlak? (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Hoe voel je je tegenover de slachtoffers op emotioneel vlak? (3)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Hoe voel je je tegenover de slachtoffers op sociaal cultureel vlak? (4)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q19 Geef antwoorde op de volgende vragen:

<i>Heel</i>	<i>Weinig</i>	<i>Niet</i>	<i>Veel</i>	<i>Heel</i>
<i>weinig</i>	<i>(2)</i>	<i>veel,</i>	<i>(4)</i>	<i>veel</i>
<i>(1)</i>		<i>niet</i>		<i>(5)</i>
		<i>weinig</i>		
		<i>(3)</i>		

<i>In welke mate ben je geïnteresseerd in de huidige gebeurtenissen en volg je het nieuws rond de Hongersnood op de voet? (1)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>In welke mate ervaar je dat de slachtoffers in Afrika helemaal aan de andere kant van de wereld wonen? (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>In welke mate voel je een emotionele connectie met de slachtoffers? (3)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>In welke mate voel je een sociaal culturele band met de slachtoffers? (4)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>In welke mate voel je je persoonlijk betrokken met de slachtoffers? (5)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>In welke mate voel je je ver verwijderd van de slachtoffers? (6)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q20 Heeft u het afgelopen jaar wel eens geld gedoneerd aan een hulporganisatie gericht op verre landen?

- Nee (1)
- Ja, eenmalig (2)
- Ja, af en toe (een paar keer per jaar) (3)
- Ja, met regelmaat (maandelijks of vaker) (4)

Q21 Heeft u het afgelopen jaar wel eens geld gedoneerd aan een hulporganisatie gericht op Belgische goede doelen?

- Nee (1)
- Ja, eenmalig (2)
- Ja, af en toe (een paar keer per jaar) (3)
- Ja, met regelmaat (maandelijks of vaker) (4)

Q22 Welke van de volgende online (hulp)acties heeft u het afgelopen jaar uitgevoerd?

- Het delen van een nieuwsbericht via social media (Facebook, Twitter,...) over slachtoffers in verre landen (1)
- Het delen van een nieuwsbericht via social media (Facebook, Twitter,...) over slachtoffers in België (2)
- Het delen van een oproep tot hulp via social media over problemen in verre landen (3)
- Het delen van een oproep tot hulp via social media over problemen in België (4)
- Geen van deze (5)
- Iets anders namelijk ... (6) _____

Hartelijk dank voor het invullen van deze vragenlijst.

Vragen over dit onderzoek kunt u richten aan: eline.huiberts@ugent.be.

Attachments

Attachment 4 – Final survey (translated in English)

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to fill in the questionnaire for research at Ghent University. The completion will take a maximum total of 10 minutes. For our research we are interested in the way you look to news and how you think about bad news from distant countries. We ask you to be as honest as possible while answering the questions. All answers will be processed anonymously, to ensure your privacy.

Part 1. Basic information

Q1 What is your nationality?

- (1) Belgium
- (2) Dutch
- (3) Other _____

Q2 Where are you born?

- (1) Belgium
- (2) Netherlands
- (3) Other _____

Q3 How many children do you have?

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- More than 4 (6)

Q4 What is your current situation?

- (1) Student
- (2) Employed fulltime
- (3) Employed part-time
- (4) Looking for a job
- (5) Unemployed
- (6) retired
- (7) Other

Q5 What is your monthly gross income?

- 0 - 1000 EUR (1)
- 1001 - 1500 EUR (2)
- 1501 - 2000 EUR (3)
- 2001 - 2500 EUR (4)
- 2501 - 3000 EUR (5)
- 3001 - 3500 EUR (6)
- 3501 - 4000 EUR (7)
- 4001 - 4500 EUR (8)
- More than 4500 EUR (9)
- I don't know (10)
- I rather not say (11)

Part 2. In this part, we assess your use of news media in your daily life

Q6 How many times do you watch / listen / read the news averagely?

- (1) Never
- (2) Once a month
- (3) A few times a month
- (4) Once a week
- (5) A few times a week
- (6) Once a day
- (7) A few times a day

Q7 What media do you use MOSTLY to follow the news? (Multiple answers possible)

- (1) None
- (2) Television
- (3) News papers
- (4) Facebook
- (5) Twitter
- (6) Radio
- (7) Online news websites
- (8) Other _____

Q8 What news medium has your PREFERENCE for following the news? (Multiple answers possible)

- (1) None
- (2) Television
- (3) News papers
- (4) Facebook
- (5) Twitter
- (6) Radio
- (7) Online news websites
- (8) Other _____

Q9 Which news medium you think is generally most RELIABLE?

- (1) None
- (2) Television
- (3) News papers
- (4) Facebook
- (5) Twitter
- (6) Radio
- (7) Online news websites
- (8) Other _____

Q10 Which themes are you most interested in?

- (1) Domestic news
- (2) International news
- (3) Local news
- (4) Economics
- (5) Sports
- (6) Politics
- (7) Entertainment and culture
- (8) None
- (9) Other, namely_____

Part 3 Now a news video will follow (2.43 minutes) about the current famine in Africa.

After seeing this short video, some questions are asked about it. Make sure that sound on your computer is turned on, then click on >> (play) and watch carefully to the video.

Q11 Have you been able to view this fragment correctly?

- (1) Yes (1)
- (0) No, I was not able to watch the fragment correctly (technical problems) (0)

Q12 Indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements

	<i>Strongly disagree</i> (1)	<i>Disagree</i> (2)	<i>Neutral</i> (3)	<i>Agree</i> (4)	<i>Strongly agree</i> (5)
<i>After seeing this kind of images, I try to imagine what difficulties the victims are going through (1)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>I find what is happening in Africa terrible (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Even if someone does not get emotional, you can still find the events terrible (3)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Ik realiseer me na het zien van dit soort beelden dat de slachtoffers veel ellende meemaken (7)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>I realize after seeing these images that the victims experience a lot of misery (7)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>After seeing these images I think 'what would I think about it if it were to happen right here?' (8)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>After seeing these images I think 'what would I think about it if I were in the same situation as the victims?'" (9)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>After seeing these images I realize how urgently the victims need help (10)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q13 Finish the next sentence:

I am not worried about the famine in Africa because....

	<i>Strongly disagree(1)</i>	<i>Disagree(2)</i>	<i>Neutral (3)</i>	<i>Agree (4)</i>	<i>Strongly agree (5)</i>	<i>Not applicable</i>
<i>... these events have no impact on me personally</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>... a famine here in Belgium is not likely to happen</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>... I have seen too many of these images</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q14 Finish the next sentence:

I have difficulty to imagine the severity of these events happening in Africa during the famine because :

	<i>Strongly disagree(1)</i>	<i>Disagree(2)</i>	<i>Neutral (3)</i>	<i>Agree (4)</i>	<i>Strongly agree (5)</i>	<i>Not applicable</i>
<i>...I have never experienced famine myself</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>... this will not likely happen here in Belgium</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q15 Indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements::

	<i>Strongly disagree (1)</i>	<i>Disagree (2)</i>	<i>Neutral (3)</i>	<i>Agree (4)</i>	<i>Strongly agree (5)</i>
<i>I find it difficult to empathize with the victims shown in Africa (1)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>I am emotionally moved by these images (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>The faces and personal stories of the victims move me emotionally (3)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Serious events closer at home (e.g. Belgium or Europe) affect me more than the distant suffering in Africa (4)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Stories about the suffering of one victim moves me more than the massive suffering of many victims in statistical figures (5)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>I feel personally involved with the victims shown in the video (6)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>I find it difficult to identify with the people I shown on the news item(7)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Because I have seen this kind of news so often, it does not affect me emotionally anymore (8)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q16 Indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

	<i>Strongly disagree</i> (1)	<i>Disagree</i> (2)	<i>Neutral</i> (3)	<i>Agree</i> (4)	<i>Strongly agree</i> (5)
<i>I think I have a moral responsibility to act (either by donating/volunteering/something else...) (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>I think I can effectively help the victims (in any kind of way) (4)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>I think my helping activities can make a positive difference for the victims (5)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>I carry the biggest moral responsibility to help (6)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>My fellow citizens carry the biggest moral responsibility to help (7)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Eventually governments and international organizations carry the biggest responsibility to help (8)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q17 Indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

	<i>Strongly disagree (1)</i>	<i>Disagree (2)</i>	<i>Neutral (3)</i>	<i>Agree (4)</i>	<i>Strongly agree (5)</i>
<i>Donating money is useless (1)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Help in any kind of way (donating, volunteering,...) is useless (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>If a lot of people would donate to Consortium 12-12 it would definitely help (3)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>The displayed suffering of the victims is exaggerated(4)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>After seeing this kind of images, I become discouraged (5)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>The Consortium 12-12 cannot be trusted (6)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>Events happening in far-away places (like Africa) are less important to me than events happening close-by (7)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>News about events close-by stay longer in my mind than news about distant events (10)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>The news cannot be trusted (11)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* Consortium 12-12 is a partnership of five humanitarian organizations. With news flashes and a call for support.

Q18 Answer the following questions:

Very Close Not Far very
 close (2) close, away far
 (1) not far (4) away
 away (5)
 (3)

	Very close (1)	Close (2)	Not close, not far (3)	Far away (4)	very far away (5)
How do you feel towards the victims in Africa? (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How do you feel towards the victim physically? (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How do you feel towards the victims emotionally (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How do you feel towards the victims socio-culturally? (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q19 Answer the following questions:

	Very little (1)	Little (2)	Neutral (3)	Much (4)	Very much (5)
<i>To what extent are you interested in the current events and are you following the news about the famine closely? (1)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>To what extent do you experience that the African victims live on the other side of the world? (2)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>To what extent do you feel an emotional connection with the victim? (3)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>To what extent do you feel a socio-cultural connection with the victims? (4)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>To what extent do you feel personally involved with the victim? (5)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<i>To what extent do you feel far removed from the victims? (6)</i>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q20 Have you donated money to an aid organization for distant countries over the past year?

- No (1)
- Yes, once (2)
- Yes, occasionally (a few times a year) (3)
- Yes, regularly (monthly or more often) (4)

Q21 Did you donate money during the past year to an aid organization focused on Belgian charities?

- No (1)
- Yes, once (2)
- Yes, occasionally (a few times a year) (3)
- Yes, regularly (monthly or more often) (4)

Q22 Which of the following online (relief) actions did you carry out in the past year?

- Sharing a news item on social media (Facebook, Twitter,...) about victims in distant countries (1)
- Sharing a news item on social media (Facebook, Twitter,...) about victims in Belgium (2)
- Sharing a call for help via social media about problems in distant countries (3)
- Sharing a call for help via social media about problems in Belgium (4)
- None of the above (5)
- Other... (6) _____

Thank you very much for filling in this survey. You can address any questions about this research to: eline.huiberts@ugent.be.

