

The reporting of disasters, crises and human suffering has become a regular feature of modern media. Scenes of tragedy and catastrophe are part of the everyday experience of audiences, who are invited to virtually participate in the suffering of distant others. In this article, I approach the witnessing of mediated suffering as a distinct modality of audience practice, which differs fundamentally from other forms of media experience, and therefore cannot be addressed within traditional conceptualisations of audience engagement with the media. Due to its close ties to human suffering, media witnessing is underlined by two main characteristics: first, its affective nature, due to its relation to human vulnerability, pain and trauma; second, its cultural endowment with a sense of responsibility to interfere with and act upon the suffering witnessed.

As such, media witnessing is also central to broader debates about media ethics in a globalised media environment and the possibility of the mediation of a cosmopolitan outlook as the ability and willingness to situate and relativise 'one's own form of life within other horizons of possibility' and see 'oneself from the perspective of cultural others' (Beck, 2006: 89). Studies on the mediation of distant suffering have illustrated the role of media, as technologies and as texts, in differently situating the viewers in a moral relationship to the distant victims by making distinct demands on their political and emotional sensibilities (Chouliaraki, 2006; Cottle and Rai, 2008; Joye, 2009). These questions, however, have been largely unexplored within the field of audience studies. In the few notable examples audience engagement with distant suffering has been mostly addressed either in terms of compassion, varied in its expressions (Höijer, 2004), in terms of (in)action with regard to humanitarian appeals (Seu, 2003) or as indifference (Scott, 2014).

My concern in this paper is, therefore, twofold. First, drawing upon theoretical work on the concept of media witnessing (Ellis, 2000; Peters, 2001; Frosh, 2006; Frosh and Pincevski, 2009), I develop an analytical framework for the exploration of audience engagement with news of distant suffering. Second, applying this framework on an empirical study of Greek audiences talking about distant disasters, the article provides a typology of media witnessing that allows for the exploration of the particularities of watching human suffering that go beyond expressions of compassion or pity.

Media witnessing: from theoretical concept to analytical framework

Media witnessing as conceptualised here is tied to moments of crisis. As such, it is distinct from ‘seeing’ or ‘experiencing’ through the media less disturbing or ‘light’ events, what Ellis (2009) names ‘mundane witnessing’; central to the concept of media witnessing as employed in this paper are the imaginative moral demands images of suffering make to their spectators. In this context, Sontag defines mediated witnessing as ‘being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country’ through the ‘cumulative offering by more than a century and half’s worth of those specialised tourists known as journalists’ (Sontag, 2003: 18). Although witnessing has evolved throughout the twentieth century through the different electronic media, it is in television that the specific modality of experience has been traditionally exemplified (Ellis, 2000: 10). The overabundance of detail found in the audio-visual, the details of the image and the ‘atmosphere’ of the sound instigate ‘a pervasive sense of liveness and intimacy’ (Ellis, 2000: 12). It is this mediated sense of intimacy that forms the basis of the emotional implications of witnessing. Watching suffering, even if only on the screen,

is emotionally compelling due to the knowledge that this suffering is real, is actually happening, a sense enhanced by the 'real-effect' of the audio-visual.

If the audio-visual mediation of suffering forms the basis for the emotional character of witnessing, its liveness, the fact that it takes place simultaneously to the act of viewing, is what renders media witnessing morally compelling. Simultaneous suffering poses questions about what can be done to alleviate it, urging its viewers to take a moral stance vis-à-vis what they see on the screen and act in the present (Peters, 2001: 721). In this context, media witnessing is a second or even third-order kind of witnessing. Journalists, by being there, are the actual witnesses the testimony of whom the audiences come to receive; they can also be themselves receivers of the witnessing testimony of the actual victims, the primary witnesses of the disaster and trauma. The witnessing of the audience in this chain of events is restricted to attending to the testimonies of the journalists, their witnessing texts. Although the focus here is on the audiences as witnesses, the complex relationship between primary and secondary witnessing is not to be dismissed or ignored but is implicated in the complexity of media witnessing as an analytical category.

Witnessing is a semantically challenging concept. It can refer to an actor (who bears witness), an act (bearing witness), a statement or text (witnessing testimony) or the 'inward experience that authorises the statement (the witnessing of an event)' (Peters, 2001: 709). In this sense, as Peters puts it, it is intelligible to claim that 'the witness (speech-act) of the witness (person) was witnessed (by an audience)' (Peters, 2001: 709). Approaching audiences as witnesses involves tensions and complexities that go beyond the concept of 'viewers' or 'spectators'. Media witnessing collapses three different practices: audiences become witnesses themselves, vicariously experiencing events that happen elsewhere; they become witnesses of the witnessing victims, the

people that give testimony of their suffering on the screen; and, finally, they are witnesses of the witnessing texts, those of the journalists that bear witness to the events taking place. Media witnessing thus conflates but also presupposes this three-fold distinction, highlighted by Frosh and Pinchevski: ‘between witnesses “in” the media, witnessing “by” the media, and witnessing “through” the media’ (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009: 1; emphasis in the original). Far from being a mere semantic game, I argue that this distinction is central to the complexity of media witnessing and analytically useful for the exploration of how audiences experience the world through the position of a witness.

Becoming witnesses ‘through’ the media, viewers are confronted with a kind of ‘painful knowledge’, which is accompanied by ‘an aching sense that something must be done’ for the alleviation of the suffering witnessed (Ellis, 2000: 11). Knowing about the pain of others implies, in cultural and social terms, complicity in their suffering and the moral obligation to act for its alleviation. Witnessing, thus, goes beyond the act of ‘seeing’ or ‘watching’; it implies a kind of participation, albeit vicarious and fleeting, to the events presented on the screen (Rentschler, 2004: 298; Peters, 2001: 708). At the same time, however, the geographical distance separating the viewer from the unfortunates undermines the moral impulse to act upon the suffering. The combination of the sense of involvement in the events that knowledge of them provides with the sense of powerlessness that distance perpetuates finds itself at the heart of media witnessing. Exploring the experience of witnessing through the media, therefore, poses the question of how viewers position themselves vis-à-vis images of human pain, compelling in their sensational visibility but remote in their mediated representation.

As witnesses of the witnesses ‘in’ the media, the distant sufferers, viewers make imaginative connections with the distant victims whose suffering they watch on their

screens. For Ellis, this kind of imaginative connections seems to reside in the management of distance through the audio-visual illusions of ‘thereness’ and ‘liveness’ (Ellis, 2000: 1). Silverstone rightfully reminds us that mediated distance is a manageable category dependent on the media representational practices, which ‘continually swings between incorporation (that is denial of both difference and distance) or annihilation (that is denial of both common humanity and distance)’ (Silverstone, 2002: 770). Audiences are on a daily basis confronted with distant events that are either framed into recognisable and familiar patterns, thus denied their specificity and ‘otherness’, or deprived of an explanatory framework and therefore exaggerated in their difference and stereotyped as incomprehensible and foreign (Silverstone, 2007: 48). In this context, distance also becomes a moral category, defining the limits and ways of the viewer’s relationship with the distant other.

Finally, the viewers’ relationship to witnessing *‘by’* the media, the journalistic accounts, pertains to questions of trust in the media. Witnessing as a practice entails the transformation of experience to discourse, of private sensation to public words, and as such, Peters argues, is vulnerable to the inescapable losses of such a process and marked by an inherent ‘veracity gap’ (Peters, 2001: 711). The veracity gap becomes even more prominent in the case of broadcasting, where distance accentuates the distrust and doubt in the mediation of experience among people who have no physical proximity or first-hand knowledge of it. This observation points to the complexities of the relationship of the audiences with the ‘witnessing texts’, posing questions of attributed authenticity and trust, central to the nature of media witnessing as a ‘cultural achievement’ (Frosh, 2006: 270). Such questions are entangled with the viewer’s experience, not necessarily as readily formulated ontological arguments of disbelief (*‘Did this really happen?’*) but as complexities in the relationship with the media text

itself (*'Is the image representative of everything that happened? What is left out?'*). They are ultimately questions addressing the evaluative assumptions about the media that underline viewers' positioning towards the suffering witnessed and their trust in media representational practices.

Addressing audience exposure to distant suffering as realised at the intersection of these three dimensions allows for the full exploration of the complexity of the vicarious experience of mediated suffering. Despite the recent increased interest in the mediation of distant suffering as part of a broader 'moral turn' (Ong, 2009) in the field of media studies, as well as the implicit assumption that the media render their audiences witnesses to atrocities and human pain, the concept of media witnessing has remained analytically barren and empirically unexplored within the limited number of empirical studies of the audience of suffering.

In one of the few studies in the field, Höijer describes the complexity of audience engagement with media reports of war as an interplay between compassion, most often directed to particular images of suffering, and indifference (Höijer, 2004: 528). Focusing on audience responses to NGO campaigns and news stories of human rights violations, Seu has illustrated the different ways people discursively distance themselves from the suffering of others and justify their unresponsiveness to human rights appeals (Seu, 2003; 2010). In a more recent study, Scott explored the different audience encounters with distant suffering beyond the genre of television news and has concluded that 'indifference and solitary enjoyment' is the outcome of most of these encounters (Scott, 2014: 3).

Significant in their own right, these studies seem to 'measure' audience engagement in terms of two factors, namely compassion or action. What ultimately underlines them is an approach to audience engagement with the suffering of others as

a direct response to media images as witnessing texts. What is neglected, and what media witnessing as developed here highlights, is that audience responses are mediated not only by the media texts as representations but also the viewers' evaluations of these representations, as well as broader discursive frameworks of everyday life. In this context, audience witnessing is often tied with and contingent on the media as witnessing texts; but it also diverges from and negotiates these texts as it is further mediated by alternative frameworks of understanding. This relationship between audiences and media texts is not unique to the case of witnessing suffering but a broader characteristic of the intertextuality of mediation, in so far as 'social resources and experiences are drawn upon in the reception and interpretation of the media' (Fairclough, 1992: 204). In that respect, the typology of audience engagement provided here might not be unique to the experience of witnessing suffering. What makes these responses meaningful and unique in this case, however, is that they are responses to the culturally embedded expectations to react to the suffering of other people, implicit in the experience of media witnessing.

Exploring media witnessing

Taking these analytical concerns as a starting point, the rest of the paper discusses empirical material based on a study of Greek audiences. The analysis draws on material of twelve focus group discussions, including forty seven participants in total.

Participants varied in terms of gender, educational level, occupation and age, with the younger cohort consisting of people in their twenties and the older of participants in their forties and fifties. Groups were homogeneous and consisted of peers, a choice made on the basis that since peer groups pre-exist the research context, their discourses

can be seen as reflective of the participants' everyday life (Sasson, 1995: 20). The methodology of focus groups was used on the premises that it is through the interaction of discussion that common sense discourses are more vividly negotiated and illustrated (Billig, 2002: 16-17). Discussions were triggered by questions about three major disasters, namely the Southeast Asian tsunami of 2004, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake of 2005, however they expanded to a number of other events and issues respondents found relevant and pertinent to the topic of distant suffering.

The analysis of the focus group material takes as a point of departure the three-dimensional nature of media witnessing addressed above and asks questions about how viewers perceive themselves as witnesses '*through*' the media, how they relate to the witnesses '*in*' the media, and what kind of assumptions they make about witnessing '*by*' the media. What these questions enable me to do is construct a 'typology of witnessing', which identifies in some detail the specific conditions upon which the experience of media witnessing may allow for certain forms of moral engagement and not others. This typology consists of four articulations of the witnessing experience, which I call here affective, ecstatic, politicised and detached witnessing. What this typology highlights is the complexity of audience engagement with news stories of distant suffering. This engagement is not limited to compassion or pity neither their assumed oppositional stances of compassion fatigue and denial. It is multidimensional and contingent upon the events witnessed, their textual representation by the media, as well as broader cultural and social discourses.

Affective Witnessing

The use of affective language was particularly common in the participants' accounts of their experience of witnessing distant disasters. Words like '*shock*', '*touched*' or '*moved*' were often used to describe both their emotional reactions to the events on the screen and their feelings towards the victims. It is this type of witnessing, describing participants' emotional reactions, that I call 'affective witnessing'. With regard to the three dimensions of witnessing, this type of audience engagement was characterised by intense emotional involvement with the human pain witnessed '*through*' the media, empathetic identification with the suffering witnesses '*in*' the media, but also a conditionality of this involvement on the sensationalist nature of the witnessing '*by*' the media.

The construction of the affective witness was centred around two basic discursive elements: the description of an image singularising particular sufferers and the articulation of the affective impact of the image on the viewer. This dual argumentative structure is illustrated in the following quote of a viewer talking about his experience of the Tsunami disaster:

Dimitris: The image of a girl, on its own, that was running...a girl that was crying non-stop, she had just found out that her parents were found drowned on a beach, and she runs and calls her little brother... Well, that was it! I was shocked at that point, I started crying on the spot!...When you see people on the screen...When you see their emotions...How can you do otherwise? You cry!

(Male, 27, middle-class, Focus Group 8)

In articulating his position as a witness, this viewer combines two forms of reporting: the description of the victim's suffering, what Boltanski calls, the 'external report' with the depiction of the viewer's emotional response to that description, or the 'internal report', which expresses 'the states through which the heart passes' (Boltanski, 1999: 86). This kind of response confirms the power of visuals in capturing audience's emotional imagination (Cohen, 2001: 173; Höijer, 2004: 520; Sontag, 2003: 85) and, in particular, the significance of the singularisation and personalisation of suffering (Boltanski, 1999: 11; Chouliaraki, 2006: 123). Victims singled out from the masses of sufferers become real people to whom audiences are able to relate to. Imagination thus becomes a moral force, in that it connects the viewer to the emotions of the sufferer and can form the basis for cosmopolitan empathy, as the capacity and willingness to take the perspective of the other (Beck, 2006: 6).

The emphasis on the intense emotions instigated by the image of a particular suffering face has implications for both the viewers' perceived agency in relation to the suffering witnessed, as well as their engagement with the victims. First, the viewers' highly emotional involvement was coupled by the frustration of being unable to act upon the suffering. The following quote, from a discussion of the 2006 Lebanon war, which was taking place contemporarily with the research, is indicative:

Olga: I see the child and I get goosebumps and I cry and then what; it doesn't stop, does it? It's an embarrassment being a human being! And you tell yourself 'shame on me, I'd rather not switch the television on! So that I don't feel shame over and over again'!

(Female, in their 40s and 50s, middle-class, FG4)

The viewers' intense emotional involvement with the scene of suffering also marks the limits of their engagement with it. The focus on the viewer's account is on her own affective response rather than on the reality of the suffering. The expression of the viewer's inner emotions, the 'internal report' (Boltanski, 1999: 86), overshadows the description of the victim's reality in an indulgence to the audience emotionality. The mismatch between viewers' intense emotions and the perceived impossibility to act upon the suffering renders the former obsolete.

Second, tied to images of specific people, the viewer's engagement seems to be conditional on an assumption of sameness connecting the audience to the victims. The following quote exemplifies this:

Gerasimos: Whenever I see a human face I feel sorry as if it were my mother.

There have been times when I said 'she could be my mother'...

(Male, 56, middle-class, FG11)

The sufferer, as a face that renders the pain imaginable, becomes an object of concern, reflection and emotional engagement. In this context, two seem to be the preconditions of the viewer's empathy towards the sufferer: first, the image of the human face, which renders the suffering visible (*'Whenever I see a human face'*) and, second, the assumption of the commonality of human pain, which renders the suffering of the other imaginable and relatable (*'she could be my mother'*). There is a certain degree of narcissism, however, in such expressions of empathy. The participants' emotional connections to the sufferers are expressed on the assumption that the latter are people similar to them and thus experiencing and feeling things in similar ways.

This illustrates an apparent collapse of distance between the spectators and the distant others on the basis of a perceived sameness. This is not to say that the physical

distance has been ignored and eclipsed; rather, as Silverstone puts it, identification with the other entails 'the elision of the different to the same' and 'the refusal to recognise the irreducibility in otherness' (Silverstone, 2007: 47). The specificity of the suffering and the particularities of the context it emerges in are neglected.

This conditionality of empathy on the visibility of specific faces and human stories underlines the circumstantial character of the viewers' emotions and illustrates the problematic of particularisation, which lies at the heart of affective witnessing and, indeed, of the representation of suffering (Boltanski, 1999: 100). Characteristic of this difficulty in generalising viewers' emotional responses from the particularity of the pained face to the masses of the victims was the substitution of the empathetic references to specific sufferers by detached generalisations when referring to the entirety of sufferers, described through discursive practices of impersonalisation and objectification. In this way, the victims were described in the discussion as *'the wretched'* (groups 2 and 8), *'the hungry'* (groups 1, 2 and 9), people who *'would even eat the expired products'* (group 1) sent to them by charity organizations, the *'dead bodies'* or the *'damned'* (group 8). Whereas the compelling image of individual sufferers instigated empathetic connections between the viewer and the distant other, general talk about the sufferers as a whole would construct them as aggregates of victims displacing their agency and emphasizing the irreducibility of difference between the viewer and the suffering other.

The explicit visualisation of the pain of others was also at the centre of the viewer's critical engagement with the media stories as witnessing texts. Journalistic sensationalism, described as the morbid fascination of the media to focus on the most devastated was the main point of this criticism:

Maria: Why should we see everything?! And they have this melodramatic music and they show the faces and then they go above the crying mother and they ask: 'How do you feel?' How should she be feeling?!

(Female, 45, middle-class, FG5)

This critical engagement with the media is dependent on the viewers' ability to decipher and recognise regularities in the journalistic conventions of covering suffering (Boltanski, 1999: 84). Paradoxically, it was mostly these sensational images that also proved to be the participants' anchoring point for emotional identification with the sufferer. When asked about their experience of the events, participants would often draw upon this repertoire of people crying over lost family members or similar images. Some would even admit that this is what mostly attracted them in the daily news bulletins. As one participant put it:

If I have to be honest, it's always news of human pain that attract us...It sells, that's it! I think it's awful, I say this, and yet I watch it!

(Female, 45, working-class, FG2)

This seems to be a constitutive paradox in the mediated experience of witnessing: on the one hand, human pain, in order to be communicated and morally engaging, needs to focus on the human body in order to nourish the viewers' imagination (Peters, 2005: 118; 262); on the other hand, this focus on sensation and the bodily pain renders suffering into a spectacle and viewers into voyeurs, lending itself to the critique of sensationalism (Cohen, 2001: 204-205). In affective witnessing, the witnessing of the audience is closely linked to media images as witnessing texts; the viewers are affected by media representations in exactly the way they accuse the media of trying to affect them, failing to substantially challenge template journalistic reporting.

In this context, affective witnessing as a type of audience engagement with distant suffering overall favours sentimentality over reflection and judgement.

Ecstatic witnessing

There were two events that were exceptional within the participants' narratives: the Tsunami of 2004, and September 11. Two were the commonalities in the discussions of these events: first, the expressions of emotional involvement, in a way similar to affective witnessing but at an intensified degree; second, a sense of immediacy of the experience of witnessing. Drawing on Chouliaraki's description of the coverage of September 11ⁱ, this witnessing is named here ecstatic witnessing (Chouliaraki, 2006). Characteristic of this type is that within the three dimensions of witnessing, viewers tend to move towards extreme positions of full immersion in the scene of suffering: intense emotional involvement with the events witnessed; unconditional empathy with the people suffering; and unquestioning acceptance of the media coverage.

As in the case of affective witnessing, the spectator's emotional involvement is expressed in relation to particular images of the news reports. This time, however, it is not the specificity of suffering faces that the viewers find emotionally compelling but rather the urgency of the situation, conveyed through the use of live footage.

Nana: I would catch myself thinking – the plane having crashed on the, let's say 50th floor-, wondering 'what are the people up there doing? Is this the end? Is this it? I mean, is their life over?...Oh, God'!

(Female, 26, middle-class, FG3)

Watching the Tsunami was described in similar terms of a feeling of urgency:

Tina: The moment that you would see the wave emerging and you would see the people that were on the street being taken by the wave and then you wouldn't see them anymore and that was going on, this is what affected me the most. Because you would actually *see* the event.

(Female, 26, middle-class, FG1)

There are two characteristics that render this emotional involvement 'ecstatic'. First, the viewers position themselves as immediate witnesses, virtually present in the scene of suffering through the frequent use of temporal deixis, such as '*at that moment*', '*at that point*', '*anymore*'. Second, they are faced with the sublime spectacle of death and the fear it instigates. These two characteristics constitute a position of witnessing which is overwhelmed by emotion. The specificities of the suffering, the causes of the disaster and its broader impact seem irrelevant in light of the emotionally compelling images. This is not to say that both the Tsunami and the 9/11 attack were exclusively discussed in relation to the moments that the disasters took place. However, what the concept of ecstatic witnessing highlights is the construction of the viewer as a fully immersed witness in the scene of suffering on the basis of footage of scenes of death.

The intensity of the experience of death as seen on the screen also forms the basis for the imaginative link between sufferer and spectator. The fear in the face of death brings to the fore the theme of a common humanity shared by viewers and victims. The expression of the respondents' emotional involvement is indiscriminately addressed to the dying victims. The agency of the latter is constructed through their description as specific people with thoughts and emotions (*'What are the people up there doing?'*). If in affective witnessing the victims were mostly recognised because of their status as 'ideal victims' (Moeller, 1999: 107), namely children and parents, which

made their suffering imaginable, in ecstatic witnessing the sufferer appears to be identified as a universal human being marked by fear in the face of death.

The sense of the temporality of viewing as synchronous to the one of suffering (*'Is this the end?'*, *'The moment that you would see the wave...'*) also underlines the audience engagement with the media as witnessing texts. Viewers are drawn into the scene of suffering as if they are watching it taking place in front of their eyes. They become witnesses par excellence, as indicated in this discussion about the collapse of the World Trade Centre:

Irini: ...you actually went through this experience! ...because you are actually waiting to see whether that person will manage to jump from the window or not, whether she will be saved from the fire...

(Female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

Central in the symbolic construction of synchronicity is the usage of live footage, amateur in its majority, which creates the sense of a realistic depiction of the events as they unfold and, therefore, construct a direct link to the scene of suffering. The focus here is on mediation as immediacy, namely as the construction of suffering as it were happening in front of its spectators' eyes (Chouliaraki, 2006: 39). The hypermediatic qualities of the medium, namely the semiotic and technological modes through which the suffering is staged, such as the camera shots and the narrative (ibid.), are ignored and almost forgotten by the viewers. Witnessing feels almost 'unmediated', as if the distance between the viewer and the scene of suffering is eclipsed so that the viewer witnesses 'live' the death of others. In this annihilation of the technological and symbolic qualities of mediation, the space for judgement of the media representational

practices is also annihilated and the veracity gap between the suffering and its representation (Peters, 2001) is invisible.

Politicised witnessing

The third type of witnessing is named 'politicised witnessing', due to the implication of political discourses in the audience discussions of their experience of mediated suffering. 'Politicised' is used here to describe discussions addressing relations of political and social power and inequality both at the global and the local level. It is not to be equated with the witnessing of political events; rather it refers to the way audience understanding of media stories as witnessing texts is framed within a political discourse.

If in affective and ecstatic witnessing, the viewer's emotional engagement was centred on specific images of suffering, in politicised witnessing there is a move from the specificity of the scene of suffering, and the witnessing provided *by* the media, to the search for causes and the attribution of blame and political responsibility for the events witnessed. This was the case in relation to suffering attributed to political reasons (for example, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were described as a compensation of the suffering Americans had inflicted elsewhere), as well as natural disasters (earthquakes and hurricanes, it was discussed, only result in so many victims due to the lack of appropriate infrastructures). In the following extract, a group of housewives are even attributing the Tsunami to manmade causes:

Litsa: But who do you think caused the Tsunami? It is not only natural, a natural disaster...! The bombs the Americans throw...in the sea can also cause these things at some point.

(Female, 45, working-class, FG2)

The viewers' emotional involvement with the scene of suffering can be best summarised in feelings of indignation, addressed either to the perceived reasons that brought about the suffering, or, most often, to its perceived perpetrators. In a similar way, the high number of victims in the Kashmir earthquake of 2005 was attributed to the lack of infrastructure:

Pavlos: They keep telling us about slum areas and stuff – but you are the one who wants the slum area to exist in the first place!... If the state didn't want it to exist, they would have kicked them out of there!...The state itself damns them to go through all these!

(Male, 40, middle-class, FG6)

What is also evident in the above is that indignation is expressed along an interpretative frame of conflict between 'us' and 'them', the latter being the ones to blame for the emergence of crises and the misfortune of the sufferers. This deictic 'they' would either stand for the 'state' or 'states' or 'the Americans', as seen above or other referents that would alternate depending on the argumentative context.

This conflict framework had a double function. On the one hand, it was employed as an illustration of discussants' understanding of power, which at the same time fatalistically constructed them as powerless pawns on the global stage, mere spectators of the suffering of others.

Simos: everything is initiated up there, everything. Everything depends on the people who have the power, either they are the state, or Kokkalisⁱⁱ, or Microsoft or

the people who have the money...They don't care about the rest who are below them.

(Male, 25, middle-class, FG1)

On the other hand, this interpretative framework was also applied to the relationship between the viewers and the sufferers. The latter were in some way distinguished between deserving and undeserving victims. Exemplary cases were the US-related disasters, namely Hurricane Katrina and 9/11. The latter, as discussed above, was experienced as an instance of ecstatic witnessing, where the viewers were drawn into the scene of the disaster. However, when discussions would turn from human stories to the generality of the events, American victims would hardly be considered worthy of pity.

Hara: There were other things behind the events that were so shocking that I admit that during the specific disaster I wasn't that moved...in the sense of human pain...Yes! I mean, in the sense 'Oh, God, so many people have died!' ...of course I was really upset. But there was all this background behind it...how terrorism started being represented, how this was a reaction...I mean, really, during the Twin Towers disaster, I was fully desensitised! Maybe because they were Americans, I don't know...

(Female, 24, middle-class, FG1)

Characteristic of this kind of talk was the fact that, whereas the sufferers would be described as the 'victims' in all other disasters, they would be identified as *'the Americans'*, when discussions would be about U.S. casualties. The identification of the victims in terms of their national identity was used to demarcate boundaries between them and the viewers, both spatial and emotional. The same kind of anti-American

discourses were dominant in discussions of hurricane Katrina, the catastrophic aftermath of which was attributed to the inefficiency of the American government to take care of *'its people'*. Such responses are expressive of a widespread and deeply rooted in Greek culture anti-Americanism, a result of both history and an 'underdog culture', underlined by the image of the martyr nation that has suffered in the hands of the mighty powers (Stefanidis, 2007).

The same kind of lay understanding of politics and power framed viewers' evaluation of media stories as witnessing texts. In a perceived universe of underlying political inequalities and struggles, the media are constructed as an ideological mechanism that serves the dominant hegemony. Expressive of this discourse were criticisms of Greek media for focusing on disasters taking place in the U.S.:

Tina: When the planes crashed on the Twin Towers in the States, the whole world stopped moving...A lot more people are being killed because of the wars Americans do. But then it was the States and all of us had to do something.

(Female, 26, middle-class, FG1)

Again, anti-American feelings are expressed as a distinction between *'the States'* and *'the whole world'* or *'all of us'*. What is also implicit in this quote is a criticism of the hierarchies of life that underline dominant media representational choices. Such criticisms, however, can be interpreted as part of a broader culture of suspicion towards institutions and the powerful rather than as a moral stance as a witness to the suffering of others, the misfortune of whom is absent or misrepresented in the mainstream media.

Detached witnessing

The final type of 'detached witnessing' describes the experience of the suffering of others as something remote or ultimately irrelevant to the viewers' everyday life. The expression of affect, either as emotional identification or indignation, is overall absent from this kind of witnessing. It was mostly the younger respondents that would construct themselves as detached and '*mere spectators*' of the events taking place on the television screen. The distinctive characteristics of this kind of discourse were the absence of affective language, the narration of the experience of witnessing as a sequence of events, and the emphatic construction of distance between the viewer and the scene of suffering. In this context, media reports as witnessing texts are being reconstructed in a way that renders their witnessing a story devoid of any moral imperative.

Indicative of this way of experiencing distant suffering is the following description of the Tsunami:

Menelaos: There was an earthquake and then the tsunami was created, the sea was drawn in, seashells came to the surface...On the bottom there were starfish, different shells and stuff and they say, 'oh, cool, let's go to collect them' – no, seriously, that's how it happened! They started, instead of going away, they stayed in the sea, they went further in, and then the tsunami came, the first and the second and the third, and took them.

(Male, in their 20s, middle-class, FG12)

What mostly characterises this narrative of the experience of witnessing the Tsunami on the screen is the focus on the external report (Boltanski, 1999: 84) of the events as

presented on the news. What is missing is the expression of the respondents' emotional response. Indeed, the viewer is completely absent as an agent in these narratives, which consist of sequences of facts and images. Also absent is the suffering itself.

Narrating distant suffering as a state of a generalised category of unfortunates, devoid of its specificity, seems to result in a failure to imagine the pain of the other. This lack of involvement with the scene of suffering is justified by the distance separating the viewers from the unfortunates:

Irini: Since we are outside of the situation, we only see it...we watch it just as...spectators...we can't really do anything, just a slight emotion...And then it somewhere far...which does not touch us...

(Female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

Respondents justify their lack of emotional engagement by emphasising the distance with the scene of suffering, both emotional and geographical. It is this stark contradiction between the reality of the suffering on the screen and the viewers' everyday life that fails to render the pain of the other imaginable and ultimately engaging for the viewer.

In this context, victims are described as fleeting images on the screen, as part of a narrative, rather than presences that make claims to the viewers' emotions. There is no distinction between deserving and undeserving victims, however, there is a distinction between relevant and irrelevant suffering. And the measure of relevance seems to be proximity, based on conceptions of both geographical distance and community.

According to one of the participants, for example, her lack of engagement with the Tsunami victims was justified because *'It's not next to us! If it had happened next to us, I could totally see us all regretting it!'*. Later on, she explains that by *'next to us'* she means:

Nana: my family environment, my circle of friends, that's it! My social environment...

(Female, 26, middle-class, FG3)

In some of the discussions, relevance was determined by national criteria too. In the following extract, one of the respondents is explaining why in the case of the Tsunami aftermath he was most interested in hearing about whether there were any Greek victims:

Nikos: You put yourself in the situation of the Greek...You don't put yourself into the situation of an African. You say, for example, I could have been there...

(Male, 26, working-class, FG10)

The moral space of care and emotional engagement is constructed through the use of spatial deictic terms, such as '*next to us*'. The narrow limits of this space include the locally situated social environment. In the way of detached witnessing, the distant other fails to enter the moral space of the viewer. Ultimately, the object of concern is not the suffering itself but its implications for the viewer. The distant other is not unwelcome but also not morally and emotionally engaging; she is mostly indifferent and irrelevant.

Emotionally disengaged from the spectacle of suffering and its victims, detached witnessing was characterised by a similarly disinterested evaluation of the role of media as witnessing texts, bringing the world closer to home. Discussing about the differential attention attributed by the media to the different disasters, respondents' acknowledgement of it seemed to be devoid of any further kind of moral evaluation.

Illustrative of this uncritical acceptance of media reporting was the reproduction of discourses of celebrity implicated in the coverage of the Tsunami disaster. The focus

of some Greek media on the local celebrities that were travelling in the area at the time of the disaster, characteristic of the celebritization of the Greek public life and the tabloidization of news (Plios, 2006) was, on the one hand, satirised by the viewers and, on the other hand, reproduced in their own discussions. Specifically, the story of a celebrity couple of television presenters that was holidaying in Thailand when the tsunami hit the area was widely reproduced by some of the younger participants, who were discussing the story as an integral part of the disaster. One of the participants started talking about the disaster by referring to the story of the couple, based on an interview with them she read in a lifestyle magazine:

Nana: He says that things were not as tragic as they presented them, at least where he was...

Irini: Alright, but weren't there a lot of victims?

Nana: And then they had problems in leaving...

(Female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

Characteristic in the narrative is the absence of actual victims of the disaster. Although one of the respondents is attempting to introduce this aspect, the focus continues to be on the celebrities and it is their account of the events that is being replicated. In this way, not only is the media's inattention to the actual suffering not addressed by the viewers but this omission is uncritically replicated by them too.

Conclusion

What the four types of media witnessing discussed here allow us to do is think about audience engagement with distant suffering in its plurality and diversity of expressions.

Albeit non-exhaustive or mutually exclusive, the four types of witnessing dissect audience responses that have hitherto been rather uniformly described as ‘compassion’ (Höijer, 2004), ‘compassion fatigue’ (Moeller, 1999), ‘desensitisation’ (Seu, 2003) or ‘moral apathy’ (Seu, 2010). They describe the mediated experience of human pain as a complex process, which cannot be assumed or predetermined by the nature of the suffering or its media representation. Media witnessing, as illustrated here, is contingent both on the nature and the mode of reporting particular disasters and broader social and political discourses viewers employ in making sense of the events.

In this context, the moral engagement of the viewer with the distant other is constructed in distinctive ways. On the one hand, affective and ecstatic witnessing describe the empathetic connection of the spectator with the sufferer, in a way of cosmopolitan empathy, as the willingness to take the perspective of the distant other (Beck, 2006: 6). However, and although the moral imagination of the spectator as illustrated within these two types moves beyond the limits of existing communities, this imagination is also delimited, first, by being bound to particular images of suffering, and, second, due to its over-indulgence in the sentimentality of the viewer. On the other hand, politicised and detached witnessing have described the viewer as positioned within the moral space of the national and local. In all four dimensions of witnessing, therefore, the cosmopolitan imagination is constructed as limited and fragmented.

At the same time, this typology opens up further questions for empirical exploration when considered in relation to technological advances and the widespread use of social media that challenge both the primacy of television’s audio-visual characteristics in the mediation of witnessing and the triangle of communication entailed in media witnessing, discussed above. With the explosion of social media and the subsequent developments in citizen journalism (Allan, 2013), media witnessing

takes place in a media saturated environment that provides 'an open and instantaneous online structure of information and action, unprecedented in disaster reporting' (Chouliaraki, 2010: 309).

Two are the main issues raised in this continuously changing media environment with regard to the concept of media witnessing as discussed here. The first concerns the possible transformation of the communicative triangle of media witnessing consisting of the audience, the journalists and the suffering victims. Audiences are now able to report the world as they see it through the use of social media, challenging the 'authorship' of the mediators of media witnessing, the journalists (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2009: 145). This in its turn poses the issue of authenticity and trust in user-generated content as a news source of secondary witnessing, as well as the question of how such instances of citizen journalism compete or become ultimately embedded within mainstream media, which at large retain their dominance in defining newsworthiness. Second, further questions are being raised about the moral implications of living in a media-saturated, real-time news environment, which places audiences in a position of constant vigilance of the outside world, and renders the distant other a virtually constant presence in the media space. The analytical framework presented here offers a point of entry to such an enquiry by placing audience engagement not only in relation to the media and the witnessing they provide, but also within discourses at play in viewers' everyday life. It is within this complex context that the increased technological opportunities for media witnessing have to be examined. How media witnessing can be transformed under these conditions and whether it can formulate the basis for a cosmopolitan outlook is a question open to continuous enquiry.

ⁱ Chouliaraki uses the term “ecstatic news” to describe the coverage of September 11, as an event that was broadcast both as “a local tragedy” and as “global political fact”, in terms of its spatiality; and both as “contingent”, “lived experience”, and as historical in terms of its temporality (Chouliaraki, 2006: 158).

ⁱⁱ A Greek businessman.

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