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Abstract

This article draws on the results of a large-scale audience study to examine how audiences respond to mediated encounters with distant suffering on UK television. The research involved two phases of focus groups separated by a two-month diary study. Research participants' mediated experiences of distant suffering were generally characterised by indifference and solitary enjoyment, with respect to distant and dehumanised distant others. However, the results also signal that, in various ways, non-news factual television programming offers spectators a more proximate, active and complex mediated experience of distant suffering than television news.

Keywords

analytics of mediation, audiences, distant suffering, documentaries, mediation, television news

The recent work of Roger Silverstone (2006), Luc Boltanski (1999), Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) and others concerned with the mediation of distant suffering has been described as representing a 'dramatic moral-ethical "turn" in media studies' (Ong, 2009: 449) – away from being 'morally cretinous ... facile and useless ... about nothing other than [itself]' (Tester, 1994: 3–10), and towards a media studies that has a concern for morality at its heart (Ong, 2009: 449). Morality, in this context, is understood as:

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the judgement and elucidation of thought and action that is oriented towards the other, that defines our relationship to her or him in sameness and in otherness, and through which our own claims to be moral, human, beings are defined. (Silverstone, 2006: 7)

The aim here is to contribute further to this apparent moral-ethical ‘turn’ by building on and extending the work of these and other authors in two directions. First, it is argued that we can learn more about how television audiences respond to faraway suffering if we expand our focus beyond ‘peak moments’ of television news coverage to include a focus on other factual television genres. Second, this article responds to the widespread calls for more, robust, audience-focused empirical research into the mediation of distant suffering by presenting the results of a large-scale audience study involving two phases of focus group research and a two-month diary study.

This article begins with a discussion of the reasons for contending that non-news factual television programming is an important site of concern for studies of media and morality. After subsequently discussing the lack of empirical evidence in this field, particularly with regard to processes of reception, the methodology entailed by my own audience study is outlined. In particular, I discuss the value of combining multiple phases of focus groups with a lengthy diary study, and of using Chouliaraki’s (2006) analytics of mediation as a framework for interpreting the results.

The results show that research participants’ mediated experiences of distant suffering were generally characterised by indifference and solitary enjoyment, with respect to distant and dehumanised distant others. However, the results also signal that, in various ways, non-news factual television programming offers spectators a more proximate, active and complex mediated experience of distant suffering than television news.

More news is bad news

Existing studies of the mediation of distant suffering, whether framed in terms of mediated cosmopolitanism (Kyriakidou, 2008) or global compassion (Hojjer, 2004), are largely concerned with ‘peak moments’ of news coverage of trauma, including suffering, disasters, conflict and tragedy (see Robertson, 2010). This focus on television news appears to stem at least partly from the assumption that when distant suffering appears on television, it is most often in the news. As Maria Kyriakidou (2008: 485) states, without any apparent empirical support, ‘for most people, most of the time the “cosmopolitan” experience is restricted to news and media images’.

The results of a series of recent content analyses of international coverage on UK television appear to contradict this assumption and, I suggest, invite us to question the value of continuing to focus almost entirely on television news coverage. In 2010 there were 343 programme hours of new factual non-news content about developing countries on the nine most popular television channels in the UK (Scott, 2011). Of this, 11%, or 38 programme hours, was specifically about the topic of ‘conflict and disaster’, defined as ‘programmes comprising international and civil war, global security, terrorism and civil unrest, as well as historical and contemporary natural and man-made catastrophes’ (Scott, 2011: 15). This included documentaries and current affairs programmes about the

ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the 2004 South Asian tsunami, the 2010 Pakistan floods and humanitarian crises in Gaza, Zimbabwe, Iraq and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

It is not only the extent to which UK television audiences encounter distant suffering outside of the news that might suggest we expand our focus, but also a consideration of the conventions of different genres. Michael Ignatieff (1998: 29) contends that:

The time disciplines of the news genre militate against the minimum moral requirement of engagement with another person's suffering: that one spends time with them, enough time to pierce the carapace of self absorption and estrangement that separates us from the moral world of others.

Ignatieff (1998: 30) goes on to argue that, as a result, 'the news makes it impossible to attend to what one has seen' because, as Keith Tester (2001: 50) puts it, it 'allows the audience no time to spend with the suffering and misery of others, making it instead a fleeting concern'. In Zygmunt Bauman's (1993: 77) terms, television news allows a 'jumping in and out of foreign spaces with a speed of supersonic jets and cosmic rockets'. By contrast, documentaries at least afford spectators the opportunity to spend more time with faraway others who are suffering.

The best documentaries ... force the spectator to see, to shed the carapace of cliché and to encounter alien worlds in all their mystery and complexity. There is almost never an occasion when the time formats of news bulletins allow even the best journalists to do the same. (Ignatieff, 1998: 32)

In summary, I contend that it is not necessarily the 'cosmopolitan experience' (Kyriakidou, 2008) that is restricted to news and media images but research into it. Furthermore, there is reason to suggest that, if we wish to expand our understanding of how television regulates spectators' mediated experiences of distant suffering then we may wish to explore further the value of non-news factual television genres. In the next section I discuss how best to pursue such an exploration.

Thin empirical underpinnings

While there is much about the study of the mediation of distant suffering that is highly contested, there is at least one issue upon which there is almost universal agreement; that debates about how far the cosmopolitan spectator is made possible by the media have been largely theoretical. As Alexa Robertson (2008: 2) argues, while authors such as Beck (2002), Boltanski (1999) and Chouliaraki (2006) 'have posed compelling questions about the preconditions for cosmopolitanism.... [t]he discussion has had a thin empirical underpinning and ... has been largely based on anecdotal evidence.'

The empirical research that has been conducted largely focuses on media texts. One of the most highly regarded examples of this being the three-fold typology of news about suffering that Chouliaraki (2006) produces. While such textual analyses are valuable for examining the nature of the responses which texts may preference, they are not

sufficiently sensitive to the agency of the audience. Indeed, Chouliraki has herself been accused of committing a ‘fallacy of internalism’ by ‘deducing the effects of A to B from a close reading of A rather than a dialogue with B’ (Ong, 2009: 451).

In some cases, this focus on media texts appears to derive at least partly from an understanding of mediation as a process of both ‘overcoming distance in communication’ and of ‘passing through the medium’ (Tomlinson, 1999: 154). While such definitions are useful for drawing attention to the complex ways in which media are implicated in the relationship between spectators and distant suffering, by themselves they produce a view of mediation which focuses entirely on the role of the medium. As Silverstone (2005: 189) argued, mediation should also be understood as a ‘fundamentally *dialectical* notion’ in which mediated experiences of distant suffering, regulated by the media, are further mediated by processes of reception. If we are to take seriously Silverstone’s understanding of mediation as a dialogical process then it is necessary to complement textual analyses with studies which take into account the process of reception.

Unfortunately, there is an acute lack of reception-focused studies of mediated encounters with distant suffering (see Hoijer, 2004; Ong, 2009; Orgad and Seu, 2008). As Birgitta Hoijer (2004: 513) argues: ‘there are especially few empirical studies of audiences’ reactions to and interpretations of the media exposure of distant suffering’. It is in this area of qualitative audience research that I therefore choose to focus my attention, in order to investigate how media texts in general, and non-news factual television programming in particular, regulate spectators’ mediated experiences of distant suffering.

Talking of distant suffering

Unfortunately, any attempt to establish the character of individuals’ mediated encounters with distant suffering, like any investigation seeking to capture audiences’ responses to media texts, is beset by substantial problems. Perhaps the greatest difficulty for the analyst is in capturing or generating reliable evidence of mediated experiences of distant suffering. This is most commonly attempted by instigating conversations about particular examples of television coverage, either through interviews or focus groups, and relying on what participants say in these particular contexts as evidence of their mediated experiences (see Hoijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2008; Smith et al., 2006).

While this approach may indeed generate talk about mediated encounters with distant suffering, such talk does not necessarily constitute reliable evidence of participants’ genuine mediated experiences of distant suffering. Boltanski (1999) argues that it is not necessary for responses to distant suffering to take the form of verbal talk but responses can simply be a whisper in the mind. Participants might, therefore, conceivably adopt particular responses to distant suffering even if this is only partly evident in their verbal speech. Equally, even if participants’ talk appears to reflect a particular emotion or response, they may be providing ‘false evidence’ (Boltanski, 1999: 100) of their authentic response. Indeed, talk generated in focus groups can be ‘contrived’ because of participants’ expectations about the research process, or because of the unavoidable imposition of the researcher’s own constructed and contingent versions of the world. For example, in her single-phase of focus group discussions of distant suffering, Kyriakidou

(2008: 163) suggests that, in general, participants simply rehearsed dominant discourses of global compassion (see Hoijer, 2004).

Rather than respond to these problems by abandoning any attempts to investigate the role of the audience, I propose a particular research design, based on the work of Couldry et al. (2007), which seeks to mitigate these problems. Specifically, these difficulties can be at least partially addressed by combining two phases of focus groups with a lengthy diary study, and by involving the same participants in all three phases of study over an extended period of time. Having two phases of focus groups with a diary activity in between encourages participants to 'move beyond' initial conversations about television coverage of distant suffering, which are often rather inhibited or somewhat contrived. Instead it provides discussants with a greater amount of time and confidence to articulate their responses to mediated encounters with distant suffering. Furthermore, by engaging with the research process over a longer period of time, participants can feel more comfortable with the conventions of the research. As a result, they may be less inclined to feel that some responses are preferable to others.

A diary also provides participants with the opportunity to express themselves in ways they might feel uncomfortable with in focus groups and to record their experience much closer to the time of the event being reported. Diaries also provide participants with the opportunity to produce detailed information that is not limited by the conventions of conversation. Indeed, several participants regularly wrote in excess of 200-word statements in their diaries about individual references.

For these reasons, a three-step research process involving focus groups and a diary study was designed and conducted. The first phase of focus group meetings took place in Glasgow, Norwich and London in January 2008 and consisted of 27 different focus groups, involving 108 participants in total, each lasting around 30 minutes. In these sessions participants were invited to talk about mediated encounters with distant others in general, or 'people who live in countries that are poorer than ours'. In addition, they were asked what they thought about specific examples of media coverage. A recruitment agency was used to screen and select participants for this study. The sample included a range of ethnicities (20% ethnic minorities), levels of education, length of residence in UK, viewing habits and experience and interest in distant others. There was an even distribution of ages with 25% of participants in each of the four different age ranges (18–25, 26–39, 40–54, 55–65) and an even spread of gender (50% female, 50% male).

Forty-eight of the initial focus group participants took part in the diary study. In the diary study participants were asked to make a record in an online diary of all media and non-media sources that they encountered on a daily basis that had some connection to distant others (whether they chose to watch/read/listen them or not). While making a record of such encounters (by recording the time, title and genre of the programme, for example), participants were also given the opportunity to write further about what they 'thought about' each reference and why they decided to watch it, or not. It is these thoughts that are used as further evidence of participants' mediated experiences of distant others.

In total, 290 diary entries were made, or an average of 6 per diarist. Just 15 entries, or 5%, related to non-media references (conversations with family members or work

colleagues), while 67% were about television. The most common references to television content were documentaries and current affairs (94 references), news (88 references), reality TV programmes (9 references) and non-governmental organization (NGO) advertisements (6 references). The remaining 28% of references were spread fairly evenly between newspapers (8%), radio (7%), online (5%), films (3%), books (3%) and magazines (2%).

The second series of focus groups were also conducted in Glasgow, London and Norwich but on this occasion consisted of six two-hour sessions with 46 of the diarists in total so as to generate longer and more detailed discussions (only two participants had dropped out by this stage). In these focus groups participants were invited to talk for longer about what they thought about television coverage of distant others in specific programmes or in the media in general. In order to generate two hours of further talk about this subject, participants were shown a compilation of short clips of recent television programmes to prompt recall and discussion. Questions were also asked about their experience of the diary study. In total, 33 different focus groups were conducted during the two phases, generating around 26 hours of talk.

The analytics of mediation

Having established the parameters for a process of collecting evidence regarding spectators' mediated experiences of distant suffering, the next question to be answered is what framework should be used to analyse this evidence. I propose to make use of the analytics of mediation, the framework Chouliaraki (2006) established for analysing the character of mediated experience of distant suffering that news texts seemingly offer audiences. This analytical framework sits within a wider set of arguments Chouliaraki makes about mediation and morality. Chouliaraki argues that existing accounts of the mediation of distant suffering are polarised between two abstract 'either/or' understandings of mediation. 'Utopian' accounts celebrate the capacity of the media to generate concern for distant suffering while 'dystopian' accounts regard the potential of the media to generate genuine concern for distant suffering as impossible. The analytics of mediation is a theoretical and methodological framework used for examining how the three central paradoxes which exist between these two competing understandings of mediation are seemingly resolved within individual television texts. First, the 'paradox of distance' relates to the role of mediation in establishing both proximity and distance and can be resolved by investigating how space and time are represented. Second, the 'paradox of in/action' draws attention to the competing claims regarding the agency of the spectator; that mediation seemingly renders the spectator as both actor and as onlooker. This contradiction can be interrogated by examining the orchestration of the 'benefactor' and 'persecutor' figures (see Boltanski, 1999) and the extent to which the other is construed as being like 'us', or the degree of 'humanisation' of distant suffering. Third, the 'paradox of technology' draws attention to the claims that the media simultaneously establishes and undermines the immediacy of the sufferer (Chouliaraki, 2006).

Chouliaraki (2006: 38–9) argues that, in order to examine how this third paradox is seemingly resolved in specific examples of mediation, we should examine the way in

which television texts 'remediate' (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) old genres of suffering, or draw upon various other media to construe the spectator–sufferer relationship via different emotions, while also seeking to present this relationship as transparent and objective. In order to guide her examination of the 'remediation' of suffering, Chouliaraki (2006: 81) draws on Boltanski's (1999) three 'topics of suffering' to describe three different potentials for emotion and options for action on suffering that different mediums give rise to. *Pamphleteering* refers to a perspective in which pity appears through a combination of both indignation and anger and is directed towards a perpetrator figure in the form of denunciation. It requires that the perpetrator has violated a sense of justice. *Philanthropy* occurs when pity is experienced as touching. It is associated with feelings of tender-heartedness towards both the sufferer and the benefactor, who comforts the sufferers' pain. It therefore requires the identification of a benefactor figure and corresponding 'victims'. *Sublimation* refers to a consideration of the unfortunate's suffering as neither unjust nor as touching, but as sublime. Specifically, it refers to a reflexive contemplation on suffering at a distance and combines a position of unemotional reflection on the distant other's condition with a similarly unemotional reflection upon the spectator's own sensibility (Boltanski, 1999: 116).

Even though this approach was developed specifically for the analysis of news texts, I regard it as being suitable and appropriate for examining audience talk about a much broader range of mediated encounters with distant others. Bolter and Grusin (2000) argue that *all* television genres, and not just news, can be understood as remediating other media genres. Equally, Boltanski (1999: xv) does not claim that the three 'topics' of suffering are peculiar to television news or that they do not apply to other (factual) genres.

However, some modification of the analytics of mediation *is* necessary to accommodate my concern, not just with particular 'morally acceptable' ways of responding to distant suffering, but for those more routine responses which fall short of the seemingly 'ideal' reactions of sublimation, philanthropy and pamphleteering. Boltanski is helpful in this regard by identifying two additional classes of possible response to distant suffering. The first is indifference in which the suffering of unfortunates, though witnessed, is simply ignored (Boltanski, 1999: 5). In one of the few previous audience studies in this area, Hoijer identifies several strategies of 'turning one's back on ... distant others' (2004: 525), including rejecting the truth claims of texts and 'dehumanising the victims'. The second class of alternative response, which Boltanski terms 'solitary enjoyment' (1999: 114), is described as 'a selfish way of looking which is wholly taken up with the internal states aroused by the spectacle of suffering: fascination, horror, interest, excitement, pleasure, etc.' (1999: 21). On such occasions, a spectator's speech tells us, 'everything about the state into which the spectator is thrown by the spectacle of suffering, but we no longer know anything about the person suffering' (Boltanski, 1999: 45). Such responses are evident empirically in Hoijer's (2004: 523) references to 'shame-filled compassion' and 'powerlessness-filled compassion'.

In summary, a modified version of the analytics of mediation provides a useful framework for examining the quality of spectators' mediated experiences of distant suffering, based on what they say and write about these experiences.

Analysis

Options for action and emotion

Sublimation. Of the three ‘ideal’ responses which Boltanski (1999) suggests spectators might adopt in relation to distant suffering, the response which appeared to be most evident in participants’ talk and comments was sublimation. Evidence of reflective contemplation appeared largely in the form of comments about the ‘accuracy’ and ‘truthfulness’, particularly of news reporting, and reflective (rather than emotive) comments about how spectators felt in relation to what they were witnessing. In the following diary entry about a news item concerning Afghanistan, for example, a seemingly objective, rather than emotional, response to the persecutor figure is apparent in the use of the words and phrases, ‘to the point’, ‘clear’ and ‘truth’.

I think it was told very straight to the point.... It’s showing how easy these people can get moved about, armed and dangerous, and get into places to bomb or cause trouble in them ... this was very clear ... it brought home the truth. (Diary 7)

Similarly, in the following diary entry about the same news item, the same unemotional response, this time towards the benefactor figure, is evident in the use of similar words, such as ‘clearer’, ‘truth’ and ‘facts’.

This was much clearer.... It brought home the truth about the problems Obama is going to face seeing as he is sending in more troops to Afghanistan. He is a clear target for them.... The narrator was very clear and it was very interesting to watch.... The story states the true facts and how the Taliban are still rife in Afghanistan. (Diary 38)

Boltanski (1999: 116) argues that to adopt a position of sublimation is to be able to weld together, within a single statement, an unemotional reflection on the distant other’s condition with a similarly unemotional reflection upon the spectator’s own sensibility. These quotations help to illustrate that, although there was evidence of reflective contemplation in participants’ talk and comment about distant suffering on television news, it often fell short of Boltanski’s requirements for an acceptable response to suffering. Instead, they appear to resort to what Boltanski (1999: 23–4) describes as a ‘that’s how it is’ kind of reporting, or ‘description without perspective’, that ‘states a pure and simple factual description which aims only to state things as they are, just so’.

Such descriptive responses were particularly common in talk and comment about distant suffering in television news. This is evident, for example, in the following quotation in a diary entry about news coverage of violence in Madagascar.

The violence at the palace was shown and seemed to consist of damage to property rather than attacks on people. However the report referred to violence that had been continuing there for months previously resulting in over a hundred deaths. It gave an impression of a volatile political situation. (Diary 40)

Those occasions in which talk and comment came closest to realising Boltanski’s definition of sublimation were almost entirely in conversations and diary entries about

documentaries and current affairs programmes. For example, the following quotation might be considered an example of sublimation, as Boltanski defines it, because it combines a seemingly rational recognition of the 'factual' reality of the condition of distant others with the spectator's own distant reflection on this reality. Furthermore, it does so without drawing on tender-heartedness, associated with philanthropy, or denunciation, associated with pamphleteering, and without indulging in the introspection associated with solitary enjoyment.

Most of the innocent victims are living in poverty and so the problems are made so much worse by the fighting and they have no access to basic necessities such as food and medicine. [*Congo's Forgotten Children*] made me realise how destructive Man is but I know this is a worldwide issue and not restricted to developing countries. (Diary 22)

Congo's Forgotten Children was a 50-minute documentary on Channel 4 which examined how children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) were being affected by the ongoing fighting in the east of the country. Its combination of personal interviews with young children and detailed contextual information provided by the narrator appeared to produce, in this case, but also for several other diarists, thoughtful and reflective responses. Indeed, another diarist wrote that this programme 'spoke volumes about our cloistered existence in this country; especially our children. What those kids [in the DRC] have experienced is beyond belief' (Diary 44).

In summary, evidence of responses to distant suffering in the form of sublimation was found much more often in talk and comment about non-news factual television genres, than in talk and comment about the news.

Philanthropy and pamphleteering. In general, responses to mediated distant suffering associated with philanthropy and pamphleteering were relatively uncommon in talk about television news, particularly among male participants. In the focus groups in particular, there was little evidence of any anger towards the elites of 'other' countries when placed in the role of persecutor. Instead, accusations took the form of either mild disapproval or begrudging acceptance of their actions. In the following quotation, for example, the phrase 'human nature' appears to absolve the persecutor figure of individual responsibility for their actions. Corruption is presented as just something that people do and not something to get particularly angry about.

Too few people making all the decisions and the government not making the right decisions for the population and just lining their own pockets, which is human nature, I know. (Norwich 1B)

Similarly, very few participants talked about the benefactor figure (evoked most commonly in talk about television news as being the community of the West) with any great emotion or intensity or gave any indication that they took pride in their implied role as a benefactor figure. As one participant said, 'we do everything every year, we do charities and everything just seems to go into a black hole' (Norwich 1H). Instead, participants' responses to the benefactor figure were characterised by 'that's how it is' reporting.

In fact, there was greater evidence of resistance to emotional appeals than there was evidence of emotional engagement in talk about news. As the following quotation demonstrates, participants were particularly critical of what they saw as attempts to make them *feel*.

Sometimes it smacks of propaganda when they are trying to make you feel a certain way. It's terrible what is happening in the Gaza but it is a tiny percentage of what does actually go on and they want you to see the worst of it so you can be more aware. Sometimes they can lead you down a path to feel a certain way. (London 2A)

Interestingly, the affective dimension of participants' responses appeared to be somewhat stronger in the diary entries than in the focus groups and in the responses of women, rather than men. On a number of occasions, female participants wrote of their 'annoyance' and even 'anger' towards a persecutor figure in diary comments about news coverage. Similarly, the following diary entry about news coverage of the war in Gaza demonstrates that there were instances in which participants appeared to respond to distant suffering with strong feelings of tender-heartedness.

It showed a little girl who when she hears a loud noise was cowering in the corner. A mother who had lost her son and was hysterical. I was very upset and emotional at the devastation the situation is causing to innocent people. (Diary 43)

Importantly, such accounts of feelings for distant suffering in television news were still relatively uncommon, even in diary entries. In general, participants' responses to distant suffering in television news were characterised by 'objectivity at the expense of emotionality' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 106).

In talk about mediated encounters with distant suffering outside of television news, there was a much greater *range* of responses associated with philanthropy and pamphleteering. As is discussed below, there were many occasions in which philanthropy and pamphleteering were not evident in talk about non-news texts. However, unlike talk about news texts, there were also many occasions in which talk about non-news programmes was characterised by a strong sense of philanthropy or pamphleteering. Evidence of such responses could be found both in claims to emotional responses to non-news television programmes and in the use of emotive language to describe suffering others. Both of these forms of evidence can be found in the following diary entry, made by another female respondent, after watching a BBC *Panorama* documentary about the war in Gaza.

It was very upsetting and emotional. It actually brought tears to my eyes when I saw the ten year old girl who had lost her parents and had seen other family members killed during the attacks on her home in the Gaza strip. There was a doctor who lost all four of his daughters in the attacks. Yet he still wants peace between the two countries. To see his family killed in front of him was devastating for him. I have always thought war of over land and religion is pointless but this really brought it home. (Diary 38)

Indeed, this quotation appears to provide evidence of philanthropy, as Boltanski defines it, because it seemingly combines an account of what is being witnessed with an account

of how it makes the participant feel, without slipping into solitary enjoyment or pure description. Although we cannot be sure that this comment is a faithful reflection of a genuine response in the form of philanthropy, or whether it represents, in Boltanski's (1999: 100) words, a 'strategic use of tears', what is clear is that there were far fewer equivalent examples of either philanthropy or pamphleteering in talk about news items. In summary, it appears that talk and comment about non-news factual genres has a stronger association with more compelling emotional responses.

Indifference and solitary enjoyment. There was substantial evidence of indifference in focus group and diary responses to mediated encounters with distant suffering, particularly in talk by younger participants. This sense of indifference was evident in various different ways, including in explicit statements about a lack of 'feelings' or 'thinking' about 'them'. As one young male participant wrote in their diary, 'I sadly have little feelings about the war [in Gaza] as it doesn't affect my everyday life' (Diary 1). In its most extreme form, apparent indifference was evident in a number of focus groups where some participants struggled to engage in any way with the topic of conversation. Offering evidence of such a minimalist narrative is difficult because it was often characterised by silence or lack of participation, but it is fair to suggest from the experience of these focus groups that some participants appeared to be entirely indifferent to mediated distant suffering, in whatever television genres.

Evidence of solitary enjoyment was also common and appeared in a variety of different forms, such as on occasions in which participants appeared to position themselves as voyeurs of distant suffering, or as witnesses to events, 'free from the moral obligation to act ... [who] can sit back and enjoy the ... spectacle' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 145). Although such comments were more frequently made in diaries than in the focus groups, in both contexts they were clearly invoked as a self-focused response to distant suffering.

I don't know how many of you have been watching all the coverage of the hotel siege and all of that in India? Do you remember the image of that hotel? I saw it and thought, 'I'd love to stay there'. It looked so amazing (Glasgow 1G).

Evidence of solitary enjoyment could also be found in comments which implied that participants engaged in *Schadenfreude*, or took pleasure in other's misfortune (Wood, 2009: 134). As one participant said, 'that's what makes people interested, they are seeing other people's misfortune and knowing that you're safe' (Norwich 1I). Similarly, when one participant was asked how he felt about encounters with mediated distant suffering, he responded, 'well, I'm obviously glad it's not me' (Norwich 1B). Such sentiments were relatively common, more so than evidence of pamphleteering or philanthropy, for example.

In summary, both solitary enjoyment and indifference appeared in a variety of ways and were particularly common responses in talk about both television coverage of distant suffering in both news and documentaries.

Space-time

Proximity-distance of distant suffering. Temporally, participants spoke about suffering others principally as living in the past, relative to 'us' and other 'western' and

'developed' countries. As one male participant put it when talking about the television drama, *Survivors* and the effect that the 'credit crunch' could have on economic growth in the UK, 'tomorrow we could all be back there just like that' (London 1C). Participants' discussions of their mediated experiences of distant suffering also frequently lacked a future-oriented perspective. This was particularly evident in the numerous comments that 'nothing ever changes' (Glasgow 1D) when talking about news programmes, or that 'these people ... [have] absolutely nothing, no hope for the future' (Glasgow 1B).

These evocations of distant others inhabiting a permanent past and a closed future were frequently combined to situate their life-worlds, not just in the past, but as part of a never-ending story in which nothing changes and no real progress is made (Chouliaraki, 2006: 128). This was revealed both in explicit statements about the lack of capacity for change and in statements which reflected a limited spatio-temporal complexity, both of which are evident in the following conversation between three young male participants.

Speaker 1: They've been fighting each other for centuries.

Speaker 2: Aye, they've been fighting forever.

Speaker 3: The third-world I've always seen as, Ethiopia and places like that.

Speaker 1: Yeah. People are starving and people are unable to, y'know, they work the land and basically the life cycle carries on the way it's always been (Glasgow 1E).

The above exchange also helps to reveal the most significant *spatial* dimension of participants' talk – that the spaces which distant others inhabit were often described as equivalent to each other. This was evident in comments such as, 'it could be anywhere in Asia' (Glasgow 2B), 'I think it could have been in any country' (Glasgow 1A), 'it's the same in every country' (Norwich 1I).

In summary, participants spoke about suffering others in television coverage as living firmly in the past without any potential for real positive change and as collectively occupying a relatively homogeneous space. This construction of space–time as narrow and uncomplex is constitutive of a considerable distance between spectators and distant suffering, rendering spectators' mediated experiences lacking in intensity or immediacy (Chouliaraki, 2006: 85). As one participant said in a conversation about news coverage of distant suffering, 'I don't think a lot of people let it get to them do they because it's so far away and you tend to distance yourself from it. I do anyway' (Norwich 1G).

Causality. The limited spatio-temporal complexity of participants' talk about distant suffering is constitutive of what Chouliaraki (2006: 99) describes as a 'logic of appearances'. Without a wider historical context within which to situate events, causality is more likely to be understood as being dictated by the immediate context rather than historical circumstances. Such a 'logic of appearances' did indeed dominate participants' discussions of causality in relation to distant suffering. As the following quotation helps to demonstrate, this frequently took the form of simple explanations of causality, largely based on narrow understandings of the actions of government or elites as being entirely responsible for the circumstances of the people.

Russia's biggest problems are because they spent most of their money on arms isn't it? On the military rather than looking after their own people (Norwich 1B).

At its most extreme, in a 'logic of appearances', events can be understood simply as random, as if they 'just happen', with little or no explanation. This was evident in a number of participants' discussions either in the form of tokenistic or nominal explanations or simply confusion.

Participant: I was interested in the Dafur programme.

Interviewer: What was interesting about that?

Participant: Obviously just what's been happening in the country, all the innocent people being killed and beaten up and all the rapes without a reason, just brutality (Glasgow 1F).

The following comment from one female diarist vividly demonstrates the idea that by moving between several loosely connected events all taking place within the present without situating them in a wider context, the spectator is left 'confused' about the nature of causality and is positioned at a distance from distant suffering.

I was very confused about this one as at first it was talking about schooling and how the country is bankrupt and schools are all closed due to no money and the country having no jobs, and then on how we are banned from Zimbabwe and meeting in secret with the Prime Minister about how someone has been arrested for treason. It doesn't explain what the deal is they are trying to do or why someone would want to stop it. (Diary 4)

The above quotations help to illustrate that a limited spatio-temporality and a 'logic of appearances' was particularly evident in talk about news coverage. Instances of talk or comment about news coverage of distant suffering which drew on complex space-times and which revealed evidence of proximity were found almost entirely in relation to non-news factual programming. As one diarist wrote after watching a BBC documentary about Nigeria:

It explained how corruption is part of everyday life and people can be bullied into voting for a certain candidate and party in elections. It also showed that a lot of young people turn to illegal gangs as it was more profitable for them than working in a low paid job. (Diary 41)

Agency

Suffering others in television news programmes were spoken about in focus groups predominantly as lacking almost any ability to affect real change over their own lives. As one male participants said, '[television news is] always going on about how they can't do this and can't do that' (Norwich 1C). Suffering others were evoked almost entirely as victims of circumstance, lacking even the acts of 'movement', 'gaze' or 'condition' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 124). In the following discussion about television news and overseas

giving, for example, three male focus group participants talk about faraway others as unable to 'grow things' or to be educated enough to become self-sufficient.

- Speaker 1:* I always wonder why can't they educate them in a way that will actually teach them to be self-sufficient. Why is it still going on?
- Speaker 2:* Twenty years down the line we still haven't taught them how to grow things and it's still the same story. It just makes me wonder where all the money goes.
- Speaker 3:* Why doesn't the money go on birth control (Norwich 1C)?

Distant others were also variously described as being 'unable to manage themselves' (Norwich 1C) and 'helpless' (Diary 8).

Expressions of the perceived lack of agency of an aggregated distant other in talk about television news often dovetailed with, or was used as evidence to support, participants' expressions of their own perceived lack of agency vis-a-vis distant suffering, just as Chouliaraki (2006) predicts. This was evident implicitly in statements such as, 'it really gripes me that we have done and are doing so much to help them and they don't seem to help themselves' (Glasgow 1D) but also explicitly in focus group conversations such as the following.

- Participant:* Whether it's the corruption that takes it [the financial aid] I don't know or whether they can't help themselves ...
- Interviewer:* How does that make you feel?
- Participant:* It makes me less inclined to donate (Norwich 1B).

The extent to which distant others were afforded agency in talk about non-news television content was far more varied than in talk about news programming. There were once again many instances in which distant others were dehumanised. As one participant said in a discussion about a television documentary about China, 'over there they are just brainwashed' (Norwich 1F). However, such examples were by no means representative of talk about distant others in non-news texts in general. As one participant said in a conversation about a special edition of the BBC2 motoring magazine show *Top Gear* in Botswana, 'they get on with things a lot better than we do because they have to' (Norwich 2A).

The lack of agency which participants frequently expressed in talk about distant suffering on television news and, to some extent, non-news programmes, also appeared to be tied to the ways in which participants talked about the persecutor and benefactor figures, also as Chouliaraki (2006) predicts. As discussed earlier, the one set of actors in 'other' countries to whom participants did afford quite considerable agency were the corrupt and/or authoritarian governments and elites of such countries. On almost all occasions this persecutor figure was evoked as being particularly powerful in relation to both distant others and the benefactor figure. This was especially evident in conversations about television news coverage of Zimbabwe, in which participants frequently described the inability of the people or the international community to do anything to stop President Robert Mugabe, who they saw as the principal persecutor figure. As one participant said, 'Robert Mugabe ... has almost destroyed his country ... the leading

party is too corrupt to accept real change' (Diary 17). Similarly, another participant commented in relation to events in Zimbabwe that 'the rest of the world are helpless to intervene' (Diary 28).

This combination of a powerful, corrupt, authoritarian government as the persecutor figure, combined with the limited financial role of the 'western' benefactor figure and the dehumanisation of suffering others did appear to correspond with expressions of a lack of agency. This is well illustrated in the following quotation taken from a conversation about the Channel 4 documentary, *Congo's Forgotten Children*.

This programme presented to me a picture of the helplessness of people who were at the mercy of the Lord's Resistance Army. They had no protection and no hope of salvation from the UN or any other power.... Despite the huge amounts of money raised by Comic Relief, a lot of which will probably go to African countries, this killing and rape and destruction will go on because the rest of the world cannot step in to stop it. The result will be that the country will remain poor while its leaders milk any wealth to be had. (Diary 39)

In summary, the (de)humanisation of distant others, the role of the persecutor and benefactor figures, and the perceived agency of spectators have a complex relationship in participants' talk and comments, but one that appears to be linked to talk about different television genres. Talk about distant suffering in television news routinely evoked distant others as dehumanised, which, combined with a particular evocation of the persecutor figure, was linked to participants' expressions of their own perceived lack of agency vis-a-vis distant suffering. While talk about distant suffering in non-news texts also, on occasion, evoked distant others as dehumanised and spectators as lacking agency, there were also many occasions in which this was not the case. Talk about non-news programmes was often characterised by a humanisation of distant others and spectator's feelings of agency.

Conclusion

In *Media, Culture and Morality* Keith Tester (1994: 105) posed a question that remains at the heart of debates about media and morality.

How is it that in the situation where technology promises the making of the greatest possible solidarity between humans, all that actually results is a kind of moral boredom and dullness?

The results of this research suggest that, 20 years later, the 'moral boredom and dullness' that Tester describes remains a prominent feature of audiences' encounters with faraway strangers through UK television. Participants' talk and comment about mediated distant suffering was generally dominated by indifference, solitary enjoyment and 'this is how it is' reporting, with respect to distant and dehumanised distant others. Responses of this nature were particularly characteristic of younger and male respondents, as has been found in previous studies (Hoijer, 2004; Kyriakidou, 2008).

Despite this, and in spite of common assumptions, the results also show that the outcome of mediated encounters with distant suffering is not always 'a kind of moral

boredom and dullness'. There *were* instances, mostly among older and female participants, of particularly emotional responses to distant suffering. A key question, therefore, is not whether television necessarily promotes solidarity or indifference, but under what conditions are such responses more or less likely?

The results of this analysis have provided one possible answer to this question. Compared to talk and comment about news texts, participants' responses to documentaries and current affairs television programming had significantly greater association with multiple forms of emotion and action, with suffering others occupying space-times of greater complexity and with humanised distant others. Based on this, it seems reasonable to suggest that if we wish to see the media playing a role in promoting 'solidarity between humans' then the appearance of distant others in programming outside of the news should be a priority. Relatedly, though not entirely coincidentally, the BBC have recently proposed amending their 'global purpose' to 'bring the world to the UK' to include explicit reference not only to news programming but also to documentaries and other genres as well. Given the discussion in this article, I would argue that this proposal is most welcome and one which other broadcasters around the world should strongly consider following.

This conclusion about the importance of looking beyond 'peak moments' of news coverage also raises the question of whether the largely theoretically driven literature in this area is sustaining other unhelpful assumptions. Is television in fact the most important medium in connecting spectators with distant others, in all contexts, as is so often assumed? Does the assumed importance of mediated *suffering* not preclude a broader understanding of the moral role of the media – in connecting us with distant others in general, suffering or otherwise? I hope that the empirical research presented here has demonstrated that to address such questions, and to advance the moral-ethical 'turn' in media studies in general, it is necessary to empower audiences to consider in detail and articulate for themselves what they think about the media texts they consider to be important.

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