

Ordinary witnessing in post-television news: Towards a new moral imagination

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Abstract

The rise of 'ordinary' voice in post-television news narratives has drastically transformed the nature of journalistic witnessing. For some, it facilitates connectivity with and action on distant suffering, yet, for others, it fragments global connectivity and creates multiple but insulated communities of 'our own'. It is this changing nature of witnessing, in the move from television to post-television news, and its implications for the moralization of Western publics that I explore in this paper.

Keywords

News, disaster reporting, post-television, witnessing, media ethics,

Introduction. Witnessing, journalism, publics

'Good journalism in the field is about bearing witness to events that others may wish to hide or ignore; or which are simply too far out of sight for most people to care about'
(BBC College of Journalism website)ⁱ.

Witnessing and journalism: In describing good journalism as a form of 'bearing witness', the BBC draws attention to a crucial function of the news not only as reporting on events but as engaging people's potential to care. In further specifying witnessing as an act of disclosure, something others may 'hide' or something that is 'too far out of sight', the BBC simultaneously situates journalism within a conception of publicity as a 'space of appearance' (Arendt 1958/1990; Siverstone 2006). Distinct, though not separate, from deliberative conceptions of publicity that emphasize the role of journalism in informing audiences or shaping public opinion, this conception of publicity throws into relief the reliance of journalism on performance, on images and stories that situate events within symbolic regimes of emotion and action and make a specific demand on their publics: to take a stance, to care (Chouliaraki 2006). This power to act in the space of appearance by making the moral claim to care renders journalism a particular 'ritual of communication' (Carey 1989), which, in reporting the news about suffering, also turns its communities of viewing into imagined communities of feeling and potentially acting together towards that suffering.

Central to this process is the voice of the journalist, which acts as a testimony of suffering by turning experience into discourse – or the 'seen' into the 'said' (Peters 2009). News discourse, in this sense, consists of narratives of '*dramatic action*' through which

the journalist invites '*the reader to join a world of contending forces as an observer of the play*' (Carey 1989:21). Rather than free-floating story-telling, however, the voice of the journalist is strictly controlled by an institutional economy of regulation that subject the narrative to the test of truth: 'dramatic action' on suffering should incorporate a testimonial element so as to evoke an emotive reaction but it should also be presented as objective information that allows spectators to judge distant suffering as worthy of our response (Boltanski 1999).

A moral critique of news journalism: It is the co-existence of these requirements, the objective and the testimonial, variously articulated as they are in news stories, that construes distant suffering in diverse configurations of dramatic action. Whereas objectivity brings into focus the management of truth in the act of witnessing, testimony draws attention to the management of our affective potential towards suffering: either in the form of denunciation against the injustice of suffering, in the presence of a persecutor, or in the form of care and philanthropic sentiment, in the presence of a benefactor.

In the case of natural disasters, like earthquakes, news narratives focus on the presence of benefactors, that is NGOs and volunteers of relief aid, that appear to act on the spot in order to comfort acute needs in the aftermath of the disaster. As a consequence, NGOs, such as the Red Cross, act both as authenticating and as emotive voices in such news stories, showing the extent to which the relationship between journalism and humanitarian agencies is one of interdependent symbiosis (Bethnal 1993). This is because, in inhabiting the zone of suffering, humanitarian actors share with journalists the unique responsibility to witness the facts and publicize them as a cause for action in the West. Yet, this symbiosis can be conflictual, as the power to report ultimately rests with the journalist, often obliging NGOs to compromise or 'package' their message in particular ways so as to have a chance for publicity; rather than straightforward, the relationship between the two is troubled with tensions (Cottle 2009:146-53).

Such tensions in the power relationship between these key agents of witnessing reflect a fundamental issue with the mediation of human suffering. This is the power of Western journalism to classify suffering into hierarchies of place and human life, privileging some disasters as worthy of Western emotion and action but leaving others outside the space of appearance (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Whereas some instances of suffering might never be witnessed as events worth reporting, those that do get reported are subject to distinct 'pathologies' of witnessing: stories of suffering that focus on witnessing exclusively as a fact, for example, diminish the emotive capacity of the news, 'annihilating' the human quality of the sufferer, whilst stories that focus on witnessing as horror, 'appropriating' the sufferer as someone who shares our own humanity, may

lean towards a commodified sentimentalism that reduces witnessing to voyeurism (Silverstone 2006).

What makes journalism as witnessing both a moralizing force in the space of appearance and an object of harsh criticism, then, is not its capacity to bring distant suffering into the space of appearance per se, but its 'ritual' power to constitute Western spectators as publics, as collectivities with a will to act, at the very moment that it claims to report on it. 'Pathologies' of witnessing, in this sense, far from instances of individual malpractice, are structural forms of journalistic bias that have a 'unifying' potential: they constitute publics that are 'communitarian', reinforcing a sense of belonging to 'our' own local world, rather than 'cosmopolitan', oriented towards forms of belonging that go beyond our own neighbourhood (Muhlmann 2008).

New media, new journalism? It is, at least partly, against this critique of television journalism as a force of 'unification', reproducing global relations of subordination between the West and the rest, that the entry of new media into journalism has been hailed as a radical move. Whereas the 'decentering' potential of citizen journalism, that is its potential to challenge the dominant flows of Western broadcasting, refers primarily to non-institutionalized media (Reese 2009; Reese and Dai 2010), major news institutions, such as the BBC, have also appropriated citizen journalism in their own cosmopolitanizing vision.

What constitutes a break with the monopoly of journalistic story-telling is the incorporation of citizen input in institutionalized news provision, so that the news is now increasingly defined as a '*collaborative product*'. At the BBC, for instance, the lesson drawn from major news on human suffering, such as the tsunami (2004) or the London attacks (2005), is that '*when major events occur, the public can offer us as much new information as we are able to broadcast to them. From now on, news coverage is a partnership*' (Sambrook 2009)ⁱⁱ.

Distinguishing the online journalism of blogging and twittering from the institutional journalism that appropriates voices of bloggers and twitters into its news structure, Deuze refers to the latter as '*multi-media*' or '*convergent*' journalism: the online presentation of a '*news story package*' that incorporates more than one media format, including '*the spoken and written word, music, moving and still image, graphic animations, including interactive and hypertextual elements*' (2004:140). Driven by techno-commercial as well as professional interests, the rise of this journalism is nonetheless primarily invested by an ethico-political discourse, that of 'giving voice' to the public (Beckett 2008). Whereas this opening up of the space of appearance to the witnessing of citizens has been welcome by humanitarian actors, as they can now get their emergency pleas to Western publics without depending on journalists on the ground, there are concerns that the space of appearance is becoming not only richer but also riskier, not only more 'democratic' but also more 'demotic', to use Turner's terms (2009).

This ambivalence is connected to changes in the control mechanism of news production from a journalism of 'indexing', which seeks to anchor the news to its official sources, to an event-driven journalism, which anchors the news in 'photographic and documentary evidence' and is therefore hard to contain through editorial control (Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston 2007). It is precisely the relaxation of control over content that points to a change in the economy of regulation in the news, raising the key question of how the emerging news narratives of post-television may be subject to the 'test of truth' - how, that is, they should appear both as objective information that respects the values of the news organization and as testimonial accounts that touch their publics into actionⁱⁱⁱ.

It is to this question that I now turn. After providing a critical overview of ordinary witnessing in the news (section 2, '*Ordinary witnessing and the ethics of journalism*'), I propose an analytical focus on the narrative aesthetics of the news genre and offer an analysis of BBC post-television news in Kashmir 2005 and Haiti 2010 (sections 3, '*Analyzing witnessing in the news*' and 4, '*Post-television news narratives: A critical analysis*' respectively). If the analysis of news narrative is important in a study of witnessing, I argue, this is because the shift towards post-television journalism does not only alter the truth claims of news but also has profound implications for the ways in which we imagine distant others and relate to the world beyond 'our own' zone of safety - for the moral imagination that post-television narratives make possible for their news publics. Before I explore these narratives in detail, I begin with a critical discussion on ordinary witnessing as the ethical force of post-television journalism.

Ordinary witnessing and the ethics of journalism

The rise of post-television journalism promises to address the moral critique of broadcasting and renew the vision of a 'decentering' journalism that cultivates the moral imagination of cosmopolitanism. It does so by replacing the journalist with the citizen as a guarantee of the authenticity of witnessing: amateur videos on the tsunami (Gillmor 2004), the London bombings (Allan 2006) or the Burma protests (Cooper 2009) celebrate precisely this new promise to deliver news that is made by '*a citizen with a sense of loyalty to other citizens*' (Harcup 2002:103). Promising as the dominance of ordinary voice in the news may be, however, the nature of witnessing in post-television journalism has not yet been thoroughly studied (but see Pavlik 2001).

'Ordinary' witnessing: As opposed to the witnessing of the journalist, which prioritizes an objectivist conception of witnessing grounded on '*the intrinsic value of facts that must be made available to members of the public so as to facilitate their efforts to engage with the pressing questions of the day*' (Allan 2009: 61), the witnessing of the citizen is grounded on first-hand testimony and personal opinion (Turner 2010). The term 'ordinary' signifies precisely this break with the monopoly of professional witnessing in favour of a

valorization of the 'person on the street' as the most appropriate voice to tell the story of suffering.

The valorization of ordinary witnessing introduces into the news a different epistemology of authenticity that relativizes the empiricism of facts in television news, by placing it side by side with the empiricism of emotion. Rather than implying that a journalism of facts has now receded, the primacy of emotion suggests that the hierarchical boundary between professional and citizen notions of fact is blurred. It is not the verification and analysis of sources but the immediacy of experience that counts as news – and it is this experience that now endows journalism with a new moralizing force.

A clear manifestation of the moralizing impact of ordinary witnessing is found in clandestine user-generated content, as in the Burma protests (2007) and the Iran riots (2009), that managed to instantly disseminate images and stories of local violence across the globe, not only setting the Western news agenda but also mobilizing a global activism of solidarity. Ordinary witnessing, in this sense, democratizes the space of appearance, by breaking the 'monopoly' of television news and allowing new voices to populate the space of appearance: '*as new actors enter the formerly privileged information-sharing sphere dominated by the mainstream media and aid agencies,*' Cooper says, '*there are increased possibilities of more diverse stories being told, and more diverse voices being heard*' (2007).

Echoing testimonial conceptions of television witnessing, for instance in the 'journalism of attachment' that combines respect for facts with a commitment to the journalist's moral conviction (Bell 1997), ordinary witnessing nevertheless departs from it insofar as its authority of moral commitment is not 'galvanized' by the scrutiny of facts but is authenticated by the force of conviction. By this token, even though the witnessing of television seeks to constitute its publics by using (various versions of) objectivity to speak in the name of a unified 'we', the witnessing of post-television journalism constitutes its publics by claiming to be precisely that 'we': ordinary witnessing is about people who '*are being represented by themselves*' (Atton 2002: 122).

The skepticism towards testimony: Despite its distinct claim to truth in the name of the people, post-television news remains caught up in the broader controversy around witnessing as a moralizing force of journalism. Far from celebrating the democratization of voice, the skeptical argument links the epistemology of subjectivism with the expansion of corporate media and their need to re-legitimize journalism in the face of a declining consumption of broadcast news (Deuze 2001; Beckett 2008).

On the one hand, instead of reflecting a plurality of information and opinion, as it promises to do, convergent journalism demonstrates a remarkable homogenization of content as similar news texts become recontextualized in different multi-media formats (Scott 2005). Even the authenticity of user-generated content, hailed as enabling global

solidarity, is ultimately a form of 'unpaid labour' that has already proven to be an inadequate substitute of professional news and has thrown into relief the quality deficit that a retreating foreign correspondence service has left behind (Turner 2010). On the other hand, as user-generated content is co-opted in major corporations for market purposes, convergent journalism becomes embedded in an all-pervasive entertainment logic that prioritizes sensationalism over in-depth analysis and turns the news into commodities: '*convergence in journalism*', as Scott puts it, is not about the democratization of information but about '*a new strategy in the economic management of information production and distribution*', whose '*raison d'être is profit*' (2005: 101).

Post-television journalism, in summary, challenges the television value of objectivity, which reflects the possibility of a unified 'we' beyond points of view, by placing it on a par with the market value of emotive self-presentation, which prioritizes the dominance of '*the private, the ordinary, the everyday*' (Turner 2010: 22)^{iv}. Even though new forms of networked solidarity emerge out of this trend, critics have it, the 'we' of such solidarities tend to constitute 'insulated' publics, which orient themselves towards their own communitarian concerns rather than developing cosmopolitan sensibilities towards distant others.

Suspended between these two positions, either celebrating the moralizing potential of citizen journalism or lamenting the demise of the news into a 'journalism of opinion', the literature on ordinary witnessing remains resolutely theoretical. As a consequence, it also fails to address the key empirical question of how the act of witnessing may itself be changing, under an emerging economy of regulation specific to the textualities of post-television. I propose, therefore, that we now move towards an analysis of post-television news as a specific narrative form that constitutes its own claim to truth in the course of reporting on distant suffering.

Analyzing witnessing in the news

The conception of news as narrative, as an 'authoring' of reality that inevitably involves the positionality of a voice, is not new (Tuchman 1976: 96; Silverstone 1981). Its starting point lies in the conception of journalism as a communicative ritual of 'dramatic action' that involves those who report from the scene of suffering and those who watch at a distance. This process of reporting, let us recall, involves an economy of regulation whereby the voice of the journalist is required to portray suffering '*without deformation in such a way that it is there for anyone to examine it ...and find themselves sufficiently affected by it to become committed and take it up as their cause*' (1999: 31).

What this economy of regulation suggests is that altruistic care is not so much a spontaneous response to the 'facts' of suffering but arises instead as an effect of a particular kind of textuality – one that combines a truth claim to objectivity, conveying facts '*without deformation*', with specific proposals of emotion, rendering publics '*sufficiently affected*', that may lead to action. Rather than claiming that journalists engage

in news reporting on the basis of explicit knowledge of these two requirements of publicity, it would be more accurate to say that the imperative to witness suffering as a 'cause for action' has historically informed the public presentation of suffering, so that changes in the articulation of these narrative requirements can be seen as sensitive barometers for concomitant changes in the modes of witnessing in the news.

To this end, I propose a framework for the study of witnessing that draws attention to two emerging features of the post-television news narrative:

i) its *multi-mediality*, which looks at the combination of the different forms of media in their online presentation of the news and ii) its *narrative structure*, which explores the impact of multi-mediality on *the cohesive structure*, or the informational architecture of the news; the *clause structure*, or the representation of authority in the news; and the *process structure*, or the representation of action on suffering in the news. Different configurations of these textual features produce different, through overlapping, claims to truth that increasingly move towards more participatory modes of witnessing and, consequently, towards a new dynamics of 'unification' and 'decentering' in the constitution of news publics.

My empirical material consists of two BBC stories on major earthquakes in the post-television era (2005-2010), exploring two distinct narrative categories of online news^v: i) convergent narratives, which include the earthquake in Kashmir, Pakistan 2005, and the earthquake in Haiti 2010) and ii) web-streaming or the 'live-feed' used only in the Haiti earthquake (January 2010)^{vi}.

Post-television news narratives: A critical analysis

I begin with the category of convergent news and continue with web-streaming, examining each in terms of their narrative aesthetics (cohesive, clause and process structure) and the modes of witnessing that each makes possible for their news publics.

Convergent news

Aesthetic quality: The Kashmir 2005 and Haiti 2010 pieces are characterized by a rich multi-mediality that reflects the increasing complexity of the news genre, as it moves beyond broadcasting towards convergence. *Multi-mediality*, the co-existence of media platforms on the online news page, facilitates the insertion of complex visual and aural material in the story, which includes interactive maps of the affected area, 'eyewitness links' with footage from ordinary people, 'audio accounts' of survivors (some transcribed as highlighted blurbs on the webpage), historical information on previous natural disasters and the web-stream or 'live feed' (see below).

As a consequence, the *cohesive structure* of the news becomes 'hyper-textual': it interrupts the flow of the linguistic story with options for interactive engagement with multiple, though not immediately available, information sources-as-links (Deuze

2006:70). Hyper-textuality, at the same time, is articulated with the traditional cohesive marker of the news, the inverted pyramid, which prioritizes 'essential' information (what, who where, when and how) and dominates the linguistic aspect of the narrative. The result is a hybrid structure that de-homogenizes the news text, as sources are now presented in terms of unrelated quotes without a tight sequential logic, but allows for multiple modes of user engagement: reading, clicking and navigating, skimming through images.

The clause structure is dominated by categorical language that conveys facts and by the extensive use of direct quotes that introduce the voice of journalistic sources. This encompasses official voices, such as local government ('*Pakistani President...said the quake was 'a test of the nation'*', Kashmir) but also international ones ('*US President Barack Obama said his 'thoughts and prayers ...'*', Haiti), which not only inject a sense of immediacy in the narrative but further 'globalize' the field of action. Importantly, the narrative includes aid agencies and ordinary people's stories: '*One rescuer, Rehmatullah said 'I rushed down...'*' (Pakistan) or '*Rachmani Domersant, an operations manager with the Food for the Poor charity told Reuters that...'You have thousands of people sitting in the streets with nowhere to go... running, crying, screaming'*' (Haiti).

The process structure brings to the fore a series of proposals for immediate action in the scene of suffering. On the one hand, the eternal present of eye-witness accounts inject a sense of urgent 'liveness' in the narrative, as in '*The cries of the people trapped in the debris haunt me. There are still many trapped there'*' (Pakistan) or '*Now it's dark outside, there is no electricity, all the phone networks are down...' (Haiti)*, but also in amateur recordings and audio links with eyewitness statements. On the other hand, interactive options, inviting user contributions ('*have you been affected by the earthquake?'*'), are available immediately after the event on the BBC website, as are links related to the geological and political history of the two nations.

This configuration of textual properties gives rise to *testimonial witnessing*, a mode of witnessing that relies on a *hybrid truth claim* both to objectivity (through the use of the inverted pyramid) and to subjective story-telling (through direct quotes and hyper-links) but also on hypertextual *action options* that allow news publics to engage with the news story-telling as potential 'sources' and benefactors. Insofar as it construes the zone of suffering as a location populated by the voices of the affected and located within our immediate reach, the testimonial witnessing of convergence breaks with the 'objectivism' of television news and introduces a challenge to the communitarian bias of Western broadcasting in favour of a journalism of 'decentering'.

Yet, there is a difference between the two: Haiti managed to capture the moral imagination of the West as the object of extensive altruistic action, but Kashmir did not (Franks 2006). Whereas there are historical and political reasons for this asymmetry in coverage, the lack of interactive media has also been singled out

as an important reason for the poor news coverage in Kashmir: ‘poorer news coverage [was] due to the much smaller number of western journalists available to cover Pakistan ... and the lower quantity of first-hand eyewitness digital images, resulting in a lower “glitz” factor’ (Thelwall & Stuart 2007)^{vii}. In contrast, the Haiti earthquake took place in a media-saturated environment that provided an open and instantaneous online structure of information and action, unprecedented in disaster reporting. As Fox News commented:

“The power of Twitter to turn eyewitnesses into on-the-scene journalists stood out in the wake of the massive earthquake that struck off the coast of Haiti on Tuesday. Graphic photographs of Haitians covered in rubble promptly shot onto Twitter, far ahead of anything from the traditional news wire services.” (January 14th 2010)^{viii}

It is to the web-stream, as the news platform, par excellence, that aggregated citizen contributions and enhanced the visibility of suffering that I now turn. Rather than claiming that news publics engaged primarily with the web-stream rather than with broadcast media as sources of information on Haiti, my argument rather is that publics spread across media, using each in different ways and for different purposes (Deuze 2006). Whilst broadcasting remained a key source of information, convergent journalism, including the option of web-streaming, acted as a source of updates and interaction throughout the course of emergency reporting on Haiti, January 13th-15th 2010 (BBC newsroom, personal communication).

Web-streaming

What differentiates web-streaming, or the ‘live feed’, from convergence news is its narrative structure, which is now fully driven by multi-mediality - the configuration of media that carry the new information. What gets reported is whatever incoming information is deemed as publishable by the BBC interactive newsroom in whichever techno-platform it appears, e-mail, twitter, video or blog entry.

As a consequence, there is a sharp increase in the presence of ordinary voice in this class of news: fifty out of a hundred and fifteen stream entries are anchored on testimonies of suffering, in the first day of reporting (January 13th 2010). Either through amateur recordings or through verbal accounts, this prominence of ordinary voice places the suffering in Haiti within a therapeutic discourse – a highly emotive discourse that vocalizes the trauma of the affected: ‘18.49 Troy Livesay, Port-au-Prince, blogs: *Thousands of people are currently trapped. To guess at a number would be like guessing at raindrops in the ocean. Precious lives hang in the balance...*’; ‘18.17 Thomas Chadwick, Florida, US emails: *I have an orphanage in Jacmel with 13 children. My wife is out there but I haven’t been able to speak to any of them since an hour before the earthquake. I feel so useless*’.

As a result of its intense multi-mediality, the narrative structure of the web-

stream differs substantially from that of convergent journalism. Its *cohesive structure* is now organized along the lines of a timeline, that is a temporally aggregated collection of self-contained entries in the form of informational 'updates': '1053 *The International Federation of the Red Cross says...*', '1101 *Former Haitian President is quoted by the AFP news agency as saying...*'. Rather than a seamless story, unified around the objectivist logic of the inverted pyramid, the experiential narrative of the web-stream is a fully de-centred textuality, a 'bricolage' of 'continuous and more or less autonomous assembly, disassembly and reassembly of mediated reality' (Deuze 2006: 66).

Textual fragmentation is further characterized by a heterogenous *clause structure* consisting of unconnected messages that share one common feature: they all contain references to their source identity: '11.17 *Try Livesay tweets*, '19.10 *The British Red Cross in Haiti has set up an Flickr picture gallery...*'. This sequential annotation of sources points to the orientation of the stream towards 'who says what' rather than on the validity of the source, 'what is being said'. As opposed to the authority of the journalistic voice, this clause structure reflects the preference for a 'situated' and contingent, rather than an objectivist, truth claim in this news narrative.

The *process structure* places the news public squarely in the sphere of simultaneity, by inserting into the narrative the dimension of 'crisis communication', that is communication with a view to act on the urgency of distant suffering (Fearn-Banks 2007). It does so through the extensive presence of hyperlinks, which make possible new options for action at a distance. Beyond the 'have you been affected by the earthquake?' invitation to email, there is now a new range of engagement options via photo and video uploads, twittering sites and, importantly, donations. Whereas donation links obviously address the West as potential benefactors of the Haitian suffering, informational interactivity, as in *Photos: Email yourpics @bbc.co.uk; Video: Upload your video; Twitter: HYS on Twitter*, invites primarily the contributions of the affected as the principal source of news in the stream. Yet, only seven out the hundred and fifteen entries of the stream include the voice of the affected, all of them 'tweets' (less-than-a-hundred-and-forty characters long) plus a mobile phone video, whilst the majority of eye witness accounts come from NGOs – approximately twenty messages. The remaining of testimonial messages come from Westerners indirectly affected by the earthquake or by Haitians who live in the West and, by exception, in neighbouring countries.

The aesthetic quality of web-streaming, then, gives rise to 'participatory witnessing', a mode of witnessing that consists of a de-homogenized narrative and relies on interactive options that equalize all contributions – for instance, the entry of the BBC journalist arriving in Port au Prince, for instance, is just one feed amongst others: '23.09 *The BBC's Andy Gallacher says: 'I've just arrived at Port-au-Prince and aid is now coming in, but very slowly indeed. There are just a few US Coast Guard and a few military planes here...*'. By placing the 'I' of the professional, still at the centre of testimonial

witnessing, side-by-side with the separate 'I's of non-professional users, participatory witnessing can be seen as a 'radicalization' of the testimonial mode – one that pushes convergent news further into the direction of 'decentering' and enables a dispersed but involved collectivity not only to comment on but to actually co-author the news on distant suffering.

Towards a post-humanitarian news public

The analysis of testimonial and participatory witnessing points to the fact that, whereas aesthetics has always been part of the news, for instance in the ways in which the witnessing styles of television challenged the 'total' gaze of objectivity (Mulhmann 2008), post-television news goes a step further in turning authenticity into an aesthetic problem. It does so by increasingly replacing the television logic of story-telling as 'dramatic action' with a logic of techno-textual interactivity, whereby the timeline, the source and the hyperlink become an explicit component of the interpretative engagement of audiences with distant suffering – a process that I call the 'technologization of witnessing'. I now turn to a critical discussion of this process and conclude with the implications of technologization on the nature of post-television news publics.

The technologization of witnessing: Two properties contribute to the technologization of witnessing in post-television news: the *visibility of journalistic labour online*; and the *presence of hypertextual interactivity*. Whilst I have so far addressed these as narrative properties of the news, I now turn to them as traces of change in the institutional regulation of the news.

The visibility of journalistic labour reflects market changes in the process of news gathering from a source-driven journalism oriented to the verification of information towards an event-driven journalism that is based on material from the zone of suffering. This is evident in the timeline, which replaces a hierarchy of importance (what are the facts) with a hierarchy of time (what comes in first); it is also evident in the annotation of sources, which replaces a hierarchy of status (what officials report) with a hierarchy of activism (whoever reports first). At the same time, the presence of hypertextual interactivity reflects changes in news authorship from an editing process that involves the writing up of individual texts, towards an editing process that involves multiple competences, including cross-media monitoring and repurposing of content in often 'collaborative' news texts (Deuze 2004). This is evident in the extra blurb with links to e-communication platforms on the top right-hand side of the website, which invites users to forward material to the network for potential release on its web-streaming site.

Rather than viewing these developments as exclusively benign features of technological progress that propel the democratization of the news, we should also see them as closely articulated with the market concerns of news institutions - a diminishing

public trust and a declining profitability of their online news provision (Scott 2005). The co-option of citizen journalists as volunteering sources, in this context, is part of an institutional strategy that capitalizes on the unpaid labour of ordinary people so as to reinvent more attractive news models at low cost – yet running the risk of providing information that is ultimately less-than-trustworthy (Allan 2007; Turner 2010).

At the same time, however, this market move from ‘business to consumer’ towards ‘peer-to-peer’ news seems to re-structure the power relations in the newsroom, endowing corporate changes in online journalism with an irreducibly democratizing dimension (Gillmor 2004). Indeed, whilst NGOs provide a large part of ‘unpaid labour’ to online journalism, they also appear to gain, in turn, extensive visibility: during the first 24hrs following the Haiti earthquake, they filled an important informational gap in the BBC stream, later covered by the arrival of journalists. In so doing, they redressed the unequal power relationship between themselves and journalists, by using the multi-media platforms of the former in order to break through the selective indifference of much television reporting. Suspicious, then, as the political economy of convergence journalism may be, participatory news seems to resonate positively with, what Jenkins calls, the ‘cultural economy’ of convergence – the promise of this type of news to offer to ‘average people the tools to ... appropriate and re-circulate content’ and thereby to take some control over the agenda of the news (2004: 93).

Yet, I argue, it is precisely this use of technology in the service of ‘average people’ that simultaneously contributes to the technologization of witnessing. This is so insofar as the multi-mediality that makes participatory narratives possible, in the first place, is also responsible for modeling them into the logic of the database: a depository of entries without internal development but available for archival purposes (Manovich 2001). This re-modeling of the news is evident in the textualities of post television news, particularly in the fragmentation of the participatory narrative: the cohesive structure of bricolage, the clause structure of the fragment and the process structure of the embedded link. It is this aggregation of disparate and unassimilated technological platforms as carriers of a story that points to the narrative logic of ‘hypermediacy’ (Bolter and Grusin 2000) – a logic that treats the technological infrastructure of convergence as an explicit and integral part of the narrative aesthetics of news.

The key implication of this multi-mediated textuality is that it dislocates ordinary voice from a coherent news narrative of ‘dramatic action’, condenses it in ‘sound-bite’ form and places it in a temporally cohesive but narratively incoherent sequence. The embedded link, a sort of ‘hyper-fragment’ itself, is a further manifestation of the dislocation process, insofar as it ‘folds’ and condenses a range of visual and linguistic voices onto online pointers and, therefore, keeps them ‘hidden’ from view - unless they are activated into visibility.

Whilst working towards a collaborative form of journalism, then, the

participatory narratives of post-television, simultaneously, 'objectify' the voices they represent, insofar as they turn their accounts of suffering into a collection of self-contained visual or linguistic 'speech acts' available for consumption, at any order and any time. The use of the live feed as an online record, entitled 'BBC. As it Happened' (see endnote v for e-link), points indeed to the archival function of participatory narratives as depositories of news or contemporary forms of 'chronicle' that provide a historical line-up of events in chronological order but '*without analysis or interpretation*' (Rantanen 2009: 6). It is the logic of the database, then, in its synchronic, as live feed, as well as diachronic form, as chronicle, that is responsible for the transformation of witnessing from a single narrative of 'dramatic action' to multiple 'petit narratives' of individual activities (for the term 'petit narratives', Deuze 2005).

Rather than a cause for celebrating the death of the journalist or the democratization of news, the shift towards ordinary witnessing points instead to a fundamental shift in the mode of the regulation of news, what Foucault calls its 'author function', from 'individuating' the journalist towards 'individuating' the news publics (Hirst 1995). The former, let us recall, involves an institutionalized practice of knowledge production that constitutes the journalist as a legitimate author of the news on the condition that her/his voice construes distant suffering as a cause for action within professional discourses of objectivity, whilst the latter involves a non-institutionalized practice that focuses on 'average people' as a legitimate author of the news within discourses of authenticity and self-expression.

Whereas the individuation of the journalist has been associated with particular 'pathologies' of witnessing, such as the annihilation and assimilation of the sufferer, and consequently criticized for reproducing global hierarchies of place and human life, the individuation of publics, much as it claims to restore the moralizing power of journalism, rests itself on an increasing technologization of witnessing that challenges the very 'narrativity' of the news. It is precisely the consequences of technologization on the formation of post-television news publics that I now turn to.

The post-humanitarian news public: The technologization of witnessing, I wish to argue, proposes a particular kind of moral imagination for Western news publics, which I call 'post-humanitarian'. This is an imagination that thematizes the participation of technology in the narration of distant suffering and rests upon an instantaneous, albeit discontinuous, 'click of the mouse' activism driven by personal testimony. I discuss two properties of post-television news publics as post-humanitarian: i) *the 'impossibility' of collective action* and ii) *the rise of therapeutic discourse*.

Far from implying that post-television narratives do not summon up their own news publics, the idea of 'impossibility' refers rather to the ways in which these publics can be imagined as a collective agency in these narratives. Drawing on, what he calls, a 'politics of attention', Dayan (2009) offers an account of the distinct imaginations of the

public that are articulated in the two key regimes of news, television and post-television. Suffering on television, he argues, offers an imagination of collective action based on an a politics of concentrated attention- on the awareness of simultaneous engagement with narratives of 'dramatic action' in the act of watching. Online suffering, in contrast, offers a different imagination of collective agency: grounded as it is on hypermediated textualities, post-television organizes the imagination of collective agency around a series of individuated and discontinuous practices of activism, such as monitoring updates, navigating and clicking on links, e-mailing or twittering, which, '*intensive*' as they may be, '*do not translate into more attention paid to the stories told...*' (Deuze 2005)^{ix}. Rather than a traditional 'audience' unified by practices of simultaneous watching, then, the news public of post-television is best imagined as a decentred body of individual media users, who are '*engaged and disconnected simultaneously, multi-tasking and paying no attention at the same time*' (Deuze 2004: 148)

This intensive, albeit 'disconnected', engagement with post-television news does not simply change the imagination of collective agency from simultaneous attention to interactive inattention. It further suggests that such collective agency is now constituted on the basis of a different truth claim: from the objectivity of television news to the radical contingency of web-streaming. The point here is that, even though post-television entails multiple truth claims, including the testimony by those involved in the circumstances of suffering and the objective accounts by journalists and official sources, it does not ultimately privilege any. Rather, the truth claim of the 'database' as a news narrative is neither that of objectivity nor that of subjective emotionality but, instead, a situated, open-ended and unfinished claim to knowledge : '*less of a claim to what the readers want or to know what an event means*' and instead, '*a site of multiple knowledge and of breadth of knowledge of the world*' (Matheson 2005: 461).

It is this 'aporetic' nature of witnessing, the (textually coded) awareness that distant suffering cannot be adequately narrated as a twin claim to objectivity and emotionality - '*without deformation*' and in such a way that people '*find themselves sufficiently affected by it*', in Boltanski's terms - but always remains a partial, contingent and fragmented story, that throws into relief the 'impossibility' of collective agency in post-television news. This public is post-humanitarian, then, in the sense that it is invited to imagine itself as an actor not on the grounds of narratives of 'dramatic action' that potentially engage them with other actors in the space of appearance, what Mulhmann calls 'a journalism of unification', but on the grounds of disconnected 'petit narratives' that engage each one as an individual with the interactive technologies of the news, in a 'journalism of decentering'.

This individuation of authorship resonates well with monitorial and voluntarist forms of citizenship that, like post-television news, move away from claims of 'representing the public' and see participation as the authentic expression of individual citizens in the context of, what Hartley calls, 'conversational democracy' (drawing on

Coleman 2005, this volume). Yet, what kind of conversation does this form of public participation constitute in the face of distant suffering? In order to address this question I now move to the second feature of post-television news, the rise of therapeutic discourse.

Ordinary witnessing, let us recall, introduces into the news a therapeutic discourse that focuses on, what Taylor calls, 'recognition': the right of the affected to render their suffering visible and, thereby, legitimate to all in the Western space of appearance (1995). Claims to powerlessness, despair, physical injury or emotional pain, in this sense, throw into relief the capacity of ordinary witnessing to function as 'performative' speech acts, that is as ritual discourse that, in addressing its publics as compassionate addresses, simultaneously constitutes these publics as ethico-political subjects within a discourse of universal humanity. Indeed, insofar as they thematize our '*shared mental and physical vulnerability*' across hierarchies of place and human life, such claims to recognition further '*project forms of solidarity across the boundaries of established communities*' and, thereby, potentially enhance the cosmopolitizing force of the news (Linklater 2007:138). Post-television, in this sense, seems to 'decentre' the 'unifying' function of television news not only in terms of individuating the collective agency of its news publics, as we saw earlier, but also in terms of expanding their moral imagination beyond their existing communities of belonging.

Yet, there is a fundamental ambivalence in this dynamics of decentering: despite the proliferation of ordinary witnessing, let us recall, the vast majority of testimonies from the affected comes from the West- only eight web-stream entries come from 'average people' in Haiti (and it is unclear as to how many of these come from Haitians) whilst the remaining forty-two are attributed either to Western NGOs or to Westerners who are indirectly touched by the earthquake.

Such inequality in the voices of witnessing, which follows a global pattern of uneven distribution and use in mobile technologies (Beckett and Mansell 2008), may thus be pointing to a new boundary that is re-emerging in the space of appearance – a boundary between the speaking Western and the silent sufferer. Reflected as it is in conversation flows of the web-stream, this emerging boundary points to the fact that, in vocalizing trauma and seeking recognition, ordinary witnessing ultimately speaks to and, therefore, reconstitutes a Western space of appearance. Rather than originating from or being oriented towards vulnerable others, then, this space of appearance takes vulnerable others as its subject of communication, but places a circle of Western addresses like 'us' at the centre of its rituals of communication; it is, in Castell's terms, a form of '*mediated mass self-communication*': *self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many* (2007: 248).

The post-humanitarian publics of participatory news, in this sense, can be

seen as acting upon the im/possibility of journalistic witnessing as a moral act in ways that are both altruistic and narcissistic. Whereas in the former capacity, they act as decentering forces that cosmopolitanize the moral imperative to act on vulnerable others, evident in the proliferation of NGO testimonies, in the latter capacity, they re-center this moral imperative around 'our' own individuated performances of 'traumatized' citizenship.

What is missing is a move beyond the urgent temporality of simultaneity towards a historicization of the suffering in Haiti in terms of the political power relations that inevitably bear on the outcomes of a natural catastrophe, including references to the colonial and post-colonial history of the nation. Such history, as James clearly shows, is responsible not only for its profound poverty but also for the dominance of therapeutic discourse, both outside and within the nation, as an instrumental form of public communication that consistently construes Haiti as the permanent object of humanitarian aid and dependence upon the West (James 2004)^x.

In seeking to redress then the political and ethical deficits of television news, evident in the pathologies of 'annihilation' and 'appropriation' I discussed in the Introduction, post-television news may be producing its own distinct 'pathology' of witnessing, 'ventrilocation': the trauma of the sufferer may now become a powerfully legitimate moral claim in the space of appearance, but only on the condition that the voice of the sufferer is situated in the West and is performed through a resolutely communitarian moral imagination.

Conclusion

In this paper, I explored the nature of witnessing in post-television news. Taking my point of departure on an analysis of the emergent narratives of convergent journalism, I showed how the multi-mediality of convergence has affected the narrativity of the news along three key textual dimensions: the cohesive, clause and process structures of the news. Insofar as such structural changes result in replacing the logic of news as story-telling with a logic of news as techno-textual interactivity, I argued, post-television witnessing can be seen as becoming increasingly technologized. This technologization of witnessing, I concluded, has enabled the emergence of ordinary witnessing and the manifestation of a caring ethos towards vulnerable others. Yet it has simultaneously given rise to ambivalent forms of collective agency, which potentially produce post-humanitarian news publics - publics that are driven by a communitarian moral imagination and are based on instantaneous, albeit discontinuous, forms of technological activism.

Biography

Lilie Chouliaraki is Professor of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics. She has published extensively on mediation and the ethics of public life,

including 'The Spectatorship of Suffering (Sage 2006), 'The Soft Power of War' (Benjamins 2007) and the forthcoming 'The Humanitarian Imaginary' (Polity).

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ⁱ Impartial witness section: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/journalism/ethics-and-values/impartiality/witness.shtml>

ⁱⁱ 'Citizen journalism and the BBC', Neiman report, Downloadable at:
<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100542>

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Sambrook (2009) in
http://74.125.155.132/scholar?q=cache:lgMTWmniQdIJ:scholar.google.com/+on+demand+news+BBC&hl=en&as_sdt=2000

^{iv} Even though experiential discourse has long dominated mass media genres of participation (Livingstone and Lunt 1994) and docutainment (Fairclough1995), the permeation of a 'hard' genre, such as the news, by a personalized 'I' transforms the objectivist epistemology of the genre into an existential narrative with therapeutic overtones.

^v The content of these news reports are available in the BBC online archive and can be accessed at the following addresses: Kashmir earthquake (2005):
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/4321490.stm
Haiti Earthquake (2005):
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8455629.stm>
Haiti webstream (or live blog; 2010):
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8456322.stm>

^{vi} Web-streaming or the 'live feed' capitalizes on the celebrated capacity of new media, from digital pictures to email and twitter, to introduce user-generated content to professional journalism and thus contribute to real-time news flows on major breaking stories, which subsequently remain on the website as an archive of the event. Originally covering live major

sports events, the genre has increasingly been used to cover global news stories such as the Mumbai attacks (November 2008), the Obama inauguration (January 2009) and the Haiti earthquake (January 2010), attracting millions of viewers. The Obama inauguration, for example, saw the BBC website collapse because of user overload, whereas CNN delivered 25.000.000 web streams on the day, with 1.3 million being delivered simultaneously and 650.000 of these through P2P technology (<http://newteevee.com/2009/01/23/tallying-the-numbers-web-video-rivaled-tv-for-inauguration-views/>).

vii Available online in: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue2/thelwall.html>

viii <http://www.foxnews.com/scitech/2010/01/13/haitian-earthquake-disaster-power-twitter-shines/>

ix <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/viewArticle/1257/1177>

× But see Al Jazeera 'live blog' on Haiti for a historicizing perspective along these lines: <http://blogs.aljazeera.net/americas/2010/01/13/why-haiti-earthquake-was-so-devastating>