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# **Solidarity as Irony: Audience Responses to Celebrity Advocacy**

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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# **Solidarity as Irony: Audience Responses to Celebrity Advocacy**

**Isabel Kuhn**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation aims to contribute to the field of media and morality with reference to the mediation of distant suffering more generally and celebrity advocacy (CA) more specifically, by providing answers to the following research questions: How do audience members respond to the mediation of distant suffering by a celebrity as compared to that of an institutional actor? What implications can we draw from these responses regarding the ethics of solidarity that underpins the moral relationship between audience members and distant sufferers, as it is constructed in the responses? The findings that derived from a thematic analysis of Focus Group discussions with LSE postgraduate students, who were shown two pieces of humanitarian communication, one by the UNHCR celebrity advocate Angelina Jolie and one by the UNHCR spokesperson Melissa Fleming, show that there is an important difference between audience reactions to the mediation of distant suffering by an institutional actor and by a celebrity. While both were scrutinized with regard to the authenticity of the mediator and her message (common strategies of denial), engagement with distant suffering was even weaker as a response to CA than to institutional advocacy. This was because audience members focused primarily on the celebrity and identified with her feelings, instead of engaging with the distant sufferer's plight. This confirms critical scholars' assumptions that CA is not a proper means for fostering a moral relationship of cosmopolitan solidarity between Western audiences and distant sufferers. More precisely, the findings support Lilie Chouliaraki's warning that celebrities foster what she calls 'ironic' solidarity – a depoliticized feel-good activism that impedes the challenging of dominant power structures and the pursuit of justice.

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## INTRODUCTION

Europe is currently facing what some have called a refugee crisis.<sup>1</sup> An increasing number of people originating from the global South risk their lives on journeys to Europe, trying to escape violence and poverty. However, most human suffering takes place outside the West – a well-known fact to news audiences of the global North. Even though most agree that ‘something needs to be done’ to alleviate the suffering of distant strangers (Tester, 2010: 9), the majority reacts with indifference or pity at best when confronted with mediated encounters of distant suffering. Action is most often restricted to donating money to humanitarian organisations (HOs) (Seu, 2011). HOs are those who are charged with the task of ‘doing something’ against the suffering by providing aid to meet sufferer’s basic needs and/or by advocating structural change in the name of global justice (Chouliaraki, 2012a: 10). However, public engagement is still crucial for alleviating distant suffering (Darnton & Kirk, 2011: 5): ‘The public provides a license’ for HOs to take action, individuals can ‘make a positive difference through the actions they take in their daily lives’, and ‘public support opens up a space for debate in society’, which might be the starting point for structural change. The difficult question that HOs have to face in order to mobilize such support is how to overcome the moral distance between Western publics and distant sufferers, which is theorized as a result of the spatial distance and thus in most cases the exclusively mediated encounters of the two actors (Boltanski, 1999; Silverstone, 2006).

Crucial for fostering a sense of connection, which would ideally lead to cosmopolitan solidarity,<sup>2</sup> is the role of a mediator who can “authenticate” the victim, channel the emotion generated, and provide both the distance and the link between the spectator and the victim’ (Brauman, 1993, cited in Scott, 2014: 4). A special kind of mediator, who has become an indispensable part of the communication strategies of HOs over the last decades, are celebrities. Since ‘offering support for global charities has become practically part of the contemporary celebrity job description’ (Littler, 2008: 237), celebrity advocacy (CA) is a ubiquitous phenomenon today that is likely to grow further. So far, humanitarian CA has been studied academically mostly from a theoretical perspective and, on an empirical level, in textual analyses (Orgad & Seu, 2014). The existing research paints an ambivalent picture. On the one hand, CA has been hailed for its ability to provide a role model for a cosmopolitan lifestyle, to raise awareness and funds for humanitarian causes, as well as to exert

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Der Spiegel (2015): Europe’s African Refugee Crisis: Is the Boat Really Full? URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/european-refugee-crisis-worsens-in-mediterranean-a-964304.html> [last consulted 5/8/2015]

<sup>2</sup> Chouliaraki (2012a: 26) defines ‘cosmopolitan solidarity’ as ‘the disposition to act towards vulnerable others without the anticipation of reciprocation’.

considerable political influence. On the other hand, it has been criticised for serving mainly the celebrities and the neoliberal system in which they are rooted, while being detrimental to the causes it is supposedly advocating – among others by fostering a narcissistic feel-good activism marked by utilitarian (non)engagement with distant others (Chouliaraki, 2012c). What have been under-studied so far, however, are audience responses to CA (Orgad & Seu, 2014), especially with regard to the moral relationship between audiences and distant sufferers. Audiences are active meaning makers (Livingstone, 2012) and thus textual analyses and theoretical reasoning cannot predict their reactions to the meanings embedded in media texts.

Against this backdrop, I will investigate audience responses to CA, with a focus on the moral relationship between Western audiences and distant sufferers. More precisely, I will answer the following questions, using data gathered from Focus Group discussions. Does a celebrity mediator really provoke different responses from the audience than an institutional actor? What do these audience responses tell us about the moral relationship that celebrities foster between audiences and distant sufferers, and what kind of solidarity concept is reflected in them? On the basis of my findings I will argue that celebrities are unsuitable for fostering cosmopolitan solidarity between audiences and distant sufferers because they direct more strongly than an institutional actor the attention and the emotions of their audience towards themselves, instead of towards distant sufferers. Ultimately I am arguing, however, that humanitarian communication strategies should be rethought more generally.

Due to the unique research design of this dissertation, which enables a comparison of celebrity and institutional advocacy, this paper makes a small but important contribution to the so far under-researched field of audience responses to the mediation of distant suffering by celebrity advocates, which can be more broadly situated in academic research on media and morality with a focus on distant suffering.

The dissertation consists of three main parts. The first is the theoretical chapter in which I will discuss the relevant literature, develop a conceptual framework and state the research questions and objective of this paper. In the second part I will explain my research design and the methodology that I used to answer the research questions, before turning to the third part in which I will present and interpret my results.

## **THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

In the first three parts of this chapter, I will discuss the relevant literature, starting with the theoretical perspectives on the mediation of distant suffering in general, followed by the role of celebrities as mediators of distant suffering and a discussion of audience studies with regard to distant suffering. After that I will develop a conceptual framework for this paper and state the research questions and the objective of the research.

### **Media and Morality: The Mediation of Distant Suffering**

How come that Western audiences, when confronted with distant suffering, most often remain passive bystanders (Cohen, 2001)? And (how) can this be changed? In order to address these questions, the terms distant suffering and mediation need to be clarified first. Distant suffering is defined as the suffering of so-called 'distant others', people who 'only appear to us in within the media' (Silverstone, 2006: 110). Therefore, mediation, defined as 'the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life' (ibid: 109), is key to the audiences' relationship with distant sufferers. While Moeller (1998) sees the reasons for Western passivity lying in the sheer abundance of pictures and information about disasters, famines and wars that Western audiences are confronted with on television every day, leading to what she calls 'compassion fatigue', most other scholars identify not the quantity but the quality of mediated representations of these events as causes for spectators' indifference and inactivity (Boltanski, 1999; Cohen, 2001; Tester, 2001; Silverstone, 2006; Chouliaraki, 2006). Current mainstream media representations are seen to be inappropriate to overcome the moral and psychological distance between spectators and sufferers (Cohen, 2001: 194). This distance, it is argued, results from the fact that the spectator is not situated in the place of the sufferer but in her/his safe and cosy home and thus does not experience the plight that (s)he experiences (Boltanski, 1999; Cohen, 2001). Nevertheless, these authors also believe that the media have the power to habituate Western audiences into cosmopolitan solidarity (Silverstone, 2006; Chouliaraki, 2012a).

#### *Agonistic Solidarity through Proper Distance*

Roger Silverstone (2006: 110) is convinced that '[m]ediation has significant consequences for the way in which the world appears in and to everyday life, and [...] provides a framework for the definition and conduct of our relationships to the other, and especially the distant other'. In his late work, he developed the concept of the 'mediapolis' – a global civil space that

would shape the morality of everyday life into one that is marked by reciprocity and responsibility (2006: 22, 109). For that to happen, he argues, media must represent the human commonality of difference (ibid: 118). This implies that media representations need to transport both, closeness (commonality) and distance (difference) in order to bring ‘into cognitive and emotional, and therefore moral, reach the subjects otherwise removed from us’ (ibid. 133). Silverstone calls this concept ‘proper distance’ – ‘the capacity to enlarge one’s perspective, and the willingness to recognize the other in her sameness and difference’ (ibid: 119). A relationship of proper distance, or what Chouliaraki (2012a) calls an ethics of ‘agonistic solidarity’<sup>3</sup>, between media audiences and distant others requires the media to provide the means for the mobilization of two crucial elements: empathetic imagination and rational judgement (Silverstone, 2006: 45-46). Empathy – the emotional identification of spectators with sufferers – requires proximity, while judgement requires a contemplative distance, and the provision of context, that allows reflexion on the audience members’ acting upon the suffering (Chouliaraki, 2012a: 192). According to Chouliaraki (ibid: 50), empathy and judgment depend on two elements of struggle in the mediation of humanitarianism: 1) Audiences need to perceive the represented suffering as *authentic* – as opposed to fictional/unrealistic – in order to be able to identify with the sufferers and 2) the employed *moralization* strategy needs to humanize sufferers in order to enable judgement.

However, it is further theorized, the current forms of media representations of distant suffering are far from living up to the normative standard of proper distance. Instead, mainstream mediated contents in this realm, provided on television as well as by HOs are most often expressions of their underlying logics of the politics of pity and/or irony (Chouliaraki, 2006; 2012a).<sup>4</sup>

#### *From a Politics of Pity to Solidarity as Irony*

In his seminal work on distant suffering Luc Boltanski (1999) suggests that Western culture is coined by a politics of pity rooted in Enlightenment thought. In contrast to a politics of justice, its underlying assumption is that suffering is caused by an unlucky fate rather than by social injustices, and thus favours charitable action instead of structural change. Nevertheless, Boltanski does not dismiss the value of pity completely, since it could, as a public and thus political sentiment, lead to action and positive social change (ibid: 180-181).

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<sup>3</sup> Agonistic solidarity is concerned with ‘the communication of human vulnerability as a political question of injustice that can become the object of our collective reflection, empathetic emotion and transformative action’ (Chouliaraki, 2012a: 377).

<sup>4</sup> The following discussion will only be concerned with the communication strategies of HOs and their use of CA, as the latter is the object of investigation of this study.

The politics of pity are based on spectacle, aimed at overcoming the distance and creating a relationship between spectator and distant other. To do so, it stresses the aspect of common humanity as a cause for action (Chouliaraki, 2012a: 33). Positive portrayals that show distant sufferers as resilient agents full of hope and strength aim to turn the represented in the Western spectator's perception into people 'just like us'. By doing so, differences and thus distance become completely erased, rendering the agonistic solidarity of proper distance impossible. The results are a de-politicization and de-historicization of distant suffering that risks manifesting power relations by glossing over the effects on global inequalities and resulting in inactivity because Western audiences get the impression that these distant others are not so badly off after all (ibid: 63). This communication style, which could be understood in terms of proper distance as 'too close', was a reaction to criticism of earlier strategies that were accused for their dehumanizing effect and a resulting alienation between spectators and sufferers, which could be labelled 'too far' in terms of proper distance. By showing distant sufferers as agentless, needy masses who were reduced to their physical needs (see e.g. Malkki, 1996), these representations also risked rejection by Western audiences, who felt overwhelmed or were trying to escape feelings of guilt in the face of such horrors (Chouliaraki, 2012a: 58-61).

Lilie Chouliaraki (2012a) has argued in her latest book 'The ironic spectator' that HOs adapt their communication strategies over time in order to uphold their claim to authenticity. Reacting to changes in their operational environment (institutional, technological and political), they are seeking to address critique voiced against them.<sup>5</sup> Over the last years, the humanitarian field has become increasingly crowded, which has led HOs to adopt corporate communication strategies of branding and marketing in order to enhance their competitiveness in the mediatized modern world (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). This, combined with growing public distrust in media institutions and HOs themselves – the former were accused of manipulation by providing unrealistic spectacles and the latter of patronization and hypocrisy (Vestergaard, 2014) – led to a new style of humanitarian communication that Chouliaraki (2012a) calls 'ironic'. The irony lies in the fact that even though the objective of the communication is an amelioration of the situation of distant sufferers, the distant sufferer's role in this new style of communication is a purely instrumental one that serves only to foster a narcissistic feel-good activism: instead of engaging with the plight of the distant other, Western spectators are asked to engage with themselves through the

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<sup>5</sup> The inherent 'paradoxes of humanitarianism' are commonly addressed by critics through the critique of spectacle (humanitarianism's dependence on staging spectacle, which undermines its truth claim) and empire (humanitarianism's rootedness in dominant power structures), which are both taken as arguments for the reinforcement rather than mitigation of global inequalities through humanitarian activities (Chouliaraki, 2012a: 36-41).



consumption of goods or spectacles. This, Chouliaraki argues, undermines the theatrical structure of the humanitarian spectacle, which could be used for moral education through proper distance/agonistic solidarity, and instead establishes a mirror structure that is completely unable to establish a cosmopolitan disposition marked by empathy and judgement towards distant sufferers. As Vestergaard (2014: 523-524) summarizes: 'beneficiaries [are] turned into objects in donors' utilitarian projects', which leads to an undermining of the possibility of social change.

The results, critics have it, of both humanitarianism's main communication strategies – pity and irony – are rising donations on the one hand but on the other also moral apathy on the part of the Western audiences that consume this kind of media representation and thus are habituated into depoliticized pity or ironic self-absorption instead of agonistic solidarity.

### **Celebrities as Mediators of Distant Suffering**

Celebrities are, next to appeals, news and concerts, one of humanitarianism's four key communication practices today (Chouliaraki, 2012a: 4). The involvement of celebrities in politics emerged in the United States in the 1960s, and CA in the field of humanitarianism became mainstream in the 1970s and 1980s (Biccum, 2011: 1333). Dan Brockington defines CA simply and quite broadly as 'any work by famous people in service of some cause other than themselves' (2014a: xxii). For reasons of convenience and space restrictions, I use the term in this dissertation in order to refer to CA *in the field of humanitarianism* without making it explicit each time. The growth in humanitarian CA was strongly promoted by the United Nations and especially by its Secretary General Kofi Annan (Huliaras & Tzafakis, 2010: 259), as he was convinced that celebrities as mediators of distant suffering could '[break] through the barrier of indifference', especially among young people (Yrjölä, 2009: 1), by raising awareness, spreading knowledge and acting as a role model for humanitarian engagement (UN Press release SG/SM/7595, 23 October 2000, cited in Chouliaraki, 2012a: 81). However, CA has also attracted a considerable amount of – mainly academic – criticism. I will discuss the potential and the dangers of CA as they have been addressed in the literature below.

#### *The Positive Potential of Celebrity Advocacy*

Celebrities are expected to be able to raise public awareness mainly by attracting media publicity, since the media's focus has shifted towards providing soft news (Panis & Van den Bulck, 2012: 78). Kogen (2015: 52, Fn. 2), for example, is convinced that 'celebrities can do much to effect change in the general population, through the popular, mainstream media'.

However, these assumptions need to be qualified, since research has shown that using celebrity advocates did not result in increased coverage of development issues (Brockington, 2014b: 96; Thrall, *et al.*, 2008).<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, it is believed that celebrities could reach especially those who are rather uninterested in political topics, such as young people (Huliaras & Tzifakis, 2010: 260). The empirical evidence here is ambivalent. Brockington (2014a: 141) found that while the young, especially female, are more interested in celebrity news consumption in general, they are less interested in the political activities of celebrities than older people. However, studies by Panis & Van den Bulck (2012) and Wheeler (2009) indicate a positive influence of CA on the engagement of young people with humanitarian causes.

With regard to raising funds, the successful track record of CA is unchallenged (Huliaras & Tzifakis, 2010: 264; Driessens, *et al.*, 2010: 719; Goodman & Barnes, 2011: 79-80). After a Cable News Network (CNN) interview with Angelina Jolie, donations for the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR spiked by half a million US dollars (Kogen, 2015: 39). But also major events like the Live Aid concerts and commodity consumption produced huge sums that went into development projects.

Most scholars also believe that one of the major advantages of CA is its potential for exercising political influence, e.g. by pressuring elites into committing more funds and attention to development issues (Cooper, 2007; Brockington, 2014a).

Another hope that is projected into CA is that celebrities as mediators can act as role models of humanitarian caring: 'Celebrities have the opportunity to demonstrate to their audiences that certain policies, or even individual efforts, can make a difference' (Kogen, 2015: 50). Many practitioners as well as scholars are convinced that people look up to and identify with celebrities (e.g. Driessens, *et al.*, 2010: 719; Goodman & Barnes, 2011: 75). However, Brockington (2014a) has shown in his recent book on CA that this is a widespread myth. He demonstrates that, even though development practitioners, politicians as well as audiences are convinced of the popularity and influence of celebrities, audience members are in fact generally uninterested in either celebrity issues generally or – if interested in celebrity – not interested in their advocacy work. Similar findings produced studies by Scott (2014),

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<sup>6</sup> However, the quantity-wise stable coverage increasingly includes content on celebrity advocates and thus becomes 'charitainment' (Brockington, 2014b: 96).

Samman et al. (2009) and Panis & Van den Bulck (2012). This leads to the criticism that has been voiced against CA.

### *The Negative Potential of Celebrity Advocacy*

The last point of the positive potential of CA brings us to the first critique of CA. Brockington (2014a), on the basis of his findings that I described above, argues that CA is part of a post-democratic order, in which popular consent is simulated through the involvement of presumably popular celebrities into politics. In reality, the public is left out of the equation and instead unaccountable elites rule.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, celebrities are accused of being unqualified for recommending political actions in the humanitarian field: they oversimplify issues and propose shortsighted solutions (Dieter & Kumar, 2008), turning humanitarianism into 'charitainment' (Yrjölä, 2009; Driessens, *et al.*, 2010).

This ties in with the critique that CA is promoting a neoliberal capitalist order of exploitation, on which celebrities' fame, ironically, depends (Brockington, 2014a: 158; Littler, 2008; Müller, 2013): Celebrities provide simplified messages of good and evil that reinforce the dichotomies between the Western saviour and the wrecked global South that needs to be saved (Müller, 2013; Tester, 2010; Kapoor, 2013; Yrjölä, 2009). By leaving issues of justice out of the discussion and thus naturalizing the current world order in which the global North dominates the global South, audiences are '[denied] to actively take part in effecting change' (Kogen, 2015: 50). Instead, solidarity becomes reduced to ethical consumerism and is situated in the apolitical private sphere (Ponte & Richey, 2014; Daley, 2013).

This leads to the argument that CA – in its current form – is, contrary to the hopes discussed above, counterproductive when it comes to fostering dispositions of cosmopolitan solidarity. As part of a broader humanitarian regime, CA has so far operated either within the register of an ethical pity or, increasingly now, irony. Chouliaraki (2012c) has analyzed the communicative style of two CA icons: Audrey Hepburn, who worked as Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF and Angelina Jolie, who is currently doing advocacy work for UNHCR. She convincingly argues that Hepburn works with the register of pity, while Jolie has turned to irony: as part of her authentication strategy, she invites her audiences to engage and identify with *her* feelings instead of with the plight of distant sufferers – with all the consequences of ironic solidarity: narcissist introspection and utilitarian exchange instead of empathy and judgment.

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<sup>7</sup> For a similar argument see also Marks & Fischer, 2002; Richey & Ponte, 2008; Kapoor, 2013; Daley, 2013.

CA becomes a means for self-fulfillment of the celebrity, which brings us to the last point of criticism: that CA only serves the celebrities themselves, as they can use it to enhance their own brand. As a consequence, once again, marketing becomes more important than substance (Littler, 2008; Kogen, 2015: 40; Goodman & Barnes, 2011).

All these critical arguments lead to the conclusion that CA, as it is practiced at the moment, upholds, willingly or not, the prevailing power structures and thus root causes of injustice by de-historicizing, de-politicizing and commodifying humanitarian communication, and erasing the distant other from moral landscape of the West.

### **Audience Responses to CA and Distant Suffering: Authenticity and Denial**

The discussion has shown that CA is a complex and controversially discussed phenomenon. However, the theoretical accounts and text studies can only make assumptions about the influence that CA and other mediated accounts of distant suffering might have on their audiences' reactions to them. These need to be tested empirically (Orgad & Seu, 2014: 15). The few studies that exist in this realm point to the fact that the perceived authenticity of the (celebrity) mediator and his/her message plays a central role in shaping audience responses to the mediation of distant suffering and the moral claims that come with it. It is theorized that in order to bridge the distance between audiences and distant others, the mediator and his/her message must be perceived as authentic, that is, credible and legitimate (Boltanski, 1999: 151-153; Silverstone, 2006: 123; Chouliaraki, 2012c; Brockington, 2014a). In a study by Brockington (2014a: 148), audiences perceived humanitarian CA as authentic especially when they were convinced of the celebrity's serious commitment to the cause(s) he/she was advocating, demonstrated through expertise, experience, sympathy, empathy, and personal suffering. An important criterion in a study by Scott (2014: 12) was the demonstration of 'everyday ordinariness' despite the extraordinary status as celebrity (see also Chouliaraki, 2012a: 88).

When celebrities were perceived as *inauthentic*, participants reacted with scepticism regarding their motives (Panis & Van den Bulck, 2012: 87) and used this argument for discursive strategies of denial (Cohen, 2001) in order to reject the moral claim of the celebrity's message (Scott, 2014). This reaction mirrors the results of a study by Irene Bruna Seu (2010), in which she investigated audience responses to human rights appeals (not involving celebrities). Audiences positioned themselves as critical consumers who scrutinized the mediator and his/her message in order to decide if they should 'buy it' or not. They rejected doing so with the argument of not wanting to be manipulated and by questioning the

effectiveness of the proposed action. In these accounts, the distant other was absent from the conversation, just as in Scott's (2014) and Brockington's (2014a) audience studies on CA. This shows that scepticism towards the truthfulness of mediated messages and the legitimacy of humanitarian actors that undermined the moral claims of the politics of pity (Vestergaard, 2014) are still vivid under the politics of irony (Seu, 2010), even though irony was designed to escape these pitfalls (Chouliaraki, 2012a).

Even when celebrities were perceived as *authentic*, the audience most often felt a connection with the celebrity instead of the distant other and reflected on the self rather than on the distant sufferer (Scott, 2014). Chouliaraki (2012c) predicted this response as a consequence of an ironic moralizing strategy marked by self-oriented, utilitarian altruism instead of unconditional solidarity. When audience members did build a connection with distant sufferers, they responded with sentiments of pity and donations (Scott, 2014; Brockington & Henson, 2014: 15). Darnton and Kirk (2011: 6) argue that the dominant charitable frame of giving money instead of fighting for justice in the United Kingdom is at least partly due to 'the noise of celebrities'.

These findings indicate that CA, just like other forms of humanitarian communication such as human rights appeals, is unable to foster agonistic solidarity by establishing a proper distance between Western spectators and distant sufferers. Instead, scepticism and denial, facilitated through the politics of pity and irony, justify moral apathy towards distant suffering. This raises the question if there is actually a difference in audience reactions to CA as compared to institutional appeals, since Seu's study (not involving celebrities) and Scott's/Brockington's studies on CA came to similar conclusions.

### **Conceptual framework**

The literature review makes clear that especially audience responses to the mediation of distant suffering by celebrities need to be further studied in order to shed light on the controversial discussion about the positive/negative potential of CA for overcoming moral apathy and inaction with regard to distant suffering. To do so, I will use the concepts of:

- (1) solidarity as *pity* (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; 2012a), marked by unconditional solidarity, evoking the depoliticized concept of common humanity as a cause for action,
- (2) solidarity as *irony* (Chouliaraki, 2010; 2012a), marked by utilitarian ethics, narcissistic introspection, and a privatized, consumerist 'feel-good' activism, and (3) solidarity as *agonism/proper distance* (Chouliaraki, 2011; 2012a, Silverstone, 2006), marked by

empathetic emotion towards distant sufferers and reflexive judgment regarding the audience members' action upon this suffering, which re-politicizes the meaning of solidarity and is concerned with a pursuit of justice, as frameworks in the light of which participants' talk will be evaluated in order to analyze if they give expression to certain forms of moral relationships with distant sufferers that the employed humanitarian moralization strategies aim to habituate spectators into (Chouliaraki, 2012a: 45).

Moreover, as these concepts have proven important in audience studies that have been conducted so far, I will pay attention to the role that the perceived *authenticity* – that is the credibility and legitimacy of the mediator and her message – plays in shaping audience members' responses. Does an authentic mediator render distant suffering authentic to audience members? What are criteria for authenticity? Finally, attention will be paid to the possible *strategies of denial* – that is the socially available argumentative resources that can be drawn on in order to justify indifference/inaction when confronted with distant suffering (Cohen, 2001; Seu, 2010) – which audience members might use when talking about the (celebrity) mediator and her message.

All of these aspects will be evaluated for the celebrity in comparison to the institutional actor in order to be able to compare and contrast similarities and differences in audience reactions and thus investigate the particularities of CA.

### **Research Objectives and Research Questions**

As already stated above, while the mediation of distant suffering in general and CA in particular have been thoroughly theorized regarding its influence on shaping the moral relationship between Western audiences and distant others, audience studies remain rare in this field (Orgad & Seu, 2014: 15, Brockington & Henson, 2014: 2). Since it is not possible to predict the plethora of ethical positions, dispositions and responses to mediated 'proposals' of engagement, 'speaking with audiences is one of the most urgent and critical tasks in the study of mediation and humanitarianism' (Orgad & Seu, 2014: 21). My first objective is therefore to test the assumptions made in the literature about the positive/negative influences of CA in terms of fostering an ethics of solidarity as pity, irony or agonism – or something completely different – among its audiences.

My second objective is to investigate the potential distinctiveness of responses to CA as compared to responses to an institutional actor's communication. CA is part of a broader system of communicative practices that humanitarianism utilizes to reach its goals. At the

same time, celebrities have their own unique ways of performing (Chouliaraki, 2012a: 85). This raises the question whether audiences react to the moral proposals of celebrities differently than to those of institutional actors – or if, in the end, it does not make a difference if a celebrity or someone else is mediating. This leads to formulation of the following research questions (RQs):<sup>8</sup>

RQ1: How do audience members respond to the mediation of distant suffering by a celebrity as compared to that of an institutional actor?

RQ2: What implications can we draw from these responses regarding the ethics of solidarity that underpins the moral relationship between audience members and distant sufferers, as it is constructed in the responses?

Answering these questions will make a small but valuable contribution to the so far understudied field of audience responses to CA, situated within the broader research field of the morality of the mediation of distant suffering. I will now turn to the research design and methodology that were applied in order to answer the RQs.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This chapter consists of two main parts: first, the research strategy, in which I will explain the strategy used for data collection and data analysis, and second, methods and procedures, where I will present the sampling strategy and the design of the research tools used to investigate the RQs.

### **Research Strategy**

In order to answer the RQs outlined above, audience responses need to be collected and analyzed. To do so, Focus Group discussions and a Thematic Analysis were conducted. I will justify these choices below.

#### *Data Collection*

Focus Groups (FGs), a form of moderated group discussion (Steward, *et al.*, 2007: 37), are a qualitative method that allows the researcher to observe how “participants share and

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<sup>8</sup> The first RQ was designed in a broad and open fashion in order to be analytically open to any kind of responses by audience members.



negotiate meanings in the course of their interactions” (Morgan, 2012: 160). Lunt and Livingstone (1996: 13) have pointed out that ‘the study of the media audience [...] increasingly concerns the study of social processes of communication’. From a constructionist epistemological perspective, which I am adopting, language produces meanings that are shaped by but also shape ‘our’ social world, including ‘our’ relationships with (distant) others (Nikander, 2012: 404). FGs can simulate a close to natural setting where people come together to discuss, thereby constructing meanings, relationships and identities (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 9-10). Therefore, FGs are a useful method for collecting rich data on audience responses – e.g. to mediated encounters of distant suffering – that accounts for the social construction of meanings and ‘reality’.

FGs were preferred to individual interviews not primarily because they are seen as a more time-efficient way of gathering detailed accounts of the opinions and attitudes of audience members (Steward, *et al.*, 2007: 42), but especially because of the above outlined features. The downside of using FGs as compared to individual interviews is that setting them up can be difficult and time consuming (since many people need to be in one place at the same time), individual participants have less time to give detailed accounts, and the data is, due to the ‘natural discussion flow’, less structured, which makes it more difficult to analyse (Morgan, 1997: 10-16). Moreover, the data produced in FGs is extremely context dependent and strongly influenced by group dynamics (Morgan, 2012: 161; Beitin, 2012: 248). However, individual interview data is also influenced by many factors, such as the questions that the researcher is asking and the answer that the interviewee thinks is appropriate, etc. But this should not only be seen as a weakness of qualitative methods more generally. It is natural that people engage in processes of reconstructing and challenging meanings, according to the context and the end of the language use (Mason, 2002: 65; Nikander, 2012: 403). Therefore, no method can capture the ‘true’ opinions and attitudes of participants. Instead, the floating nature of meaning construction should be acknowledged and included in the research design, as it is done in FGs. The optimal choice for limiting researcher influence and observing audience responses as they occur naturally would have been participant observation. However, it would have been close to impossible to find and extremely time consuming to observe audience reactions to CA and similar instances of the mediation of distant suffering by an institutional actor, so that this method was no feasible option.

Quantitative methods such as surveys were rejected because they risk imposing predefined categories upon the participants and, as opposed to qualitative methods, do not enable the researcher to collect in-depth, complex accounts of participants’ perspectives on the



discussion topic, including their justifications for their voiced attitudes and opinions (Mason, 2002: 65-66). The downside of choosing quality over quantity is of course that the findings will not be generalizable. However, FG data derives its validity from data saturation (Beitin, 2012: 244): participants, as members of a certain layer of society, will usually draw from a limited range of arguments and concepts that are available to them. When answers become repetitive, a point of saturation is reached and points can be identified that are 'common' across contexts (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996: 15).

Having weighed the above discussed advantages and disadvantages of FGs, they were chosen as the best feasible method for collecting data on audience responses to the mediation of distant suffering by a celebrity and by an institutional actor.

### *Data Analysis*

For the analysis of the FG data, Thematic Analysis (TA) was chosen. In a pilot that was conducted for testing FGs as a method for data collection, I envisaged Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as data analysis method (see e.g. Fairclough, 2013). CDA enables the researcher to explore in detail how participants use language, drawing on culturally available accounts, to make sense of and thus (re)construct social reality, such as the social relations between Western audiences and distant others (Nikander, 2012: 403-409). Such an analysis can shed light especially on the second RQ, which asks about the moral relationship between the actors involved in the mediation of distant suffering and how it is influenced by CA. By doing so, CDA can uncover the underlying ideologies and power structures that are constituted by and constitutive of the talk (Machin & Mayr, 2012: 4-5), which is helpful for evaluating how CA influences these.

However, it became clear that the amount of data produced in the FG discussions was too large to be analysed with much attention to the linguistic detail of the participants' talk. Therefore, I decided to use TA instead. TA 'focus[es] on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes' (Guest, *et al.*, 2012: 10). As opposed to CDA, TA 'does not allow for claims about language use or fine-grained functionality of talk' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). It also does not account for contradictions *within* the data *sample* (but across the sample). Apart from that, TA, if exercised in a certain fashion, can do similar work as discourse analysis: when adopting a constructivist epistemology and looking for latent themes, TA aims to identify the underlying ideas, assumptions and ideologies of the semantic data content and 'seeks to theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts' (ibid:

85). It can generate unanticipated insights and produces a rich but complex description of a large data set. Therefore, TA is a useful method to analyse the large data set that the FGs produced, without losing sight of the importance of socially produced meanings that are shaped by and shape the relationships between the actors involved in the process of the mediation of distant suffering, which need to be analysed in order to answer the second RQ.

While the study would profit from triangulation to account for the weaknesses of the selected approach, FGs and TA were chosen as the best options for answering the RQs with the given resource restrictions. In the following section, I will summarize how I operationalized the above outlined research strategy.

## **Methods and Procedures**

In this part, first the sampling strategy and then the design of the research tools will be explained.

### *Sampling*

Postgraduate students of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) were defined as sample universe (Robinson, 2014) for the FGs and recruited through a combined strategy of convenience and snowball sampling (Steward, *et al.*, 2007: 53), using as a starting point people I knew personally. This way, students could be recruited in a time-efficient manner and without offering special incentives, which would not have been possible due to resource limitations. This sampling strategy resulted in the participation of a disproportional amount of Western, female Master's students from different social science study programmes. The obvious downside of this small sampling universe is that the FG data and the findings that derive from it will be limited to a very particular socio-economic group of people, which considerably limits the insights that the study will be able to give with regard to audience responses to CA. Therefore, a broader sample universe would have been commendable, if the resources for recruiting from it would have been given.

However, the chosen sample has also some advantages: the rather homogenous groups are likely to come together in a natural setting, which facilitates vivid discussions (Morgan, 1997: 35-6), and makes the data less staged (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996: 10-11). Moreover, young female participants qualify as the presumed target audience of CA (Cooper, 2007: 33). Four FGs, including a pilot, with six to seven participants each, as recommended by Morgan (1997: 42-3), were conducted between April and June 2015.

### *Design of Research Tools*

To comply with standards of research ethics (Marzano, 2012; Kaiser, 2012), ethical approval was obtained and signed consent forms (see Appendix I for the template) were collected from all participants. A topic guide (see Appendix I) with open-ended questions was designed in order to structure the discussion loosely, leaving room for the participants to develop their own foci without losing sight of the research topic (Morgan, 1997: 48). The questions were structured in a funnel model, proceeding from general impressions to more precise questions on feelings and thoughts with regard to different actors, inspired by the relevant literature. To trigger the discussions (Steward, *et al.*, 2007: 92), two videos were shown, one right at the beginning and the other after about an hour of the two hours that the FGs lasted. The first was a TED talk by the UNHCR spokesperson Melissa Fleming (thus an example of the mediation of distant suffering by an institutional actor) and the second a speech of similar content held by Angelina Jolie, celebrity advocate for UNHCR, on World Refugee Day. These data samples were chosen as the speeches were comparable in style and content,<sup>9</sup> it was deemed that it would be easy for people to talk about refugee issues, as they featured prominently in the media at the time of the discussion and that most (if not all) participants would recognize Jolie as a famous Hollywood actress (which was in fact the case). Obviously, the data shown to participants is likely to strongly influence their responses. Therefore, it would be interesting to conduct further audience studies with different examples of CA.

The discussions were recorded and the data was later transcribed verbatim, following the transcription conventions proposed by Tilley and Powick (2002: 310), which were considered appropriate since TA does not require the same attention to linguistic detail as for example CDA does (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 87-88).

For the TA of the data, a coding frame (see Appendix II) was developed that was inspired by the theoretical concepts outlined in the conceptual framework and aimed at identifying semantic as well as latent themes. I went several times through the whole data set, reduced the text through summary sentences and keywords (Bauer, 1996: 9) and then coded the summarized responses with the help of the coding frame, which led to a slight modification of the coding frame in order to capture everything that seemed important in relations to the research interest. Afterwards, I compared the coded responses of each participant after each video to each other and of each group to each other enabled me to identify salient and less

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of Jolie's communication style, see Chouliaraki (2012c) and Kogen (2015). Both mediators attempted to humanize distant sufferers by telling stories of individual refugees that they had met and both stressed the great potential of refugees and the importance of education. While Jolie showed strong emotions, Fleming told her stories with professional seriousness and provided, next to individual stories, more general facts and figures about refugees.

prevalent themes and sub-themes, their relation to the RQs and to each other (see Annex III for the thematic map). Themes are defined as ‘something important about the data in relation to the research question’ that ‘represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 82). Prevalence was determined by a combination of the quality (e.g. if something was especially stressed by the participants) and the quantity of the answers (how many and/or how often participants talked about a theme). The results of the TA will be presented and interpreted in the following section.

## **RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

The following three main themes were identified in the analysis: engagement with the mediator, engagement with the message, and engagement with distant sufferers. The first two were especially most prevalent and focussed mainly on the issue of authenticity, while engagement with distant sufferers was usually of short duration and stayed rather superficial. I will present the themes and their subthemes below, before turning to the discussion of how they relate to the concepts of authenticity and denial and the ethics of solidarity that is evoked by them.

### **Engagement with the Mediator**

A prevalent theme that emerged with reference to both videos was an intense engagement with the mediator, for the video of the UNHCR celebrity advocate Angelina Jolie even more than for the video of the UNHCR spokesperson Melissa Fleming. Many participants stated that they focused mostly on Jolie’s voice and her looks while watching the videos and that they were trying to figure out if she was acting or not, which hints at the focus of the talk about the mediators: authenticity.

#### *Authenticity*

Participants were torn between accepting and rejecting Jolie’s authenticity: that is, her credibility and legitimacy as an advocate for distant sufferers. Criteria for authenticity that participants drew on were mainly the demonstration of genuine commitment through emotional and personal involvement and continuous engagement:

From reading gossip magazines you know that she’s involved in loads of things. And I don’t really question that she’s emotionally involved in it. I did believe her emotional reaction to it. And I can see how for her it has been a very meaningful experience to

meet people and let them have teach her things. (FG3-J) <sup>10</sup>

...it seems like she is constantly taking a big care of you know coming back to the places... that made it for me a bit more trustworthy what she's saying, maybe. (FG1-S)

Ordinariness was also a criterion, which emerged mainly in comparison with Fleming, who was perceived as overly professional, so that participants could not identify with her, as opposed to with Jolie:

I perceived [Jolie] much more as an individual and not in her role as PR person for UNHCR. (FG3-An)

If the above-mentioned criteria were not seen as fulfilled, Jolie's authenticity was questioned:

I would love to believe that her feelings are genuine and that her stories are true but as an actress she can cry whenever she wants (FG2-M)

The quote is interesting insofar as it also demonstrates how participants linked the authenticity of the mediator to the authenticity of her message. Moreover, it exemplifies that participants were aware of the highly staged nature of the celebrity performance, which could lead to questioning her authenticity – as in the quote above – but did not have to. Many respondents perceived her performance as more authentic than Fleming's:

The weird thing is...I still believed her more [than Fleming]. Knowing that she is an actual actress, fully professional, who has been organized by the UN to give these things. I think it still works. (FG1-D).

There was little difference between the criteria used to evaluate the celebrity performance and the performance of the institutional actor. Fleming's authenticity was questioned by the majority of the participants with the argument that she seemed overly professional and not emotionally involved, which participants explained by her lack of personal involvement. She was primarily seen as a Public Relations professional whose 'job' it is to talk about distant suffering:

I didn't really trust [Fleming] because I was: this is something your PR advisers wrote for you and you showed these pictures, pretending you know these refugees. (FG3-T)

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<sup>10</sup> Quotes were selected on the basis of how well they represent the patterned responses identified in the analysis and described in the text.

However, some participants also stated that they generally preferred an objective, professional style to a personal, emotional account.

One difference in the authenticity criteria was the question of expertise. While Fleming was criticized for not providing detailed information, as an expert should, participants were less 'strict' about this with Jolie. One participant stated as a reaction to the utterance, that Jolie did not 'ask for anything' (FG1-C):

It's funny because from [Jolie] I also don't expect it. In the [talk by Fleming] I was really missing that one because I was like: that's your profession, you should give us, you know, proper advices and for her it didn't strike me as missing that much. (FG1-S).

A general critique on the basis of which the authenticity of both, Jolie and Fleming, was rejected by some participants was patronization. Why do privileged, white, rich women talk about suffering in the global South from their Western perspective instead of giving distant sufferers a voice? This is one of the reasons why, in both cases, many participants said that they would have preferred a refugee speaking.

It would have made a bigger impact on me if I heard one of them talk to me directly instead of this very obviously privileged woman. (FG3-J).

### *Emotionality*

The other reason why participants would have preferred someone speaking who was directly affected was that they thought that they could emotionally relate to their story better than was the case especially with Fleming, but also with Jolie. Even though some participants said that they did feel emotional after having watched Jolie's speech, it was striking that this feeling was reported as diffuse or even directly attributed to the celebrity, instead of the refugees:

What I felt was sympathy. I'm not sure if it was with Ms. Jolie or with the refugees but it was a feeling of sympathy towards it. (FG1-D)

She is much more sympathetic than the other. I actually like her...this one let you become emotionally involved with it, as opposed to the other. Because she's quite emotional and talks about it in a very emotional way. (FG3-J)

On the other hand, participants stated that they did not feel any emotional connection towards the refugees in the stories told by Fleming because Fleming herself did not seem to

be emotionally involved when telling them.

...the way she presented it, maybe because her voice was a little bit cold, I was the entire time a little bit torn between thinking 'yeah, it's really touching and sad' and at the same time I couldn't really connect with her... I found the presentation a little bit cold or a little bit difficult to really feel what she was saying. (FG3-T)

This shows that participants indeed thought that genuine emotions on the part of the mediator could make them feel for distant sufferers, but it really primarily led to emotions towards the celebrity mediator.

### **Engagement with the Message**

The other prevalent theme of participant's talk in reaction to the two videos was a critical engagement with the mediators' message. Again, the question of authenticity was the focus of attention. Especially with reference to the video by the institutional actor Fleming, participants were torn between rejecting and accepting the authenticity of her message. They engaged less with Jolie's message, but if so, mostly rejected its authenticity. In most cases, the judgement about the authenticity of the mediator correlated with the perception of the authenticity of her message, but this was not always the case:

I didn't necessarily disagree with anything that [Fleming] was saying. It was for me a quite positive message. The only negative was just really the superficial delivery. (FG3-S).

The most important argument for questioning the authenticity of the message was questioning the truthfulness and/or representativeness of the stories:

In all the stories [of Jolie's speech] people are so brave and so strong and so optimistic of the future, even though they suffer a lot. It's not realistic. (FG2-R).

As the last quote exemplifies, it was also criticized how refugees were represented in a stereotypical, overly positive and yet needy way, which neglects political and historical contexts. Fleming especially was criticized for exploiting human stories with the goal of manipulating audiences into giving money, which was the reason why most FG members did not feel addressed by her talk.

Yeah, to be honest, to me it wasn't appealing at all because if I see things like this I rather feel manipulated than presented with a real story. (FG1-S).

It was kind of interesting to see that she came from this really tragic human level – they want education, they want a better life – to, we need more funds. (FG1-D).

Many participants also did not like the ethical frame that they felt was transported by the videos. For Fleming, they criticized her strategy of commodification and utilitarianism:

It was like she was making like a sales pitch, like she was selling some software or something. (FG3-J).

For Jolie, participants questioned her attempts to make refugees seem sympathetic:

So what if they're not the nicest people you've ever met? Are they then not worthy of help? You know, I don't get it. Why do they have to be nice people in order to get help? (FG1-B).

However, other participants were not as critical. They understood this strategy in order to make people care for distant others and thought it was okay to simplify and humanize the suffering in order to make it comprehensible to the audience.

This shows that the opinions about the criteria for an authentic message are very varied. It is striking that the messages were scrutinized in detail by the participants for their authenticity, as well as their style and function:

I found [Jolie's] narrative absolutely brilliant. I might not agree with it or like it, but it was absolutely brilliant. From a communications perspective, well done. (FG1-P).

If you know anything about journalism or making a story, it's always very helpful for making your point, to humanize. (FG1-D).

It is interesting, however, that even though most participants criticized the message of the institutional actor especially harshly, they also engaged more with the content of her message and less with the mediator, as it was the case with the Jolie video. This was also articulated by participants:

In the first one [Fleming], because I am not so much focusing on her celebrity status, I would probably critique it more, like I did, but also want to know more about what UNHCR is actually doing. (FG1-B)

I was questioning what she [Fleming] was saying, doubting it, I feel like, engaging more with it critically, which also means at the same time that you would think probably about what the situation looks like. And with Angelina Jolie, you rather just take it in and be, like, yeah okay next thing. (FG1-S)



### **Engagement with Distant Suffering**

Engagement with distant suffering was rare compared to the engagement with the mediator and the authenticity of the message discussed above. Nevertheless, it was not completely absent from the discussion. When participants were concerned with distant suffering, they most often rationally reflected on its circumstances and scrutinized the proposed action. Emotional responses were the exception and remained superficial.

#### *Rational Reflection*

A good example of how criticism of the message of the mediator could lead to rational reflection on distant suffering is the following response to Fleming's talk:

I keep thinking: what about integration in society, what about states like...? I was reading something about how Israel only accepts about less than one per cent of asylum seekers as refugees. So what about those issues? (FG1-C)

These episodes usually ended quite quickly, however, because other participants did not pick up on them. The following response with reference to Jolie's speech is a good example, showing that participants apparently thought that engaging with the circumstances of distant suffering – even though they were heavily critical of the fact that the appeals did not provide enough context – was not primarily what they were supposed to do:

Where... well it doesn't really matter. These refugees from Tanzania were from where? [No one knows] Okay sorry, I was just wondering because I wasn't aware that there's a huge refugee issue going on in Tanzania, to be honest. (FG1-S)

Triggers for reflection on distant suffering were most often numbers and facts, which were mainly provided by Fleming:

I didn't know that Lebanon had a million [refugees]. (FG3-S)

More, it's only Syrian. They have Palestinians as well. (FG3-An)

Right, so it's even more than that. I mean Ireland's got a population of four million [like Lebanon]. And the country would shut down if there was just another million planted in there. So that was kind of incredible. (FG3-S)

Individual stories could also be triggers for reflection:

What convinced me was the story [told by Fleming] about the guy who wanted to go

to university... maybe because for me it's important to go to uni for one thing... and also because education, as she mentioned all the time, can lead to a future where you can impact on society more. (FG2-Jo).

Even though individual stories were provided not only by Fleming but especially also by Jolie, the reflection on her person, instead of the content of her message, weakened the link between engagement with the message and reflection on distant suffering.

### *Action*

When participants reflected on the action frame (what should be done about distant suffering), they often explicitly rejected the charitable frame of giving money, but at the same time implicitly referred to giving money as a solution for humanitarian crises.

Unfortunately organizations like the World Bank and the UN think that you can just throw money at the problem. Give them money, give them loans. (FG2-S)

[Jolie] said: 'I walked through these camps, I saw the suffering and I felt helpless'. And I'm like: you're kind of making a bad case for you... you have millions! You could have adopted the entire camp. (FG2-S)

When asked about becoming active themselves, those participants who did not reject action on the grounds that refugees were not a priority issue for them and were not active already, said that they did not feel targeted or did not know what to do because neither Fleming nor Jolie told them enough about their organization (UNHCR) or what they could do in order to help (apart from giving money in the case of Fleming) – even though they knew, theoretically, very well what could be done:

... [Fleming's talk] is still lacking one or two minutes being like: 'go on the streets, sign a petition', this call for action which wasn't there at all. You raise awareness but then the awareness is there but you don't do anything with it. (FG1-S)

At the same time, some participants evaluated Jolie's speech positively because she did not ask her audience to become active:

The neat thing about the Angelina Jolie video is that it really doesn't call you to do anything. You sort of feel bad for a second, then you feel sympathy because she is reaching out, telling her story, now your awareness is raised. And that's her job. So I don't feel like doing anything at all actually. (FG1-D).

### *Emotionality*

As the last quote exemplifies, and as already discussed above, emotions towards distant sufferers were most often replaced by emotions towards the mediator, especially in Jolie's case, or reflections on the mediator and/or her message:

I was a little bit sad at the beginning for the poor refugees but then in the end I thought: well, what's [Fleming's] story? (FG2-Jo)

Only a few participants stated having experienced emotions directed at distant sufferers. If they experienced feelings, they were most often negative, diffuse and shallow: feeling sad, depressed, or overwhelmed. Some participants felt guilty, because they thought that they 'should feel bad or sad' (FG3-T), but did not. Others stated that they could not understand why the mediators were trying to make them feel for the refugees, because the question of helping them or not should be independent from feelings and rather a general ethical question of right and wrong.

This leads us to the discussion of the results of the TA in terms of how they relate to the concepts outlined in the conceptual framework of this dissertation: denial, authenticity, and solidarity as irony, pity and agonism/proper distance.

### **Discussion**

Comparing the themes discussed after each video has shown that for both the institutional actor and the celebrity, talk about the mediator's and her message's authenticity was especially prevalent, while the engagement with distant suffering stayed secondary and was rather superficial. Strategies of denial linked to questions of authenticity played important roles in participants' answers and revealed interesting insights with regard to the ethics of solidarity that is implicit in audience members' reactions to CA as compared to institutional advocacy.

### *Denial*

The findings reflect to a great extent what Seu (2010) found in her study on audience responses to human rights appeals: participants used strategies of denial (see Cohen, 2001) in order to escape the responsibility that an engagement with the moral claim of the messages would entail. Boltanski (1999) argues that when audiences are witnessing distant suffering, they have two options in order to preserve their dignity: they can either act or they

must find arguments not to do so. The majority of the FG members went with the second option. Just as Seu (2010) described, they positioned themselves as critical consumers rather than as moral agents and carefully scrutinized the authenticity of the mediator (a denial strategy that Seu calls 'shoot the messenger') and of the message ('the medium is the message'), as well as the effectiveness of the proposed action ('baby and bathwater'). By doubting their credibility and legitimacy and through accusations of manipulation, participants had a socially acceptable reason to reject the moral claim to act when witnessing distant suffering. The action-related strategy of denial became especially apparent by comparing the paradoxical reactions to Jolie and Fleming. Fleming was criticized for not giving advice on how to act in order to alleviate distant suffering, which was used as a moral justification for inaction, while Jolie received positive feedback from the same participants for 'not asking for anything', which rendered the effort of employing a strategy of denial unnecessary.

However, contrary to Seu's results that were marked by a complete absence of distant sufferers in participants' talk, it was found that participants sometimes engaged with distant suffering, especially when criticizing the content of the institutional actor's message. For example, criticizing Fleming for stressing a certain topic (education), and not talking about other issues that were important in relation to refugees, could be seen, just like other critiques of the content of the message, as a strategy of denial. However, because the participant did not simply reject the message but reflected on other issues that are linked to the topic it can also be interpreted as productive rational engagement with the issue.

### *Authenticity*

The criteria for authenticity were the same for the celebrity and the institutional actor, and coincide with the authenticity criteria for CA identified by Brockington (2014a: 148) and Scott (2014) with one exception, however. While serious commitment demonstrated through genuine emotions and continuous engagement, as well as ordinariness were criteria for both, expertise was expected primarily from the institutional actor and less from the celebrity. Participants expected from the celebrity in the first place to entertain them, but not to inform them or to make serious propositions for possible solutions to a problem – as opposed to an institutional actor, whose 'job' it is to do so. This led participants to be more forgiving with perceived flaws in the celebrity speech. Even though this gives participants less working points to attack the celebrity's message and proposed action for strategies of denial, it also meant that participants hardly engaged with these issues at all, which impedes rational

reflection on distant suffering.

This is an important difference to reactions to the institutional actor, where participants criticized the message and the proposed action more, which sometimes led to an engagement with issues surrounding distant suffering, as described above. Engagement with distant suffering was also triggered by facts and figures, which were mainly provided by the institutional actor. With Jolie, participants focused mostly on her. This demonstrates that authenticity cannot be a guarantor for providing a link between distant sufferers and audiences of CA. Even when participants perceived Jolie as authentic, this enabled more of an emotional connection and identification between the participants and Jolie than between audience members and distant sufferers, which accords with Scott's (2014) findings and affirms Chouliaraki's (2012a) assumption that CA fosters an ethics of solidarity as irony.

### *Solidarity as Irony*

The strong focus of participants on the celebrity mediator impeded an engagement with distant sufferers more than this was the case with the institutional actor. Empathetic identification with distant sufferers could hardly be established by both, Fleming and Jolie, but participants at least reflected more on distant suffering as a reaction to Fleming's talk than it was the case with Jolie. Reflection in the form of judgment is, together with empathetic identification with the sufferer, part of the concept of proper distance/agonistic solidarity, and therefore an important element in fostering a moral relationship between distant sufferers and Western audiences that can lead to social change and the pursuit of justice (Chouliaraki, 2012a; Silverstone, 2006). With Fleming, participants also criticized her for not providing enough context, which is important for judgement. Therefore, the findings indicate that authenticity is less important than content for fostering an engagement with distant suffering. As Chouliaraki (2012a) and Vestergaard (2014) have argued, the orientation towards an ironic communication strategy can be seen as an attempt by HOs to uphold their authenticity against the critiques of spectacle and empire that the politics of pity had evoked. However, critique was still very present in the FG audience's responses. This might be due to the fact that many elements of the politics of pity were still apparent in the videos and taken up by the audience, e.g. references to common humanity and attempts to make participants feel bad/sad about distant suffering.

At the same time, the prevalence of criticism can also be seen as an expression of agonism: as the analysis has shown, and as Silverstone (2006: 127) stresses, critical questioning is

important and can be productive when it leads to a critical engagement with the content of the mediator's message. This is impeded, however, when the attention is mainly caught by a celebrity mediator, from whom audiences do not even expect to engage politically with the topic that they are advocating. Even though participants recognized that Jolie's performance was highly staged and lacked a provision of context, which is needed for judgment, many participants still liked her performance more than that of Fleming, because of Jolie's "nice" voice or the emotional stories that she provided, which however mainly led to emotions towards the celebrity. All of this confirms Chouliaraki's (2012c) warning that the ironic authentication strategy of Jolie – rendering suffering authentic through her own authentic feelings – turns the mediator more into a distraction from, than into a link with, distant sufferers. Thereby, the possibility of the mediator to "authenticate" the victim, channel the emotion generated, and provide both the distance and the link between the spectator and the victim' (Brauman, 1993, cited in Scott, 2014: 4) is destroyed. Instead of establishing a proper distance, the authenticity of the distant sufferer becomes secondary to the celebrity's authentic feelings, with which audiences are invited to engage. The idea of humanitarianism – 'paying moral attention to others who are beyond one's own immediate sphere of existence' (Tester, 2010: vii) – is replaced with the utilitarian ethics of post-humanitarian feel-good activism (Chouliaraki, 2010).

The results therefore confirm the assumption that CA is inapt for fostering cosmopolitan or agonistic solidarity, because it primarily led to an ironic spectatorship, which distracts from an engagement with distant suffering and thus renders social change through the tackling of injustices more difficult. These findings, together with Brockington and Henson's (2014) audience study showing that most people are far less interested in CA than is generally thought, stand in harsh contrast to the hopes of those – including audience members<sup>11</sup> – who believe that celebrities can 'break through the barrier of indifference' by advocating humanitarian causes to a broad public. One preliminary implication of this study – with the caveat that further research needs to be conducted to confirm or qualify the results of this dissertation – is therefore, that celebrities should not be used as part of the humanitarian communication strategy directed at the general (Western) public, but rather for targeted groups or political pressure.

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<sup>11</sup> See Brockington (2014a). For reasons of space restrictions and because it was not directly relevant for answering the RQs, I do not discuss the FG participants' opinions on CA here in any detail, but in summary it can be said that they thought mostly very positively about it.

### *Rethinking Humanitarian Communication*

However, the institutional actor also failed to foster emotional identification with, or deeper debates about, distant suffering, which could lead to an ‘orientation towards action’ (Boltanski, 1999: 152-153) among audience members. Therefore, it might be more generally recommendable to replace Western mediators with people who are directly affected by situations of distant suffering. This could reduce possibilities for denial through questioning the authenticity of the mediator and would turn the suffering of the mediator, with which participants could identify, into the suffering of the distant other, since the two would be equal, thereby fulfilling the precondition for action voiced by Boltanski (ibid.) that ‘there must not be too much doubt about the real existence of the unfortunate represented, or about the intentions or desires of the presenters’. It would also be in accordance with the spirit of Silverstone’s (2006) concept of proper distance, which entails an obligation to listen to the distant other. Moreover, humanitarian communication should provide much more historical and political context and concrete proposals for action – apart from making donations – as it was wished for by the participants, in order to enable audience members to engage more deeply with the circumstances of distant suffering and their role in it, and to render denial more difficult. This way, it might be possible to bring ‘into cognitive and emotional, therefore moral, reach the subjects otherwise removed from us’ (Silverstone, 2006: 133). Only by opening up to, and reflecting on, those who are far away and yet so strongly affected by our actions, can we work towards more justice and equality in this still highly unequal world. Otherwise, donations might keep flowing, but moral and political apathy will also be likely to continue.

## **CONCLUSION**

This dissertation analysed audience responses to the mediation of distant suffering by a celebrity and an institutional actor in order to examine the particularities of CA and the ethics of solidarity that are evoked by it. By analysing thematically data from four Focus Groups conducted with LSE postgraduate students, it was found with regard to the first RQ about the reactions to CA as compared to institutional advocacy, that even though participants focused mostly on the authenticity of the mediator and her message with regard to both videos, they engaged even less with distant suffering in reaction to the video by the celebrity. The reason for this was that they focussed primarily on the celebrity’s performance and experienced emotions towards her, instead of towards distant sufferers.

With regard to the second RQ about the ethics of solidarity that is evoked in these audience responses, the findings show that, as opposed to the hopes of many, celebrities are especially inapt for fostering a genuine connection between audiences and distant sufferers. They indicate instead, as Lilie Chouliaraki had critiqued, that celebrities tend to foster an ironic solidarity of feel-good activism, that erases the distant other from the moral gaze of the audience more than an institutional actor does. However, the institutional actor was only slightly more successful in making audiences reflect on distant suffering and also unable to foster empathic identification with distant sufferers. Therefore it is concluded that the currently common humanitarian communication strategies need to be reconsidered more generally, if they aim to foster a meaningful ethics of solidarity marked by a proper distance between (Western) audiences and distant sufferers. Although this normative benchmark might seem high and difficult to reach, it should not be given up on, since evidence of rising donations but declining engagement and manifested power structures suggests that the current strategies of moralization are counterproductive in fostering substantial change in the direction of more global equality.

With these findings, this dissertation contributed to the so far understudied field of audience responses to distant suffering more generally and to CA more specifically. It shed light on the theoretical controversy surrounding CA's ability to foster a moral relationship of at least cosmopolitan, and at best agonistic, solidarity between audiences and distant sufferers by testing some of its assumptions empirically. However, the findings are limited to a very narrow socio-economic group and the data that was produced in the FGs was naturally influenced by many factors such as the choice of the actors (institutional/celebrity and the organization they stand for) and other features of the videos that were shown to the participants, group dynamics, and so on. Therefore, there is a need for further audience studies, which use different material (e.g. showing other celebrities), data collection methods (e.g. participant observation) and broader sampling universes in order to close the existing research gap in this area. This would ideally foster not only a purely academic debate about the implications of different styles of humanitarian communication for the moral relationship between audiences and distant sufferers, which shapes Western audiences' attitudes and actions with regard to humanitarian issues.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix I: Topic Guide

Video 1: Ted Talk Melissa Fleming

[http://www.ted.com/talks/melissa\\_fleming\\_let\\_s\\_help\\_refugees\\_thrive\\_not\\_just\\_survive](http://www.ted.com/talks/melissa_fleming_let_s_help_refugees_thrive_not_just_survive) (9.5 min.: 0-7:50; 14:30-16)

- What is your first **spontaneous reaction** to what you've just seen?
- *E.g. what do you think or feel and why?*
- [Ask each participant to take some notes and then share their thoughts with the group]
- What did you mainly **focus** on while watching the speech?
- *E.g. the person who was speaking, the content of the speech, the settings...? Why?*
- Did you feel addressed? Who do you think it was **directed at**?
- Which **effect** would you say had the speech on you? Why?
  - Which **feelings** have you experienced?
  - Do you feel like you've **learned** something? If yes, what?
  - Did you **reflect** on things you already knew?
  - Having watched this, would you like to **know more** about the topic?
  - Do you **believe** what was said? *Do you **trust** the organization/ the messenger?*
  - Having watched this, would you like to **become active** in any other way?
  - Having watched this, do you feel like **something needs to be done** about the issue presented?  
*If yes, who should do what/ who is responsible?*  
*Do you feel this is your business?*
- Would you **usually watch** this kind of speech?

Video 2: Angelina Jolie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtt1Vs9Lcpo>

Speech held on World Refugee Day 2009 (about 8 minutes)

- *Same questions as above*
- How do you feel about Jolie's involvement in humanitarian causes?
- What do you think about the involvement of celebrities in humanitarian campaigns more generally?

General Questions:

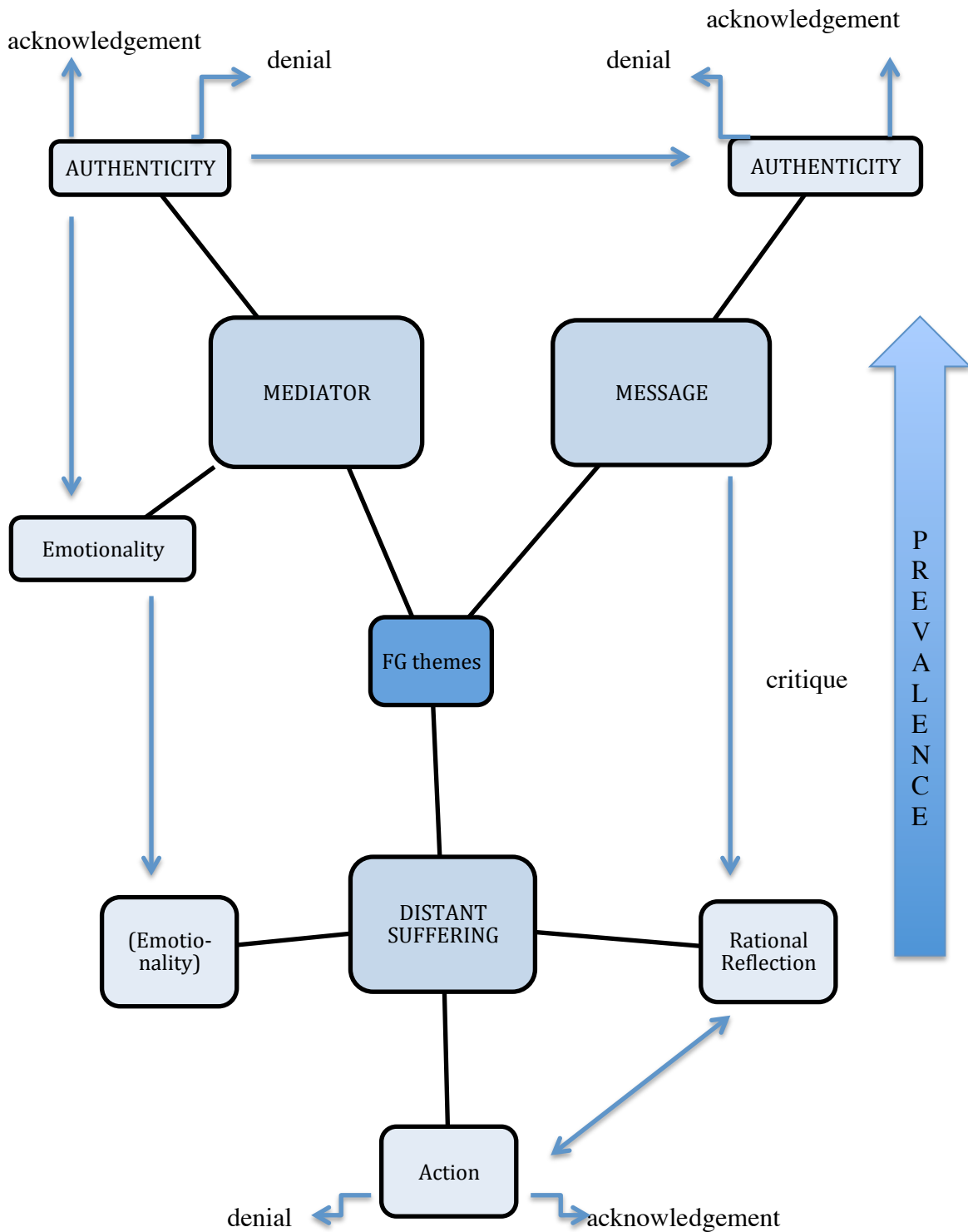
- Do you think it is appropriate for you/your community to help people suffering in faraway places?
- In what circumstances?
  - *Do you think we should act on the on moral grounds? Why?*
  - *Do you believe that Western countries are politically co-responsible for the situation in poorer countries?*
  - *Do you think we would profit from helping?*

## Appendix II: Coding Frame

FLEMING TALK		would watch this?		Felt addressed?		
MEDIATOR	MESSAGE	EMO-TIONS	RATIO-NAL REFLE-XION	ENGAGEMENT FRAME	PLANNED ACTION	SOLIDARITY CONCEPT
AUTHENTICITY (= trust + legitimacy)  Authentic  Inauthentic  DENIAL: shoot the messenger: is this a true story? Should we trust them?  OTHER	DENIAL  The medium is the message → message scrutinized for its style and function  Baby and bathwater → rejection of proposed action  Other  None  ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	DISTANT S.  pity  empathy  none  Other  OTHER		Money  Other	Donations  Pol. Action  Other  None	pity (common humanity; salvation/ revolution)  irony (utilitarian considerations, reflexion on self)  agonism (reflect on circumstances of specific case)  Other

JOLIE SPEECH		would watch this?		Felt addressed?		
MEDIATOR:	MESSAGE	EMO-TIONS	RATIONAL REFLEX-ION	ENGAGEMENT FRAME	PLANNED ACTION	CELEBRITY ADVOCACY
AUTHENTICITY (= trust + legitimacy)  Authentic  Inauthentic  DENIAL: shoot the messenger: is this a true story? Should we trust them?  OTHER	DENIAL  The medium is the message → message scrutinized for its style and function  Baby and bathwater → rejection of proposed action  Other  None  ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	DISTANT S.  pity  empathy  none  Other  OTHER		Money  Other	Donations  Pol. Action  Other  None	REACTION  Positive  Negative  REFLEXION  Positive  Negative

### Appendix III: Thematic Map



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