

# **DISTANT SUFFERING IN THE MEDIA**

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## 1. DISTANT SUFFERING IN THE MEDIA

### 1. 1 From Ethiopia to the Global Village



This is Michael Buerk, reporting from Korem, the site of Ethiopia's largest camp, on the victims of famine that drove 800.000 people to death 25 years ago – this is October 1984. The report was a watershed. It was shown in more than 450 stations around the world and is still thought to be a turning point in at least two ways.

On the one hand, it triggered Live Aid and Bob Geldof's 50 million of aid donation to Ethiopia (not all well spent as we know). It did so perhaps because it reminded us of an awkward, painful even, condition of our times: that confronting the reality of distant suffering is confronting ourselves with the limits of the ethical and political legitimacy of modernity. Distant suffering on our screens was then, and still is now, a reminder of a world divided in zones of prosperity and poverty, safety and danger - persistently raising the question of 'what to do', only for us to keep evading it in our everyday lives.

But at the same time, this report ignited a different debate about the ways in which famine and human suffering are portrayed in western media. It was welcome for its shock effect, which made people care and raised money for the Ethiopian emergency. It was criticised for this same shock effect: for perpetuating a stereotypical view of Africa as a continent of death and war; for turning suffering into a spectacle for consumption in the mega screens of the Live Aid concerts; for ultimately bringing about compassion fatigue among audiences: 'no more pictures of dying African children, please'<sup>i</sup>.

Both outcomes of the picture, the practical action on suffering and the public debate about suffering in the media, throw into relief the power of the visibility of suffering in the news, an ambiguous and controversial power. This is the kind of visibility that inevitably raises the

question of 'what to do', the practical appeal, and simultaneously makes a moral claim as to how we relate to distant others, who it is important to care for.

## **1.2 The moral claim of distant suffering**

The Michael Buerk report has admittedly been uniquely successful both in terms of its practical appeal and in terms of its moral claim. But this is rare. Indeed, if this power of the visibility of suffering is ambiguous and controversial, this is precisely because the practical question of what to do is not always connected in a straightforward manner to the ethical question of who I should do something about, who I should care for. And this is what this paper is about. Suffering as public communication that tells us who to care for by addressing the 'what to do' question in a selective way: sometimes telling us that action is possible or, rarely, even necessary, but most often reassuring us that action is irrelevant to our everyday lives.

So, I revisit similar issues about stereotyping and de-humanising the sufferers, similar tensions between raising awareness and compassion fatigue as the ones raised by the 1984 BBC report on Ethiopia, but I do so from a contemporary perspective. In our global media age, these issues are meaningful, in fact crucial, insofar as they connect the visibility of suffering with the imagination of community beyond the nation.

There is indeed an intense debate going on today about us belonging to a global village, about the reality, and the moral imperative, of a new cosmopolitan imaginary<sup>ii</sup>. Thanks to trans-national networks and the new media, the argument has it, we are now more connected with and closer to distant others than ever before - and this brings with it an awareness of just how interdependent our lives and fates are on this planet as well as a new sense of responsibility for those distant others. But what kind of awareness? What kind of responsibility?

What I do next is take us through examples of news broadcasts, in order to show the different ways in which they manage the visibility of suffering. In the process of doing so, I wish to argue, these broadcasts already respond to the practical question of 'what to do' - and they already make a moral claim as to whose suffering should matter and which community we should belong to.

## **1.3. News and their publics**

In this sense, the discussion on the management of the visibility of suffering is also a discussion about what kinds of people the media imagine us to be. They do so everyday, through their

routine news-gathering techniques, their conventions of reporting, their standardised narratives and use of imagery - and their editing procedures, news *editing is a form of law* said Silverstone in *Media and Morality* to convey this sense of power that journalists have in 'cutting and pasting' their different versions of world events (2006: 184) <sup>iii</sup>.

The question then on how the news manages the visibility of suffering, by portraying it as the sublime 'tableau vivant' of a flooded landscape, the sentimental story of children dying, the amateur documentary of the tsunami, or the urgency of an Amnesty International appeal, is also a question about the kinds of sensibilities that the news encourages us to enact. For the cultural representations and aesthetic tropes the media use, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz '*are not mere reflections of pre-existing sensibilities, they are positive agents in the organisation and maintenance of a sensibility*' (1973: 451) <sup>iv</sup>. The media, in other words, do not only present us with the news, they also show us how to orient ourselves in it. They don't simply have an informational value, they also have a performative value: through their routine choices of image and word, they help us imagine what we cannot experience: the reality of other people's suffering and where we stand in relation to them <sup>v</sup>.

So, even though it would be naïve or even misleading to assume that what the media propose us to become is what we ultimately become, it is perfectly legitimate and in fact necessary to claim that the media, as other types of public spectacles at different times in history, contribute to who we are by routinely performing certain dispositions of thinking, feeling and acting that we, as audiences, may or may not take up <sup>vi</sup>. It is fair then to ask: What kinds of communities, imagined communities, do the media invite us to belong to? Can they connect us together in a global village or do they reproduce a western community easily fatigued by distant others?

There are good reasons to believe that the latter in the case. We live in a society where our own private feelings are the measure by which we perceive and evaluate the world and the others – and the media reflect this. They are almost obsessively preoccupied by our own 'interiorities': our intimate relationships, our fears and desires, our homes, our bodies and appearance. Reality television is one obvious manifestation of a public culture that takes intense narcissistic pleasure in staging the private. The news, formal and detached from emotion as it often appears to be, becomes part of the society of intimacy insofar as it, implicitly, reserves the potential for emotion for 'our' own suffering and leaves the far away 'other' outside our horizon of care and responsibility. It is responsible for creating communitarian publics.

Yet, what the Michael Buerk report reminds us is that it might be otherwise. That the news can make a difference in drawing our attention to vulnerable others. To the extent that it can do this, the news is able to act as agents of cosmopolitan imagination: it can make us imagine the world beyond our own community as a terrain where our actions can make a difference. It is to these exceptions that I believe we can build on.

## **2. VISIBILITY AND THE IMAGINATION OF PUBLICS**

Let's look into the visibility of distant suffering in the news media of three different Western European countries, the UK-based BBC World network, Danish National Television (DR) and two Greek National Television networks (NET, MEGA). What I wish to show is that there is a major contrast between news stories that contribute to re-creating our own communities of care, and thus perpetuate a sort of 'global intimacy', and the rare news stories that push our sensibilities beyond our own communities, helping us to become cosmopolitans in our everyday life. These differences construe a hierarchy of news that corresponds to a broader hierarchy in global relations of power and reflects the historical fact that some places and, therefore, some human lives deserve more news time, more attention and more resources than others.

### **2.1 Communitarian publics**

The two types of news stories that re-create, what we may call, *communitarian* media publics differ very much from one another. I discuss each one of them, first 'adventure' news, then 'ecstatic' news.

#### **The management of visibility in 'adventure' news**

Let us look into the first type. Here is a BBC piece of news:



It accompanies a simple and brief story that reports on a 'boat accident' without much detail. The narrative is descriptive and factual. A river-boat capsized in river Baytarani, in Indian province of Orissa as it was making its way towards Jaipur town – 40 people died most of them

office workers and school children. The management of visibility involves the use of maps: one of the Indian province of Orissa and its neighbouring provinces with dots on the relevant locations and one of India framed within another map of the northern hemisphere. I call this type of news ‘dots-on-the-map’ news. Such pieces of news represent suffering in geographical terms, casting them in the abstract and decontextualised mode of cartography. They involve no living context of suffering, no people, no action, no emotions. These absences correspond to choices (not intentional but institutional and routine) over where, when, and with whom the suffering is shown to occur, which are at the same time choices of disposition to action: do nothing – care not. The geographical distance to river Baytarani is coupled onto another kind of distance, an emotional and moral distance between us and those distant sufferers.

A different, but not too dissimilar, piece of news reports on **floods in Bangladesh**:



This piece differs from the previous one in that it involves the visualization of the scene of suffering, though it also involves an equally brief and descriptive narrative as the ‘Boat accident’ news<sup>vii</sup>. All visual images are long shot. There are people, but no frontal gazing to the camera; no purposeful action; no voice. What the long shot does is that it universalizes the scene of suffering: this could have been elsewhere, at any other time, involving another population. Moreover, the long shot creates an aesthetic distance from lived reality: it is all about water, trees and human figures in a static composition. This is not the footage of a catastrophe, which covered 60% of the nation and where 40.000 people were feared drowned and 20 million were either displaced or became dependent on food aid for a year. This is a ‘*tableau vivant*’ piece of news, inviting not engagement with but the distantiated contemplation of the spectacle of flooded land<sup>viii</sup>.

The minimal narration of suffering, the refusal to humanize these sufferers, the interruption of emotion vis a vis distant suffering is part of our regular diet of daily news reports; it is their majority. And there is a pragmatic argument about it: selectivity. We cannot report on everything; nor can we report on everything in same order of importance. In this sense, ‘adventure’ news does not represent an immoral or evil type of journalism as opposed to a ‘moral’ or benevolent type of reporting. It is part of a particular logistics of news-gathering and reporting. Yet, what this class of news throws into relief is that the interruption of emotion involved in this professional logistics is not only a journalistic necessity but simultaneously also a **moral claim in**

**its own right.** It reminds us that emotion is a scarce resource and that part of the capacity of news to present the world to us is its capacity to reserve the potential for emotion for some sufferers; to locate others outside our own community of belonging and to place their suffering beyond the remit of our action.

### **The management of visibility in 'ecstatic' news**

In contrast, there are news stories with a very different management of visibility – though these are admittedly not the majority. These exceptional stories include rich verbal and visual narratives and aesthetically complex presentations that demand our exclusive, sustained and active engagement with the sufferer. I call this class of news '*ecstatic*' news and I use the term '*ecstatic*' to mean that these pieces break with our ordinary conception of time as a swift flow of 'now' moments and present us with, what Alain Badiou calls *truly historic time: moments when a minute lasts a lifetime, or when a week seems to fly by in next to no time* (in Barker 2002:75).



'Ecstatic' here captures our shock and disbelief at the moment of the second plane crash on the World Trade Centre, a moment when, indeed, 'a minute seems to last a lifetime'. In terms of news conventions, this means a move from the broadcast to the live footage, that is to an uninterrupted flow of images and stories with various degrees of emotional power.

Here are three sequences from the **September 11<sup>th</sup> footage** on DR, Denmark:

#### **The eye-witness account:**



This is a right here-right now exposition of events. We are at the Copenhagen studio together with its experts' panel and, at the same time, connected via telephone link with the Danish Consul in New York, who gives an eye witness account of chaos and mayhem in Manhattan. Images, some of the first to reach us after the towers' collapse, show ambulances, people walking away from the scene of catastrophe, the camera itself dusted by the debris of the buildings. We are there as action unfolds, listening to a first-hand account of events.

### **The update of events:**



This was an update of the events of the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, inserted into the flow of the live footage at regular intervals throughout the evening, to inform new viewers as to what had happened earlier that day. In terms of management of visibility, we are everywhere where action took place: New York with the WTC attacks; Washington DC with Pentagon burning; Florida with Bush' first appeal to the American people. The manner in which these sequences are linked, particularly placing Bush' speech (*'we're going to hunt down those folks who committed that act'*) towards the end of the update, already provides the September 11<sup>th</sup> events with a particular logical cohesion, some tentative causality, which places the attacks, terrorism and the promise of retaliation in one meaningful narrative. As opposed to the here-and-now quality of the event-as-breaking-news in the eye witness sequence, the update is the beginning of writing September 11<sup>th</sup> as history.

### **The sublime cityscape:**



This is an extended sequence of the live footage, which provides us with a long shot of the Manhattan cityscape in grey smoke. Filmed from an Ellis island crane, the long shot again creates



an aestheticised effect, whereby the scene of suffering appears as a spectacle to be contemplated rather than acted upon. Confronting us with the sublime quality of human tragedy, this management of visibility removes the urgency of the 'here and now' and opens up a space of analytical temporality, providing us with the option for reflection on the events. Indeed, the voiceover of this sequence is the deliberations of the expert panel, tentatively touching on the causes and speculating on the consequences of the attacks.

In sum, the September 11<sup>th</sup> footage offers us a hectic alternation of genres and a multiple flow of images that enable us to engage with the scenes of suffering in multiple ways: to empathize, to denounce and to reflect on it as a human tragedy and as a political reality. Importantly, the sufferers of September 11<sup>th</sup> are presented as thoroughly humanized and historical beings; as people who feel, reflect and act on their fate. In short, people like 'us'. We identify with them., What we recognise in them is the same quality of humanness that makes 'us' feel pain, terror or vulnerability. We are united with them in denouncing the evil-doers (recall Le Monde's headlines, *We are all Americans*, 12.09.01) or in supporting the benefactors (the political legitimacy of the 'war on terror' was also, partly, due to 'ecstatic' quality of world reporting on the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks).

The next piece of news, the tsunami catastrophe, provides us with a different type of agenda, a different quality of urgency but an equally 'ecstatic' kind of reporting. Is the ecstatic quality of the tsunami due to the scale of the catastrophe or to the scope of suffering, with almost 300.000 people losing their lives? Perhaps so. Importantly, however, the ecstatic quality of this piece is due to the reasons that Koffi Annan formulated in his BBC interview on Jan. 9<sup>th</sup>. The unprecedented aid to tsunami victims, he said, is due to the fact that the *whole world witnessed the tragedy*, and also, he added, to the fact that *60 nations mourned their own victims*- nine thousand of them being citizens of the West on Christmas holiday across the tsunami hit coast-line.

From the perspective of the management of visibility: the tsunami catastrophe marked, at least according to Gillmor (2005)<sup>ix</sup>, the turning point in User Generated Content videos, many of them subsequently broadcast in world media. It is the right-here-right-now quality of such an extraordinary event, further combined with witness accounts coming from people like 'us' that have created, in a way different to September 11<sup>th</sup>, another sense of belonging together in a community of vulnerability: the tsunami was a far away disaster hitting people who live next door<sup>x</sup>. This is the 2004 tsunami catastrophe recorded on an amateur video broadcast on various news networks around the world:

<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=w9ygYqj4rVM&feature=related>

As the tsunami is approaching, the British tourists filming it from the safety of their hotel balcony show no awareness of its imminent catastrophic consequences. What we see and hear on video is stuff reminiscent of what families do when on holidays: the rough quality of the image; the casual conversation style; the accent. This close-to-home aura of the piece suddenly snaps, as the recording culminates in fear, shock and awe at the powerful wave blow, throwing into relief the immense identification capacity of UGC-material in taking us, ordinary people, there where it is all happening.

### **The imagination of communitarian publics<sup>xi</sup>**

The first type of news, 'adventure' news, includes stories that we hardly ever remember; the second, 'ecstatic' news, is about stories that are hard to forget. Despite the radical differences in their management of visibility of suffering, these stories share a key feature: they address their audiences as *an already constituted community*. This is a community that is united in blocking out emotions for 'irrelevant' sufferings or united in fully empathizing with sufferers who are like 'us' – the safe West. As a consequence, neither type of news can invite their audiences to engage in public action towards suffering that occurs beyond the West. Those who celebrate the creation of global communities through television viewing find justification in the empirical reality of ecstatic news – where the far away appears suddenly too close to us to ignore. Those concerned with compassion fatigue, the 'no more African children dying' attitude to suffering, find justification in the empirical reality of 'adventure' news – suffering may be visible but nobody appears 'humane' enough to move us to a response. Neither of these two classes of news provides us with a quality of connectivity that brings with it a responsibility towards or practical obligation for those outside our own communities of belonging.

These positions represent a key aspect of the information divide in today's spaces of mediation - a significant bias in the intersection between global and national news flows. This bias suggests that, despite the global expansion of transmission technologies, all news is eventually subject to a process of selection and particularization that defines whose suffering matters most for western spectators<sup>xii</sup>. Whereas this bias is well-documented by now, we need to go further than this and ask: which kinds of sensibilities do these media perform? Which kinds of collectivities do they enable us imagine as belonging to? Are there alternatives to this management of visibility?

## **2.2 Cosmopolitan publics**

There is a class of news that can push our sensibilities beyond our own community. This is a seemingly simple but subtly complex class of news, where the visibility of suffering is managed in an in-between space, one that does not completely deprive the sufferer of her humanness nor does it render this sufferer thoroughly sovereign – thoroughly humane. The key feature of this type of news is that it raises the demand for action here and now. In so doing, it incorporates an element of emergency in its presentation of suffering, hence the naming of this class of news as ‘emergency’ news<sup>xiii</sup>. Let us have a look at a couple of examples.

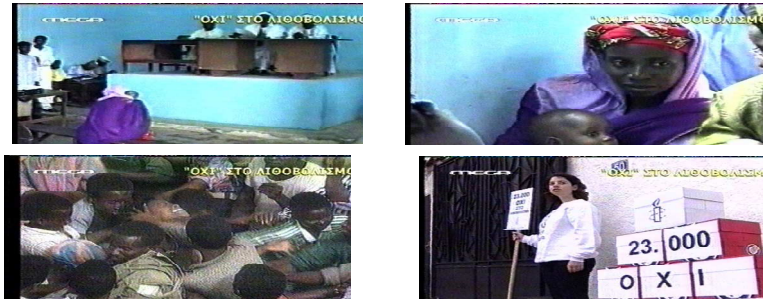
### **The management of visibility in emergency news**

#### **Argentinean children:**



This is a piece on the economic crisis that hit Argentina in 2002, with famine deaths, especially of young children, in the poor province of Tucuman. The piece of news informs us: ‘They are dying of hunger’. It refers to Hilda Duahlde’s, then First Lady of the country, self-help programmes and then mentions that US aid was inadequate and of low quality, provoking the anger of Argentineans. The management of visibility is mainly organized around a series of images of children suffering, crying, lying in hospital beds. The key difference from ‘adventure’ news is that some form of action does take place now to alleviate the suffering of these children: there are governmental self-help programmes; there are hospitals; there is international aid. These children are ‘others’, they are not like ‘us’, yet their gaze has significant appellative force: ‘do something’ – a force that the voiceover explicitly invites us to acknowledge: ‘their gaze’, it says, ‘does not leave you space for complacency’. There is agency and a sense of humanness in the visibility of these sufferers. Yet, these are not enough. More needs to be done.

## Nigerian convict



This is a piece on a Nigerian woman convicted to death by stoning by a sharia court. It provides us with brief historical information on the case; it also has considerable affective power, as it represents Amina Lawal, the accused, as a woman with a face, a name, an age and her young child on her lap. This picture clearly draws on the 'Madonna imagery', a well-established theme of motherhood as vulnerability, innocence and pure feeling in Western iconography<sup>xiv</sup>. Amina does not have a voice. It is Amnesty International that speaks for her explaining why Amina was convicted and urging us to sign the 'save her life' petition. Amina, however, is endowed with what we may call '**conditional agency**' - the agency of a young woman and a mother which, however, cannot make a real difference in her own life, hence the need for external intervention. The very fact of limited agency, nonetheless, endows her with a sense of humanness and dignity that we do not encounter in other pieces of news.

### The imagination of cosmopolitan publics

It is not that the class of emergency news does not evoke the West as the imagined community where we belong to. Of course it does. It is rather that it presents us with some demand for engagement that does not exclusively follow from the pre-commitment to implicit obligations; from the communitarian bond. We are neither the apathetic spectators of 'adventure' news nor the over-engaged spectators of 'ecstatic' news. We are simply confronted with the question of suffering as a problem to be solved. We are invited to consider our commitment to it as a matter of our own judgment. Is Argentinean famine or Amina's imminent stoning a cause worthy of our action? In just posing this question for our own reflection, emergency news also opens up a space

that pushes us, even momentarily, beyond the concerns of our communities of belonging - beyond the obligations of the communitarian bond.

But, again, there is a difference between the two. The first, Argentinean famine, confronts us with images of sick children lying in hospital, stirs our emotions but ultimately leaves us wondering: how can I help? It produces too much of the shock effect, which early humanitarian campaigns are criticized for, without an outlet to effective action. As such, it may be held responsible for generating some form of compassion fatigue.

The other piece of news tells us what to do: sign this petition; you can save her life. The presence of Amnesty International is instrumental here. Amnesty International is both about values ('no to stoning') and about actions ('defending lives'; 'monitoring rights'). As Kaldor (2000) puts it, Amnesty enacts cosmopolitanism in a dual sense: as a moral sentiment and as a political project<sup>xv</sup>. This duality in the agency of Amnesty International enables the management of visibility in the Nigerian sharia law news to combine a politics of emotion with a claim to justice. It demonstrates how the management of visibility in the news, in addressing the question of why this is important and what to do about it, may indeed open up to a cosmopolitan alternative.

So what, one may ask? Is signing a petition cosmopolitan action? Is this what cosmopolitanism is all about? The answer is yes. This, I want to argue, is not 'grand' cosmopolitanism; it is not a fully-blown vision for a new kind of society nor does it promise an army of global citizens emerging out of our banal habit of watching the news. I am not talking about the emergence of a new coherent system of public virtues here. Just like the humanness of Amina Lawal belongs to a twilight zone of being and not being like us, it is conditional agency, so this form of cosmopolitan agency is unstable- it is fleeting and contingent. It is conditional cosmopolitanism. This form of cosmopolitanism depends both on the limited options for action in our public culture: speaking and paying<sup>xvi</sup>. It also depends on the constraints of action at a distance that mediated suffering inevitably places on us<sup>xvii</sup>. There is so much you can do as a citizen in our societies and so much you can do on suffering that you watch on television.

### **Global visibility and 'conditional cosmopolitanism'**

Conditional cosmopolitanism does not presuppose a radical shift from the management of visibility we have followed so far. It presupposes a subtle shift. It involves a subtle discursive proposal to take public responsibility, to speak or to pay, in ways that may make a real difference to people's lives - as indeed they made in the case of Amina Lawal. It is about the media proposing dispositions to engaging with distant others that are neither about blocking emotions altogether

(as in the 'dots on the map' news) nor about the sterile sentimentalism of the shock effect (the Argentinean news), as both these types potentially lead to compassion fatigue – to doing nothing. Conditional cosmopolitanism is rather about the subtle balance between feeling for and reflecting on each individual case suffering that journalists have already deemed worthy of our attention. This is an option which audiences may or may not decide to take up – but at least there is a choice.

This reflexive and low key disposition shapes, I believe, the kind of cosmopolitan figure that we can pragmatically demand of our media to imagine for us in their everyday news stories: a figure of moderate feelings and modest actions. This is a figure sufficiently aware of some bigger issues but not the 'fully informed' citizen; someone with a fleeting sense of responsibility whenever we judge the cause to be right, but not fully present in the acts of protest or philanthropy; someone with a contingent willingness to act, but without expectations or guarantees as to the outcomes of action; someone who believes in values and projects of justice but is not necessarily committed to grand narratives of political activism.

Unlike arguments that deplores the lack of community and passion in our public life, we should not expect the media cosmopolitan to be a Good Samaritan but rather a Stoic Cosmopolitan<sup>xviii</sup>. The former option is not only unrealistic, at least for our reflexive modernity. It is also dangerous. Behind fully present emotions and passions, or fully-blown identifications with others lies, as we saw in 'ecstatic' news, the narcissistic intimacy, the communitarian reflex: it drives us to care for other like 'us'. Given that emotions are a scarce resource, indeed, we cannot care about every single sufferer in the same way at all times. But what we can expect of our media is that they can at least make sure we care for the right people at the right time; that they remind us of a simple fact. Our actions may be more relevant and effective when oriented towards those neglected precisely because they do not share our own humanity - rather than towards others like us.

Social solidarity, as a cultural-political sensibility, rather than the once fully blown political project, is a necessary dimension of any cosmopolitan project. This is because cosmopolitanism is not only about trans-national governance organisations or post-national political constellations. It is also about the power of the media to stretch the concerns of various publics beyond their local perspectives and to re-configure the imagined contours of these publics beyond their existing affiliations. The importance of journalists but also of NGO practitioners as key agents of this cosmopolitan imagination cannot be emphasised enough.

Indeed, pieces of news such as the Nigerian death-by-stoning one are

admittedly rare amidst a pervasive culture of communitarian intimacy - both in national and trans-national television. Yet, if 'emergency' news tells us anything, this is that cosmopolitan connectivity in the media may be an exception but it is definitely a possibility. It is, in my view, a key question in the agenda of social research today to investigate, rather than to celebrate, the conditions under which trans-national news flows may reproduce or transform our communitarian sensibilities in the zone of safety and to reflect on ways in which such flows may cultivate productive connectivities with distant others. And to do so not only in terms of the question of what to do, which is the focus of this paper, but also in terms of the questions of how we communicate with distant others and how we can peacefully live together in a world marked by military conflict and cultural difference.

### **Conclusion. Humanitarian visibility and public ethics**

This paper addresses the power of the visibility of suffering in the news. This is, I argue, an ambiguous and controversial kind of power, for at least one important reason: it is positive power because it brings us closer to human pain and confronts us with the responsibility of 'what to do' to improve the life of vulnerable others. It is negative because it only poses the question of 'what to do' when the moral claim to a better life is reserved for sufferers who are like us.

Whereas others have raised similar questions, looking at the bias in global information flows, the decline in foreign reporting or the hierarchies of place and human life in our media<sup>xix</sup>, I talked about this from the perspective of how managing the visibility of suffering raises acute questions regarding our *emotional identifications and the imagination of community* in our global age.

I have already emphasised the responsibility of journalists in the process. Though, obviously, this is not the whole story, as journalism is a whole economy of institutions, practices, cultures. If there is anything to iterate, in this context, this is that *news are formed before they are gathered* (Lule 2001:144)<sup>xx</sup> and to call for journalists' reflexivity over the often unquestioned ways in which they manage the visibility of suffering. But at LSE, Media and Communications, we do more than this. POLIS, the LSE think-tank on journalism and society, generates debate and engages with journalists and scholars across a range of issues on the role of journalism in social life. POLIS was conceived and set up by Roger Silverstone who sadly left us early. But his vision on the 'mediapolis' is still with us. It inspires us to continue, placing questions of ethics and the public sphere at the centre of our research and debates on journalism.

By way of conclusion, I would like to sketch out one single element of our intellectual

agenda in POLIS, by no means exhaustive. We need to go further than journalistic reflexivity. We need to think about our public sphere not just in terms of political discourse or celebrity culture, civil society or deliberative democracy, public service regulation or free market media – which are all things POLIS is doing and will continue to be doing. We need to push our understanding of the public sphere, or spheres, beyond our own zone of comfort and safety. We need to talk about the *public sphere as a space of vulnerability*. There is a strong line of political and feminist theory thinkers who are doing this<sup>xxi</sup>. As we are moving towards trans- or post-national constellations, it is this sense of our mutual dependence, our openness to physical injury and symbolic harm, to death and mourning that can become a new foundation for social and political integration, these theorists argue. This may be debateable for all sorts of reasons. The media, however, are already doing just this in our everyday life. Our imagination of the world is primarily an imagination of the vulnerability of others. What, therefore, we can research and debate is *whether the media address the moral deficiencies of global inequality by giving access, voice and fair visibility to those who need it most*. Whether the media can, at least, sometimes and in imperfect ways, act as, what Silverstone would call, agents of *hospitality* (2006: 139-142).

POLIS, is now launching a series of events on humanitarian communication<sup>xxii</sup>. If, as I have argued, humanitarian communication is instrumental in bringing social solidarity in our everyday life - what happens when NGOs find themselves operating in a hugely competitive environment for getting into the news agenda? There is a clear tendency for humanitarian communication today towards the corporate model, towards turning suffering into a commodity package (celebrities, entertainment) and towards marketing NGOs in a professional manner as corporate brands<sup>xxiii</sup>. This process of commodification raises key questions. People pay, NGOs accumulates on brand value but what happens to public sensibilities and moral virtues? What is the fine line between conditional cosmopolitanism and individualist consumerism? Which is the role and the ethical responsibility of journalists in accelerating or moderating this process? And, finally, how can journalism exercise the virtue of hospitality in this context of an increasing marketisation of humanitarian communication?

Indeed, at the heart of research and debate on the visibility of suffering lies the question of ethics, even though my argument did not involve explicit references as to what is or is not ethically right in managing this visibility in our media . This is indicative of a particular way of being ethical<sup>xxiv</sup>, a particular ethos towards the major challenge that media and journalism are facing today- the challenge of how we deal with our encounter with other humans and how, in so doing, we define the meaning of humanity. There is, I would claim in conclusion, no general and



definitive response to these questions. There is no 'how this should be'. There is only search, a collective, open and continuous search, for the different meanings of humanity in the different media environments and forms of life where these emerge. As I attempted to show, this is a search for the meaning of humanity in the hermeneutic sense: what does it mean to be human in the multiple contexts of our media, old and new? But it is also a search for meaning in a more philosophical sense: what happens to our humanity when the media fill our screens with vulnerable others? what happens to our humanity when the media confront us with the other in our own selves? It is in addressing these questions, in their own contexts of emergence and use, that, it seems to me, we may become better journalists, better scholars, better citizens and, most importantly, cosmopolitans in our everyday life: willing and able to make a difference in our vulnerable 'global village'.

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<sup>i</sup> For a systematic study on compassion fatigue, Moeller, S. (1999) **Compassion Fatigue. How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death** Routledge, London; for critical studies on the implications of imagery of distant suffering see Perlmutter, D. D. (1998) **Photojournalism and Foreign Policy: Icons of Outrage in International Crises**, Praeger; Lidchi, H. (1999) *Finding the Right Image: British Development NGOs and the Regulation of Imagery* in Skelton T. and Allen T. (eds.) **Culture and Global Change** Routledge; Campbell D. (2002) *Atrocity, Memory, Photopgraphy: Imaging the Concentration Camps of Bosnia* parts 1 and 2 in **Journal of Human Rights** 1:1 and 1:2; Campbell D. (2003) *Salgado & the Sahel: Documentary Photography and the Imaging of Famine* in Debrix F. & Weber C. (eds) **Rituals of Mediation: International Politics and Social Meaning** University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis; 'Imaging Famine' website: C:\Documents and settings\User\Desktop\Imaging Famine.mht

<sup>ii</sup> For Politics and International Relations literature on the topic see Archibugi D. & Held D. (eds) (1995) **Cosmopolitan Democracy. An Agenda for a New World Order** Polity Press, Cambridge; Archibugi D., Held D. & Koehler M (eds) (1998) **Re-imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy** Polity, Cambridge; Archibugi D. (2001) *The Cosmopolitan Perspective. Terrorism & Cosmopolitanism*: <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/archibugi.htm>; Archibugi D. (ed) (2003) **Debating Cosmopolitanism**, Verso, London; for Sociology and Social Theory literature see Beck U. (2006) **The Cosmopolitan Vision** Polity Press, Cambridge; Beck U. and Sznaider N. (2006) *Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the social sciences: a research agenda* in **British Journal of Sociology** Vol. 57 Nr. 1 pp.1-23; Thompson J. (1995) **Media and Modernity** Polity Press, Cambridge; Tomlinson J. (1999) **Globalisation and Culture** Sage, London

<sup>iii</sup> Silvestone R. (2006) **Media and Morality** Polity, Cambridge

<sup>iv</sup> Geertz C. (1973) **The Interpretation of Culture** Basic Books, New York

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<sup>v</sup> Boltanski L. (1999) **Distant Suffering. Morality, Media and Politics** Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Silverstone R. (1999) **Why Study the Media** Sage, London; Chouliaraki L. (2006) **The Spectatorship of Suffering** Sage, London

<sup>vi</sup> Chouliaraki L. (2008) *The Media as Moral Education* in **Media, Culture & Society** Vol. 30 Nr. 3; Chouliaraki L. (2008) *The Mediation of Suffering and the Vision of a Cosmopolitan Public* in **Television and New Media**

<sup>vii</sup> Due to the low image quality of the original television footage, this picture comes from Google Image on the 2004 Bangladesh floods; the iconography is identical.

<sup>viii</sup> Boltanski (1999: 114-31) for the aesthetic topic in the representation of suffering in Boltanski L. (1999) **Distant Suffering. Politics, Morality and the Media** CUP, Cambridge

<sup>ix</sup> [http://dangillmor.typepad.com/dan\\_gillmor\\_on\\_grassroots/2005/01/tsunami\\_and\\_cit.html](http://dangillmor.typepad.com/dan_gillmor_on_grassroots/2005/01/tsunami_and_cit.html)  
On UGC and changes in news reporting see Gillmor D. (2004) **We the Media. Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People** O'Reilly Sebastopol, CA

<sup>x</sup> Olsson E.K. & Riebert K. (2005) *The importance of ritual for broadcast journalism's coverage of crisis* **Nordicom Papers in English** p. 20; Hellman M. & Riebert K. (2006) *Transnational and National Media in Global Crises* Paper at the Conference on Social Change sponsored by the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, Oxford

<sup>xi</sup> Anderson B. (1983) **Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism** Verso, London for the concept of the 'imagination of community'; for elaborations on the link between media and the imagination of (national and post-national) publics see also Alexander & Jakobs (eds) (1998) **Media, Ritual, Identity** Routledge pp. 28-32; Dayan D. (2001) *The peculiar public of television* in **Media, Culture & Society** Vol. 23, No. 6 pp. 743-765; Peters J. (1999) **Speaking into the Air**, Chicago University Press pp.; Silverstone (2006) **Media and Morality** Polity, Cambridge pp.43-55 in the Media and Communications literature; Barnett (2003) **Culture and Democracy. Media, Space and Representation** Edinburgh University Press, London pp. 81-107; Linklater A. (1998) **The Transformation of Political Community in the post-Westphalian Age**, University of South Carolina Press pp. 77-100 and Linklater A. (2006) *Distant Suffering and Cosmopolitan Obligations* in **International Politics** Vol. 44 Nr. 18 pp. 19-36 for Political Theory literature.

<sup>xii</sup> Relevant literature here includes Braman S. and Sreberny A. (1996) **Globalization, Communication and Transnational Civil Society** Hampton Press, N. Jersey; Sreberny A., Winseck D. McKenna J. & Boyd-Barrett O. (eds) (1997) **Media in Global Context. A Reader** Hodder Arnold, London et al; Chalaby J. (2005) **Transnational Television Worldwide. Towards a World Media Order** Tauris Books, London; Hafez K. (2006) **The Myth of Media Globalisation** Polity, Cambridge

<sup>xiii</sup> For a relevant use of the term 'emergency' see Calhoun G. (2005) *A World of Emergencies: Fear, Intervention and the Limits of Cosmopolitan Order* speech at the **Social Sciences Research Council Humanitarian Action Seminar**, New York; see also Calhoun C. (2003) *Belonging in the Cosmopolitan Imaginary* in **Ethnicities** Vol. 3 Nr 4 pp. 531-53

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- <sup>xiv</sup> For the relationship between images of suffering and Christian iconography see Moeller (1999) **Compassion Fatigue. How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death** Routledge, London; Morgan D. (1998) **Visual Piety. A History and Theory of Popular Religious Imagery** University of California Press, Berkeley; Moser S. (1998) **Ancestral Images. The Iconography of Human Origins** Sutton Publishers.
- <sup>xv</sup> Kaldor M. (2000) *Cosmopolitanism and Organised Violence* paper presented at **International Conference on 'Conceiving Cosmopolitanism'**, April 27-9, University of Warwick, UK
- <sup>xvi</sup> For a discussion see Boltanski (1999: 17-19; 149-69)
- <sup>xvii</sup> Peters D. J. (1999) **Speaking into the Air. A History of the Idea of Communication** Chicago University Press; Tomlinson J. (1999) **Globalisation and Culture** Sage, London; Tester K. (2001) **Compassion, Morality and the Media**. OUP, Buckingham
- <sup>xviii</sup> Peters (2005: 289-293) for a similar argument; see Peters J.D. (2005) **Courting the Abyss. Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition** in Chicago University Press
- <sup>xix</sup> For example, Cohen S. (2001) **States of Denial. Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering** Polity, Cambridge; Seaton J. (2005) **Carnage and the Media. The Making and Breaking of News about Violence** Penguin, London;
- <sup>xx</sup> Lule J. (2001) **Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism** Guildford Press, London
- <sup>xxi</sup> Turner B. (2006) **Vulnerability and Human Rights** Penn University Press;  
Fraser N. (2005) Transnationalising the Public Sphere in <http://www.yale-university.org/polisci/info/conferences/fraser1.doc>; Ahmed S (2004) **The Cultural Politics of Emotion** Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh; Butler J. (2004) **Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence** Verso, London; Linklater A. (2007) *Public Spheres and Civilizing Processes* in **Theory Culture Society** Vol. 24: pp. 31-37
- <sup>xxii</sup> <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/polis/>
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Vestergaard A. (2008) *Branding the Humanitarian. The case of Amnesty International* in **Journal of Language and Politics** Vol. 7 Nr. 3; Cottle S. and Nolan (2007) *Global Humanitarianism and the Changing Aid-Media World* in **Journalism Studies** Vol. 8 Nr 6 pp. 862-78
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Chouliaraki (2006:60-7) on Aristotelian 'phronesis'; see also Chouliaraki (2008) *Mediation as Moral Education* in **Media, Culture & Society** Vol. 30 Nr. 3 for a development of Aristotle's 'virtue ethics' in the context of mediation; the reference to Aristotle: *The Nicomachean Ethics* 1140a24-1140b12, 1144b33-1145a11 on phronesis-prudence (*The Nicomachean Ethics* transl. by Irwin T, Hackett Pub, 1999); Flyvebjerg (2001:110-28) for an appropriation of Aristotle's work in post-structuralist epistemology; Ross (1995: 31-49) for Aristotle's inductive methods and analytics.