

## **'Witnessing' or 'Mediating' Distant Suffering? Ethical Questions Across Moments of Text, Production and Reception**

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This article argues that mediation theory has much to contribute to the current literature in media ethics, particularly to the discussion about the social and moral consequences of television in the representation and reception of distant suffering (Ashuri & Pinchevski 2009; Born 2008; Chouliaraki 2006; Couldry 2008; Ellis 2000; Frosh 2006; Hoijer 2004; Moeller 1999; Orgad 2008; Peters 2001; Silverstone 2007). Whereas recent scholarship has profoundly expanded the scope of media ethics beyond questions of law and organizational 'codes of ethics', the text-centered approaches and philosophical essays in the literature often overemphasize how media unidirectionally *cause* compassion fatigue while universalizing a Western-centric and middle-class conception of 'the audience'. At the same time, the few audience-centered studies on distant suffering enumerate audience responses with inadequate references to the textual elements and social factors that shape these responses.

Mediation theory, understood here as a 'circulation of meaning' across moments of text/production/reception (Couldry 2008; Livingstone 2009; Madianou 2005; Silverstone 1999), potentially offers a new and exciting analytical space to think through the social and moral consequences of television in its thrust for holistic analysis for how a medium and its generic forms can transform social experience. While the concept of mediation has been often used to describe how 'media logic' has radically altered the

conduct of politics (Couldry 2009; Silverstone 2005), its application to the study of the consequences of media to the experience of suffering potentially points to new ways of thinking about media ethics and audiences' responsibility to vulnerable others.

In addition, due to its attentiveness to the distinctiveness and interrelationship of moments of text/production/reception, mediation theory can challenge scholars to more clearly articulate their specific normative positions about the ethics of media texts, media production, and audience reception. Current trends in media ethics, as articulated by the popular concept of 'media witnessing', often fixates on the text and its ability to constitute moral audiences, with less to say about particular audiences' decisions to ignore or engage with televised suffering as well as the important ethical issues that arise in the *process* of media production. Indeed, with its methodological preference for ethnography, mediation can avoid the textual determinism as well as moral universalism of existing studies on televised suffering by foregrounding the diverse contexts in which suffering is transformed by processes of media production and reception.

This article proceeds with a review of the literature on media ethics and distant suffering, with a focus on the conceptual contributions as well as the limitations of both text- and audience-centered approaches in their respective categories of *Textual Ethics* and *Audience Ethics*. My general argument in the sections 'Textual Ethics' and 'Audience Ethics' is that studies about distant suffering provide valuable material to ground the more abstract, normative debates about relating with 'the other' in the context of globalization, broadcasting, and media saturation (e.g., Peters 1999; Pinchevski 2005; Silverstone 2007). However, I discuss that these approaches currently lack holism in their critique by 'fixing' their analyses on only one moment of the mediation process, while speculating about their consequences to the other moments. In the succeeding section 'A Critique of "Media Witnessing"', I argue that although the concept of 'media witnessing' attempts to account for the ethical questions in the production and reception of suffering, it commits the same oversight as previous studies in its similar inattention to the socio-historical conditions of 'the witness' that it theorizes about. To address this gap, I outline the key tenets of mediation theory in the section 'The Mediation of

Suffering', and suggest the kind of theoretical investigation and additional ethical questions it will pose about the representation and reception of distant suffering.

### **Textual Ethics**

Studies classified under Textual Ethics are concerned with the textual politics of the representation of suffering, particularly the analysis of the moral claims embedded within individual texts, or groups of texts. The methodological tools used here are content analysis, discourse analysis, visual analysis, and general impressionistic analysis of texts. A common assumption shared by scholars here is that media texts hold symbolic power in the ways in which they make visible the suffering of others and thus offer claims for compassion from audiences. As Lilie Chouliaraki notes, 'The point of departure in reversing compassion fatigue is to actually tap into the texts of mediation and work on their pedagogical potential for evoking and distributing pity' (2006: 113).

Perhaps the significant contribution of works in Textual Ethics to the broader media ethics literature is their skillful distilling of abstract philosophical principles down to the critique of individual, instantiated, and intentional 'objects' of media production. For instance, while the appropriation of the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in media studies began with philosophical essays that discuss the ethical challenges of interacting with 'the other' in the space of technologically mediated communication (Peters 1999; Pinchevski 2005; Silverstone 2007), the analytics by which one could identify the particular processes of other-ing in in media narratives and media spaces is developed by text-centered studies. Indeed, in a recent special issue in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Silverstone's philosophical prescription about the media's infinite responsibility to 'the other', particularly through his normative concept of 'proper distance', is applied and developed through textual critique of the news (Orgad 2011), humanitarian advertising (Chouliaraki 2011), and accounts of torture (Sturken 2011).

A key concern for many scholars here is whether or not sufferers should be represented as possessing *agency*, that is, whether they should be shown to have the capacity for self-

determination and independent action. For some scholars (Chouliaraki 2006; Moeller 2002; Tester 2001), media narratives that depict sufferers as possessing agency are assumed to enable (Western) audiences to effectively relate or identify with the situation of distant sufferers. They further argue that depictions of sufferers without agency are assumed to not only disable identification, but in effect also reduce the humanity and dignity of the sufferers.

Lilie Chouliaraki's (2006) *The Spectatorship of Suffering* creates a typology of news narratives of suffering based on the different ways that agency is conferred on sufferers by visual and rhetorical elements of news texts. The least morally desirable of news narratives is what she calls 'adventure news', which depicts sufferers as having little or no agency by using 'dots-on-the-map' imagery and impersonal references to sufferers as aggregates of victims, thus containing no moral claim for audiences to care for sufferers. She contrasts this with the more morally superior techniques used by 'ecstatic news' and 'emergency news', which offer a more complex variety of positions for spectators to feel and act for distant sufferers (2006: 137-146). Visual techniques of using both long shots and close-ups and rhetorical strategies of *giving a name* to the sufferer are assumed to confer agency and humanize the sufferer.

While Chouliaraki uses discourse analysis in her book, other scholars rely on general impressionistic analyses of texts. For instance, there is Moeller who observes and criticizes the 'repertoire of stereotypes' used in the news. Among these stereotypes are the portrayal of rescuers as heroes (1999: 43, 104) and the portrayal of sufferers as the 'starving innocent child' (2002: 53). She argues that using and reusing such conventions in the representation of suffering simplify the conditions of sufferers, and she speculates that this creates 'compassion fatigue' among audiences.

However, Shani Orgad (2008) proposes a counter-argument to the view that it is better and more ethical to depict sufferers as active agents. For her, depicting too much agency in sufferers may be detrimental to their cause, as viewers might see sufferers as in fact capable and independent, and thus in no need of attention or aid. In her comparative

content analysis of newspaper coverage of the October 2005 South Asia earthquake and the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, Orgad found that the pain and suffering of the sufferers in the South Asia earthquake were implied to be 'more tolerable' and 'having feasible solutions' in comparison to the London bombings (2008: 18). Orgad observed that the word used to describe the sufferers in the South Asia Earthquake was 'survivors', while the term for London bombing sufferers was 'victims', even though the number of actual casualties of the South Asia Earthquake grossly exceeded that of the London terror attack. She argues, challenging Chouliaraki and others, that portraying sufferers as victims and portraying suffering 'at its worst' may in fact convey 'a message of agony that requires political action' (2008: 21).

While these studies have effectively raised agency as an ethical consideration in representing suffering beyond the dulled yardsticks of 'objectivity' and 'impartiality' characteristic of traditional professional and popular discussions (Bell 1999), Textual Ethics studies suffer from key limitations.

First, these studies can be criticized to suffer from a determinism that overstates the consequences of media texts on audiences. For example, Moeller's thesis about compassion fatigue claims that audiences' disinterest towards distant suffering 'is an *unavoidable* consequence of the way the news is now covered' [emphasis mine] (1999: 2). And although Chouliaraki attempts a more theoretically robust conceptualization of television texts and their relationship with media audiences, in a few passages she commits similar overstatements as Moeller. In her observation that Western media systematically accord low quantity and quality of news coverage to non-Western sufferers, she concludes, 'The main implication for this exclusion is that, in the name of the spectators' benign desire for comfort, television *blocks the possibility* of public action beyond their familiar community of belonging' [emphasis mine] (2006: 188). As with Moeller, the phrase 'blocks the possibility' here presupposes a certain linearity in the relationship between media narrative of suffering and audience response.

Second, the above Textual Ethics studies approach their critique of texts with an *a priori*

assumption that the 'agency' of sufferers is that which shapes and influences audience responses. Between the disagreements whether it is the presence or the absence of agency that prompts 'political action' on the part of the audience (Orgad 2008: 21), what is set aside are factors *beyond* agency that may turn out to be more significant in shaping audience response. The *site* of suffering may in fact be the common ground between Chouliaraki's and Orgad's analyses, as they similarly identified greater public attention accorded to Western atrocities—9/11 in the USA (Chouliaraki) and 7/7 in the UK (Orgad)—in spite of varying degrees of agency they identified between the two. In addition, we can also speculate that the *cause* of suffering could have affected audience responses more than the presence or absence of agency, given that their examples identified terror attacks rather than natural disasters or mundane poverty as receiving greater attention.

Indeed, Textual Ethics studies have more productive contributions in their distilling of ethical principles in their judgment of representations of suffering rather than in their speculative accounts of how 'good' or 'bad' texts are linked with active or passive audience responses. In the next section, we turn now to the contributions and limitations of audience-centered studies to the ethical debates about the reception of distant suffering.

### **Audience Ethics**

Audience Ethics in relation to distant suffering includes both questions of consumption and reception. Whereas the former focuses on access, preference, and interest in particular platforms or programs, the latter foregrounds the emotional responses and interpretations that people have about specific narratives of suffering.

Crucial to discuss first is the normative position of many researchers that audiences *should know about* the suffering of others. Ignorance of others' suffering or, in more general terms, ignorance of public issues is considered less desirable than being aware and attentive. This expectation on audiences—in normative terms referred to as 'publics' (Livingstone 2005)—explains why audiences' consumption of news is a significant point

of study for many scholars. News watching is assumed to be a civic duty for audiences because it is deemed a crucial practice in the operations of democracy.

In the discussion of distant suffering, scholars in different fields of media studies, sociology, and social psychology express a moral evaluation that audiences *should* act as 'moral spectators' (Boltanski 1999), rather than disinterested 'metaphorical bystanders' (Cohen 2001: 15). While it is recognized that there is 'no decent way to sort through the multiple claims on our time or philanthropy' in the face of the world's atrocities (Midgeley 1998: 45-46), scholars nevertheless positively value audience activities of information-seeking (Kinnick *et al* 1996), empathizing and analyzing (Donnar 2009), donating money (Tester 2001), or even the mere act of viewing rather than turning away (Cohen 2001; Seu 2003). Luc Boltanski rescues the value of speech and protest as legitimate actions toward media narratives of suffering, contrary to perceptions that talk 'costs nothing' or have no consequence. He suggests a modest, 'minimalist' ethics where 'effective speech' is viewed as a valuable moral action for spectators of distant suffering (1999: 18-19).

Just as in Textual Ethics, 'compassion fatigue' is a recurring term across this literature, as different scholars are concerned about patterns of society-wide desensitization and indifference to social suffering as a function of mediation. However, compassion fatigue is operationalized and measured in different ways. There are those who empirically study patterns of avoidance towards televised suffering (Kinnick *et al* 1996); some research rhetorical responses of apathy or pity toward specific texts of suffering (Höijer 2004); while others theorize about both (Cohen 2001; Seu 2003).

Kinnick and his colleagues' study claims to be the first empirical investigation of compassion fatigue as it relates to media coverage of social problems. They argue that compassion fatigue can be measured in people's *selective avoidance* of particular issues in the news. They say that an issue which is emotionally distressing for an individual 'is more likely to be associated with avoidance behaviors, ostensibly as a form of self protection' (1996: 700-701), while issues of interest are associated with 'information-

seeking' (1996: 698). By using telephone survey methodology, however, their study was unable to explain the reasons why certain issues prompt more or less avoidance, and was likewise unable to tease out the specific textual strategies of specific media reports that trigger avoidance.

Bruna Seu's focus group-based social psychological study delves deeper into this issue of avoidance. First, she argues that compassion fatigue is *not* a result of information overload or normalization, but is in fact an 'active "looking away"' [emphasis in original] (2003: 190). Her interviews uncover that participants routinely used clichéd psychological terms such as 'desensitization' when talking about why they turn away from humanitarian advertisements. Crucially, Seu argues that desensitization is not an explanation but a *moral justification*; popular psychological discourse becomes a resource which people draw from to distance themselves from their responsibility to others' suffering (2003: 190-192). While Seu's critical approach is useful in the ethical critique of audience responses, particularly in its clear normative position that compassion fatigue is an individual moral choice rather than a top-down social or historical process, its limitation lies in its inability to link the individual moments of 'turning away' with the specific visual or rhetorical prompts that might trigger these undesirable actions.

One of the best-cited audience studies on televised suffering was Birgitta Höijer's work in Norway and Sweden. Using both surveys and focus groups, she enumerated different 'discourses of compassion' that her respondents expressed toward distant suffering (2004: 522-523). Höijer's sociological contribution is her observation that these expressions appear to be *gendered*: females are more likely to express compassion while men 'shield and defend themselves by looking at the pictures without showing any outer signs of emotion' (2004: 527). Nevertheless, she fails to elaborate on how different discourses of compassion might be expressed toward particular kinds of news clips or genres, or toward representations of suffering with various degrees of agency or causes of suffering, or how people make judgments about the *media's* actual role in representing suffering. Finally, although she highlights gender differences in her sample,

she neglects the salience of other categories such as class, age, religion, and even ethnicity—in spite of her sample coming from different countries—in shaping the experience of witnessing distant suffering.

In the next section, I discuss how the perspective of ‘media witnessing’ builds on these previous studies by attempting a more holistic analysis of ethical considerations that arise from different witnessing positions. However, I identify that, in its ambiguous shifting from description to prescription, and generalizing account of the audience, ‘media witnessing’ is a small but insufficient step forward in our discussion of distant suffering.

### **A Critique of ‘Media Witnessing’**

One theory that is increasingly used in the media ethics literature to describe and critique the representation and reception of distant suffering is that of ‘media witnessing’. Initially used by John Ellis (2000) and John Durham Peters (2001) to discuss epistemological questions about the representation of reality and the condition of spectatorship in late modern society, media witnessing has since been developed in the media ethics literature in judging the ethical practice of producers and audiences.

Through discursive critique of news reports, documentaries, and fiction films, witnessing theory asks whether or not these individual texts successfully or unsuccessfully ‘bear witness’ to events of trauma and suffering, such as the Holocaust or 9/11 (Frosh 2006; Frosh & Pinchevski 2009). Successful ‘witnessing texts’ are measured in how they enable ‘witnessing subjectivities’ through aesthetic, narrative, and technological techniques that enable reflexivity, estrangement, and an ‘experience of loss’ on the part of their readers and viewers (Brand 2009).

At the same time, and sometimes rather confusingly, witnessing theory is also used by some scholars to discuss the experience of the viewer at home and processes of judgment that are provoked in the act of being *eyewitnesses* of televised events. John

Ellis' essay phenomenologically describes the condition of 'mundane witnessing' as a kind of 'default' experience of a paradigmatic (and de-historicized) television viewer. While mundane witnessing involves a general 'awareness of events around us and of the people who make up our society and wider world', it 'does not require the detailed recall of news stories' nor any other kind of political or moral action (2009: 83). As with the majority of studies on media ethics, 'mundane witnessing' assumes that the television viewer's ordinary life is one of safety and stability defined by geographic and social distance from suffering. For Ellis, this 'default' position of a television viewer gives way to a more engaged and attentive audience experience only during events that may be 'traumatic in their implications for normal states of awareness or may bring up painful personal associations and deep fears' (2009: 85).

In addition, John Durham Peters' seminal essay entitled 'Witnessing' foregrounds the problem of truth or *authenticity* as the central question that underlies the judgment of the viewer of mediated distant events. For Peters, audiences are involved in working through 'the veracity gap' that underlies their experience of being distant in space and time from events broadcasted on television. Whereas doubt and distrust are present in the media witnessing of 'reports from distant personae' in contrast with interpersonal communication with '[those people] we know and trust' (2001: 717), he argues in some contexts such as those of *live* media events, doubt and distrust are reduced though the experience of "'being there" in time' (2001: 719).

While the moral and epistemological questions raised by witnessing theory are often novel and compelling, the literature suffers from some ambiguity both in its confusing and inter-/ever-changing jargon and its unclear normative position about the moral obligations, if any, of the audience, or the 'witness'.

On the first point, the witnessing literature attempts to distinguish between passive and active forms of witnessing, such as the distinction we reviewed above between 'mundane witnessing' and the more active—and the morally obliging—witnessing of traumatic events or events with personal resonances (Ellis 2009). However, such

distinctions between passive versus active, amoral versus morally charged, forms of witnessing often collapse or are even interchanged in the literature. Despite efforts to create typologies between 'eyewitness' and the person who 'bears witness' (Peters 2001: 709) or witnessing 'in', 'by', and 'through' the media (Frosh & Pinchevski 2009: 1), ultimately there is a lack of specificity and consensus in the literature whether 'witnessing' ultimately refers to 1) passive audience spectatorship or voyeurism, 2) active audience responses to media events of suffering, or 3) textual strategies that lend authenticity to media representations of atrocity and therefore invite an active response from audiences, or 4) all of the above. This confusion has led Sue Tait (2011), in her own critique of the media witnessing literature, to propose a strict analytical distinction between 'witnessing' and 'bearing witness', where the latter should only refer to the *active*, moral engagements with events of suffering. Tait's own empirical work however focuses on the practices of 'bearing witness' of a particular journalist, with less to say about the diverse ways that audiences at home may (or may not) be able to 'bear witness'.

Certainly, the question of how the audience may or *should* 'bear witness' is another unresolved issue in the media witnessing literature, as there seems to be an overwhelming emphasis placed on the moral force of 'witnessing texts' over their audiences. This is seen, for example, in Frosh's writings where 'bearing witness' is an 'act performed not by a witness but by a witnessing text' (2006: 274). In our review above, it was evident in Peters' analysis that the textual feature of *liveness* in a television broadcast is that which *resolves* the veracity gap that audiences supposedly work through in their reception of television, assuming a rather linear relationship between a textual characteristic and an audience response. Most accounts of witnessing would have little to say about how differences in class, gender, age, and ethnicity of audiences may affect the process of judging the 'authenticity' of representations. And although Ashuri and Pinchevski's framework of 'witnessing as a field' initially acknowledges the 'particular cultural boundaries, ideological settings, and power relations' that shape audiences' judgments about distant suffering (2009: 146-147), their subsequent application of this framework in critiquing how documentaries 'bear witness' to a West

Bank conflict focuses *completely* on the textual elements of the documentaries while keeping silent about the audience. Indeed, long-standing arguments about the diversity of 'the audience' and their interpretive skills (Ang 1996; Bird 1999; Press 1999) would challenge the presumptuous account of the activity of 'the witness' in most of the literature.

As I elaborate below, mediation theory stands in contrast to this as it acknowledges the diverse positions of audiences that may orient them to media in different ways, even prior to the 'immediate encounter' of the receiver with a media message. In its recognition of the distinct 'moment' of reception in the mediation process, a mediational approach challenges media ethics scholars to articulate a clear position on the obligations, if any, they wish to place on audiences (or specific groups of audiences) in, for instance, seeking information, donating or volunteering to victims on television, or challenging stereotypical media representations.

### **The Mediation of Suffering**

Sonia Livingstone defines mediation as the ways 'the media mediate, entering into and shaping the mundane but ubiquitous relations among individuals and between individuals and society' (2009: 7). It emphasizes on the one hand the contemporary condition of 'media saturation', or the fact that media are ever-present in modern life; on the other hand, and more significantly, mediation theory underscores media's *transformational* capacities toward social processes (Couldry 2008: 380).

Methodologically, mediation theory pushes for a greater degree of holism in media research through its invitation to imagine relationships between production and reception. It hearkens back to Stuart Hall's (1992) 'circuit of culture', but requires researchers to simultaneously embrace and transcend the traditional model of producer/text/audience. This is why Livingstone argues that mediation studies cannot simply use textual analyses, or even the focus groups of traditional reception research; mediation theory *invites* an ethnographic methodology (2009: 8). Ethnography is viewed as the best methodological approach to 'follow the trail' of media power and the

circulation of meaning *across* different moments of the mediation process. Studying the mediation of distant suffering then begins with the everyday lives of a group or groups of audiences in a particular locale, identifying the programs and texts of suffering that they encounter, analyzing the textual characteristics of these texts, and recognizing how particular audience responses and interpretations are affected by the text and other social factors that prove salient during ethnographic observation.

In other words, mediation requires the analysis of the actual *consequences* of media and communications technologies to the reality of distant suffering. This necessarily engages with questions of representation raised in Textual Ethics and the media witnessing literatures, including whether sufferers are portrayed with humanity and agency (Chouliaraki 2006; Orgad 2008), and whether the account of the event is truthful and believable (Peters 2001). This analysis will however treat these questions not in isolation (i.e., through internalist critique of texts or technologies), but as *immediately* interrelated with their reception by audiences. Therefore, ethnographic interviews and participant observation with audiences are indispensable to a mediational approach, as it is through audience analysis that linkages are made between the visual and rhetorical techniques of representing suffering and audience responses of ‘turning away’, expressing discourses of compassion, or donating and volunteering (insights from Audience Ethics). Mediation theory will be necessarily sensitive to qualify how particular techniques of representing suffering may evoke different responses to audiences according to categories of class, race, age, ethnicity, or individual experience, recognizing that ‘the social is in turn a mediator’ (Silverstone 2005: 189).

Additionally, it will invite reflection on the ethics of media *process*, particularly in the interactions between media producer and the sufferers that they represent. This follows from mediation theory’s expansive conceptualization of media power as including people’s ‘direct experiences with media’ (Couldry 2000; Madianou 2005). In so doing, mediation may challenge the orthodox literature in its sensitivity toward the perspectives of ‘those represented’ by recording how sufferers regard their own representations as well as their personal interactions with media producers. Following

these principles, it is indeed possible to dialogue back to the normative (and sometimes speculative) positions of researchers about 'agency' and 'compassion fatigue' by qualifying how these concepts 'hold up' in local contexts.

The use of mediation rather than its related (and often interchangeable) term 'mediatization' is intentional here. Although there are clear overlaps of meaning with both these terms that seek to describe media's cumulative effect on social organization (Lundby 2009), the emphasis on 'conversation' and 'mutual shaping' between media and audiences that has been traditionally inscribed in the concept of mediation offers a more useful and clearer directive for empirical research on distant suffering. Whereas mediatization directs researchers to seek out the 'media logic' of a text or medium and examine how it recalibrates the operations of a particular social process (Altheide & Snow 1979)—a direction that has certainly enhanced our understanding of how political campaigns have been transformed by television's logic of entertainment (Meyer 2002)—it is perhaps less useful in the context of studying distant suffering and media. In this context, identifying a single 'media logic' that underpin the multiplicity of genres and narratives that represent different events of suffering and the different ways in which producers and journalists interact with sufferers is not only analytically boastful but perhaps even unnecessary if our interest is really to nuance and specify the generalities previously laid out by works on 'media witnessing' and 'compassion fatigue'.

In the two sections below, I proceed to illustrate how the key elements of a mediational approach pose additional questions and insights in the study of distant suffering.

### **1. The Diversity and Activity of Witnesses**

A recurring theme from my review of text- and audience-centered studies about distant suffering as well as the media witnessing literature has been their de-historicized accounts of audiences. From 'mundane witnessing' (Ellis 2000) to the spectatorship of suffering (Chouliaraki 2006) to audience-centered studies themselves (Höijer 2004), it has been a middle-class Western witness who has emerged to 'stand in' for 'the audience' of distant suffering.

Situating the default viewer within the Western 'zone of safety' has been undoubtedly productive in media studies' contribution to the political and philosophical project of cosmopolitanism (Bauman 2001; Singer 2009). The very shorthand of this area of studies as 'distant suffering' rather than, say, 'televised suffering' or 'representations of suffering' is telling for its emphasis on the geographical category of distance rather than technology. Indeed, the *global* backdrop of witnessing 'distant suffering' distinguishes this literature from 'trauma studies' in the humanities, which engages with similar issues, such as the fraughtness of representing pain and how texts ethically bear witness to suffering (Onega 2010). And so, the critique here is not specifically about the witness being situated in 'the West', but in a West that is assumed to be socially and culturally distant from both the conditions and cultural contexts of non-Western others, and estranged from the experience of suffering itself.

Previous studies on mediation as well as the wider audience studies literature would certainly attest to the presence of diasporas and ethnic minorities in the West whose activity as audiences differ from the majority group (Gillespie 1995; Georgiou 2006; Madianou 2005). In the context of distant suffering, audience analysis that is attentive to ethnic differences among 'witnesses' may challenge assumptions in the literature about compassion being primarily directed toward Western rather than non-Western sufferers, or how *liveness* is *the* primary textual characteristic that triggers identification for the viewer. Previous ethnographies with minority groups have conveyed that their everyday experiences of exclusion from the dominant culture shape their judgments about news, and may lead to seeking out news about their homeland and rejecting news about their host country (Author; Gillespie 1995; Georgiou 2006; Madianou 2005). Certainly, a mediational approach that also accounts for social rather than media-centric factors can recognize whether audiences from minority groups may hold stronger moral obligations for faraway rather than proximal others. The literature's predetermined emphasis on the liveness of texts as shaping identification may in this case prove to be less significant than ethnic or cultural intimacy that audiences share with others whom they recognize to be 'like them'. Certainly, accounts of the minority positions of

'witnesses' of distant suffering can broaden the current debates about humanitarian obligations toward distant suffering by linking them with related issues of multiculturalism and identity politics.

The assumed *gender* and *class* of the model 'witness' of distant suffering can also be challenged by an ethnographic approach. Indeed, the rich body of work of feminist audience studies that illustrates working-class women's both creative and mundane engagements with media (Bird 1999; Press 1999; Skeggs *et al* 2009) can be drawn upon to consider diverse scenarios by which people may engage with distant suffering. Whereas the current literature emphasizes rationalist processes of judgment in the act of witnessing (Ashuri & Pinchevski 2009; Peters 2001) and other-oriented discourses of compassion (Höijer 2004), if we recall insights from feminist media research then it is equally plausible that 'responses' may also include reflexive and/or melodramatic statements about viewers' *own* conditions of vulnerability or poverty. Ethnographies of working-class women attest to tendencies to use media narratives for purposes of therapy to cope with conditions of insecurity and depravity (Abu-Lughod 2002; Press 1999). The 'witnessing position' of a person who self-identifies as a sufferer herself is absent in the current discussion of distant suffering. And upon the ethnographic encounter with such a person in the context of studying distant suffering, the question of whether such a witness *should* or *could* have the same moral obligation as the 'ideal type' Western middle-class witness is posed.

In addition, through the work of Beverley Skeggs and her colleagues, we learn that audience reception of television provokes different taste and moral judgments about the *media themselves*—their generic conventions, symbolic status, and social significance. Particularly illuminating from their work is their observation that *class* shapes people's moral judgments about media, particularly in reflecting on how they are exploitative (or not) toward participants, as well as the value that they serve in society (2009: 10). Although Skeggs *et al* focus only on the genre of reality tv, we can extract interesting questions about the mediation of suffering from their work. In their insight that audiences have classed moral judgments about media genres and practices, we can

explore how audiences also express 'lay moralities' about media practice—evaluative statements of 'good' and 'bad' in relation to media conventions of representing suffering as well as their general expectations toward journalists, producers, and audiences like them. Indeed, one issue that is unresolved in the distant suffering literature is whether audience decisions to 'seek information' or 'look away' are primarily issue-driven (Kinnick *et al* 1996), or prompted by judgments about *how media represent* these issues (Cohen 2001; Moeller 1999), or a general distrust toward media and other social institutions in. This idea that audience responses to suffering may be informed by knowledge and judgment about the media themselves links with the next section on *Ecological Ethics*, a third category of media ethics that we should consider alongside Textual Ethics and Audience Ethics.

## **2. Ecological Ethics of Media**

As mentioned, the ethnographic perspective of mediation studies widens the remit of analysis beyond the text, and beyond the encounter between text and audience; it also includes people's direct experiences with the media frame. Nick Couldry (2000) and Mirca Madianou (2005) have previously attested to how people's direct contact with journalists and media institutions inform their interpretation of individual television texts. And in the wider media ethics literature, writings about the 'media environment' (Silverstone 2007), 'media ecology' (Born & Prosser 2001; Born 2008), and the 'mediated center' (Couldry 2003) have raised normative questions about the media at the infrastructural, institutional, and organizational scales, which I would categorize here as *Ecological Ethics*.

A mediational approach therefore can lead us to connect the ethical debates about distant suffering in Textual Ethics and Audience Ethics to the Ecological Ethics of how media institutions should create an ethical and democratic 'space' that upholds equality of voice (Couldry 2003; 2010; Cottle 2006), hospitality for vulnerable others (Silverstone 2007), and the just treatment of employees and participants (Ouellette & Hay 2004; Mayer 2011; White, 2006; Wood & Skeggs 2009). Although these writings variably discuss ethical concerns across different scales—from system-level critiques of

media ownership to organization-level critiques of media production processes—the common focus here is on how control over media representation may be democratized and diversified rather than concentrated to economic and cultural elites in society. Granting mediated visibility to the ‘invisible’ and voice to the ‘voiceless’ are deemed as social goods (Cottle 2006: 175-182), just as the abuse and humiliation of participants and employees in the creative industries are critiqued. In the context of distant suffering then, I identify that the more expansive discussion of media exploitation in Ecological Ethics can inform the text-centered debates about how media should (or should not) grant ‘agency’ to sufferers. Particularly, a mediational approach can link the critique of the intentional object of representation (the ‘moment’ of the text) with the experiences of all those involved in the process of representation (the ‘moment’ of production), including the experiences of the ‘sufferers’ recruited and interviewed by television producers.

Studies that shed light on the recruitment of participants in reality television (Author; White 2006; Wood & Skeggs 2009), news (Madianou 2011), and fictional drama (Mayer 2011) raise ethical questions so far absent in the distant suffering literature. For instance, the commonplace judgment that to personalize and ‘give name’ to the sufferer is ethical insofar as it humanizes her condition (Chouliaraki 2006) is complicated by a critique on whether they were given just (economic) compensation (White 2006), had control over their own speech and actions while on television (Wood & Skeggs 2009), or admitted to experiencing shame by being placed under the media spotlight (Madianou 2011). Certainly, judgments about the ethical value of representation from only a Textual Ethics approach might be contradicted by empirical findings that may find that ‘those represented’ contest their representation and the process by which it took place. A more complex scenario is posed in Vicki Mayer’s (2011) research on the filming of the HBO series *Treme* in a Louisiana town post-Hurricane Katrina. Her study highlights how members of this traumatized community engaged in a form of ‘self-exploitation’ by working as extras for long hours, but in fact articulated the positive symbolic rewards of appearing on television and ‘commemorating’ their real experiences of loss. Approaching this case study using a mediational approach to distant suffering can

provoke reflection about how to reconcile (if at all) the contrasting moral judgments that may arise from the different moments of text/production/reception. Does the moral judgment of the researcher supersede the lay moral judgments of audiences? Does a 'good', 'ethical' text of suffering justify the 'bad', 'unethical' process by which it is produced? How can we think about the 'agency' of sufferers as involving not only textual characteristics but also the sentiments of 'those represented', not to mention the 'lay moralities' of agency and respectability held by different audiences? These are difficult questions so far absent in the distant suffering literature and wider media ethics debates that can indeed be further explored by a mediational approach.

### **Conclusion**

Scholars of mediation theory admit that such a perspective can sometimes also obscure the analysis of media processes. In its conceptualization of a multi-directional 'conversation' or 'mutual shaping' between media and audiences, it might disarm researchers from acknowledging clear asymmetries of power (Couldry 2008: 380), such as between producers' control of representation and audiences ability to 'resist' meanings. And with its ethnographic thrust, there is a danger that it will become 'difficult to imagine where to begin and where to end the analysis' (Ang 1996: 353). In spite of these tendencies, mediation opens up an exciting analytical space by which we could take the discussion of distant suffering and media ethics forward. Mediation, more so than recent work on 'affect' and trauma in relation to media, foreground normative evaluation of media conduct in its attentiveness to power and control (and thus, exploitation) in relation to media representations. Yet unlike previous studies and the current 'media witnessing' approach that tip the scales toward the primacy of texts of suffering as determining the conduct of humanitarian action, it would nuance and specify our understanding of the conditions of technologically mediated moral action. And by sketching out in greater detail the diverse experiences of 'witnesses' across social and historical contexts, it may more faithfully address the call for a media ethics that simultaneously recognizes the global consequences of media/audience practice and the particular social, cultural and moral contexts that enable, justify, and animate them.

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