

The Mediation of Suffering and the Vision of a Cosmopolitan Public

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In this article, the author argues that if researchers wish to move toward a “global village” with cosmopolitan values, then they need to examine critically the discourses and practices by which global information flows invite the individual spectator to be a public actor in the contexts of her or his everyday life. In the light of empirical analysis, the author presents a hierarchical typology of news stories on distant suffering that consists of adventure, emergency, and ecstatic news, and she examines the two broad ethical norms that inform these types of news: communitarianism and cosmopolitanism. The possibility for cosmopolitanism, the author concludes, lies importantly (but not exclusively) in the ways in which television tells the stories of suffering, inviting audiences to care for and act on conditions of human existence that go beyond their own communities of belonging.

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This article addresses the question of whether transnational information flows may contribute to shaping public dispositions that go beyond the nation. It is, in particular, the mediation of suffering in the media that best throws into relief this question. Whereas everyone agrees that the media today enable an unprecedented visibility of distant misfortune, there is controversy over the impact of this visibility on the possibility for cosmopolitan citizenship.¹ Some talk about an increase in compassion fatigue among audiences, yet others optimistically claim that a “democratization” of responsibility and care is today more possible than ever.

This article participates in the controversy over the role of the media in public life not by taking sides in this theoretical debate but by turning to the study of concrete practices of mediation. By mediation, I refer to the process by which technologically articulated discursive resources, namely language and image, produce meaning about suffering and, in so doing, propose to media audiences specific ways of engaging with distant sufferers. As I show in a number of examples, such proposals encompass a wide range of ethical positions, from responsibility and care to indifference and apathy, and, in so doing, they throw into relief the crucial role of the media in producing various forms of connectivity between spectators and sufferers across national borders.

To be sure, the media do not in themselves determine how the multiple and heterogeneous media audiences engage in public action; for this to happen, a broader chain of links to action must be in place. Furthermore, studying the extent to which audiences respond to media reports on suffering would require a different analytical focus than I adopt here. Rather, my assumption in this article is that, through their systematic choices of word and image, the media not only expose audiences to the spectacles of distant suffering but also, in so doing, simultaneously expose them to specific *dispositions to feel, think, and act* toward each instance of suffering.² In the context of the debate on media and cosmopolitan connectivity, it becomes particularly important to specify which media reports on suffering may dispose audiences toward a passive voyeurism of human pain—as the compassion fatigue argument has it—and which reports may urge them toward active charity and humanitarian action—as the 2004 tsunami catastrophe showed.

My argument develops in three steps. First, I provide an overview of the key arguments that dominate the debate on the role of the media in establishing global connectivity, and I propose that, rather than debating this ethical role in the abstract, we should subject concrete instances of mediation to systematic analysis (Mediation and Public Ethics). Second, in the light of such analysis, I show that the distribution of public dispositions toward distant suffering in Western European television is hierarchical and that this hierarchy depends on the distribution of the symbolic resources, language, and image that news reports on distant suffering use. Specifically, I show that these hierarchical dispositions to suffering depend on the proximity to the sufferer and the options for action on his or her misfortune that news reports present to their audiences (Mediation and the Hierarchy of News). Finally, I conclude that the question of expanding our sense of responsibility beyond our own neighborhood, far from simply a matter of transnational networks or global governance institutions, is also a matter of the mundane stories and images of distant others that the media bring into our everyday life. I argue that, to move away from the hierarchical distributions of suffering, we should closely examine those few news stories that enable the spectator to consider some form of action on distant suffering as possible and effective; these stories enact a specific type of discourse that combines emotion for the sufferer with the demand for justice and, in so doing, manage to bring into the news broadcast the proposal for social solidarity (The Discourse of Cosmopolitan Connectivity).

Mediation and Public Ethics

The role of television as a global agent of responsibility and care lies at the center of the debate on cosmopolitan public life in media and social theory. Part of the broad communitarian tradition of Durkheim and Merton, this celebration of global connectivity rests on the anthropological premise that the media work as symbols that generate sociability across dispersed times and spaces. Let me summarize two

key versions of global connectivity, the “celebration of communitarianism” and the “democratization of responsibility” versions.

In the “celebration of communitarianism” version of global connectivity, television introduces the spectator into a broad community of fellow spectators simply by engaging him or her in the act of simultaneous viewing. This argument, present in McLuhan’s (1964) early idea of the “global village” and in current accounts of mediation, claims that television establishes a spectatorial “feeling in common” based more on the activity of viewing and less on the content of the spectacle itself. Television, Eco says, “speaks less and less of the exterior world. . . . It speaks of itself and of the context it establishes with its audience” (Eco 1985, in Maffesoli 1996, 66). This self-referential quality of television evidently comes about from the capacity of the medium to have us all watching the same images at the same time.

Yet there is deep pessimism in this line of thinking.³ Whereas images bring spectators together in new forms of sociality, the questions of what these images show or how their content may affect the spectator remain unaccounted for. This is because it is not the connectivity to the spectacle on screen that counts as the purpose of mediated experience but the connectivity to fellow spectators.⁴ Such connectivity, however, not only separates the spectator’s zone of comfort from the zone of suffering as two worlds that never meet but also deprives the world of suffering of its dramatic urgency and moral appeal.⁵ What this view of mediation as tele-sociality ultimately misses out is an orientation toward the distant other. Closely connected to this view is the argument about compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue takes its point of departure in the spectator’s everyday life under conditions of safety and comfort and accuses television of overburdening spectators with news of human pain and misfortune. This overdose of misery, the argument has it, renders suffering banal, unimportant, and irrelevant to the spectator’s lifeworld; each piece of news on suffering is yet another story that reaches our screen, only to disappear in oblivion as soon as we zap to another channel.⁶

In the “democratization of responsibility” version of global connectivity, on the contrary, television news from around the world increases the spectator’s concern for the misfortune of the distant sufferer. Taking its point of departure in the reflexive organization of the self in late modernity, this optimistic argument begs the question of how our mediated experience can translate into political deliberation and public action (Giddens 1990, 1991; Thompson 1995; Tomlinson 1999). The constant flow of images on screen, the argument has it, inevitably opens up the local world of the spectator to non-local realities and enables the reflexive process by which the spectator comes to recognize such realities as a potential domain of his or her own action. It is the interplay between the visibility of the sufferer and the reflexive response of the spectator to his or her suffering that contains here the promise of cosmopolitanism.⁷ Despite its forceful rhetoric, however, this optimistic version proposes no specific perspectives as to how such forms of publicness may be realized. Rather than asking how exactly the image of the sufferer may lead to effective action, the

“democratization of responsibility” argument ultimately turns to wishful thinking. Audiences, we are told, must turn their sense of responsibility “into a form of moral-practical reflection because this is the best—the only option we have” (Thompson 1995, 265). The dream of cosmopolitanism is asserted, but the question of how we get there is essentially ignored.

To sum up, the two versions of global connectivity that I reviewed here understand cosmopolitanism as the formation of a certain relationship between the spectator and the distant other. Whereas in “celebration of communitarianism” this relationship connects the safe spectator with other safe spectators at the expense of recognizing the moral demand that the spectacle of distant sufferers may press on us, in “democratization of responsibility” this relationship does entail a sense of responsibility toward distant sufferers but cannot tell us how we can move from simply watching to actually caring for those sufferers. The paradox of technology seems to haunt both optimistic arguments on mediation: technology connects, but how and who connects with whom remain unaccounted for. Can we overcome this paradox to understand just how mediation may shape beyond-the-nation forms of connectivity and how it may offer the possibility of a cosmopolitan public?

Mediation and the Hierarchy of News

The potential of mediation to cultivate a cosmopolitan sensibility, I wish to argue, is neither straightforward, as the optimistic arguments have it, nor completely impossible, as their pessimistic counterarguments insist. The potential of mediation to shape a cosmopolitan sensibility has its own conditions of possibility. What we need to do to investigate these conditions is to empirically investigate how television tells stories about human suffering and how, in so doing, it places the spectator in particular ethical relationships to the sufferer, thereby, inviting or blocking the spectator’s feelings of pity for the sufferer.

I approach the notion of pity not as the natural sentiment of human empathy but as a sociological category that is constituted in discourse. Pity, in this sense, is a product of the manner in which television puts the relationship between the spectator and a distant sufferer into meaning. Pity therefore draws attention to the concrete meaning-making operations through which the sufferer is presented on screen so as to engage the spectator in multiple forms of emotion and dispositions to action. In order to generalize, Boltanski (1999, 6) writes, “Pity becomes eloquent, recognizing and discovering itself as emotion and feeling.”⁸

Two dimensions of the spectator–sufferer relationship are relevant to the analysis of the “eloquence” of pity, its production in meaning. These are the dimensions of proximity–distance and watching–acting. How close or how far away does the news story place the spectator vis-à-vis the sufferer? How is the spectator “invited” by the news story to react vis-à-vis the sufferer’s misfortune—look at it, feel for it, act on it?

Using these questions to investigate the ethical impact of mediation helps us break with dominant norms about how television should or should not moralize the spectator and allows us to examine how television actually produces its own ethical norms and standards for public conduct. This analytical perspective approaches ethics as the situated enactment of values rather than as abstract principles of conduct. Situated ethics, in this sense, does not altogether abandon the normative perspective, but it provisionally brackets this perspective to assess how the meanings of right and wrong are construed in particular examples of news on suffering.⁹

To this end, I have studied a range of news broadcasts from the global channel BBC World and two national European channels, the Greek and the Danish state broadcast corporations (NET and DR, respectively). Three categories of news emerge out of this study. Each category reports on various instances of suffering around the world by combining the language and image of television in different ways. Consequently, each category of news proposes its own ways through which the spectator should engage with the scene of suffering and its own options for action on the sufferer's misfortune:

- a. *Adventure news*, a class of news that blocks feelings of pity toward distant sufferers,
- b. *Emergency news*, a class of news that produces a demand for action on the suffering, and
- c. *Ecstatic news*, an extraordinary class of news that manages to bring the globe together in the act of simultaneous watching.¹⁰

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 do others (Tester 1999; Cohen 2001; Seaton 2005; Silverstone 2006).

Adventure News

The category of adventure news is illustrated by three pieces of news, "shootings" in Indonesia, a "boat accident" in India, and "biblical floods" in Bangladesh—all of which are accommodated in less than one-minute reports.¹¹ Their common feature is that their value was not prioritized in their respective broadcasts. The fact that, for example, forty children on their way back from school were drowned in the boat accident in India not only failed to appear as "breaking news" but also was presented without any reference as to the contexts and conditions of the accident. I use, therefore, Bakhtin's term *adventure* to describe this category of news that, like the early Greek romance he critically discusses, fails to provide a framework for understanding the events it describes and renders their broadcasting a chain of random and isolated "curiosities" that make no emotional demand on the spectator.¹² Three semiotic features are typical of the category of adventure news:

- Brief descriptive narratives that only register “facts;”
- Singular spacetimes that restrict the spectator’s proximity to suffering, and
- The lack of agency that dehumanizes the sufferer and suppresses the possibility of action in the scene of suffering.

But can we then talk about the representation of suffering without pity as involving a moral mechanism? The answer is yes, morality without pity is possible insofar as we do not use the term *morality* to mean inherent “goodness” in the perspective of representation, contrasting it to an inherently “evil” perspective of representation that is devoid of morality. As situated ethics implies, choices over where, when, and with whom the suffering is shown to occur always entail specific ethical dispositions, independently of our own evaluative judgement on these dispositions as desirable or undesirable.

By this token, the minimal narration of suffering, the establishment of radical distance from the location of suffering, or the refusal to humanize the sufferer may indeed come to interrupt the production of pity, but they should not be regarded as lying outside the enactment of the moral mechanism of mediation itself. The interruption of pity is a variation of this enactment and a moral claim in its own right. Suffering without pity is itself an ethical option available to the spectator, which construes the sufferer in discourses of insurmountable cultural difference, as an Other, and thereby frees the spectator from the moral obligation to engage with the sufferer’s misfortune.

Emergency News

From news stories that interrupt pity, we move to news stories that produce pity in their representation of suffering. This includes prime-time news on a “rescue mission” for illegal African refugees who were caught in a storm in the Mediterranean sea on their way to southern Europe, on a “famine crisis” in the poor Argentinean province of Tucuman leading children to emaciation, and on the “death by stoning” verdict against Amina Lawal, a Nigerian woman who gave birth to a child outside marriage.¹³

All these figures of suffering share one feature that was absent in adventure news: they call for emergency action. As opposed to adventure news, the enactment of pity as emergency action entails complex news narratives, with multiple connections between safety and danger and novel possibilities of action both for the participants in the scene of suffering and for the spectator.¹⁴

Who acts and how on the scene of suffering, however, is an open matter. Each piece of emergency news has a different response to these questions, creating an internal hierarchy of sufferers and actors on the television screen. The rescue action on the African refugees, for example, is a high-adrenaline spectacle to be watched by the spectator–voyeur, the Argentinean famine news is a sentimental story that provokes no more than a tear of concern, whereas, finally, the Nigerian convict story

urges the spectator to do something practical, signing an Amnesty International petition against the sharia verdict. In this respect, I consider emergency news to be a complex category that best throws into relief the possibilities and limitations of public action that the media make available to us.

The distinction between adventure and emergency news can be described in terms of three major shifts in the representation of suffering:

- *The move from visually static and verbally minimal descriptions with low affective power to visually and verbally complex narratives with increasing degrees of affective power.*
- *The move from singular and abstract spacetimes (the map) to concrete, specific, multiple, and mobile spacetimes (chronotopes).*¹⁵ Chronotopes place suffering in the contexts of lived experience and give suffering historical depth and future perspective. Chronotopes may also connect suffering with the spacetime of safety and propose a particular type of action to the spectator himself or herself. As we shall see, it is, in fact, only in the example of the news on the Nigerian convict that such connectivity between suffering and safety is established.
- *The move from non-agency (numerical sufferer, absence of other agents) to conditional agency (active and personalized sufferer, presence of benefactors and persecutors).* Conditional agency implies that the sufferer is able to be active only in a limited and ineffective way, hence the need for external intervention. Yet the very fact of acting endows this sufferer with a quality of humanness that we do not encounter in adventure news. Again, it is particularly the Nigerian Amina Lawal who is presented as a fully historical figure—at the same time, a cultural other and a human being like “us” (see below).

Ecstatic News

I reserve the term *ecstatic* for media events such as the tsunami catastrophe or the terror attacks of September 11—the latter of which I have analyzed as a prototypical case of this category of news.¹⁶ The term *ecstatic* refers to the radical openness of such extraordinary events, which are presented to us as they unfold moment by moment. The temporality of such events is “ecstatic” in the sense that it breaks with our ordinary conception of time as a swift flow of “now” moments and presents us with *truly historic* time, “moments when a minute lasts a lifetime, or when a week seems to fly by in next to no time. “This is what Heidegger calls ‘ecstatic temporality,’ or time taking place in its authentic moment of ek-sistence” (Barker 2002, 75). This formulation of the “ecstatic” captures the spectator’s shock and disbelief at the moment of the second plane crash on the World Trade Center, a moment “when a minute seems to last a lifetime.” Ecstatic news, in this sense, is news that seeks to resolve the radical undecidability of the event it reports, during the act of reporting itself.¹⁷

Although ecstatic news shares with emergency news the demand for action, the two categories differ in their overall representation of suffering and, therefore, in the

way each organizes the ethical relationship between spectator and sufferer. The distinction between emergency and ecstatic news can be described in terms of three major shifts in the representation of suffering:

- *The move from the genre of the news broadcast to that of the live footage.* This is the move from a conventional news narrative, consisting of single, finite, and unrelated pieces of news to an uninterrupted flow of images and verbal narratives with various degrees of emotional power. This flow enables the spectator to engage in multiple topics of suffering and so to empathize, to denounce, and to reflect on the suffering.
- *The move from the emergency chronotope, that is, from concrete, specific, multiple, and mobile spacetimes, to an ecstatic chronotope.* This is a temporality that places suffering both in the order of “lived” experience and in the order of historical rupture and a spatiality that connects this specific suffering to the globe as a whole, making “humanity” the simultaneous witness of the suffering.
- *The move from conditional agency to sovereign agency.* Sovereign agency construes each actor in the scene of suffering as a thoroughly humanized and historical being—somebody who feels, reflects, and acts on his or her fate. Specifically, sovereign agency entails three typical features:
 1. The sufferer and the benefactor coincide (in the September 11 footage, Americans rescue American victims),
 2. The sufferer is in a position both to mourn for his or her suffering and to analyze it (accounts of ordinary people in Manhattan and journalists),
 3. The sufferer has the capacity to respond to the persecutor’s infliction of suffering on himself or herself (statements by the White House and by Pentagon experts).

This presentation of the sufferer as a sovereign being is instrumental in further construing the relationship between spectator and sufferer as a relationship of *reflexive identification*, whereby the spectator engages with the misfortune of the sufferer continuously, intensely and in multiple ways.¹⁸ It is this relationship of identification that, subsequently, enables the emergence of a “universal” moral stance vis-à-vis the September 11 events—a stance that was later used to try to legitimize the political project of “war against terror” that followed these terror attacks.

In summary, each news piece on suffering across the three types of news is organized around a set of moral values that appear to be evident and natural, but, when placed in comparison to one another, they reveal their complicity in sustaining the hierarchy of place and of human life that media critics denounce. At the low end of the hierarchy, the type of adventure news offers the spectator a position of maximal distance from the sufferer and no options for action toward the misfortune he or she watches. At the high end of the hierarchy, the type of ecstatic news offers the spectator a position of reflexive identification, through which the spectator recognizes the sufferer as a sovereign agent and fully engages with his or her misfortune.

These positions represent a key aspect of the information divide in the space of mediation. Although the landscape of global news flows is more complex than any

single typology can capture, this typology identifies a significant bias in the intersection between global and national news flows insofar as the presentation of suffering is concerned. This bias suggests that, despite the global expansion of transmission technologies, all pieces of news are eventually subject to a process of selection and particularization that defines whose suffering matters most for the Western spectator (Rantanen 2002; Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen 1998; Clausen 2003; Volkmer 1999; Ekecrantz 1999, 2001). If cosmopolitanism—the ethical disposition that links spectator and sufferer in a relationship of responsibility and care—depends on television’s capacity to produce proximity with the sufferer and propose action on his or her misfortune, then the question is, which proximity? Whose action?

The Discourse of Cosmopolitan Citizenship

To answer this, let me now briefly return to the theoretical debate on the ethical role of the media. The optimistic arguments, which celebrate the creation of global communities through television viewing, find justification in the empirical reality of ecstatic news. Their pessimistic counterarguments, which deplore the failure of television to connect spectator and sufferer in a moral sense, find justification in the empirical reality of adventure news. But can adventure and ecstatic news provide us with a quality of connectivity that brings spectator and sufferer in a relationship of emotional and practical engagement? The answer is no, neither of the two types of news are able to construe the public space of television as a space of cosmopolitan connectivity because their model of the public is their very own community: the community of Western public life.

The Communitarian Public of Adventure and Ecstatic News

Adventure news is paradigmatically associated with the argument on compassion fatigue. This argument blames television for bombarding the spectator with images of human misfortune and, consequently, holds television accountable for weakening the spectator’s sensibility toward distant suffering. Yet rather than finding the cause of compassion fatigue in the omnipresence of images of suffering, adventure news shows that compassion fatigue is related to the systematic absence of certain sufferers as human beings from the viewing community of Western spectators.¹⁹ This inadequacy of television to represent certain sufferings as deserving the spectator’s emotion and action results in excluding certain places and human lives from the public space to which the spectator belongs and within which the spectator feels able to act. The main implication of this exclusion is that, in the name of the spectator’s benign desire for comfort, television blocks the possibility of public action beyond the spectator’s familiar community of belonging.

Ecstatic news is paradigmatically associated with the argument on tele-sociality, which takes its point of departure in television's capacity to connect dispersed groups of people into a community of fellow spectators. In this respect, ecstatic news clearly shows the effectivity of television to create a global audience, but it simultaneously shows that this effectivity is reserved for those rare pieces of news that have a historical significance for the West. In the September 11 live footage, television offers the Western spectator multiple emotional engagements with the terror attacks. Yet this therapeutic connectivity works to rationalize the move from thinking of terrorism as a story about others to thinking that such terrorism is a real possibility for somebody like the Western spectator himself or herself. The community of ecstatic news, global as it may be in its scope, in fact addresses the fears of the European who may now imagine that similar attacks are imminent in his or her own soil. As a consequence, the space of identification and action in ecstatic news is the space to which the spectator already belongs, leaving out places and populations whose suffering from terror precedes and follows the Western experience by many and by far.²⁰

Adventure and ecstatic news, in their different ways, appeal to a community of spectators that is already constituted as a public space. This public space is either the familiar and safe space of everyday denial, where no call to the cause of a distant other disturbs the spectator, or the space of common vulnerability, where the spectator's commitment to the suffering other is natural because the sufferer is somebody like him or her.²¹ It is precisely by virtue of this shared feature, namely that they address their audiences as an already constituted community, that neither adventure nor ecstatic news can invite these audiences to engage in public action toward suffering that occurs beyond the West.

The problem with evoking the West as an already constituted community of spectators is that these types of news simultaneously evoke a set of preexisting assumptions implicit in any communitarian bond, as to whose misfortune matters and what there is to do about the misfortune. The communitarian bond, in other words, organizes the content of mediation around the concerns and interests of specific viewing publics, which may transcend the national but do not encompass the global; they are resolutely Western. The West, in this perspective, is not a "universal" context of viewing and action but a particular public, a micro public, that coexists with other such micro publics in the global information landscape.²² The Western claims to care and responsibility vis-à-vis distant suffering compete with similar claims of alternative news flows that equally appeal to their own sense of commitment and care for their own sufferers. Today, more than ever, it is important to compare these competing claims to humanity and pity across micro publics because such comparison can help us illuminate possible links between broader political and cultural antagonisms and the local mediations of whose suffering matters most to whom around the globe.

This comparison would further throw into relief the fact that the communitarian bond of the West is based not exclusively on "natural" affinities but also on textual devices that bring an aura of objectivity to Western representations of suffering.

Certain techniques of visual editing and verbal reporting, for example, the map or the use of factual descriptions, make a strong claim of showing “the” truth about suffering and portraying reality as it is. The communitarian bond in Western television may appear to work through this impartial representation of “facts,” but, simultaneously, it distributes different potentials for pity over different “facts” of suffering across types of news.²³ It would be interesting to see, through comparative studies, how other micro publics appeal to their own techniques of truth, visual and linguistic, to present and legitimize their own hierarchies of suffering in their media.

The Public Space of Pity in Emergency News

Between adventure and ecstatic news, the category of emergency news covers a middle space that does not completely efface the sufferer nor render this sufferer thoroughly sovereign. It is not that emergency news does not evoke the West as the imagined community to which the spectator belongs. Of course it does. It is rather that emergency news presents the Western spectator with a demand for engagement that does not exclusively follow from the pre-commitment to implicit obligations, from the communitarian bond. Neither the apathetic spectator of adventure news nor the over-engaged spectator of ecstatic news, the spectator of emergency news moves through a number of proposals for agency vis-à-vis the distant sufferer. He or she intensely watches the rescuing of the African sufferer, sheds a tear for the misfortune of Argentinean children, or protests the death verdict of the Nigerian convict.

As opposed to the communitarian perspective on distant suffering, these pieces of news pose the question of commitment as a problem to be solved and render distant suffering a case to be judged as worthy of action. In opening up a range of positions from which the judgment of suffering is now possible, emergency news simultaneously opens up a space of engagement that may lie beyond the spectator’s local horizon for feeling and acting. This means that rather than restricting public space to the West as a given community, television now addresses the public as an undefined entity.

The “undefinedness” of the public points to the fact that mediation does not always assume the public as a given but may also call a public into being, at the moment when it presents the individual spectator with a cause for engagement.²⁴ In appealing to the spectator as a philanthropist toward Argentinean children or as an activist protesting against Amina Lawal’s verdict, emergency news throws into relief this pedagogical dimension of mediation as guiding the spectator’s conduct toward the cosmopolitan ideal. The spectator is now a member of a world bigger than the West, who may develop a desire and will to act on this world in response to visions of the public that television itself proposes. This is why the more we insist on examining the nature of mediation, which emergency news enacts vis-à-vis an undefined and always in the making public, the closer we get to the conditions of possibility for cosmopolitanism, for public action on humanity as a whole.²⁵

The Fragile Connectivity of Emergency News

Emergency news demonstrates that the move from a communitarian to a cosmopolitan sensibility requires a specific kind of public discourse that assumes no prior commitment between spectator and sufferer, but, simultaneously, it evokes the ideal of commitment at the moment of telling the story of suffering. Which is then the quality of connectivity that characterizes emergency news?

Emergency news, let us recall, presents the humanness of the sufferer as an inherently unstable condition and construes the question of commitment to non-Western suffering in an indeterminate and fragile manner. The humanness of the Nigerian convict, for example, remains suspended between a condition thoroughly “universal,” her motherhood, and thoroughly alien to the Western experience, her life or—better—the threat to her life under the sharia rule. Similarly, the spectator’s judgment vis-à-vis African refugees or Argentinean children constantly hovers between these sufferers’ desire for life, compatible with the spectator’s own, and their fate, radically different from anything the Western spectator is likely to experience. It is, I believe, this very instability that sums up the paradox of cosmopolitan action: the possibility of cosmopolitanism lies in the impossibility of representing the condition of distant suffering as suffering proper.²⁶

This impossibility, however, is at odds with the dominant discourse of ethical conduct today, which does not acknowledge the indeterminacies inherent in the mediation of suffering and assumes that, once confronted with the spectacle of suffering, the spectator reacts with a compassionate reflex. Indeed, in the arguments on the ethics of mediation that I examined earlier, it is obvious that the spectator of suffering, in general, is automatically under the moral obligation of the sufferer on screen—his or her sensibilities blocked only by the numbing effects of mediation.

At this point, however, we can see that it is strictly the spectator of emergency news who may be confronted with some form of moral obligation toward distant suffering. This is because the spectator of emergency news is the only one to be confronted with a concrete possibility for action and, consequently, with those values of engagement with suffering that claim to have a universal appeal in our culture.²⁷ In the philanthropic cause of the Argentinean famine news, the moral horizon of the spectator is based on the value of common humanity, which moves the spectator’s heart in empathy at the sight of children in need. In the denunciatory cause of the sharia verdict, the moral horizon of the spectator is based on the value of justice, which urges the spectator to protest against the violation of human rights.

At the same time, these universal values of suffering do not stand on their own. Because each piece of news seeks to accommodate its own specific realities of suffering—the misery of refugees, the emaciated bodies of Argentinean children or cruelty in the streets of Nigeria—there is always a struggle between the universal truths of humanity, casting the suffering in an enabling proximity, and the detail of singular sufferings, inevitably evoking a certain distance from the scene of misfortune.

Confronted with these “twilight” presences on screen, the spectator also becomes an ambivalent figure himself or herself. Neither a true philanthropist who compassionately cares for stranded refugees or emaciated children nor a proper activist who engages in a practical politics of justice, the spectator is captured in a fragile, if not impossible, representation too. Contradictory as this may sound, the spectator’s fragility is not a bad thing. On the contrary, I wish to argue, it is precisely this paradoxical and fragile condition that we need to preserve if we wish to sustain the idea of cosmopolitanism not only as a programmatic utopia of mediation but also as a political promise of contemporary public life.

The key is to draw attention to the internal hierarchy of emergency news that affects the quality of each particular case of suffering, and, consequently, it also affects the combination of this particular case with a universal discourse of action. Although all emergency sufferings appear to be concrete and specific for the spectator, only some pieces manage to represent suffering in terms of multiple and dynamic contexts of activity or as mobile and practically accessible terrains of action. Similarly, the human presence of the sufferer across emergency news ranges from an undifferentiated mass of “miserables,” the African refugees, to an individual with a personal biography and a cultural history, Amina Lawal—the Argentinean children appealing to “our” common humanity but remaining too far away for us to do anything to alleviate their misery. It is indeed only the news on the Nigerian convict that manages to turn suffering into a cause for practical action, by connecting Amina Lawal as a person threatened by a death verdict with the imperative of social solidarity.

This suggests that for the spectator to be confronted with the call for effective action, action that can make a difference in the sufferer’s fate, only certain combinations of the particular and the universal are appropriate, only certain types of fragility of the sufferer are powerful enough to present him or her to the spectator as a cause for concern. The capacity of the Nigerian convict news to place pity for the sufferer in a context and to link pity to a demand for justice makes its representation of suffering a characteristic instance of cosmopolitan connectivity in this typology of news.

The Cosmopolitan Disposition: Historicity and Reflexivity

What differentiates the Nigerian convict news from the other two pieces of emergency news is that it goes beyond simply bringing a story into the public spotlight. It further begs the questions of “why” and of “what to do.”

It is, to begin with, the question of why that makes Amina’s suffering appear as a dynamic and open event worthy of public commitment. This is not a “grand” why referring to the structures of society or the traditions of religion. It is a “modest” why that lends elements of historicity to the narrative economy of the news. This means that this news incorporates relevant fragments of the trajectory of events around the Nigerian case, such as the hint to a potential conflict between the secular government of the country and the Islamic law or the reference to a similar Amnesty campaign

thanks to which another convict had eventually been acquitted in Nigeria. By pointing to the tensions and potentialities that are inherent in the development of the story, references like these simultaneously establish the multiple, specific, and mobile connectivities between the spacetimes and actors of suffering and those of the spectator. Who has acted or should act, when and where, so as to make a difference to Amina's life are key narrative elements that do not explicitly moralize the spectator into a politically correct activism but subtly confront the spectator with the possible consequences of his or her own actions.

To be sure, the Nigerian piece of news is precisely this: a single piece of news inserted in the flow of a longer broadcast. It can provide only glimpses of the event it represents. It can, under no circumstances, determine the nature, causality, or outcome of Amina Lawal's suffering. Nevertheless, by begging the question of why, this piece of news does offer to the spectator the space to reflect on the cause for action that it proposes. This is what Boltanski calls a "politics of justice."²⁸ As opposed to the politics of pity, in which the urgency to bring an end to the suffering always prevails over considerations of justice, in the politics of justice the sufferer never simply happens to suffer but is always subject to a test of fairness, to the question of whether her misery is justified. Why should a woman who had her baby outside marriage be convicted to death? Why should inhumane practices against women take place without us speaking out in favor of human rights? It is these questions on the justification of suffering that the spectator is here called to contemplate.

A crucial feature of "why" questions is that they are not simply propositional; they do not simply formulate issues. They are also performative; they enact a certain disposition toward the broader issues that the news presents. "Why" questions, in other words, at once express and construe the reflexivity of the spectator—the capacity of the spectator to consider himself or herself as a speaker who responds to the suffering he or she watches as part of a non-communitarian public. In the Nigerian convict news, such a reflexive response of the spectator is multiply performed in the news story itself. First, it is linguistically formulated in the voiceover through references to the unfairness of the verdict and the shock of the international public opinion. Second, it is visually displayed in the top-right screen graphic "no to death by stoning." Third, it is—crucially—embodied and enacted in the interview of the Amnesty International activist who calls audiences to sign the petition for Amina's life and to denounce "practices of humiliation, stoning, mutilation." Both the verbal and the visual modes, then, stage this piece of news as a response not only to the question of "why" but also to that of "what to do"—as a proposal for public action.

Cosmopolitan Action: Social Solidarity

This form of action speaks in the name of an international public opinion that uses agencies such as Amnesty International to monitor the will of governments to

act on world suffering and injustice.²⁹ Foucault, a theorist of power widely known as denying the possibility of resistance, forcefully advocated such a form of militant international citizenship, reclaiming the right of the governed to act within the sphere of those who are governing:³⁰ “Amnesty International, Terre des Hommes and Medecins du Monde,” Foucault (1984) states, “are initiatives that have created this new right—that of the private individual to effectively intervene in the sphere of international policy and strategy” (in *Liberation 1984/2000: 474-75*).

Is not the call for action to the individual spectator in the name of Amina’s life made possible precisely by the presence of Amnesty International? This is because, in its capacity as a human rights NGO, Amnesty International is both the carrier of global civil society values and a powerful political agent that monitors the democratization process around the world. To use Kaldor’s (2000) words, Amnesty enacts cosmopolitanism in a dual sense: as a moral sentiment and as a political project.³¹ This duality in the agency of Amnesty enables the representation of Amina Lawal’s news to combine a politics of pity with the claim to justice.

In this respect, the personalization of Amina, that is, her presentation in the news as an individual with a name, a face, and a universal human quality, her motherhood, plays an important role. This is because it is this personalization that presents Amina’s suffering as a cause worthy of our emotion and action—as a cause for social solidarity. Despite the fact that Amina represents a very different identity from that of the Western spectator in terms of her race and religion—both elements easily participating in the “othering” of sufferers, as we saw in adventure news—this news story takes care to place religion and race in a broader context and to portray Amina as a historical figure caught in a series of tensions between religious conflict and political power in her country.³² Indeed, the ideal of social solidarity, Calhoun (2001, 164) tells us, may be introduced in public discourse in two ways: “partly through enhancing the significance of particular categorical identities,” here exemplified in the personalization of Amina as a young mother, whose fate we may never experience as such but fully recognize as demanding our urgent support, and “partly through facilitating the creation of direct social relations,” which is here exemplified in the symbolic connectivity that the signing of the petition seeks to establish between her and us.

Social solidarity is a specific type of global connectivity that, as Calhoun (2001, 170–74) further explains, refers to a bond of mutual commitments that is not based on similarities of pre-established interests or identities (the communitarian bond) but rather includes the citizens’ engagement in shared projects of constituting a better future. Calhoun’s concept of social solidarity here does not only de-couple people’s bonds of commitment from their specific interests as already existing groups. It also further connects this sense of commitment with the vision of a “better future” for people who, because they remain undefined, can in principle come to consider any distant other as a humane sufferer (regardless of religious or racial background) and thereby expand their care beyond people like “us.” This cultural definition of social

solidarity is a necessary dimension of any cosmopolitan project because cosmopolitanism is not only about technological or economic development. It is also about the power of mediation to stretch the concerns of various publics around the world beyond local perspectives and, thereby, to constitute these publics as non-communitarian publics.

The mediation of social solidarity, then, is an important discursive proposal for the spectator in the context of this discussion because social solidarity makes a call for action that is more than simply words or wishful thinking and invites audiences to make a concrete difference in the sufferers' lives. The effectiveness of this kind of cosmopolitan politics, in turn, crucially depends on the voices of Amnesty International and other NGOs, the United Nations, Nelson Mandela, or the Live Aid artists because all of these agents bear the expertise, the authority, and, not least, the celebrity aura necessary to push the ethical cause of suffering through to vast television publics.

Pieces of news such as the Amina Lawal one are admittedly rare, both in national and in transnational television. National television, as we know, increasingly draws on transnational broadcasting in its news reports, but it does so in a manner that addresses the spectator as a national citizen within the communitarian logic of its own body politic.³³ In a similar manner, transnational broadcasting has emerged as a strong player in the arena of international politics, setting agendas and giving voice to the disempowered, but it is questionable if it does so in ways that cultivate a politics of social solidarity beyond the West.³⁴

Yet if the closer study of emergency news tells us anything, this is that cosmopolitan connectivity in the realm of mediation 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 transnational news flows may reproduce or transform the spectator's communitarian concerns in the zone of safety and to reflect on ways in which such flows may cultivate productive connectivities between spectator and distant sufferer.

Conclusion

In this article, I argue that if we wish to move toward a "global village" with cosmopolitan values, then we need to critically examine the discourses and practices by which global information flows invite the individual spectator to be a public actor in the contexts of his or her everyday life. In the light of empirical analysis, I discussed a hierarchical typology of news stories on distant suffering that consists of adventure, emergency, and ecstatic news. The two ethical norms that inform each of these types of news are communitarianism and cosmopolitanism.

Communitarianism suggests that the spectator of the news is invited to act on suffering that is proximal and relevant to the community to which he or she belongs. Adventure and ecstatic news, despite differences in their presentation of suffering,

enact the communitarian logic. Adventure news enacts the communitarian logic by blocking the option for pity for the suffering of people who are not like “us,” whereas ecstatic news enacts the communitarian logic by expanding globally a demand for action on suffering that is “our” own.

Cosmopolitanism suggests that the spectator engages with distant suffering through a demand for action on a distant other who does not readily belong to “our” own community. Far from the direct outcome of globalizing technologies of communication, cosmopolitanism appears to be a potential outcome of one class of news only, emergency news. Emergency news formulates a specific discourse on suffering that (a) personalizes and historicizes the sufferer, (b) incorporates the questions of “why” and “what to do” in its representation of suffering, and (c) uses global voices of authority to turn distant suffering into a cause for action. As a consequence, emergency news has the potential to introduce the option of social solidarity in the everyday life of the spectator—an option that can make a concrete difference in the sufferer’s fate, as it has indeed done in the case of Amina Lawal.³⁵

Notes

1. Silverstone (2006) calls this the “mediapolis.” In this article, I draw on a social theory definition of cosmopolitanism as “an orientation, a willingness to relate with the Other” (Hannertz 1996, 103; for a comprehensive discussion of the concept, see Tomlinson 1999, 181–205). In international relations theory, Archibugi’s (2001) definition of cosmopolitanism is very close to mine: “The cosmopolitan perspective sets out from the assumption that it is necessary to give equal value to human life, irrespective of whether an individual belongs to “our” or to “another” political and social community” (<http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/archibugi.htm>).

2. The claim that media texts make available proposals for identification and action to spectators is shared by a number of critical hermeneutic approaches to the media that ask the question of how media texts may participate in turning a group of spectators into a media public—a collectivity with a will to act (Alexander and Jakobs 1998, 28–32; Corner 1999, 6–8; Dayan 2001, 743–65; Seaton 2005, 102–32; Silverstone 2006, 43–55). Such approaches draw on a variety of theoretical resources to break with the ahistorical and static interpretations of spectatorship theory—a psychoanalysis-inspired set of approaches that analyze how the viewer is interpellated by the political apparatus of cinema texts to become a subject of power—while they insist on the key claim that the media systematically propose resources for judgment and action to their audiences—independently of the extent to which such audiences may or may not take up these proposals. For a comprehensive criticism of spectatorship theory, see Campbell (2005); for an example of spectatorship theory specifically applied on images of suffering and disability, see Cartwright (2004, 35–49) and Benin and Cartwright (2006, 155–71).

3. For the pessimistic line of argument on the ethical role of television in social life see Adorno (1938), Baudrillard (1988), Habermas (1989), and Robins (1994).

4. See Silverstone (1999, 141) and Peters (1999) for this critical point.

5. See Silverstone (1999) for the concept of *annihilation*, Peters (1999) for the use of Adorno’s term *pathic projection*, and Butler (2004) for the concept of *radical exclusion*. All these terms refer to the reduction of the humanness of the “other” in the media.

6. See Moeller (1999). See Tester (1999, 54–71) for a critical discussion of the concept of compassion fatigue. See Cohen (2001, 192) for the term *media fatigue*, which introduces the responsibility of the media in the discussion of audiences’ apathy vis-à-vis distant suffering.

7. This optimistic account of the ethical force of mediation goes as far as considering the media to be changing democracy today toward a deliberative model. Deliberative democracy, as opposed to representative democracy, is a non-localized, non-dialogical model of democracy, which comes about when audiences use media information to form judgments about distant events and undertake public action in the local contexts of their everyday life. See Thompson (1995, 114–16, especially, for examples of such possibilities); also see Alexander and Jakobs (1998, 22–41) on American civil society.

8. As the discursive mechanism that establishes a generalized concern for the “other,” pity is central to contemporary conceptions of Western public life and indispensable for the constitution of modern democratic societies. See Boltanski (1999) and Arendt (1963, 58–114, “The Social Question”) for a seminal critique of the conception of post-Enlightenment European public life around the question of pity. See McGowan (1998, 81–95) for a discussion.

9. For Aristotle’s situated ethics and inductive methods, see Aristotle (1976, Nichomachean Ethics 1140a24–1140b12 and 1144b33–1145a11), Flyveberg (2001, 110–28), and Ross (1923, 31–49).

10. For a detailed discussion of the methodology and the critical analysis of each class of news, see Chouliaraki (2006, 70–96).

11. The “shootings” and the “boat accident” pieces come from BBC World, August 31, 2002, whereas the floods in Bangladesh news comes from national Greek television, July 23, 2002. The first two were inserted in the flow of BBC World’s hourly news broadcasts and the third one in NET’s main evening news broadcast. BBC World shifted, just after the Indian boat accident, to “breaking news” on the Palestine–Israel conflict. NET slotted the flood story just before sports.

12. For the reference to narratives of adventure, see Bakhtin (1981, 101–2).

13. These pieces come from Greek national television (July 23, 2002, for the African rescue news and November 8, 2002, for the economic crisis in Argentina and the death-by-stoning verdict in Nigeria). I selected them because each piece gradually propels my main argument that there is an internal hierarchy of emergency news on television and helps me illustrate this argument with clear examples. Yet the basic semiotic features of these examples are, by no means, idiosyncratic to national television. They are part of the broad repertoire for the public staging of suffering, available in contemporary Western media, which include both Danish television and the BBC World service.

14. See Calhoun (2005) for the term *emergency* and an insightful analysis of what he calls *the emergency imaginary* defined as the dominant, media-induced perception of Western societies about what distant suffering is.

15. See Bakhtin (1981, 250–58) for a thorough discussion of the term *chronotope*.

16. Dayan and Katz (1992) provide early examples of such media events, including the assassination of J. F. Kennedy and the moon landing. My analysis of September 11 news is based on television material from the National Danish Television Network DR.

17. See Ellsworth and Sachs (2003) for this catching-up process in the September 11 global news.

18. See Nichols (1991, 156–58) on “identification.”

19. See Sontag (2003, 6) and Tester (1999, 54–71) for critical discussions of the concept of compassion fatigue and Cohen (2001, 192) for the term *media fatigue*, which introduces the responsibility of the media in the discussion of audiences’ apathy vis-à-vis distant suffering.

20. See Butler (2004, 30–31) for this point.

21. The mediation of the September 11 attacks was an extraordinary “media event” (Dayan and Katz 1992) that managed to re-establish and re-confirm the West as a community of citizens and viewers by throwing into relief the vulnerability of all Western societies in the face of blind terror attacks—a fear sadly confirmed later, in Madrid and in London. This granted, however, we should also bear in mind that the mediation of suffering has always served the purpose of building community and legitimizing political authority. This is because the spectacle of distant suffering inevitably contrasts with a sense of “our” safety, leading media publics to appreciate or even celebrate the cultural and political conditions that safeguard their safety. For this reason, the spectacle of suffering is often conveniently exploited as political propaganda in the context of a “politics of fear” (Furedi 2005, 123), in totalitarian as well as in democratic

regimes. As Cohen (2001, 20) explains, distant suffering manages to depoliticize reality by reminding audiences of their own vulnerability while simultaneously providing them with the evasive reassurance that “worse things happen elsewhere”.

22. For the micro public of Arab media, see Lynch (2003), Sakr (2002), and Karim (2002).

23. See Peters (1999) and Ellis (2000) on the function of witnessing in television (the sense of “being there right now”) as a performative function of the medium that construes the “truths” it represents at the moment of claiming to simply report them.

24. See Scannel (1989) for the role of the “anyone as someone” communicative structure in construing public space through the mass media. Also see Dayan (2001, 743–65) and Barnett (2003, 54–80) for key discussions on this point.

25. See Brown (2001, 8) for the theme of “humanity as a whole” and the “universal citizen” in the cosmopolitan literature. For the same theme, also see Hannertz (1996), Chartier (1999), Boltanski (1999), and Calhoun (2001). Last, but not least, see Barnett (2003, 100–104) for the connection between the governmental technology of power exercised by television and the formation of new subjectivities and new publics.

26. Silverstone’s (2004, 444–45) work on “proper distance” reflects, at once, an acknowledgement of this impossibility and an attempt to formulate a norm by which an enabling sense of proximity to the “other” may be construed on television. Similarly, Butler’s (2004, 144) work on “dehumanization” reflects both the recognition that it is impossible to fully represent the human and the need to understand how this failure becomes embedded in norms of media representation that selectively value and care for the lives of the West.

27. “Universal” morality, a discourse informed by ideas of Christian care and civil responsibility, was first articulated into the public realm in Enlightenment Europe and today constitutes a powerful discourse of ethics in the Western world. As Arendt (1963, 75) explains, it was the spectacle of human destitution and poverty with which the French revolutionaries were confronted that shifted the demand for action on poverty from compassionate charity by the good Samaritan to care for the “other” as a practice of the citizen. The historical origins of the politics of pity lie, therefore, in the enlightened awareness of early modern Europe that the suffering of others should no more be acted on through private charity but through public action.

28. See Boltanski (1999, 5) for a discussion of this concept.

29. For an overview of interdisciplinary literature on cosmopolitanism, see Archibugi and Koenig-Archibugi (2003, 273–91), particularly the sections on “cosmopolitan citizenship” and “cosmopolitanism as cultural aspiration” (282–83) and “ethics and norms in international affairs” (287–88).

30. See Foucault (1984, 474–75) on the announcement of an International Committee against Piracy in “Confronting Governments: Human Rights.”

31. See Seaton (2005, 81–82) for a discussion of the crucial role of Amnesty International in pushing distant suffering into mass media agendas. More generally, see Held (1995), Archibugi and Held (1995), and Archibugi, Held, and Koehler (1998) for a view of cosmopolitan politics that is organized around different layers of participation in discourse and decision making in institutions of global civil society, such as the United Nations, for example, rather than around the international politics exercised by nation-states.

32. See Butler (2004, 128–51) for a theoretical discussion of how media representations contribute to the humanization or dehumanization of cultural others.

33. For the role of mass media in the construction of national identity, see Anderson (1983), Billig (1989), and Barnett (2003).

34. See Volkmer (1999) for the emergence of transnational news networks, what she calls “self-referential” networks of public life, that act as powerful political agents in the global space of mediation. The question, however, remains whether such self-reference emanates from a communitarian or a cosmopolitan structure of address. See Held (1995) for the “democratic deficit” of global governance institutions that reproduce structures of global power rather than exercise a politics of solidarity.

35. For details on the acquittal of Amina Lawal by the Nigerian court (November 2003) see, <http://web.amnesty.org/wire/November2003/Nigeria>.

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