"Bring in the Audience!" Exploring an Interdisciplinary Approach to Investigating Audience Reactions to Mediated Distant Suffering

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly work on audience reactions to mediated distant suffering tends to focus on the moral, ethical and/or emotional aspects involved (Höijer 2001; Chouliaraki 2006; Scott 2014) while there is also a bias in foregrounding negative reactions such as denial, skepticism or indifference (Moeller 1999; Seu 2010). Hence, more complex and qualified aspects of audience reception risk staying under-explored in future scholarly work. This article acknowledges the complex nature and identifies a broad range of aspects (psychological, cultural, sociological,…) that can influence people's attitude towards distant societies and suffering. The objective is to explore different processes and aspects that can be integrated in research on audience reactions to images of distant suffering, from different disciplines within social sciences. Cultural anthropology and sociology of new media are briefly discussed in this regard while social psychology is looked in more closely. An interdisciplinary theoretical basis is quintessential in understanding the audience and its complex relation to distant suffering. In this respect, the presented article responds to the call for more empirical and theoretical audience research in the field of mediated suffering by taking the first step towards interdisciplinary and multi-methodological research (Joye 2013; Ong 2014; Orgad and Seu 2014).

KEYWORDS

Audiences, cultural anthropology, interdisciplinary, mediated distant suffering, social psychology, sociology of new media,

Introduction

Over the last decade, the issue of distant suffering has gained increased attention by scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds. These scholars have contributed to the expansion of this young line of thought, although questions and issues remain un(der)explored. Throughout the current field of research, the discussion has significantly revolved around moral issues, especially on the production, mediation and reception of distant suffering (Boltanski 1999; Moeller 1999; Peters 2001; Chouliaraki 2006; Silverstone 2006; Ekström 2012; Nair 2012), how distant suffering is produced and represented by different media (Joye 2010; Cottle 2014), and, to a limited extent, empirical research on how audiences actually respond (Höijer 2004; Kyriakidou 2011; Seu 2010; Scott 2014). Simultaneously with the increasing academic interest in and preoccupation with the subject, a call to further expand the

debate is becoming louder as well (Cottle 2009, Joye 2013; Ong 2014; Orgad and Seu 2014). New suggested lines of research include a broadening of the predominantly (news) media-centric analysis to incorporate the production and reception of humanitarian communication by NGOs (Orgad and Seu 2014); more empirical research on how audiences respond (Ong 2014); and the need for more integrated interdisciplinary research (Joye 2013; Cottle 2014). Following this, the aim of this article is to further open up current scholarly research on mediated distant suffering by examining the value and use of an interdisciplinary approach to studying audience reception of distant suffering. After a brief overview of the scholarly discussion so far, we will briefly examine several disciplines within social sciences and some basic theories of which we believe they can contribute to moving the field forward. Within the framework of this article, we will develop one particular discipline in depth – that is social psychology – which we set forth as a field of thought that can substantially contribute to new epistemological and methodological insights in the study of audience reception in the face of mediated distant suffering. It is our thought that before we can structurally begin with an empirical exploration of the audience in relation to distant suffering, we first need to explore how different disciplines within social sciences and humanities can inform new and relevant research questions.

Overviewing the debate on mediated suffering and audiences

While distant suffering and the mediation thereof has only recently attracted the attention of an increasing number of scholars and disciplines (for a more extended overview, see Orgad and Seu 2014), it is no new subject of discussion within social sciences. An early pioneer in the field is Singer (1972) with his critical account about global moral responsibility (especially of a Western society) to relief distant suffering. Jumping ahead several decades, another seminal work that contributed heavily to the current discussion is Boltanski's (1999) work on the notion of the 'politics of pity', stressing the importance of representational practices of suffering and the different articulations of pity. During the same period, Moeller's (1999) description of 'compassion fatigue' comprehensively described the feelings of indifference and desensitization that mediated suffering can inflict upon a Western audience. Partly based on Boltanski's accounts and also in response to Moeller's ideas, Höijer (2004) qualified some of these theoretical assumptions. Höijer's empirical research showed that audiences are still compassionate towards the suffering of others although a compassionate response is gender-related and depending on different kinds of mediated suffering. In the early 2000's, the academic discussion gained momentum and the likes of Tester (2001) and Chouliaraki (2006; 2008) stressed the related concept of cosmopolitanism as it refers to a shared humanity in a global setting that could (or ought to) engage people and motivate them to be compassionate and solidary in order to act on the suffering of a distant other. Other voices were raised as well, as Cohen (2001) and Seu (2010) point towards the sceptic, critical viewer who is both selective in caring (Cohen 2001, 187) as critical towards possibilities that are offered to alleviate the suffering (Seu 2010). Currently, there is a growing body of literature and research that is more aimed at (empirically) exploring the audience in relation to mediated distant suffering. Kyriakidou (2014), for example, demonstrated that audiences remember disasters and suffering-related events in a very hierarchical manner, resulting in different modes of moral and emotional attachment of the viewer towards the suffering. In addition, Scott (2014) concluded, drawing on focus groups and a diary-study, that viewers can become indifferent due to images of suffering they see on the news, while non-news related narratives can still elicit emotional responses and a deeper attachment to the suffering. Despite a growing amount of empirical evidence, we argue that these empirical studies are, as

valuable as they are, lacking a sense of coherence or structure as they are scattered over different disciplines and still leave many aspects untouched or out of the equation. Let us now turn to some of these items that are yet to be thoroughly explored.

Advancing research on audiences and mediated suffering

The majority of the discussion on audience reception so far has occurred on theoretical grounds and has started from moral, ethical and emotional points of view, indicating that an audience can be, or ought to be either emotionally attached, involved and compassionate (Tester 2001; Höijer 2004; Chouliaraki 2006), or critical and sceptical (Cohen 2001; Seu 2010), outright indifferent (Moeller 1999) or rather rational in a sense of acting as moral agents who are reasoning their way through life (Seu 2010). In addition, as Ong (2012) notes, this (largely theoretical) discussion concerns itself with a 'uniform' paradigmatic Western-oriented audience, thereby ignoring possible and critical differences amongst the (global) audience. One of the few empirical articles acknowledging such differences is the one by Höijer (2004) who describes gender-related differences in audience reactions to distant suffering. Yet, gender is only one of many factors that can be taken into account. Ethnicity, age, political preferences, someone's financial welfare are but a few other personal factors that result in different reactions from a public (cf. Kyriakidou 2011). In addition, contextual factors could be taken into account as well; one can for instance wonder whether our current actions towards distant suffering would be the same if we were not experiencing an economic crisis. Further, Joye (2013) points towards the current Eurocentric nature of our field of study, and calls for a widening of our field to include more non-Western points of view in order to de-Westernise of the on-going research.

In an inclusive effort to map out the field of mediated distant suffering, Orgad and Seu (2014) have pointed towards several important gaps in the literature that are in urgent need of further investigation. Most notably, they refer to the exclusion of mediated messages by NGOs as well as to the scarcity of empirical research on the audience. They conclude that we "should also investigate – systematically and rigorously – how things *are* rather than only discussing how things *ought* to be" (Orgad and Seu 2014, 28 – original emphasis), hence moving away from a merely normative discussion. Another recent contribution comes from Ong (2014, 179) who raises ethical questions regarding the investigation of text, production and reception of distant suffering that still "lacks a nuanced account of the relationship between televised representations of suffering and the audiences that encounter these in their everyday lives". Though still focussing on moral issues, he suggests new ways to study just what Orgad and Seu call for as well; how does an audience *actually* receive and consume images of distant suffering? Using Livingstone's (2009 in Ong 2014, 188) described theory of "mediation" as a method and perspective, Ong urges us not to overlook the dialectic process between audience and media as he believes that "conversation" and "mutual shaping" ought to be central in all discussions (Ong 2014, 188). Besides bearing these dialectics in mind, Ong asserts that adopting a more audience-driven perspective would reveal and recognize the diversity amongst the audience, raising questions about the value of the current debate where such differences have hardly been discussed (cf. supra).

These calls to empirically engage more with the audience and open up the existing research on mediated suffering and the audience can also be seen as part of a wider effort to broaden the field in terms of disciplinary boundaries. Due to the diverse realities and nature of human suffering, several scholars such as Kleinman (1988), Graubard (1996) and Wilkinson (2005)

are opposed to constraining the debate on suffering to a single discipline of study and therefore highly appraise the value of interdisciplinary study. Drawing on in-depth interviews with internationally acclaimed scholars in the field of media and distant suffering, Joye (2013) posed the question as to whether we ought to regard mediated distant suffering as an "emerging independent discipline", an "interdisciplinary field" or as a "subfield of an established discipline". Most of the interviewed scholars agree that the subject of interest should neither be considered as a "field" nor as a "discipline on its own" but rather as an "emerging interdisciplinary *area* of research" that has increased in interest linearly with the emergence of distant suffering throughout media and society (Joye 2013). Despite this scholarly acknowledgement of the value of interdisciplinary research, Joye (2013) finds that most are uncomfortable to thread away from their own area of expertise and beyond their own disciplines, thus rendering an interdisciplinary exchange of knowledge and insights rather difficult. A possible pitfall of these insular discussions is the neglect of relevant questions and topics that could potentially contribute to a better understanding of the audience in the face of distant suffering. Therefore, a truly interdisciplinary approach can offer us more perspectives to investigate audience reception of distant suffering more thoroughly.

Accordingly, we argue that there is a need for the acknowledgement of an intricate, multifaceted and sometimes contradictory spectator given the many different issues and factors, both contextual and personal, at play in observing the attitudes, actions and interpretations of the audience when confronted with distant misfortune. Once the intricacy of the spectator is acknowledged, the value of an interdisciplinary, yet integrated, approach to studying audiences becomes even more apparent. Looking through the lenses of cultural anthropologists, for example, could place the cultures and identities of an audience more centrally. A more sociological perspective can point towards new questions related to developments stemming from technological developments such as how online (inter)actions or the use of mobile phones can change the perception of an audience. Having said that, we need to acknowledge that this article does not aim to create a comprehensive theoretical overview of all possible disciplines and theories to be explored. The objective of this article is to inform and broaden the current media-centric debate by identifying relevant insights from related disciplines within social sciences, eventually to come to an interdisciplinary approach to the study of mediated suffering and its audience. Let us now turn to the different challenges and opportunities that this approach of interdisciplinary research represents by looking into some disciplines that could advance the current media-centric research.

Exploration of disciplines

Research on suffering displays a variety of disciplinary interests and contributions, mostly rooted within social sciences but also humanities (Wilkinson 2005, Joye 2013). Suffering has been theorized and studied by sociology, political science, economics, media studies, arts and literature, anthropology, theology, law and ethics. In this article, we foreground three areas of research and will discuss them in terms of their respective contributions to the on-going debate. The first, cultural anthropology and the second, sociology of new media will be discussed briefly while the third, social psychology, is explored in more detail in the last part of this article.

Cultural anthropology

An important perspective that seems to be surpassed or outright forgotten in current research is that of the victim, the sufferer who is central to the questions at hand. Cultural anthropology urges us to re-appraise the role that is played by distant people and communities and investigate how these relate with the domestic audience. It offers the possibility to learn more about distant suffering from the point of view of the victims themselves. Their experience of suffering is critical to understand the concept of distant suffering. As will become apparent, from a cultural anthropological point of view it is the *relation* between viewers and the sufferer that deserves our attention.

Indeed, one of the major contributions of the anthropological school of thought to social sciences in general, has been the continued emphasis on the importance of the formation of identities within a wider social context (Hall 1990; Gupta and Furguson 1992; Hall and Du Gay 2003; Nagel 2003). Hall, for example, noted how cultural identity is not only built and constructed by shared experiences and similarities but that "there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'" (Hall in Rutherford 1990, 225). Correspondingly, cultural anthropologists focus on the ways in which different societies, both Western and non-Western, *relate with each other.* At the same time, focusing on both Western and non-Western cultures, habits and behaviour, functions as a critique towards ourselves by using other cultures and ideas as a mirror (Milton 1996; Marcus and Fischer 1999; Abu-Lughod in Moore and Sanders 2014). Another major influence was Appadurai's (1990) description of globalizing processes where he describes how media, economy, ideologies, ethnicities and technologies vastly change people's perception on a global scale. His analysis of the process of globalization shows how seemingly separate nations and cultures are deeply embedded in a globalizing atmosphere (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), echoing the notion of cosmopolitanism. Perspectives, changes and developments thus happen within this context and must be approached as such. Related to our central research question, to find out how the audience relates to and perceives distant suffering is not only dependent on the audience in its Western context but must also be seen in relation to the far-away groups of people. We can learn how an audience can relate to and identify with distant suffering as well how those who suffer at a distance relate to the audience if we study both groups.

Besides this more epistemological insight, cultural anthropology can also inform the further development of the methodological toolkit for studying an audience. A classic example of the value of an ethnographic approach is Barth's (1969) contribution to the study of ethnicity. Drawing on a multitude of ethnographic studies he concluded how ethnic boundaries are not only maintained by overall consensus of shared traits within a community but that there are as many differences in traits *within* a community as *between* communities. His findings, resulting from multiple extensive fieldtrips doing ethnographic research, have heavily influenced many other scholars in the field of social psychology, sociology, political science and conflict studies (cf. Tajfel 1978; Giddens 1985; Fearon and Laitin 1996; Axelrod 1997). For the research on audiences and mediated suffering, ethnographic research can serve to discern more long-term attitudes, thoughts and feelings of an audience instead of only taking snap-shots of spectators' reaction to images of distant suffering.

In short, cultural anthropology concerns itself with the different flows of culture that are crossing boundaries on international, national and communal scale, resulting in the notion of

an ever changing community where modes of thought, codes of conduct and behaviour are not fixed but continually change over time. From this perspective, we can learn more about how a Western audience relates to the distant sufferer as well as on how the sufferer relates to the 'distant audience'. Rather than only observing a Western audience, the perspectives and insights of the distant sufferer are brought to our attention. This way, we can also take a step towards the de-Westernisation of our field of research. The importance of the victims' perspective, or at least of those who live in distant societies, is becoming even more important with the rise of the internet and the abundant use of mobile phones in developing countries. This brings us to the next, more sociological and rather technological perspective on audience and distant suffering.

Sociology of new media

Aside its obvious link to the discipline of media and communication sciences, the study of new media can also be considered to be part of the sociological discipline as the amount of literature and research on new technological advances within the field of sociology is steadily growing. Technological advances, namely the internet but also the use of mobile phones, have brought societies closer while also creating a more relative notion of 'distance'. One discussion connected to the possibilities of the internet is that of the possible renewal and revitalization of an active, indeed, *inter*active public sphere (cf. Habermas 1974) with all its possible consequences. The discussion has been revitalized along with the growth of digital connectivity and online activity (Iosifidis 2010; Goode 2010; van Os 2007; Dahlgren 2005). The internet does not only have the potential to bring the audience closer to the sufferer, it is also not confined to a more active audience. It is argued that internet and mobile phones have the potential to better inform and activate a Western audience as well as to emancipate, inform and activate people in developing countries (Agarwal, Kumar, Nanavati, and Rajput 2010; Aker and Mbiti 2010; Wasserman 2011).

It is, for instance, argued that digital communication can lead to a change in the construction of collective identities, replacing national with transnational as the basis for identity formation, thereby facilitating possibilities of transnational collective action (Lance Bennett, Breunig and Givens 2008; Richardson and Brantmeier 2012; Castells 2007). In addition, the rise in the use of mobile phones and increase in online connectivity can result in an increased economic development, education and collective political participation in developing countries (Katz 2008; Agerwal et al. 2010; Wasserman 2011). Nevertheless, more pessimistic voices in this discussion note the still existing inequalities, in particular the digital divide and the inequality of connectivity between Western nations and developing nations (Dahlberg 2005; Gerhards and Schäfers 2010). Questions have been raised as to the extent to which online activity and participation actually resonate in active social participation offline (Twenge 2013). Others refute the ideas of more agency for people and instead point to the mere continuation of existing hegemonic structures and the persistence of dominant discourses, only enhanced with the advance of the internet (Marmura 2008; Neumayer and Raffl 2008).

It is the increased interconnectivity and the construction of online collectives that result in interesting new questions for our study of the audience. The interactive and public nature of the internet could create a public sphere that transgresses both geographic and cultural boundaries (Uricchio 2004), resulting in a *transnational* rather than a national public sphere (Bohman 2004; Burgess, Foth and Klaebe 2006). It offers both to victims as to the audience

possibilities to start a cross-cultural dialogue (Burgess et al. 2006). While in the case of a disaster such boundaries may be difficult to overcome, a general cross-cultural dialogue could lead to a discourse of the cosmopolitan shared citizenship and to an increased solidarity or sense of agency when confronted with distant disastrous events as an audience. Although the scholarly discussion on the impact on the (transnational) public sphere of internet and other connective devices such as the mobile phone is growing, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to online possibilities within the field of research that is central to this article. As the internet impacts our (Western) lives, it also influences our experience of distance and proximity, our sense of agency, and, possibly, our scope of solidarity. On the other hand, we need to bear in mind the possibility of an increasingly passive audience, staying in the online confines of a Western dominated hegemonic, commercialized atmosphere, potentially leading to spectators who care less and less about distant events, perhaps eventually cumulating in a digital form of compassion fatigue (cf. supra, Moeller 1999).

Both cultural anthropological and sociological points of view so far have resulted in general but pertinent questions regarding the viewer's reception of distant suffering. While some of these general questions have already (slightly) been touched upon in earlier research, it still shows the many facets of audience responses that are in need of exploration. How extended and wide-ranging our subject of research is or could be conceived to be, becomes even more apparent when we highlight one particular discipline. In the next section we will take a more extended look at the discipline of social psychology as a new point of reference.

The case of social psychology

In the field of audience studies there is a long tradition of studying audiences in relation to media from a more social psychological point of view (cf. Livingstone 1998; Bryant and Zillmann 1991). Consequently, it is remarkable how little this interdisciplinary approach has been applied to the study of audiences in the face of mediated suffering. There are some studies hinting into the direction of social psychology, although limited to the reception of humanitarian communication. Seu's account on the denial of suffering by the audience (2010) is a good example of this emerging strand of research. However, if we - as media and communication scholars - are to reach new depths of discussion, we must step away from our comfort zones entirely and thread into other areas of expertise to explore existing theories from different disciplines and approach the subject from different angles. In what follows, let us explore some basic social psychological concepts and theories in order to identify new ontological, methodological or epistemological insights to study audience's reception of distant suffering.

Basic concepts

Contemporary social psychology focuses mostly on how a person's thoughts (cognition), feelings (affect) and behaviour influence each other and how these are influenced by the social context (Hogg and Vaughan 2010, p. 26). More precisely, lending Ross and Nisbett's explanation about social psychology, there are three distinguishing principles that can be viewed as "the tripod on which social psychology rests" (Ross and Nisbett 1991, p. 8). First, social psychology distinguishes itself as a separate discipline by examining an individual in the context of his/her situation; social psychology thus stresses both the person *and* the situation (Ross and Nisbett 1991). A second aspect that is taken into account is an actor's

construal of a situation; how a person acts in a given situation is depending on the particular traits, thoughts, and feelings of that person during that specific situation. In other words, behaviour is dependent upon a person's interpretation and consequential construction of the situation (Ross and Nisbett 1991). Third, social psychologists consider the person and the situation to be in a constant state of tension; "individual psyches, as well as collectivities ranging from the informal social group to the nation, must be understood as systems in a state of tension" (Ross and Nisbett 1991, p. 13). In other words; similar to the cultural anthropologist's interest in the relation between audience and sufferers, so are social psychologists drawn to the *dialectic* of an individual to its given situation which is central to social psychology.

Basic theories

The range of fundamental social phenomena that are studied from a social psychological perspective is wide: going from identity formation, conformity and obedience, social relationships and attachment, anti-social and pro-social behaviour to prejudice and stereotyping, social justification and altruist versus selfish (or preservative) behaviour (for an extended overview see Van Lange, Kruglanski and Higgins 2012). It is clear that many of these concepts are relevant to inquiries into the relation between audiences and mediated suffering. For now, two concepts that are central to the social psychologists school of thought will be described more thoroughly; identity and social relationships. We believe that social psychology can inform our understanding of the way in which an audience identifies with, and relates to the distant victims.

First, similar to the cultural anthropological discipline, the construction and consolidation of identities – both collective and individual – are central to social psychology. While cultural anthropologists take different cultures as a starting point, social psychologists focus on a (Western) individual within its (direct) social context. The 'social identity theory' (SIT) is one of the 'grand' theories stemming from social psychology (Ellemers and Haslam in van Lange et al. 2012). Starting from the notion of people's tendency to define themselves by comparing themselves to others, this theory stresses how groups are formed and maintained not only by inclusion of some, but also by exclusion of others who are considered not to meet up to the in-group standards. This theory has become an important starting point, reaching far beyond the discipline of social psychology and is widely used throughout social sciences, including the field of sociology, anthropology, history, gender studies and communication sciences. The importance of (collective) identity for a study of suffering becomes very evident through Oveis, Horberg and Keltner's (2010) work on compassion in relation to perceived "self-other similarity". They describe how compassion and empathy are more likely felt towards people with a perceived similarity. In other words, people's compassion was elicited more likely towards a person belonging to the in-group as this is the group that a person identifies most strongly with. The strength of in-group relationships thus has consequences for our capacity to feel empathy and compassion towards those who are closest to us (cf. Loewenstein and Small 2007; Goetz, Keltner and Simon-Thomas 2010; Oveis et al. 2010; Trope and Liberman 2010). Questions about people's compassion and care in relation to distance (and proximity) have been asked in our field of study as well (cf. Höijer 2004; Chouliaraki 2005; 2008; Silverstone 2006). From this social psychological point of view, compassion may less likely to be felt towards socially different people, including those who are portrayed as such in mediated messages of distant suffering.

A second key issue stemming from social psychology that deserves our attention is the formation and consolidation of social relationships (both collective and individual). Clark and Mills (2012), for example, posited the 'social exchange theory', noting that people's motivation to give to others is dependent on the kind of relationship they have with each other. In case of close and familiar relationships (communal relationship), people are more often inclined to give benefits (in any form), are motivated by emotional and empathetic feelings, and are less likely to expect anything in return (Clark and Mills in Van Lange et al. 2012). On the other hand, in an 'exchange relationship', a relationship of an individual with someone outside of the 'in-group', there is the expectation to get something in return (Clark and Mills in Van Lange et al. 2012). It must be stressed that their study was aimed at exploring social and communal exchange in Western contexts so we cannot directly distil how this relates to the spectators' relation with distant, non-Western sufferers. Still, it is obvious how people are motivated differently, depending on the kind of relation that a person has with the other. Building further on these findings, Newman and Cain (2014) explored how people experience the act of donating to charity organisations. They found that acts of altruism, such as donating to charity, are often not experienced as 'altruistic'; people rather experience it, simultaneously, as an altruistic *and* as a selfish, non-altruistic act that serves their self-interest. Interestingly, this "tainted altruism" was judged more negatively by participants than behaviour that was motivated entirely by selfish reasons (Newman and Cain 2014, 653).

In conclusion for these two key concepts and their relevance to a study on audience reactions to distant suffering, we can point to some general findings. Spectators' concern towards and reactions to distant suffering are, as we can see from these points of view, not straightforward and they depend on the way people identify with and relate to distant events and distant groups of people. It shows us the diverse and sometimes contrasting thoughts, feelings and behaviours that people can hold about themselves and towards others. Therefore, we can expect that viewers of mediated distant suffering experience conflicting emotions and thoughts. For a more holistic, full understanding of an audience then, these social psychological insights into the conflicting and complicated nature that drives these processes must be taken into account.

As a final point of discussion, let us now scrutinize a central element of the notion of distant suffering – that is 'distance' – from a social psychological point of view. For this, we dwell on Trope and Liberman's (2010) "construal level theory" (CLT) that echoes many of the central ideas of social psychology (cf. supra).

Case study: construal level theory and distant suffering

Trope and Liberman (2010) distinguish two levels of 'construals', that is, the way a person interprets and reacts to a given situation. The construal level theory (CLT) first refers to high level construals as being "relatively abstract, coherent, and superordinate mental representations, compared with low-level construals" (Trope and Liberman 2010, 441). High level construals involve more abstract, cognitive lines of thought, and are more related with *intentions* rather than real actions. In return, low level construals are more concrete, strongly associated with an individual's emotional state, and are more likely to result in specific pragmatic thoughts and actions. As Trope and Liberman argue: "each action (e.g., study for an exam) has a superordinate, abstract level, which answers the question of why the action is performed (e.g., do well) and a subordinate, concrete level, which provides the details of how the action is to be performed (e.g., read a textbook)" (2010, 441). In their example, the

intention of "do well" is the use of a high level construal in interpreting the situation while "study for an exam" is the low level construal that is more concrete and clearly more pragmatic in order to fulfil the intention. Psychological distance must be seen as an umbrella term describing various types of distance such as spatial distance, social distance and temporal distance that all lead to higher perceived distance and thus the use of higher construals (Trope and Liberman 2010). To relate this to our current investigation, we will now explore how distance (temporal, social and spatial) can, according to the CLT, affect people's perception and reaction to mediated distant suffering. In other words, how does the *distance* between spectator and victim influence audiences' perception of mediated suffering?

To examine how *spatial* distance influences people's perception of others, Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope and Liberman (2006) invited participants to watch a video that was said to take place at a spatially proximate location while other participants were told that the video took place in a more distant (cross-Atlantic) setting. Their findings suggest, in line with CLT, that more distant events are described in more abstract terms, while a proximate experience results in a more pragmatic way of talking about the presented images. Additionally, they discovered that participants could identify more easily with people in the proximate video (Fujita et al. 2006, 281). Their findings further point towards two important insights for studies on audiences' viewing experience of distant suffering.

First, given that distant events are generally interpreted in more high level, abstract construals, we can assume that distant suffering will be perceived and processed in more abstract terms. Indeed, Eyal and Liberman (2010) found that psychological distance "changes people's moral judgements and value-laden plans by changing the way they mentally represent situations in terms of moral rules and values". They describe how people are more likely to judge psychologically distant events and actions by their moral and ethical standards and less by emotional, hence low-level construal levels.

Second, as low-level construals are less likely to be used, we could question the extent to which people are capable of being emotionally affected by images of distant suffering. This leads to the conclusion that compassion, care and empathy are not so easily elicited by images of distant suffering as is generally expected and assumed. Indeed, it is not only *spatial* distance but *social* distance that potentially causes people to be less likely emotionally involved. It is argued that people are inclined to apply high level construals when thinking of out-groups (i.e. socially distant), regarding such out-groups as homogenous and structurally the same (Fujita et al. 2006; Trope, Liberman and Stephan in Kruglanski and Higgins 2007). Referring to mediated distant suffering, the inherent psychological distance at both spatial and social levels would - according to CLT - induce spectators to use high level construals and thus prompt moral judgements and intentions while excluding more emotional responses.

Until now, spatial and social psychological distance have been shown to have implications for an audiences' perception of and reaction to distant suffering. CLT, however, also stresses the importance of *temporal* distance. Trope and Liberman (in Van Lange et al. 2012, 451) argue that when people are asked to predict their future behaviour, they are more optimistic in setting their goals and intentions because they use high-level construals. More proximate future behaviour is based on low level construals and is more pragmatic, involving short-term subordinate goals that are associated with more emotional motivations. In addition, people's predictions about long-term future plans and goals (i.e. temporally distant) are less likely to be accurate. Coming back to our object of inquiry, while distant events such as disasters and other causes of distant suffering are thus assessed with high-level construals so that moral

judgements and intentions are made, do people eventually act out their morally proper intentions? Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-Benzoni and Bazerman (2010) clarify this in their study about ethical behaviour. They point towards the difference between intentions and actual behaviour and claim that we are "not as ethical as we think we are" (Tenbrunsel et al. 2010, 153). In terms of CLT, they argue that people "are overly optimistic, predicting they can complete tasks and accomplish their goals more quickly than they actually do" (Tenbrunsel et al. 2010, 158). So, when confronted with images of distant suffering, audiences are overly optimistic and self-enhancing about their future ethical behaviour but tend to neglect the more short-term low-level construals (i.e. affective state, concrete information, practical issues) which are essential in actually carrying out these moral intentions. For instance, donating money to a charity organization is considered to be a superordinate goal (high level construal) that is based on morally correct grounds but is intended to be conducted *in the future* while near-future behaviour is more influenced by low-level, concrete construals (e.g. specific situational and practical circumstances such as *how* to donate, how much, to whom and when). This way, a spectator may have the intention to donate money to a charity organization after seeing images of distant suffering, but whether such intentions will eventually be carried out or not remains unsure and questionable unless the spectators carry out their intentions *as soon as* they have watched the images.

In short, according to CLT, psychological distance - spatial, social and temporal - can have a profound effect on how people perceive actions and events in distant places and how they react to them. Psychological distance can result in thinking in high-level construals by using abstract and general terms, and leading to superordinate and morally appropriate goals. However, such high-level construals are less associated with the more affective, emotional experience that is generally linked to mediated images of a suffering other. Social psychology qualifies this and demonstrates that distant events and actions are less likely to induce emotional response which may have implications for people's capacity to be emotionally, compassionate and empathetic towards distant suffering – and our (academic) assessment of this capacity. In addition, based on temporal distance, it is questionable whether people's moral intentions will be carried out unless words are immediately accompanied with deeds.

Conclusion

In this article we have strived to open up the current discussion on the topic of audience's reaction to and perception of mediated images of distant suffering. Following the growing interest in this topic, it is vital to gain a more holistic and complete understanding of the audience in a context of mediated distant suffering. In the current field of research, the theoretical and empirical focus has mainly been on production and mediation of distant suffering as well as on ethical, moral questions concerning both audience reception and production of mediated suffering. To further develop as an emerging strand of research, we argue that there is a need to engage with the audience on a more empirical level as well as to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. In order to delineate the topic of audience reception of distant suffering, we must first expand and explore different theoretical and disciplinary points of view to avoid overlooking pertinent questions and insights. A more interdisciplinary approach serves to broaden the current debate by setting out new questions about the audience while simultaneously offering possibilities to de-Westernise our field of research.

In this article we explored several disciplines more closely in order to identify how these disciplines could contribute to the study of audiences in the context of mediated distant

suffering. From a cultural anthropological point of view, we are reminded of the importance of the victim who is displayed by the media. It is critical that we do not disregard them as mere background. In addition, sociological reflections on developments of the internet and the use of mobile phones have demonstrated the importance of acknowledging distance between groups and cultures, which has implications for the ways in which audiences perceive distant suffering. By a more detailed examination of several theories within the field of social psychology, it became obvious how we could examine an audience in the context of their surroundings, and in recognition of the many different personal traits and contextual factors that can lead to different reactions of spectators. Distance, for instance, can result in very different cognitive and affective viewers' reactions to mediated distant suffering.

For future research on mediated suffering and the audience, it is quintessential to broaden the horizon and bring new epistemological, ontological and methodological ideas to the fore. This article underwrites the call to open up the debates by demonstrating how treading on unknown territory can be valuable to identify new (theoretical, methodological and empirical) insights into, and possibilities for, research on the audience reception of, and reaction to, mediated distant suffering.

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