

# **Regarding Distant Suffering**

Audience engagement with  
representations of humanitarian disaster

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**Regarding Distant Suffering**  
Audience engagement with representations of  
humanitarian disaster

**Kijken naar mondiaal leed**  
De betrokkenheid van het mediapubliek bij  
representaties van humanitaire rampen

Proefschrift

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# 1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The man who looks straight at the camera, at us, has just finished digging out a hole in the arid soil. He squints his eyes against the blowing dust and the brightness of the blazing sun. The man is a Somali farmer, and the hole is the grave for his four-year old son.

A few weeks ago, the man had left his village in central Somalia together with his wife and son, to escape a devastating drought. After a long and punishing walk across their battered country, the small family finally reached their destination two days ago: an overcrowded refugee camp in Northern Kenya.

But the hardships of the journey had taken too much of a toll on the little boy. After their arrival, he died from exhaustion and malnutrition.

Here, in the Dadaab refugee camp, his father now stands next to the tiny grave and speaks into the microphone of a European camera team. He talks of his family's ordeal of fleeing their village, of the life they left behind, how his son always used to help with herding their cattle.

In a few days, the footage of the grieving father will become part of the flow of images about a food crisis at the Horn of Africa. Eventually, some of these images will reach the Global North, in a brief item on the evening news, a Facebook post, a newspaper article, a YouTube video, or the fundraising campaign of a humanitarian organization.

This dissertation is about what happens at that moment, when representations of distant suffering enter the lives of western audiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this chapter has been published (in German) as: Von Engelhardt, J. (2015). Leid und Mitleid: Mediendarstellungen humanitärer Katastrophen und deren Wirkung. *In-Mind Magazin*, 5.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2003) writes: “[B]eing a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience” (p. 18). What Sontag sees as quintessentially modern, evidently, is not the scope or scale of humanitarian crises that take place, but rather continual mediated exposure to them.

Most people who have been affected or killed by large-scale humanitarian disasters in the last decade, lived in the so-called “developing world” (CRED, 2016). How “we” – as western audiences – relate to the human suffering caused by drought, civil war, by famine, or forced migration is therefore derived mostly from various forms of representation. In consequence, as Zygmunt Baumann (2001) reminds us, the question of how to relate to the wider world becomes intimately intertwined with the problem of a globalized morality:

For most of human history, the reach of human moral challenge and the extent of human ability to act, and to act effectively, overlapped. As a rule, our ancestors saw no more human pain than they could ‘do something about’. [...] But while our hands have not grown any longer, we have acquired ‘artificial eyes’ which enable us to see what our own eyes never would. (p. 2)

Importantly, these “artificial eyes” – in contrast to our organic ones – are not under the control of their beholder. What we get to see of distant humanitarian crises and how we see it, is not up to us.

But what is shown and what is omitted, how a distant other is represented, how a narrative is constructed – all this feeds into our experience, and thus into our cognitive, moral and affective relationship with the suffering other. In that sense, representations of distant suffering do not simply inform us about – some of – the world’s misery. They compel us to position ourselves towards that misery by “inviting and instantiating a moral universe in which boundaries of community [...] are variously redrawn and bonds of solidarity correspondingly invoked” (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle, 2012 p. 49).

Inevitably, though, representation tames the most horrid human misery. It sanitizes and dilutes the numbing despair of losing one's child and one's future; the lived realities of extreme poverty; and the physicality of dying. What is more, in the case of humanitarian disasters in developing countries, the experiences of those who are suffering might often remain largely *unimaginable* to most of a western audience. After all, for most of us who are lucky enough to be living in the Global North, our capacity to imagine the realities of famine, of civil war, of the total – i.e., uninsured – loss of livelihood, remains limited. And then there are the banal circumstances in which these representations of misery enter our life worlds – in the train, on the couch, at the kitchen table, in bed – a “domesticity of reception” (Chouliaraki, 2006) so drastically removed from the context in which the actual suffering takes place.

As we will see below, the academic debate on representations of distant suffering has mostly focused on two dominant storytellers: the news media and the humanitarian organizations. Some have blamed them for an unrelenting flow of images and perpetual tropes of hopelessness, victimhood and western superiority that have led to a state of “Compassion Fatigue” in audiences (Moeller, 1999). The argument here is that the way the west continues to imagine and represent the Global South forecloses meaningful engagement with suffering that takes place in those parts of the world. But there are also those who have argued that narratives of connectedness and global humanity can cultivate a disposition of cosmopolitan care towards the distant other (Chouliaraki, 2006).

Until very recently, these academic debates on distant suffering have been informed largely either by empirical representation studies or theoretical reflections on the audience-sufferer relationship. The research presented here adds to the small – albeit growing – body of studies that investigate *empirically* how audiences *actually* engage with representations of humanitarian crises (Orgad & Seu, 2014; Scott, 2014; Ong, 2009). More specifically, the aim of this dissertation is to contribute empirical insights regarding the conditions that can facilitate or limit audience engagement with the suffering of distant others.

As I will show below, the current literature dealing with *audiences* of distant suffering very much draws on the literature on western media *representations* of distant suffering. An overview of this body of representation studies therefore offers a suitable entry point for a discussion of this dissertation's theoretical framework.

## **1.1 General theoretical framework**

### **1.1.1 Mediated humanitarian disaster**

The diverse and extensive literature on western representations of humanitarian disasters in the Global South shares a predominantly pessimistic view towards the ways in which distant suffering has been depicted by the news media and humanitarian organizations. A number of dominant threads of concern can be identified.

The first and most elementary theme in the academic critique of western representations of distant suffering is that of selection. A range of studies has shown that the amount of media attention that a particular humanitarian crisis receives is greatly dependent on geographical and cultural proximity, as well as geo-political and economic relevance of the affected region (Adams, 1986; Belle, 2000; CARMA, 2006; Hawkins, 2002; Joye, 2009; Simon, 1997; Singer et al., 1991). For example, both Belle (2000) and Adams (1986) found that the level of popularity a given country enjoys among US tourists can serve as a significant predictor for the amount of disaster coverage. By stressing the importance of political and economic factors, these findings thus tend to fall in line with the more general literature on news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001).

Importantly, however, some of these authors offer more than a mere media systems critique. They are concerned also with the material consequences for those affected by humanitarian crisis, as the amount of news coverage has

consistently been linked to the public's interest in a given event (McCombs, 2005) and – in the case of humanitarian disaster – also to the level of private donations (Waters & Tindall, 2011; Simon, 1997). Along the same lines, the extensively researched CNN effect thesis (e.g. Gilboa, 2005) assumes extensive media interest in a given humanitarian crisis to trigger audience engagement, eventually forcing democratic governments into intervention.

For those depictions of humanitarian crises that do reach western audiences, a frequently voiced criticism is that they offer little more than sensationalist and simplistic sound bites of distant misery, thus failing to provide audiences with sufficient context and meaningful explanations (Campbell, 2012; CARMA, 2006; Franks, 2005; Joye, 2009; Moeller, 1999; Ploughman, 1995). For example, Ploughman (1995) demonstrates how distant complex disasters such as famines are routinely covered merely in terms of their “natural” causes, thus failing to address their social, political and historical roots. Along similar lines, in reflecting on western iconographies of famine, Campbell (2012) observes that “while our understanding of the causes and the context of famine has undergone major revisions in the twentieth century, the photographic portrayal of food crises has remained largely static through the use of stereotypes” (p. 80).

The stereotypical portrayals that Campbell refers to are often attacked for drawing on neo-colonial discursive repertoires and narratives of backward tribalism (e.g., Brookes, 1995; Wall, 1997; Franks, 2005; Philo, 2002). For example, Wall (1997) found that US magazines covered the 1994 Rwandan genocide as an incomprehensible outbreak of irrational violence, drawing analogies with biblical mythology and employing comparisons with natural – and thus unavoidable – disaster. According to Wall, the reliance on the readily available tropes of African tribal hatred and savagery left little room for dispassionate political and historical analysis of the events and their actual causes.

These types of representations are also said to often be steeped in an imagined binary opposition between “us” and “them”, between “here” and

“there” (Joye, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2006; Konstantinidou, 2007). Analysing photographs of suffering from the Second Iraq War in Greek newspapers, Konstantinidou (2008) finds that while appealing to readers’ moral emotions, the pictures simultaneously served to “construct the distance between ‘us’ (readers/viewers) and ‘them’ (non-Western world) along the lines of bipolar oppositions such as past/present, archaic/modern, urban/non-urban, but also order/disorder, masculine/feminine, anger/lament, etc. (2007, p. 154). Similarly, Joye’s (2009) critical discourse analysis of Belgian television coverage of international disaster leads him to conclude that “news coverage of international crises not only reflects current global divides and power structures but also constructs and maintains the sociocultural difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ as well as a division of the world in zones of poverty and prosperity, danger and safety” (p. 58). Representations that obscure the numerous points of interconnectedness between those zones of “danger” and “safety” are also problematized as conveying to the audience a false sense of “radical distance from the location of suffering” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 376).

Bankoff (2011) places this “division of the world in zones” in a historical perspective. He observes that throughout time, western thinking about non-Western countries has successively been guided by concerns about “their” tropical diseases (to be cured through western medicine), about “their” poverty and development (to be cured through western aid), and finally about “their” vulnerability to natural disasters (to be cured through western aid and science). Drawing on the work of Edward Said, Bankoff points to a discursive continuity in these three tropes as they all “form part of one and the same essentialising and generalizing cultural discourse: one that denigrates large regions of the world as dangerous” (p. 24).

Another common theme of concern relates to the allegation that news media and humanitarian communication tend to favour representations of helplessness over those of resilience. All too often, suffering others are said to be depicted merely in terms of victimhood, as if lacking any agency. Consequently,

the frequent use of suffering children by humanitarian organizations and in disaster reporting is problematized as conveying a distorted image of passivity and helplessness (Campbell, 2012; Cohen, 2001; Franks, 2005; Seu, 2015; Höijer, 2004; Joye, 2009; Moeller, 2002). For the case of famine in Africa, Franks (2005) argues that the endless images of anonymous and emaciated children “reinforce the spectacle of an Africa full of passive, suffering victims” (p.134). What is more, presenting individuals in the Global South as helpless and passive is said to legitimize simplistic hero narratives of western actors bravely saving those in need (Moeller, 1999; Jia, Mislán, Deluliis, Hahn, & Christo-Baker, 2011; CARMA, 2006; Bankoff, 2011).

So far, I identified a number of dominant themes in the academic critique of western representations of distant suffering: failing to provide sufficient context and nuance; drawing on neo-colonial stereotypes and notions of inferiority; falsely creating a sense of disconnectedness between “there” and “here”; depicting victims of humanitarian disaster as weak, passive, and surviving only by virtue of heroic western intervention.<sup>2</sup>

In the following section, we will see that the sense of pessimism in the literature on *representation* reviewed above, also characterizes much of the works on how *audiences* make sense of and respond to these representations of suffering. As Orgad and Seu (2014) have aptly put it: “Scholars’ despair over representation is usually inseparable from their despair about the spectator and the precariousness of his/her judgment” (p. 29). This tendency towards “despair” is prominent already in one of the most influential early reflections on audiences vis-à-vis mass-mediated distant suffering: the *Compassion Fatigue* thesis, as formulated by Susan Moeller in 1999.

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<sup>2</sup> Even though this discussion is not the focus of this chapter, it should be noted that Scott’s recent contribution (2017) forcefully challenges the empirical bases of this hegemonic mood of despair in the literature on western representations of developing countries.

### **1.1.2 Compassion Fatigue and beyond**

In her now classic book, Moeller (1999) provides an in-depth analysis of the US media's coverage of a range of humanitarian crises, such as the Ebola outbreak in then Zaire in 1995, the famines in Sudan and Somalia during the early 1990s, and the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Moeller documents the depictions of suffering that US audiences were exposed to, the images that were shown and the metaphors that were employed. Largely in line with the literature reviewed above, Moeller finds that most of the US television coverage of foreign humanitarian crises was characterized by oversimplification, lack of context, sensationalism, detrimental standardization, and the solidification of cultural stereotypes.

The central question that Moeller aims to address, however, is not about representation, but about audiences: "Why, despite the haunting nature of many of these images [of humanitarian crises], do we seem to care less and less about the world around us?" (p. 4). For Moeller, the answer is found in the way the US media – and television in particular – cover distant suffering. Essentially, Moeller argues that the US audience lost its ability to feel for those in misery due to an overflow of decontextualized stories and visuals, and a resultant general sense of powerlessness. Compassion Fatigue for her is "a consequence of rote journalism and looking-over-your shoulder reporting. It is the consequence of sensationalism, formulaic coverage and perfunctory reference to American cultural icons" (p. 32).

Moeller illustrates the numerous shortcomings in the coverage of the selected crises with a wealth of engaging examples. But when it comes to the effect on audiences, Moeller is forced to resort mainly to anecdotal evidence, quotes from journalists and highly selective and sporadic use of public opinion data. As Paletz (1999) critically remarks in an early review of Moeller's book: "The author does not deal with the difficult, perhaps intractable issue of how to measure the prevalence of Compassion Fatigue, its increase or decrease over time and the period studied." (p. 497). And while there have been attempts to



engage empirically with the idea of a decline in compassion for suffering others (Kinnick, Krugman & Cameron, 1996; Höijer, 2004), it is still true that the idea of a general Compassion Fatigue remains conceptually contested and empirically unsupported.

This lack of empirical foundation has left the Compassion Fatigue thesis particularly vulnerable to a substantial amount of academic criticism in the two decades since its publication (see Cohen 2001; Hanusch, 2010; Tester 2001; Campbell, 2012). One of the most forceful critiques is found in Cohen (2001). After what appears to be a sincere attempt to identify psychological mechanisms that might lead to Compassion Fatigue, Cohen eventually has to conclude that “the whole thesis is an urban myth. There is not the slightest evidence for this in personal biography [...] or in cultural history (where exactly the opposite could be argued: a heightened emotional sensitivity to the suffering of distant others).” (p. 191).

Moeller’s account of the media as determining how people think and feel about distant suffering has also been attacked for essentially neglecting the audience’s capacity to reinterpret and critically appropriate representation. Arguing against the notion of a passive and predictable audience that the Compassion Fatigue thesis seems to imply, Tester (2001) suggests that “the moral horizons of the audience [...] are to a considerable extent *independent* of the media” (p. 75; emphasize added).

Moeller sees support for her claim of an emotionally and morally *fatigued* audience in her observation that there appears to be little interest, and even less moral, or emotional responses to suffering abroad. But, as highlighted by Hanusch (2010), this is not a particularly convincing inference:

“[The Compassion Fatigue thesis] assumes that there already exists a certain level of compassion that is progressively eroded by constant exposure to emotional images and stereotyped disaster coverage. But who is to say that people have not always been less affected by people in distant places?” (p. 123).

The fallacy that Moeller commits is, essentially, assuming that the past was better just because the present is not great.

To be sure, the forceful critique of the US coverage of humanitarian disaster that Moeller delivers in *Compassion Fatigue* was an important and much needed contribution to the debate on western representations of suffering in the Global South. But its central thesis of a general decrease in compassion remains contested and empirically largely unsubstantiated.

Despite the criticism and the lack of conclusive empirical support, the Compassion Fatigue thesis has found its way into public discourse and appears persistently in academic work on public responses to distant mediated suffering.<sup>3</sup> To some extent, this problematic legacy of Moeller's book is symptomatic for the field of distant suffering even today – a field where a scarcity of audience research has for long allowed claims about media effects to remain empirically unchallenged (Höijer, 2004; Scott, 2014; Ong, 2009; Orgad & Seu, 2014). As Orgad and Seu (2014) conclude in their critical review of the current state of the field:

It is striking that, despite the rich and prominent tradition of audience research within media and communication studies, debate hitherto on the mediation of humanitarianism (and distant suffering more generally) is informed largely by text-based suppositions about the effects of messages and the process of mediation, rather than empirical evidence showing how they are received and negotiated. (pp. 18-19)

With this dissertation, I aim to add to this body of empirical evidence about the relationship between representations of suffering and audience engagement. As the focus of this chapter moves from *representations* to *audiences* of distant suffering, I now turn to two recent contributions that have been seminal for the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, analyzing marketing strategies of international NGOs, Vestergaard (2008) sets out to investigate “how, in the face of compassion fatigue, the organization manages to carve out a new space for itself in the marketized ethical discourse” (p. 472). In a similar vein, Swain (2005) claims that “[c]overage [of HIV/Aids] has both reflected and led to ‘compassion fatigue’” (p. 146).

academic debate that Orgad and Seu describe hereabove: Lilie Chouliaraki's *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006) and *The Ironic Spectator* (2013).

### **1.1.3 Theorizing western audiences of distant suffering**

While different in method, style and analytical focus, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* and *The Ironic Spectator* both explore the complex relationships between a western audience and a distant, suffering other.

In *Spectatorship of Suffering*, Chouliaraki turns to the news media's potential to facilitate audience engagement with distant humanitarian crises. She rejects unsubstantiated generalities of both naive optimism and radical pessimism and argues that – in the absence of conclusive empirical findings – these two positions have become irreconcilable, foreclosing constructive debate. She seeks to solve this standoff by exploring specific characteristics in representation that might facilitate or foreclose a meaningful connection with the suffering other. Here, she draws on the concept of cosmopolitanism.

As a theoretical concept, cosmopolitanism has been used in various disciplines and assigned various meanings such as the ability and willingness to travel, to move outside one's 'comfort zone', to consider one's own society and culture in comparison to those in other parts of the world, and to understand and approach distant others in non-hierarchical relationships (Szerzynski & Urry, 2002). As Ong (2009) notes, "perhaps the common thread that ties together the many cosmopolitanisms that have been depicted in the literature is a fundamental orientation to the stranger, a welcoming of differences" (p. 450).

Chouliaraki builds her work on a similarly inclusive understanding of cosmopolitanism as she turns to Hannertz' (1996) broad definition of "an orientation, a willingness to relate with the Other" (p. 103 cited in Chouliaraki, 2006, p.14).

Her appropriation of the concept of cosmopolitanism is central to the methodological framework she develops in *Spectator of Suffering*. This framework – which she calls the "analytics of mediation" – together with its

theoretical underpinnings, has informed several empirical studies on both the representation (Joye, 2009, 2010; Verdonschot & von Engelhardt, 2013) as well as the reception of distant suffering (Scott, 2014; Kyriakidou, 2015). In fact, as Scott (2014) suggests, possibly the most important contribution of *Spectator of Suffering* was “to provide a detailed means of analysing precisely how news texts seemingly position spectators vis-a-vis distant suffering” (p. 344).

Putting to work her “analytics of mediation” to analyse actual instances of disaster coverage, Chouliaraki develops three ideal types of reporting that she sees as cultivating or foreclosing a “cosmopolitan disposition” in audiences: *adventure news*, *emergency news* and *ecstatic news*. She argues that, as *adventure news* glosses over the complexities and root causes of a crisis, and shows nothing of the resilience, humanity and agency of those who are affected, this mode of disaster reporting exacerbates the distance towards the suffering others. In contrast, she describes *emergency news* as offering context, highlighting connections between “there” and “here” and thus creating room for more nuanced and compassionate imaginations of the other as a feeling, acting and morally-relevant being. Similarly, the highly disruptive and engaging style of reporting that she labels *ecstatic news*, also facilitates a sense of care towards those hit by disaster – but under the strict provision that the other can be construed as part of a meaningful “us”. Chouliaraki’s “analytics of mediation” will be dealt with in some more detail in chapter 4.

In *The Ironic Spectator*, her second major contribution to the field of distant suffering, Chouliaraki turns her attention to what she identifies as a contemporary and potentially problematic shifts in representing and engaging with suffering others. While *Spectatorship of Suffering* theorized the moral potentials of disaster reporting, Chouliaraki now broadens her analytical focus to include various forms of representing distant suffering.

Informed by a historical perspective that she uses to contextualize contemporary practices of representation, Chouliaraki aims to demonstrate that we are currently witnessing a paradigmatic shift in the way we imagine and

relate to distant suffering others. She argues that, within the genre of humanitarian communication, past representations of suffering have typically drawn on the emotional repertoire of pity and guilt. In contrast, within the new paradigm, engagement with a suffering other is constructed primarily as a moment of personal experience and emotional gratification. In this paradigm of “post-humanitarianism”, grand moral narratives of global solidarity and injustice have given way to the personal gratifications of “doing good”, of fixing a problem, of being a moral individual.

For Chouliaraki, this development goes hand-in-hand with a shift in aesthetics from primarily photo-realistic depictions of suffering to more playful or artistic forms: the former accenting the truthfulness and authenticity of representation, the latter catering to the individual’s desire for aesthetically, emotionally and morally rewarding experience. This focus on gratification typifies the type of audience engagement that Chouliaraki describes as post-humanitarian. No longer susceptible to narratives of global solidarity or to political ideology, the post-humanitarian Ironic Spectator is fundamentally self-oriented, even – or especially – in the mediated encounter of a distant suffering other. In consequence, moments of engagement turn into transactional encounters and are sought only insofar as they offer affordances for gratifying experiences, for “moral actualization”, and for publicly parading one’s compassionate identity. In Chapter 2, I will return to the concept of post-humanitarianism in some more detail.

Both *Spectator of Suffering* and *The Ironic Spectator* have been instrumental for the recent advancement of the field of distant suffering. However, they also showcase a problematic tendency in the literature of distant suffering. Not entirely unlike Moeller’s *Compassion Fatigue*, both books speak about how audiences make sense of and respond to representations of suffering, without actually studying those audiences. As theoretically stimulating and normatively compelling Chouliaraki’s work is, she offers little empirical support for the claim that different types of disaster representations either facilitate or block

cosmopolitan care towards distant suffering others, or for the increased prevalence of audience engagement that might be labelled post-humanitarian.<sup>4</sup>

But this empirical deficiency is by no means unique to these two works. In fact, scholars of distant suffering increasingly acknowledge the dangers of making claims about *audiences*, based on the empirical study of *representation* (Ong, 2009; Orgad & Seu, 2014; Scott, 2014). As Ong (2009) observes: “The problem of the existing literature of course lies with the perils of making dangerous assumptions. When one deduces the effects of A to B from a close reading of A rather than a dialogue with B.” (p. 451)

And while emphatic calls for more research on audiences of distant suffering have mostly been a thing of recent years, it should be noted that already in what is often cited as the first systematic audience study in the field, Birgitta Höijer (2004) questions the value of an academic debate on distant suffering that is not also informed by audience research. While she acknowledges the need for rigorous theoretical reflections, it also seems evident to her that “[t]he value of discussing a theoretically constructed audience is [...] limited” (p. 528).

Fortunately, as more scholars of distant suffering have flagged the field’s empirical deficiencies, there has been a noticeable increase during the last few years in, mostly qualitative, studies on western audience engagement with distant suffering (Huiberts, 2016).<sup>5</sup> Before I turn to this body of audience research and to how it has informed the studies presented in this dissertation, we first need to turn our attention to terminology.

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<sup>4</sup> To be sure, Chouliaraki (2006) herself is very much aware of this as she concedes that “studying the extent to which audiences respond to media reports on suffering would require a different analytical focus” (p. 372).

<sup>5</sup> This recent development is also exemplified by the publication in 2015 of a special issue of *The International Communication Gazette* on audience research on distant suffering (guest edited by Stijn Joye and myself).

#### **1.1.4 Audience engagement**

In the title of this dissertation and throughout the text, I speak of “audience engagement”. Both terms require some clarification.

With “audience”, I mean a group of individuals who are exposed to a given media text. My use of the term is therefore relatively open, as it is common in the literature on distant suffering (see e.g., Huiberts & Joye, 2017; Kyriakidou, 2015; Höijer, 2004). Importantly, “audience” in this dissertation should also be read as free of any connotations of passivity that it has often carried for some (McQuail, 2010). On the contrary, the perspective I take is that of an active audience, one that engages in interpretation and participation – a perspective that, as Livingstone (2013) puts it, “leads to an insistence on the empirical, since inquiring into people’s everyday lives reveals how they can surprise, resist or contradict expectations” (p. 27).

Furthermore, I use the more neutral “audience” rather than “spectator” (Chouliaraki, 2006; 2013), because of what I see as the latter term’s restrictive normativity. As Orgad and Seu (2014) convincingly argue, conceptualizing audiences as mere spectators typically goes hand in hand with “lamenting the loss of the moral and political potential of the mediation of suffering in an encounter that is essentially a voyeuristic gaze at the pain of distant others” (p. 13).

Using the term “audience” throughout this dissertation – as opposed to, for example, “public” – also seems the most reasonable choice, as the different studies in this dissertation fall in the broad category of audience research – described by McQuail (2010) as, *inter alia*, “[u]ncovering audience interpretations of meaning” (see chapter 2) and of “[a]ssessing actual effects on audiences” (see chapters 3 and 4).

With “engagement”, I refer to all of the various ways in which people respond to mediated, distant suffering. In comparison to other terms used in the field to describe audience responses, such as “global compassion” (Höijer, 2004),

“cosmopolitan disposition” (Chouliaraki, 2006) or “denial” (Seu, 2010), the term “engagement” is considerably more inclusive. Scholars of distant suffering speak of “engagement” to capture the entire spectrum of possible responses to distant suffering (see Orgad & Seu, 2014; Kyriakidou, 2015; Chouliaraki, 2006). For example, Seu and Orgad (2014) discuss Höijer’s (2004) focus group study as shedding light on “the specificity of viewers’ engagement with the mediation of suffering” (p. 19). But also Chouliaraki (2006) routinely employs the term to capture the whole range of cognitive, affective, moral and behavioural responses to representations of suffering.

The inclusiveness of the term “engagement” is of particular utility for this dissertation, as its different empirical studies vary substantially both in methodology and analytical focus. “Engagement” thus provides me with a single term that covers the diverse ways in which participants responded to the specific instances of mediated suffering used in the study they took part in. In the different chapters, I then specify more narrowly the particular forms of engagement relevant for the respective study, such as the distanced and self-referential “post-humanitarian engagement” (chapter 2); the “critical appraisal” of the circumspect and media-savvy consumer (chapter 3); “empathic responses” such as compassion (chapter 4); or “the politicized witnessing” that is concerned not just with the actuality of human misery, but its structural causes (chapter 5).

To be sure, my use of the term is thus distinctly different from that of (civic) engagement within the literature on participatory citizenship in modern democracies (e.g., Dahlgren, 2006). “Engagement” as used in this dissertation, as well as in the works cited above, does not mean an act of political participation, but rather refers to all forms of engagement with representations of suffering and, as a possible consequence, with those who suffer.



### 1.1.5 The empirical study of audiences vis-à-vis distant suffering

As we have seen, the field of distant suffering is characterized by a conspicuous scarcity of audience studies. This, however, is not to say that no such research exists. A helpful way of categorizing the limited body of empirical studies on audiences of distant suffering that do exist, is by the breadth of their empirical scope.

On the one hand of the spectrum, we find a number of more *holistic* studies that explore audience engagement to distant suffering without limiting themselves to a specific type of response or a specific element in representation. These are the ones discussed in the next section.

In the two sections after that, I will review more *atomistic* research that focuses on specific forms of *audience* engagement (such as justifications and passivity) and on the implications of specific characteristics in *representation* (such as the use of children or strategies of domestication).

#### 1.1.5.1 Exploring the diversities in audience engagement

The multi-method study by Höijer (2004) is often cited as the earliest piece of systematic audience research on representations of humanitarian disaster. Höijer investigates how Swedish and Norwegian audiences engaged with news coverage of the Kosovo war (using focus group interviews) as well as mediated human suffering more generally (using phone interviews and in-depth individual interviews).

Even though Höijer does not set out explicitly to empirically test the Compassion Fatigue thesis, she inevitably engages with Moeller's book that was published just five years earlier. At first, Höijer finds that, for the case of the Kosovo war, participants' interest and engagement had indeed suffered throughout time. Eventually, however, she concludes that her "empirical research opposes, or strongly modulates, the thesis about a pronounced compassion fatigue among people in general" (p. 528). Overall, her results paint

the picture of an audience which is highly diverse in the ways they experience and make sense of distant suffering.

One of the central themes in Höijer's analysis of her empirical material is that of victimhood, as she observes that "the discourse of global compassion designates some victims as 'better' victims than others" (p. 516). Specifically, Höijer shows how children, women and the elderly were routinely constructed by her participants as "ideal victims": blameless and weak, and thus worthy of moral concern and compassionate action. In contrast, "[a] man in his prime is not worthy of our compassion since we do not regard him as helpless and innocent enough" (p. 521).

But Höijer's contribution goes much beyond identifying elements in representation that elicited audience engagement. Starting off from Martha Nussbaum's work on compassion, she develops a definition of global compassion as "moral sensibility or concern for remote strangers from different continents, cultures and societies" (p. 514). By exploring manifestations of global compassion in her mainly qualitative material, she develops a taxonomy both of compassion, and of distancing vis-à-vis distant suffering. As this taxonomy informed my analysis of open responses in chapter 5, it will be discussed in some more detail in that chapter.

A similarly diverse spectrum of audience engagement with distant suffering is found by Kyriakidou (2008). In her focus group study, she invited participants to discuss the coverage of three recent natural disasters in South-East Asia, the USA and Pakistan. While Kyriakidou's focus initially was on representations of these three specific disasters – and differences in their perception – focus group discussions frequently moved on to various other events of distant suffering. This, Kyriakidou suggests, is the result of overly formulaic coverage by the western media that fails to highlight the specific contexts of humanitarian disasters, so that they "lose their uniqueness and become part of a broader discursive framework" (p. 285). Similar to Höijer (2004), her findings also show

how audiences often draw on singular images when reflecting on and remembering the various humanitarian disasters.

But Kyriakidou's analysis (2008) also challenges the widespread notion that western audiences predominantly perceive the world as one of us (the west) versus them (the Global South). While participants frequently engaged in us/them talk, "the referents of this distinction would alternate both among and within the group discussions" (p. 286). Importantly, participants did not use the term *us* exclusively to describe a category of "us, the west", but also to speak of "us, the ordinary people", of "us, the poor" (a category that included those depicted in the Global South) or "us, who are not US-American" (a category employed in talks of anti-Americanism).

This diversity of audience talk of and engagement with distant suffering is also found in Kyriakidou's later focus group study (2015). Unsatisfied with past empirical efforts in the field, Kyriakidou now calls for a more careful exploration of those conditions that facilitate or foreclose audience engagement. She posits that earlier audience studies on distant suffering (reviewed in the next two sections) have taken an "approach to audience engagement with the suffering of others as a direct response to media images as witnessing texts" (p. 219). In consequence, she claims, such research has neglected "that audience responses are mediated not only by the media texts as representations but also the viewers' evaluations of these representations, as well as broader discursive frameworks of everyday life" (ibid.).

Even though – as we will see below – her harsh critique of those earlier studies is not entirely justified<sup>6</sup>, the taxonomy of audience engagement that Kyriakidou develops, marks a valuable contribution to the study of audiences vis-à-vis distant suffering. She observes in her participants four basic forms of witnessing: *affective witnessing* characterized by strong empathic engagement with the suffering other; *ecstatic witnessing* as an experience of complete

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Höijer's (2004) analysis of audience engagement is informed by tropes such as the "ideal victim", that presumably are very much part of such "discursive frameworks of everyday life".

emotional immersion in the dramatic spectacle of mediated suffering; *politicized witnessing* concerned with the causes and moral implications of distant suffering; and *detached witnessing* manifested in ostensive distancing and complete lack of audience engagement. As with Höijer's taxonomy of global compassion, I will return to these four forms of witnessing in chapter 5, as they guide my empirical analysis of the unstructured responses to representations of distant suffering.

#### 1.1.5.2 Focus on strategic denial and audience passivity

In her focus group study, Seu (2010) explores various strategies of “denial” in the face of distant suffering. Informed by Stan Cohen's work on the mechanisms of denial (and its social and psychological utility), Seu shows that – if threatened in their positive self-image as moral beings – audiences are prepared to go through great rhetorical pains to rationalize their passivity vis-à-vis distant suffering: “Participants effectively justified their refusal to donate and their general passivity in response to the appeal, whilst retaining a position of human rights supporter and warding off potential doubting of their moral stance.” (p. 452)

Her detailed analysis of these justifications allows Seu to identify three strategies of “denial”: a refusal to be “manipulated” by humanitarian appeals; taking on an overly critical stance towards humanitarian organizations; and questioning the value of the action suggested by the appeal. In chapter 3, I will turn to these three strategies in some more detail, when I examine empirically their implications in the critical reception of the viral humanitarian video *Kony 2012*.

Similar to Seu, Scott (2014; 2015) is concerned mostly with audience responses of denial and passivity. Both of his audience studies draw empirically on focus groups and diaries that participants were asked to keep for the duration of the research projects.

In Scott (2014), these diaries were used to document any mediated encounter with a distant other. In the subsequent focus groups, those real-life encounters were then discussed and reflected upon by participants.

In his later work, Scott (2015) uses a similar, slightly more complex design that combined every-day and “artificial” exposure to distant suffering. Focusing on representations of suffering on the internet, he builds on Seu’s (2010) work to show how participants effectively neutralized moral demands. Partly in line with Seu, his analysis suggests that participants were concerned largely with these strategies of justification, rather than any meaningful engagement with distant suffering:

The results show that participants’ online behaviours vis-a-vis distant suffering were characterized, not by understanding, immediacy and action, but by the deployment of culturally acceptable justifications which allow users to remain inactive whilst also retaining a positive moral self-image. (p. 638)

The findings of Scott (2014) give equally little reason for optimism. Here, he finds that for the most part, participants talked about distant suffering in ways that suggested that they remained largely unaffected and indifferent by the humanitarian drama, and concerned primarily with their own wellbeing. Importantly, however, some of his findings also told a different story:

There *were* instances, mostly among older and female participants, of particularly emotional responses to distant suffering. A key question, therefore, is not whether television necessarily promotes solidarity or indifference, but under what conditions are such responses more or less likely? (p. 18, emphasis in original).

This “key question” that Scott formulates is at the heart of this dissertation as a whole, and in particular of the experimental study presented in chapter 4.

### *1.1.5.3 Narrowing the focus: children and domestication in representations of suffering*

While the audience research reviewed so far have taken a more holistic approach, there are also a number of studies that have focused on particular forms of audience engagement, or the role of specific elements in representation.

In a series of focus groups, Seu (2015) explores how audiences respond to and reflect on the use of suffering children in humanitarian communication. Informed by Höijer's notion of children as "ideal victims", Seu's study confirms that these images indeed elicit stronger and more immediate empathic responses than suffering adults would.

Much more interesting than this finding, however, is Seu's detailed analysis of those moments when her participants regulated or blocked their spontaneous responses. Oftentimes, this happened as pictures of suffering children were experienced as so disturbing that participants – in particular (soon-to-be) parents – felt the need to distance themselves in what was generally described as an act of self-defence.

Seu's analysis also suggests that the effects of using children in humanitarian communication are in fact moderated to a large extent by participants' more general attitudes towards NGOs. Not unlike the strategies of denial found in Seu (2010), taking on a critical position towards the development sector enabled participants to dismiss depictions of children as nothing but marketing strategy. This effectively served to shift the focus away from the actuality of the suffering and its possible moral implications. Despite its relatively narrow empirical scope (the use of children in humanitarian communication), this study thus holds important insights of the reception of distant suffering more generally.

The same can be said about the recent study by Huiberts and Joye (2017). In a series of focus group discussions, different strategies of "domestication" are explored that serve to create a sense of proximity with the distant suffering other. What Huiberts and Joye's study highlights is that various strategies of

domestication are employed not only by *journalists* (as previous representation studies had already shown), but also by *audiences* who otherwise struggle to relate to the distant suffering (the authors call this “second-level domestication”). While participants also regularly expressed and defended positions of denial and passivity, there were those who attempted to “domesticate” the mediated events of suffering by relating them to their own realities. Evidently, the success of these audience strategies of domestication was contingent on what was provided to them in representation:

People were far more capable of empathizing with mediated suffering when they experienced a more personal connection to the suffering. This personal connection was often based on a sense of cultural similarity, shared experience, or geographical proximity. (p. 9)

Besides these empirical insights, what makes Huiberts and Joye’s contribution particularly valuable is that they draw heavily on insights from the field of moral psychology in order to distinguish between different cognitive and affective audience responses to distant suffering. In doing so, they respond to repeated calls for inviting this subdiscipline of social psychology into the field of distant suffering (Seu, 2010; von Engelhardt, 2015; Huiberts & Joye, 2015; Huiberts, 2016). In chapter 4, I elaborate on this call for interdisciplinarity in some more detail and explore its implications for studying audiences of humanitarian disaster.

## **1.2 Structure of this dissertation**

The four studies that together form the empirical body of this dissertation are investigations into audiences of mediated distant suffering. Specifically, I explore audience engagement with distant suffering in an interactive app (chapter 2), an online video campaign (chapter 3) and a television news item (chapters 4 and 5).

However, the aim of this dissertation is not to arrive at *comparative statements* about these forms' respective affordances in conveying distant suffering or their potential for engaging audiences. While the four studies all are situated within the theoretical context presented in this chapter, each of them addresses a different set of empirical questions and employs a different methodology.

The study described in chapter 2 engages with Chouliaraki's concept of post-humanitarianism. In a series of focus group discussions, I explore audience engagement with a mobile phone app called *My Life as a Refugee*. The app was launched in 2012 by the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR to convey the hardships of forced migration. In this chapter, I first provide a bird's-eye view of relevant developments in the field of humanitarian communication of the previous five decades, and in particular of the major shifts in dominant modes of representing the suffering other. I then show how a young, tech-savvy audience engages with this unconventional and interactive form of representing distant suffering. In the thematic analysis of the focus groups, I pay particular attention to the various ways in which the app appears to succeed or fail in eliciting engagement and how this is related to its post-humanitarian features.

In the survey study of chapter 3, I explore audience engagement with *Kony 2012* – a campaign video on child soldiers in Uganda, produced by a US-based humanitarian NGO. In March 2012, *Kony 2012* became the most viral video in the history of Youtube at the time, with 100 million views worldwide in the first six days after its online release. But its makers also quickly faced a massive critical backlash that soon overshadowed the video's initial record-breaking popularity. Based empirically on an online survey conducted in the weeks after the release of the video and theoretically steeped in Seu's work on denial and Chouliaraki's post-humanitarianism, this study explores the level of individually perceived moral responsibility evoked by the video. Specifically, I aim to dissect how the



clip managed to create a sense of pressure to act, and to what extent taking on the position of critical consumer can serve to evade this pressure.

In chapter 4, I explore the effects in audiences of specific elements in media representations of suffering. This large-scale experimental study (n=822) was conducted among members of the Dutch representative panel of the Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS). The LISS panel data are collected by CentERdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands) through its MESS project funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. For the purpose of this study, I edited a news item on a humanitarian crisis at the Horn of Africa and had it re-dubbed by a professional Dutch voice-over actor. The experiment was set up to explore the effects of two factors that have received much attention in the current theoretical literature: portraying the distant others as active agents or passive victims; presenting the life worlds of audiences and sufferers as detached or interconnected.

In chapter 5, I turn to a body of rich qualitative textual material that was also generated as part of the LISS study described hereabove: the spontaneous and unstructured thoughts and emotions that participants shared right after watching the news item about the humanitarian crises (and before answering closed questions). I conducted a content analysis to code and structure this large body of diverse expressions of audience engagement – or lack thereof.

Empirically, this dissertation thus draws on a focus group study, a survey study, an experiment, and a content analysis of qualitative material. In the conclusion, I then aim to demonstrate how such methodological diversity can in fact contribute to a fuller understanding of a subject matter that is too complex and important to be studied from within a single methodological paradigm.



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## 2 IN THE SHOES OF THE DISTANT OTHER?

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH UNHCR'S APP

*MY LIFE AS A REFUGEE*

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*“That we need games to have empathy with people on the other side of the world.*

*If you think about it, it's crazy.”*

*Richard, session 6*

## 2.1 Introduction

In 2012, UN refugee agency UNHCR launched a smartphone app called *My Life as a Refugee (My Life)*. According to its own website, *My Life* “lets players contemplate the same life-changing decisions refugees make in a true-to-life quest to try to survive, reach safety, reunite with loved ones and re-start their lives” ([www.mylifeasarefugee.org](http://www.mylifeasarefugee.org)). After selecting one of three refugee characters, one is confronted with the ordeals of forced migration and continuously required to take decisions to navigate specific situations that are depicted through drawings, photographs and written text.

In contrast to conventional forms of humanitarian communication, *My Life* thus invites audiences to take part in and interact with these narratives of distant suffering. As I will argue below, with its playful aesthetics and its emphasis on interactivity and personal experience, *My Life* can be seen as showcasing a development in humanitarian communication that Chouliaraki (2013) has described and critiqued as an “ironic” shift towards “post-humanitarianism”.

But while Chouliaraki’s critique of post-humanitarianism is now a reoccurring theme in recent works on distant suffering (e.g., Madianou, 2012; Nothias, 2013; Nikunen, 2016; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014; Driessens, Joye & Biltereyst, 2012), very little research actually exists on how audiences *actually* engage with these forms of representations (Scott, 2013).

In the following section, I first provide a brief account of the history of humanitarian communication. Embedding *My Life* into this historical context allows me to bring to the fore those characteristics that sets the app apart as an unmistakably contemporary attempt of representing a suffering other. In the empirical section, I then present the results of a series of focus groups on participants’ experiences of and reflections on *My Life*.

Finally, in the conclusion, I examine how my empirical contribution from the focus groups results might inform the more general, and largely theoretical, discussion on post-humanitarianism.

## 2.2 Theoretical framework

Ever since their rapid proliferation in the latter half of the last century, non-state humanitarian organizations have found themselves faced by the challenges of engaging western audiences with distant suffering. And while the basic parameters of that challenge might not have fundamentally changed over time (how to bridge distance, how to render the misery of distant others morally relevant), the socio-political, technological and discursive environments in which humanitarian organizations operate undoubtedly have (see, e.g. Cottle & Nolan, 2007). It is not surprising, then, that substantial shifts have taken place in the aesthetic and technological characteristics of humanitarian communication, as well as in audiences' sensibilities and the ways they appropriate representations of suffering to mark out their position towards distant others in need. In order to make sense of *My Life* and how it is experienced by audiences, it is thus useful to discuss the historical and discursive contexts within which to situate the app as a piece of humanitarian communication.

### 2.2.1 The changing faces of humanitarian communication

Expressions of compassion for victims of distant humanitarian disaster can be found well before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, news about the devastating 1755 earthquake in Lisbon generated a wave of compassionate responses and donations from across Europe (see Sliwinski, 2009). But the story of modern – i.e. professionalized, mass-mediated, and donation-seeking – humanitarian communication begins in the late 1960s.

One specific event is typically accredited with propelling non-state humanitarian actors onto the public stage as moral authorities and storytellers of distant suffering: the 1967-1970 war of independence and famine in Biafra, Nigeria. For the first time, western audiences found themselves confronted with a profusion of imagery of emaciated children with eyes sunken deep into tiny skeletal faces, of bodies deformed by months of undernourishment and

dehydration, of African corpses piled up in the sun (O'Sullivan, 2014). Never before had these kinds of images from a former European colony found their way into western living rooms on such a large scale. Biafra is therefore remembered today not only for its toll on human lives, but as "the first African famine to become world news" (de Waal, 1997, p. 74).

The unprecedented public response to the Biafra charity appeals and the massive scale of the relief efforts on the ground led to a significant professionalization and expansion of the global humanitarian sector, as well as to a boost in its public visibility.<sup>7</sup> As O'Sullivan (2014) recounts, "[t]he Biafran humanitarian crisis holds a critical place in the history of non-government organizations (NGOs). [...] As part of a wider 'NGO moment', it focused public and official attention on the role of non-state actors and accelerated the emergence of an internationalized, professionalized aid industry that took centre stage in the mid-1980s" (p. 299). It was through Biafra that western NGOs were to become not only "symbols of societal responsibility and global morality" (quoted in O'Sullivan, 2014, p. 300), but also the dominant storytellers of distant suffering.

The types of images that humanitarian actors used during the Biafra crisis continued to dominate the aesthetics of western humanitarian communication for many years to come, up until the late 1980s. This imagery employed an aesthetic of documentary-style realism: sincere, unlayered and – from today's perspective – strikingly unapologetic in its authenticity claims. Human pain is shown as raw, shocking and up-close; as morally unjust; and to be mitigated by way of western intervention (Cohen, 2001; Chouliaraki, 2013).

The humanitarian narrative at the heart of this imagery draws much of its appeal from its simplicity and moral unambiguity with those helping on our behalves (the relief workers) as saviours: pure, compassionate and heroic. But

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<sup>7</sup> One example of the defining role of Biafra for the sector is the foundation of the NGO Doctors Without Borders in the direct aftermath of the crises by a group of former Red Cross doctors, frustrated with their former employer's stringent guidelines on political impartiality which – in their view – had resulted in aiding the perpetrators of the Biafran war/famine, rather than helping its victims.

also the role of the suffering other is iterated in equally narrow, non-negotiable and essentializing terms: vulnerable and innocent, devoid of agency, defined exclusively through victimhood, and entirely reliant on external assistance for their physical and spiritual wellbeing. In more than one sense, then, this narrative is essentially one of dualities: “Following in the tradition of Africanism (Orientalism’s close cousin), NGOs in Biafra replicated the dichotomies of the ‘developed’ and ‘under-developed’ worlds: traditional versus modern; subsistent versus productive; agrarian versus urban” (O’Sullivan, 2014, p. 307). Blending colonial tropes of paternalistic care with narratives of global solidarity, the imagery of these early day *shock-effect appeals* (Chouliaraki, 2013) primarily aims at the moral emotions of pity and guilt.<sup>8</sup>

From the 1970s onwards, this humanitarian imagery of “decontextualized misery, permanent victims, endless suffering, [and] helplessness” (Cohen, 2001, p. 179) faced growing opposition, albeit initially only from within academic circles that problematized it as perpetuating paternalistic and neo-colonial discourses of western superiority (as also described in the previous chapter). It was not until after the 1985 Live Aid campaign that criticism of the mainstream tropes in humanitarian communication began to be heard more widely and vocally.

Aimed at raising money for a devastating famine in Ethiopia, Live Aid heavily relied on the familiar imagery of starving children and heroic westerners that had remained largely intact since Biafra. Somewhat ironically, however, the massive public visibility of Live Aid – described as “the world’s first proper global cultural event” (Jones, 2013, p. 117) – also lent considerable traction to those criticizing how NGOs represented the victims of war and famine in developing countries. For its critics, Live Aid showcased everything that was wrong with

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<sup>8</sup> Chouliaraki (2013) adds to this that if the communication identifies structural causes and/or perpetrators, the emotion of guilt can be accompanied or even supplanted by that of indignation (p. 60). For Chouliaraki, then, this is an important marker in distinguishing between humanitarian communication that can trigger no more than apolitical charity-based responses (motivated by guilt), and those capable of inspiring political activism that challenges perceived injustices (motivated by indignation).

how the west continued to imagine and depict its former colonies: “Pathetic images of starving children, helpless and dependent, perpetuated a patronizing, offensive and misleading view of the developing world as a spectacle of tragedy, disaster, disease and cruelty” (Cohen, 2001, p. 178). As Cohen shows, it was in the direct aftermath of Live Aid that the critique of these dominant imageries finally left the lecture rooms and academic journals and started to become articulated in wider society.

In response to these pressures, a new paradigm in humanitarian communication emerged. In this new paradigm of “positive-image appeals” (Chouliaraki, 2013), the imagery of suffering and misery is supplanted with that of hope and inspiration. Those struggling with hardship are no longer exclusively defined as needy and helpless, but as resilient and dignified. Within this “deliberate positivism” (Dogra, 2007, p.164), beneficiaries can be seen as enacting agency, smiling at the camera, thankful for the help they have received (Cohen, 2001; Orgad, 2013). Throughout the 1990s, this move away from simplistic and often dehumanizing representations of victims was formalized and accelerated by different humanitarian communication guidelines that prescribed how those affected by poverty and disaster should and should not be depicted. Most relevant for the European context, the “Code of Conduct on Images and Messages” by European NGO umbrella organization Concord (2006) requires its members among other things to: “Avoid images and messages that potentially stereotype, sensationalize or discriminate against people, situations or places; [...] Ensure those whose situation is being represented have the opportunity to communicate their stories themselves” (p. 3).

Within the new paradigm of “positive-image appeals”, audiences are addressed no longer primarily through pity and guilt. Rather, they are invited to be inspired by stories of resilience and dignity.<sup>9</sup> Chouliaraki (2013) fittingly

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<sup>9</sup> The contemporary version of this idea is captured well by the slogan of Oxfam’s Dutch chapter that presents itself as “Ambassadeurs van het zelf doen”/ “Ambassadors of do-it-yourself”. For more illustrations of this gradual shift from *pity* to *inspiration*, see von Engelhardt & Koopman (2015) (in Dutch).



describes this gradual movement as one from “shocking destitution” to “hopeful self-determination”.

Evidently, the account of the shifts in humanitarian communication provided here should not suggest that images of “shocking destitution” no longer appear in NGO campaigns today. Even though some humanitarian NGOs now have categorically banned from their communication arsenal pictures of helpless or starving victims, others still readily employ them in their fundraising efforts. Even within humanitarian organizations, the question of using negative (pity-evoking) or positive (inspirational) imagery in campaigns is a constant point of disagreement between fundraisers on the one hand and programme/advocacy professionals on the other (see Orgad, 2013). Importantly, though, humanitarian communication that still operates within the logics of the “Live Aid legacy” (VSO, 2002) increasingly runs the risk of public criticism and shaming.<sup>10</sup>

### **2.2.2 A third paradigm emerges**

The decades since Live Aid have seen an enormous expansion of the humanitarian sector, and an increasingly fierce competition between western NGOs for the audience’s time and money (Cottle & Nolan, 2007). Besides progressing professionalization and bureaucratization of the field, this has led humanitarian organizations to engage in ever more commercial and brand-focused communication styles (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Brough, 2012; Vestergaard, 2008). At the same time, audiences have grown increasingly critical towards persuasive communication techniques, and suspicious towards truth claims of appeals and the moral authority of NGOs in general (Seu, Flanagan & Orgad 2015; Seu, 2010; Kyriakidou, 2008).

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<sup>10</sup> Probably the best known international example of this is the “Rusty Radiator Award” that is handed out each year to a humanitarian campaign that relies on pity-evoking imagery and tropes of passive victimhood (<http://www.rustyradiator.com/>). In the Netherlands, a similar blaming-shaming function is fulfilled by the “Vlieg op het Oog Award”/“Flies around the Eyes Award” (<http://idleaks.nl/>).

These developments go hand in hand with a gradual erosion of moral and emotional certainties in the face of a suffering other – certainties that were still intact at the times of the Biafra crisis. In his seminal book on this estrangement from conventional humanitarianism, Luc Boltanski (1999) sees this erosion as an indicator of a wider phenomenon of a Crisis of Pity when he asks: “why is it so difficult nowadays to become indignant and to make accusations or, in another sense, to become emotional and feel sympathy – or at least to believe for any length of time, without falling into uncertainty, in the validity of one’s own indignation or one’s own sympathy?” (p. 12).

Furthermore, the availability of new communication technologies has pushed humanitarian organizations to move away from exclusive broadcast-model campaigning. NGOs have embraced social media and other digital tools that carry the promise of creating low-barrier spaces for mobilization and interaction (cf. Madianou, 2012; Brough, 2012). These technologies afford audiences with novel ways of getting “involved” by signalling support for a particular cause or organization – often at marginal personal costs or effort. These moments of “involvement” have been described as primarily self-directed and calculated acts of “moral self-actualization” (Chouliaraki, 2013). As Madianou suggests, “[j]oining a humanitarian campaign and making a statement on one’s profile becomes part of the narrative of the self, a virtual ‘prop’ that may confer distinction and other desirable characteristics” (p. 9). Or, in the words of eminent technology sceptic Evgeni Morozov (2012): “[M]uch of it happens for reasons that have nothing to do with one’s commitment to ideas and politics in general, but rather to impress one’s friends” (p. 186). Brough (2012) has aptly described these self-directed forms of audience engagement as the “conspicuous consumption of humanitarianism”.

As a prominent point in case, the *Kony2012* campaign – the subject of the next chapter – was crafted not so much as a realist account of the child soldier’s actual suffering, but rather as an effort to conjure up an imagined community of engaged online activists (Madianou, 2012; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014).

Importantly, these newly emerging forms of humanitarian communication are also no longer restricted to realist principles and documentary aesthetics and in fact often depart from “showing” distant suffering as they aim to “represent human vulnerability in innovative ways that break with the ‘objective’ certainties of pity” (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 8). As Brough (2012) observes, in this new humanitarian imagery “[t]he earnestness of ‘real’ portrayals of suffering is being matched with – or even supplanted by – more light-hearted, postmodern pastiche and youth culture aesthetics, and glamorized or playful representations of the humanitarian donor-as-consumer” (p. 176).

In *The Ironic Spectator* (2013) Chouliaraki has argued that these distinct, yet interrelated, processes described above – the marketization of the humanitarian sector; the emergence of an increasingly critical and media-savvy audience; the appropriation of new technologies and new ways of engagement – have contributed to the proliferation of a genre of humanitarian communication that can no longer be fittingly described by the categories of *shock-appeal* or *positive imagery*.<sup>11</sup>

According to Chouliaraki, both of these “conventional” paradigms of humanitarian communication shared two important premises regarding form and function of representation. Firstly, both *shock-appeals* and *positive imagery* appeals rely on the representational mode of photorealism. This mode derives legitimacy from its – typically unspoken – promise of authenticity, neither expecting nor encouraging its audiences to problematize the relationship between depicted and depiction. Secondly, both paradigms have typically relied on grand (moral) emotions in their audiences as a vehicle to push them into action: pity and guilt in the case of *shock-appeals*; compassion and empathy in the case of *positive imagery* appeals. According to Chouliaraki, neither of these premises subsist in what she calls the new paradigm of post-humanitarianism.

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that while *The Ironic Spectator* offers the most comprehensive and coherent analysis of these developments, similar shifts in humanitarian communication had previously been described by other authors (e.g., Brough, 2012; Madianou, 2012; Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Vestergaard, 2008).

While Chouliaraki's complex critique of this paradigmatic shift is not easily summarized, four features of post-humanitarianism can be identified that she discusses as particularly problematic.

First, as briefly mentioned above, Chouliaraki (2013) describes post-humanitarian communication as no longer tied to realism as the only admissible mode in the representation of suffering. In contrast to conventional humanitarian communication, the photorealistic depiction of suffering others has become but one of many aesthetic options. Post-humanitarianism therefore signals a "shift away from photorealism as a vehicle of authentic witnessing, evident in the 'negative' and 'positive' appeals, and move towards self-conscious textualities as yet another aesthetic choice through which suffering can be staged" (p. 69).

The strategy of post-humanitarianism is thus not to address but rather to side-step the dilemmas brought on us by the Crisis of Pity, by turning these dilemmas themselves into subjects of contemplation. Chouliaraki describes how the playful combination of different forms of representation – some realist, some not – can create a "semiotic juxtaposition that invite a contemplative relationship to distant suffering" (ibid.). For example, in one of the campaigns that Chouliaraki analyses, Oxfam uses cartoon-like animated characters to foster a sense of estrangement as well as self-reflection on our complacency in the face of injustice and suffering. Importantly, however, the post-humanitarian break with realism does not imply a complete abandonment of realist depictions, but rather the production of aesthetics which aim to "remind us that we are now confronted not with the facts of suffering but with acts of representation" (ibid.).

Second, post-humanitarian communication is conceptualized by Chouliaraki as both de-moralized and de-politicized. De-moralized, as it no longer builds on narratives of global inequality or global solidarity that conventional *shock-appeal* and *positive imagery* campaigns tapped into. To be sure, this is not to say that, for Chouliaraki, morality has no place in post-humanitarianism. But universal moral narratives do not need to be at the heart of its messages, since

individual instances of misery are presented to audiences as singular and isolated issues to be fixed. This logic, then, makes it possible, that “representation of suffering becomes disembedded from discourses of morality” (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 74). Similarly, as campaigns are typically focused on clearly demarcated micro-issues of suffering (e.g. lack of covered wells in Eastern Malawi) and simple pre-identified actionable solutions (e.g. buy a certain brand of bottled water), their narratives are also systematically stripped from any geo-political, historical and economic context (see also, Madianou, 2012). Attention is thus carefully diverted away from failing (domestic) institutions and (international) economic structures that might create and perpetuate the humanitarian crisis at hand.

Third, post-humanitarianism is described by Chouliaraki (2013) as marking a shift from “affective” to “reflective” communication. Campaigns are not constructed primarily with the aim to stir up the moral emotions of compassion or guilt as motivators for action, but to encourage reflections on the damaged relationship between representation and one’s emotion, as well as between one’s emotion and action. Not the immediate experience of emotion features most prominently, but the reflective engagement with our own emotional experiences and those of our peers. This shift in humanitarian imagination is showcased in Vestergaard’s (2008) critical analysis of what she calls “Meta-Campaigns”: campaigns that primarily invite audiences to reflectively engage with their own relationship to humanitarianism and international development, rather than to relate to the actual distant sufferer.

Fourth, and intimately connected to this “reflective turn”, post-humanitarian engagement with a charitable organization is understood by Chouliaraki first and foremost as an instrument for personal experience and moral self-actualization. Post-humanitarian communication is thus essentially self- rather than other-oriented, typically less focused on mediating the realities of distant suffering and more concerned with formulating promises of emotional gratification, rewarding introspection and appealing identities for audiences to

adopt. This is what Brough (2012) has described as a “shift in emphasis on the discursive production of the beneficiary to that of the donor”<sup>12</sup> (p. 188). For her, this turn towards the self is also indicative of a “more self-aware humanitarian culture that acknowledges self-interest and personal discovery in the encounter with the other” (ibid.). As a point in case, Madianou (2012) demonstrates in her analysis of the online *WaterForward* campaign how the skilful integration of social media and the public display of the user’s humanitarian “high score” has been central to its widespread popularity.

For Chouliaraki, then, the implications of this blunt self-orientedness are far-reaching and potentially dangerous as “they subordinate the voice of distant others to our own voice and so marginalize their cause in favour of our narcissistic self-communications” (2001, p. 9).

While Chouliaraki’s critique of post-humanitarianism is analytically and empirically focused on representation – contrary to what her book’s main title *The Ironic Spectator* might suggest – the paradigmatic shift towards post-humanitarianism for her also encompasses a shift in the moral and aesthetic sensibilities of the audience. She paints the figure of the Ironic Spectator whose engagement with post-humanitarian communication is steered by a “disposition of low intensity emotions and technological imagination of instant gratification and no justification” (2013, p. 73). While audiences of earlier, conventional humanitarian communication might have grappled with issues of authenticity and moral justification, in Chouliaraki’s *Ironic Spectator* these concerns are replaced by the need for gratification and self-actualization.

She characterizes the Ironic Spectator as a “savvy consumer of the mega-brands of the United Nations and Amnesty international, fully familiar with the advertising tropes through which these brands promote themselves in the market” (p. 176). Importantly, however, it is not apathy or full-out cynicism but

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<sup>12</sup> Brough herself does not use the term post-humanitarianism but speaks of “vanity fair” to describe the self-oriented, experience-based campaign style of Invisible Children (the NGO behind the Kony 2012 campaign). However, the conceptual overlaps between Brough’s vanity fair and Chouliaraki’s post-humanitarianism are substantial enough to also draw from Brough’s analysis here.

rather scepticism and ambiguity that characterizes the Ironic Spectator's response to distant suffering: Chouliaraki argues that while "reluctant to act out a solidarity of conviction, [the Ironic Spectator is] harbouring a visceral moral sense that guides [her] own altruistic response to human suffering" (p. 185). The Ironic Spectator is no longer occupied with larger questions of inequality and justice or even authenticity, but seeks out short-term and unproblematic "consumptions of humanitarianism" to satisfy emotional, moral and social needs.

Given Chouliaraki's vivid and rich characterization of the Ironic Spectator's motivations and sensibilities, it is important to remember that she is speaking not of an empirically observed phenomenon but a theoretically derived construct. As I have argued in the previous chapter, audience research is therefore needed to better understand how audiences actually engage with post-humanitarian communication. But before turning to audiences in the empirical section of this chapter, I first examine *My Life* through the prism of Chouliaraki's concept of post-humanitarianism.

### 2.2.3 *My Life* as post-humanitarian communication

In a number of ways, *My Life* can be seen indicative of the shift towards post-humanitarianism that Chouliaraki observes. To begin with, the app's imagery is not primarily realist, but makes use of the kind of playful modes of representation that Brough (2012) refers to as "postmodern pastiche and youth culture aesthetics" (p. 176). While the background of the visuals are actual photographs – a destroyed village, thick forest, a sea shore, etc. –, the characters that appear on the foreground are drawn in a non-naturalist and abstract style. Through this aesthetic device, the characters are placed atop of – rather than within – the photorealistic setting, lending them a distinct vividness. This imagery conveys nothing of the earnestness of conventional humanitarian appeals that aimed at showing distant suffering "as it is". Rather, the realist mode of representation appears as merely one of various aesthetic choices and no depictions of actual suffering are used to stir up compassion or pity. While the interactive nature of the app purposefully creates spaces for empathic engagement with the refugee character, it carries none of the urgency and actuality of appeals with emaciated children looking directly at us through the camera. The most gruesome events (such as murder or rape) are narrated and depicted in a neutral and descriptive tone, just as the characters' small and big triumphs in the face of hardship.

Throughout the app, we also do not encounter explicit narratives of shared humanity or moral responsibility. There is no "We are the World". In contrast to conventional appeals within the *shock-appeal* and *positive imagery* paradigms, *My Life's* moral subtexts are substantially more subtle. As the suffering is individualized, the user is invited to identify



Juxtaposition of realist and non-realist aesthetics in *My Life as a Refugee*



with the refugee character, to become engaged with his or her fate. This individualization of suffering also means that engagement cannot transcend the individual – and fictional – character. In fact, it can be argued that this radical “particularization” of misery goes to show that *My Life* discourages people to reflect on structural solutions to real refugee crises.

What is more, the countries in the narratives remain unnamed, as do the featured conflicts and natural disasters. Even though the background visuals suggest that events take place on, respectively, the African, Asian, and South-American continent, this delocalization of suffering forecloses any structural critique that surpasses the simplistic dichotomy of developing vs. developed world. This is characteristic of what Chouliaraki (2013) describes and problematizes as post-humanitarian “chronotopic estrangement” (p. 69).

Arguably, this de-politicization of suffering is in part a necessary corollary of *My Life*'s interactive form: we are no more aware of the wider socio-economic and political context of the events than the refugee characters who suddenly see their lives disrupted by large-scale violence and natural disaster.

As we have seen before, the shift towards post-humanitarian communication that Chouliaraki problematizes is also a shift away from an emotional towards a reflective style of communication that is concerned first and foremost with audiences' needs for reflection and experience. For *My Life*, this gives rise to the question whether the app's aim is primarily to offer a rewarding personal experience or to foster care and understanding for suffering others. As UNHCR's press release on the launch of *My Life* promises: “The events and outcome of each story depend on the decisions that the player makes, resulting in a potentially different experience every time” ([www.mylifeasarefugee.org](http://www.mylifeasarefugee.org)).

Furthermore, the very concept of *My Life* can be understood as showcasing an inappropriate or even dangerous obsession with the self in representing the other. Arguably, the very attempt to “simulate” the experiences of forced migration showcases the type of post-humanitarian “communitarian narcissism” which – as Chouliaraki (2013) warns us – cultivates “a sensibility that renders

the emotions of the self the measure of our understanding of the sufferings of the world at large” (p. 121).

*My Life* can also be understood as a post-humanitarian vehicle for branding UNHCR. There is at least one moment in each narrative where the refugee character either reaches a UNHCR camp or is otherwise aided by UNHCR staff. Even though the UNHCR logo only features quite modestly in the visuals and its employees are but one of various actors that cross the character’s path, the intention to infuse or reinforce favourable attitudes towards the organization is evident. For Chouliaraki (2013), such strategies of branding-by-association are characteristic of post-humanitarian communication: “[I]t is not the verbalization of argument but the ‘aura’ of the brand that sustains the relationship between product and consumer” (p. 71). This seems indeed the mechanism through which branding in *My Life* aims to operate: not by formulating explicit moral claims, but by invoking a positive “aura” surrounding UNHCR.

Another post-humanitarian element in *My Life* can be found in the app’s use of celebrity endorsement. When the character’s narrative stops (either because the character died or because he/she reached safety), a link sporadically appears to a video message by Angelina Jolie. The actor has become an integral part of the UNHCR brand due to her sustained involvement with the UN agency – since 2001 as Goodwill Ambassador and since 2012 as Special Envoy. For Chouliaraki, close identification of the brand of a celebrity with that of a humanitarian organization is indicative of the post-humanitarian paradigm. She notes that while celebrities using their fame to promote humanitarian causes is nothing new, we can now observe an unprecedented level of publicized emotionality and, in turn, ostensible relatability.

In fact, in *Ironic Spectator*, Chouliaraki (2013) herself uses the example of Jolie’s involvement with the UNHCR to discuss the post-humanitarian role of celebrities, describing it an “equal brand partnership between Jolie and the UN” (p. 100). To her, the public and personal involvement in humanitarian causes of public figures such as Jolie should be welcomed with caution as it “intensifies

connection with those like ‘us’, but without engaging us with the conditions of suffering others” (p.104).<sup>13</sup>

As we have seen, it is not a far stretch to construe *My Life* as indicative of the post-humanitarian paradigm: it turns away from realism as the only admissible form of representation and steers clear of tear-jerking or uplifting imagery characteristic of conventional *shock-appeals* or *positive imagery* communication; its narratives avoid explicit references to binding overarching moralities, but rather seek to engage users in an empathy-inducing, yet playful simulation of misery; and it discourages reflections on structural causes of conflict and natural disaster as the particularized suffering is both fictional and intentionally decontextualized as well as delocalized. What is more, the very premise of *My Life* can be understood as distinctively post-humanitarian, as the app attempts to convey the reality of distant others not through acknowledgment of and engagement with *their* suffering and distinct otherness, but through simulation, that is, through *our* experience and, in particular, *our* emotions.

Chouliaraki’s work on post-humanitarianism thus goes a long way in helping to conceptualize *My Life* as it pulls into focus those features of the app that are particularly novel and qualitatively different from previous, more conventional representations of suffering. However, there are also a few features of the app that cannot so easily be reconciled with the concept of post-humanitarianism.

First, *My Life* does not seem to be designed first and foremost with the aim of maximizing user’s experience and emotional engagement. In contrast to most contemporary mobile games, it features no sound or video content, users cannot earn points, advance to different levels, or record their accomplishments in a

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<sup>13</sup> Taking a similarly critical approach, Driessens, Joye and Biltreyst (2012) explore the different roles that celebrities play in the Dutch/Flemish context for legitimizing and commodifying televised fundraising campaigns. See also Littler (2008) who carefully dissects the seemingly symbiotic relationship between celebrities and humanitarian organizations.

high-score. If the makers of *My Life* had fully and unapologetically embraced the “communitarian narcissism” of post-humanitarianism that fetishizes personal experience and rewards, considerably more efforts would have been put into maximizing user immersion and gratification. As it is, the app comes across as fairly sober and somewhat subdued.

Second, the app is not an effective tool for “conspicuous humanitarianism”, as it offers no in-built possibilities for self-presentation on social media, or for showing off one’s progress, experiences or moral engagement with the app’s cause.

Third, while the analysis thus far focused on the app’s narratives, *My Life* also features another, albeit less prominent, content element that is not congruent with the app’s post-humanitarian character: a small text bar that appears at the bottom of the screen and contains short informational texts prefaced with the clause “Did you know?”.

These texts are noteworthy insofar as they complement the narratives in three specific ways: they provide more general background knowledge on refugees that contrast with the unmitigated particularization of suffering in the narratives<sup>14</sup>; they give information about how UNHCR assists refugees and thus promote the brand in a rather straightforward and explicit manner<sup>15</sup>; and they formulate moral claims that are explicit, unapologetically universal and other-oriented<sup>16</sup>. While the short texts displayed in the info-bar are not particularly prominent, their educational and moral tone does appear at odds with the app’s

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<sup>14</sup> For example: “Did you know? The vast majority of refugees find shelter in neighbouring countries. Only a small minority make their way to Europe.” / “Did you know? As many as 12 million people around the world are stateless, without basic rights to education, housing, employment and health care.” / “Did you know? The great physicist Albert Einstein was a refugee.”

<sup>15</sup> For example: “Did you know? UNHCR works closely with NGOs to distribute aid, give protection, and provide shelter, nutrition, water, sanitation, health and education.” / “Did you know? UNHCR pursues three durable solutions for refugees: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement to a third country.”

<sup>16</sup> For example: “Did you know? War and persecution have displaced more than 40 million people globally. 1 person forced to flee is too many.” / “Did you know? Every year many asylum seekers are forced back into deadly situations. 1 refugee returned back to danger is too many.”

post-humanitarian character. It is this somewhat ambivalent nature of *My Life* that makes the app a particularly interesting object of study.

It has rightly been widely acknowledged that Chouliaraki's theoretical contributions have infused new momentum to the field of mediated distant suffering. However, how audiences actually interpret and respond to post-humanitarian representations of distant suffering has remained largely unstudied, so that "evidence of an ironic shift in humanitarian communication remains very much confined to media texts" (Scott, 2014, p. 346).

In an effort to start filling this gap, this study addresses the following research question: *How do My Life's post-humanitarian affordances shape participant engagement?*

### **2.3 Focus groups and analysis**

I conducted a total of six focus group sessions in the summer and autumn months of 2015. Group sizes varied with one group of three, two groups of five, two groups of six and one group of seven participants. All 32 participants were undergraduate students, enrolled in an English-taught Media and Communication programme at a Dutch university. The group discussions were conducted at the university research facilities and lasted between 35 and 50 minutes. Participants signed up voluntarily and did not receive credits or financial compensation. At the beginning of each session, I retrieved participants' oral consent to video- and audio-record the discussion and to use anonymized individual quotes for research purposes. Participants were assured that none of the audio and video-material would be made available to third parties.

As the study required participants to talk about their experiences with the UNHCR app, it was necessary to ensure that they had already played the app in their own time. In the days prior to the group sessions, participants were therefore asked to install *My Life* on their phones and to play it with at least two

different refugee characters. In addition, they were sent an Email request to fill in a short online questionnaire about their experiences. The questionnaire consisted of three Likert scale items: whether participants thought that playing the app could change the way people think about refugees; whether they were emotionally affected by the fate of the refugee characters in the game; and whether they got a better sense of the realities of being a refugee by playing the app.

This short questionnaire served two main purposes. First, it made sure that participants had actually played the app beforehand and had started to reflect on their own reactions to and opinions about it. Second, it allowed me to use participants' responses during the focus group interviews, occasionally referring to either individual or aggregated answers to stimulate discussion.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the interviews, I tried to make sure not to steer participants towards focusing on specific features of the app that I had theorized beforehand as distinctly (not) post-humanitarian. Rather, I wanted participants to bring up whatever they found striking, odd, or memorable about *My Life*.

Trigger questions that I introduced at opportune times in each group were: What did you think about the app? What were your experiences while engaging with it? Why do you think that UNHCR produced this app? How could the app be improved?

After transcribing and anonymizing the interviews, I used the free coding tool QDA Miner Lite to conduct a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In its essence, thematic analysis is a method for distilling meaningful patterns from a body of qualitative data. As Braun and Clarke note, the method is neither tied to a specific theoretical or epistemological position nor necessarily geared towards full-fledged theory building. Compared to other methods of qualitative data analysis, thematic analysis thus takes a relatively modest stance as a "method for

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<sup>17</sup> Prior to the focus interviews, I had asked and received consent from all participants to share their answers with the group.

identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).<sup>18</sup>

My analysis loosely followed the phases of analysis described by Braun and Clarke. After transcribing and re-reading through the complete material – a process that already involved the scribbling down of ideas – I started to apply low-level mutually-nonexclusive descriptive codes to text segments such as “talk of credibility/authenticity of story-line” or “mentions other media”. After an iterative process of coding, re-reading and recoding, I eventually grouped a number of these codes into more abstract themes such as “role of app’s aesthetic attributes for player engagement”.

To guide this process, I paid particular attention during analysis to articulations of two symbolic relationships. As I discussed above in section 2.2.2, Chouliaraki describes the shift from conventional paradigms of humanitarianism to post-humanitarianism as a transformation of the relationship between audience and representation (how audiences engage), as well as between representation and the external reality of suffering (how suffering is represented). In my effort to understand how participants would engage with the post-humanitarian affordances of the app, it therefore seemed useful to analytically separate on the one hand how they positioned themselves towards the representation, and on the other hand how they conceptualized the app as relating to actual, ongoing suffering.

In consequence, my analysis focuses on the ways in which participants reflected on the experience of engaging with the app, as well as on how they spoke of its role as a piece of representation of *actual* suffering.

This conceptual division proved very useful for the process of analysis. Furthermore, it also serves to structure the results section where I first discuss

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<sup>18</sup> Braun and Clarke are keen to stress that what they define as thematic analysis is by no means a novel or innovative approach. On the contrary, they claim that researchers oftentimes conduct what essentially is a thematic analysis but then fail to name it as such. Rather, the analytical process is then artificially “dressed up” to seemingly fit within more prestigious and “branded” traditions such as Critical Discourse Analysis or Grounded Theory.

themes that emerged in participants' reflections on their own experiences while engaging with the app (e.g. on their level of emotional involvement), to then move the focus towards themes on the app as a piece of representation (e.g. ethical considerations when depicting real suffering).

## **2.4 Results**

### **2.4.1 The limitations of mediation**

One of the questions in the survey sent out prior to the focus group sessions asked participants whether they had been “emotionally affected by the fate of the refugee characters in the game”. A clear majority of 24 out of 32 agreed to some extent with this statement. However, during the focus group sessions, it became clear that these findings capture but one side of a much more complex story.

During the group discussions, many participants were indeed able to recall specific moments of emotional involvement while playing. At the same time, they were typically quick to qualify them as quite superficial and inconsequential, and oftentimes struggled to experience the depicted suffering as anything but fictional:

EVA: I found it sad, but it was like...I couldn't imagine it happening to me. So I wasn't emotionally attached by it. It was more like, I saw it really as a game, and not like a real person. I know it happens, I know real persons make that decision and lose family. But – I don't know – I really didn't feel much emotions with the game. (session 4)

Like many other participants, Eva is seeking permissible explanations for her apparent lack of emotional engagement. She points to the game's failure to touch her emotionally but also brings up her own inability to really imagine what it is like to be the depicted other. Importantly, she does not question that the app accurately simulates some of the life-or-death decisions of real refugees, but seeks a sensation of emotional empathy that the app is unable to deliver. This



perceived tension between cognitively knowing about the reality of the refugee's suffering – a form of cognitive empathy – on the one hand, and an unsettling perceived inability to effectively – i.e. affectively – *imagine* the characters' hardships of the other, emerged as a recurring theme:

BARBARA: I think, I was kind of depressed. Because it seems like it's a videogame and you are playing a videogame. But actually it's real life. And for you to realize that. And that you can't actually do anything about it. Like, how am I supposed to do anything about that person's situation right now? I don't know, it gave you a bit of a background knowledge what they go through. Yeah, you can't really imagine it here, because you have never experienced something like that before. (session 5)

The various reasons for the app's limited capacity to bring about emotional engagement was a frequent topic of discussion. As all participants were young, tech-savvy Media and Communication majors, it was not surprising that much criticism was aimed at the app's production value. Whenever group discussions turned to *My Life's* technical affordances, there was no doubt that the app did not meet current standards of a mobile game. While it was frequently suggested that – in principle – the idea behind *My Life* could “work”, the app's perceived technical inadequacies were routinely brought up as a major obstacle to more substantial player engagement. Specifically, criticism focused on the app's simple read-and-click logic, the absence of any audio and video content, and the limited level of interactivity.

LAURA: Well, I see potential in this but I think this was made really badly. Like it could have had more action, like you have to run or something. I don't know, like, make it into a proper game. That doesn't last a minute, that you are very fast...

SUSAN: Yeah, exactly.

LAURA: ...but that it kind of engages you in a way. Cause here I wasn't engaged at all, really. (session 2)

When reflecting on the app as a mobile game, participants like Laura felt mostly underwhelmed. *My Life* failed to offer the kind of immersive affordances

expected of mobile apps. As Rose put it: “When I play a game I kind of like to do something. Like Angry Birds” (session 3).

Participants in all groups came up with various recommendations to improve the game characteristics of the app, such as adding different levels to give players a sense of progress, offering the ability to “unlock” new refugee characters or including video/audio content. Interestingly, however, these suggestions were often met by expressions of unease of other participants:

TIM: But if it was more real life, really more virtualized and not just drawings as he said, maybe it could capture more the attention of the people.

PAULA: But then it would kind of, it would start becoming...

BOB: Well it would become like Modern Warfare and stuff, like a game that people just play for amusement.

PAULA: But like Modern Warfare is not an actual situation, like this is actually happening. (session 4)

This excerpt nicely illustrates how the suggestion of a participant to enhance the app’s game appeal often prompted concerns about the app’s admissible entertainment value. In the excerpt above, Paula is clearly uncomfortable with making the app all about experience, about catering fully to a post-humanitarian need for personal gratification. She struggles to resolve the tension between a perceived necessity to make the app more engaging on the one hand and doing justice to the severity of the depicted reality on the other (“this is actually happening”).

It was moments of reflection and disagreement like these, that often steered the discussions towards the more general question of how the app should in fact be understood, and thus be judged: as a game, meant to entertain and engage; or as an educational tool, meant to inform and to raise awareness.<sup>19</sup> Participants often disagreed on the most adequate term to describe both what the app was, and what it should aspire to be. Besides “game” and “educational tool” the app was referred to by participants as an “interactive book” or a way of “storytelling”.

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout the discussions, I deliberately avoided using either term, sticking to the more neutral “app”.

But in whatever terms participants talked about *My Life*, discussions routinely arose about the appropriate level of entertainment value that would still do justice to the suffering of actual refugees. While not unsusceptible to the post-humanitarian promises of affective identification, participants thus did not seem to indulge in an emotional narcissism obsessed only with personal emotional gratification.

#### **2.4.2 The significance of empathic hooks**

Even though participants in all groups were quick to point to the limitations of the app, many did recall specific moments of emotional engagement. Typically, these were related to specific scenes or decision prompts, rather than the character's narrative and hardship in its entirety. A principal feature of these moments of emotional engagement turned out to be the perceived similarity with the refugee character:

JvE: But did it also work in the sense of actually putting you - as you said - 'putting you into the skin of that refugee' that you were playing?

LAURA: Not really.

TAMARA: Not really.

SUSAN: Just, I think the family thing for me maybe a bit. Because I could relate to, you know, siblings that I have. I would never lever them behind, for example. So in that sense, yeah. But in the other senses, the other woman for instance, I couldn't really relate to her. But maybe, you know, leaving my brother or sister behind is obviously something that I can relate to. (session 2)

Susan brings up her own siblings here as a way to connect to the characters. Seemingly superficial commonalities like these were frequently mentioned as an essential or even necessary condition for meaningful empathic engagement with the characters' fate.

TAMARA: Also because maybe, I'm here alone, by myself. I cannot even see my parents or my family that often. So I can imagine if one day, they just tell you, you cannot go back to [Tamara's home country] anymore, because it is in war. You have no idea where your parents are and you are in Europe. (session 2)

Tamara makes a substantial effort here of trying to relate her current living situation to that of the character. While she is aware of the obvious limits of the comparison, Tamara uses her experience of being separated from her own family as “a way in”, as a method to feel what it must be like, as a path to some form of affective empathy with the character. The identification of these “empathic hooks” – having siblings, being the same age, being far from home – was often a way to connect to the refugee character’s fate:

LYDIA: I don't know, I was attached I guess by the role that they had or the little description they had. I think it was Paolo, the brother of four. And I mean I have three other siblings too, so I kind of felt like connected in that sense. Oh if my brother did that. So I think in a way that's how I was connected with him.  
(session 3)

Similar attempts to reduce distance by identifying commonalities were common among participants and have also been observed by Huiberts and Joye (2017) who, as I showed in chapter 1, have fittingly described them as “second-level domestication”.

What is more, it was not uncommon for participants to report that they had deliberately selected characters which they saw as most similar to themselves. Some argued that the app should therefore offer a more varied range of refugee characters to choose from:

TIM: And maybe [the app should include] more characters.  
PAULA: So you could actually find a character that is closest to you.  
TIM: Someone you could relate to.  
PAULA: If it was like a 19 year old girl who went to school, that would be closest to me. So then, I'd probably be more likely to choose her and feel more emotionally connected to her, because she is me, but then more...  
BOB: Yeah, that was my first thing as well, looking through the characters.  
Where am I? (session 4)

What is more, participants in several groups suggested that the app should allow for the “customization” of refugee characters to make them more akin to the player:

RICHARD: It sounds really strange, but why couldn't you insert your own name and that it's you in the game. Cause if you want to create awareness – let's be honest, most of the people don't care a lot about others. And it's like far-fetched – like the other side of the world – for me it's different but for a lot of people it's like that. So why shouldn't you...if it's you who is the character, you know. So you are in this world, and you have to solve it by yourself. It's not like you are making a decision for someone else. Cause that's already an extra barrier to play, you know.

SIMONE: Yeah, that's really a good idea. Even if it's just your name.

RICHARD: Yeah, just your name. Or your age, for example. (session 6)

In another group, this idea of customization was taken even further:

SUSAN: They could even like....you could even make your own character that looks like you. And then they assign you with a background, as a refugee. Like, you are this and this and this. And then you start your life. (session 1)

From the vantage point of Chouliaraki's critique of post-humanitarianism, these excerpts can readily be construed as expressions of participants' unwillingness or inability to truly engage with the *otherness* of distant others. For Chouliaraki, this narcissistic need to make sense of distant suffering by domesticating it, renders any engagement into a fleeting and essentially inconsequential moment of personal gratification. She posits that "as long as our relation to others is only accomplished through an imagination *of ourselves*, solidarity can never become a matter of commitment and justification" (2013, p. 77).

Arguably, however, this is not the only possible reading of the results. Participants' attempts to spot and make use of "empathic hooks" as tools for identification might also be seen in a more positive light: not as self-directed acts of denying difference and otherness, but rather as participants' efforts to relate to hardships and life worlds that would otherwise remain, quite literally, beyond their imagination.

### **2.4.3 Interactivity as a facilitator of engagement**

Besides perceived similarity, a factor that appeared most relevant for participants' engagement was the app's interactive nature. While most were outspokenly critical about the various technical limitations of *My Life*, there

appeared to be an almost universal consensus that being forced to take decisions from the refugee's perspective can indeed function effectively as a method of engaging players with the hardship of the characters:

MICHAEL: I think empathizing is really, really hard for people to do in any situation, and I think if you have a story – because that's what it was: a story that you don't know – and then if you make decisions yourself, I think yeah, like you [ANN] said, it's much more effective.

ANN: Because you really can understand what they've been through.

CHARLOTTE: Begin to understand.

ANN: Yeah. Yeah, that's more like it. (session 1)

While keen to stress their awareness of the radical distance that separates their own world from that of the refugees, Ann and Charlotte do acknowledge the merits of role-taking for getting a better understanding of the situation. The element of interactivity was also seen as a useful tool to simulate a refugee's state of constant stress. For Susanne, the interactive nature of the app helped to convey a sense of disorientation and helplessness that she imagines to be part of forced migration:

SUSANNE: Because you needed to think as a refugee for certain tough questions, you...how can I describe that. You are more in the world of a refugee and you need to think: well I have no idea where I am, what this language is here, what the culture is so you need to look a bit for yourself and you really need to help your family and others and how you're gonna survive this and that. (session 4)

This ongoing need to take decisions was also often cited as one of the main advantages compared to other media when covering the refugee crisis. For some, following the journey of a single individual and taking his or her decisions along the way, was a welcomed change of perspective:

NICK: [The mass media] portray mainly those masses of refugees that come to South Europe on a boat and try to sort of integrate themselves, or maybe not, I don't know. But it doesn't really say much about the individual stories and the reasons for why this actually happens. So I think it really contrasts with the mainstream media portrayal. And thus it is really useful. (session 3)

The merits of being forced to take difficult decisions became particularly evident when participants spoke of the decision prompt in the very beginning of the narrative. To answer this first question the user is given no more than 20 seconds. Often perceived positively as inducing a certain amount of stress, this time limit was mostly described as a much-welcomed moment of emotional engagement that temporarily allowed participants to become more involved with the character's fate. In all but one group, participants brought up the time pressure of the first question and discussed it as successfully simulating an apt sense of urgency. As Paula (session 4) puts it: "If your town is being bombed, you can't have a whole day to decide what you are going to take". For participants, this artificially induced time pressure appeared to bridge a tiny yet perceptible portion of the chasm between their own life world and that of the fictional refugee character fearing for their life.

#### **2.4.4 Calling for the bigger picture**

When talking about their experiences with the app, and about its strengths and limitations, participants typically soon started discussing the depth and scope of the narratives of the three refugee characters. In fact, many attributed the app's limited capacity to involve players to the lack of information about the particular geographical/political context and of richer backstories of the characters. Some participants took particular issue with the developers' choice to keep narratives generic and not locate them geographically:

BOB: I think maybe [they should] name places and countries where they go. Because then they can relate. Cause now for example I think for the boy and his brother: "Your village is attacked by terrorists". But as you don't name a country or a region, you don't really feel that you know the place. Of course, if they name the region and you haven't been there...but it does give you more of a geographical...like you know where it is and that it is happening over there. Whereas now it is just a made-up village, which puts more distance between you and the character. Therefore, it has less of an impact. (session 4)

For Bob, the inevitable distance to the fictional characters might have been somewhat reduced had their suffering been explicitly located in time and space. This call for more concrete details was a frequently heard point of critique. While there were also those who disagreed with Bob's point about geographical location – arguing that naming a specific country would distort one's imagination with inaccurate preconceptions – there seemed to be an overall consensus that the story lacked in richness:

CHARLOTTE: Also, maybe describe more the situation in the country. [...] Start with how things were ok, and then how the situation is escalating until the point where you can no longer stay there. That kind of beginning. Because now you are really thrown in the story just too - I don't know - too abruptly, I guess.  
(session 1)

Just like Bob, Charlotte calls for more details about the character and the context of events. However, what Charlotte is asking for is not merely a richer narrative, but one that – within the temporality of the fictional narrative – sets in *before* the catastrophic event disrupts the characters' lives. This notion that *My Life's* narratives failed to create spaces of imagination of the character's normalcy of every-day (pre-disaster) lives, when “people” had not yet become “refugees”, was voiced numerous other times in the group discussions:

PAULA: I think it would be really interesting to see what they were going through at home. Like if they were in a really difficult situation and what that did even before it all started. Like if there were a baker, or what they did and like their real story and if they really explained it. Now I know, like, one of them was a feminist and the other one.... but, like, if their real day to day life was – if there were just a mother or if they actually did work and have skills. (session 4)

For Paula, showing the pre-disaster life of the characters in the app would not only make for a more interesting story, but could also render it easier to engage with the suffering of actual refugees, as she continues:

PAULA: Because we kind of don't know how difficult it was, for the actual refugees, we don't know how difficult it was for them and why they are moving here. I think that's why a lot of people can have negative thoughts about them,



because they don't know how much pain they went through. Like I don't know how much pain they went through.  
SUSANNE Me neither.  
(session 4)

In a different group, it was suggested that starting narratives before disaster strikes might speak to people's imaginations more effectively, as we might simply find more to relate to in the character's normalcy of everyday life, than in their hardships of war and natural disaster. For Ann, the way the narratives are currently constructed inevitably complicates any efforts to connect to the character's experience:

ANN: Maybe if you start with how they live, you can relate more to the person. Because it maybe has similarities with your own life, then rather that you start with the crisis, which you hopefully never experienced.

Not only did participants comment that narratives set in too late, but also that they ended too soon. All narratives in *My Life* end when the refugee either reaches a refugee camp or host country or dies. However, Barbara believes that the app could have told a much more complete and powerful version of the actual "Life as a Refugee", if the story had continued beyond the moment of arrival in a host country:

BARBARA: Maybe also make the story a bit longer afterwards. Like for example, if you come to the refugee centre. Like what happens to you after that. Like years after that? Like what do you? Like you face a lot of problems when you get to Germany for example, as a refugee. How do you cope at a refugee centre if you don't have an education and you can't speak the language? What do you do? What are the options, what can you achieve and which problems arise when you get to the country? Cause it's not like everything is great cause you are in Germany now. And maybe also the danger of being deported back, cause that happens a lot as well. Something like that. (session 5)

It is clear that the fact that *My Life's* narratives are limited to the period of acute crisis was typically seen as a lost opportunity to connect or to cultivate a more reflected position towards migration. Interestingly, this position is at odds with the Ironic Spectator's presumed susceptibility for narratives of simple and

de-contextualized issues that can be fixed by well-meaning individuals. At the very least, the above excerpts illustrate that participants were often not content with individualized – albeit fictional – representations of suffering that provided little in terms of context or causes.

#### **2.4.5 The right dose of realism**

Besides the perceived lack of narrative complexity and scope, another theme that featured prominently in the discussions, was *My Life's* unique imagery. In particular, participants took issue with the app's game-like visuals:

PAULA: I think the drawings made it especially a game. Because you don't actually see actual people. That might make you doubt the situation. Because it's not actual people that you are following, it's like if you're playing, I don't know, Mario Kart, it's not real persons either. So that's more of a game and this is also drawings, so maybe you see that as more of a game than if it was...if you put actual people there. Like if you put the boy who drowned and like followed his story, before, that would probably make it... it would really have a massive effect (session 4)

For Paula, the abstract drawings take away from the urgency and actuality of the characters' misery, and thus foreclose more meaningful identification. As other participants, she proposes to include stories of "actual people", such as that of three-year old Aylan Kurdi who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea and whose picture became an iconographic image of the humanitarian crisis in late 2015.

This call for using more "real" stories and depictions was a theme that emerged regularly in reflections on the app's visuals representations. It was clear that many participants took issue with the perceived conflict between the non-realistic representations of suffering and the very real hardships of actual refugees. For some, this conflict could have been resolved by relying on more consistently naturalist representations and on stories of actual refugees:

ANGELA Also talk to real refugees, like...refugees. And ask them what they really go through. And make it more realistic and you know for sure that it really happened.

SIMONE Maybe with little movies.

VANESSA Interviews.

SIMONE Or movie clips of real...not just cartoons. (session 6)

However, the view that characters should be depicted in more naturalist forms rather than as what Simone somewhat derogatively calls “cartoons”, was by no means unchallenged. In what follows, Lynn and Marc develop the argument that a certain degree of distancing achieved through the abstract drawings would in fact allow rather than prevent players to engage with the depicted suffering.

LYNN: It's not like news on TV and so I...I...I could connect with the...no, not connect, but I can feel for the story, but still it's not like horrific.

MARC: Yeah, I agree. That the distance from the horror happening there is just right. Because you can still feel compassionate but it's not like disgusting or horrifying, or something.

JvE: What do you mean when you say that you feel like the distance is just right?

MARC: Well, as we said, if it would be really either sad or horrifying, or something, then probably it wouldn't be as...it would probably be unpleasant to play the game. While now it conveys a story, and, yeah, there is a character, you know, there is a fictional person, but it's kind of based on real facts. And you can kind of feel compassion. But yeah, without all the nasty bits. (session 3)

Marc's perception that the “distance from the horror” is “just right” mirrors his highly reflective position that allows him to acknowledge his own unwillingness or inability to face the full force of the horror. For him, the app's non-realist aesthetic form absorbs part of that horror, rendering it more bearable and, thus, accessible.

Interestingly, similar observations about the role of aesthetic distancing for empathic engagement have been made in the field of empirical literary studies. When studying reader responses to suffering in literature, Koopman (2016) found that “[a]rtful and/or fictional representations might provide the space for people to endure their own distress and engage with it, overcoming tendencies to turn away from suffering”<sup>20</sup> (p. 223).

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<sup>20</sup> See also Koopman, Hilscher and Cupchik (2012) for a discussion of how a similar mechanism came into play when reading texts about rape.

#### 2.4.6 The actuality of suffering

As we have seen, participants were vocal in their criticism of the app's narrative, technical and aesthetic properties. At the same time, the *My Life's* qualities as a piece of representation, and – tied to this – its implied truth-claims, remained largely unchallenged. Generally, the scenes and stories of hardship were accepted by participants as corresponding to (if not representing) an external reality of refugees' actual suffering. At times, this faith in the narratives' trustworthiness appeared to derive mainly from the perceived legitimacy of the UNHCR as the organization behind the app. More importantly, however, the depicted realities appeared credible to most participants as they matched pre-existing imaginations constructed through other representation.

MARC: I don't think they [the stories in the app] are that fictional. I mean, yeah, if you are going to develop an app it's, there is probably not going to be like fiction, or exaggerating everything. And it doesn't seem like it's exaggerated. Yeah, I mean, the stories for me, I mean they probably created them, but they really seemed realistic and probably not too far from reality. (session 3)

In those instances when critical questions about authenticity were voiced, they remained rather specific and did not translate into an outright rejection of the app's credibility or of its call to support UNHCR.

At the same time, there were some participants who raised concerns that the app should have been more explicit about how the stories had been constructed and whether they were indeed based on individual biographies. These concerns reflected an underlying need for more explicit demarcations between the “real” and the “fictional” – demarcations that then might also provide clues about the appropriate form of engagement with the characters' suffering:

TAMARA: Because now, I could think those things are all also made up. So maybe that's the reason...If it really happened, that pregnant women really had a story. [...] Then I will feel like, then I will remember this story better, like that. So that the facts back it up, in the end. (session 2)

Notice how Tamara does not actually claim outright that the story in the app is indeed “made up”. Instead, she is calling for more certainty about its specific truth-value. Similar calls for more explicit reference pointers to external reality were voiced by other participants who suggested to integrate interviews with actual refugees. As in the following quote, these calls were also often tied to aforementioned discussions about the appropriate levels of aesthetic realism:

SIMONE: Now you just saw a pregnant woman in a cartoon. I think if you saw a little clip, you know, nothing with talking, but just with a woman standing there, pregnant and stuff. That's just more realistic.

VANESSA: That's true.

ISABELLE: And it maybe feels like more that you have to [*inaudible*]

JvE: Sorry, it feels like what?

ISABELLE: More that you have to save her life.

SIMONE: That it's real live, and not a character. (session 6)

Besides these reflections on authenticity, concerns were also raised about the ethics of representation. In particular, some participants problematized the inherent power imbalance between those who are being depicted and those who depict:

LILLY: But I don't know how I would feel, to be honest, if I'm a refugee and I know that there is a game from me. Where people that are not in my situation play a game. I don't know I think there is kind of...

JvE: How would you feel, what do you think?

LILLY: I think I would feel kind of weird. I would really not be comfortable. (session 5)

While Lilly still seems to be struggling here to find the right words that best capture her sense of unease, Richard is more direct and outspoken in his critique of the app's very premise:

RICHARD: If you think about it, it's pretty ridiculous. If there would be a game for people who are refugees to have the same challenges as we do in our lives. Like, in the supermarket – which meal will we have? If you think about it, it's pretty ridiculous that the western society would develop games to confront

ourselves, to have some empathy. That we need games to have empathy with people on the other side of the world? If you think about it, it's crazy. (session 6)

By way of this thought-experiment, Richard effectively puts into relief what he perceives as the fundamental absurdity of the app: that any one group should be allowed to take another group's experiences and turn them into a game.

Chouliaraki describes post-humanitarianism as a shift from affective to reflective communication, i.e. from immediate and pre-rational emotional experience to reflective engagement with humanitarianism and representation. And indeed, it appeared that the fictionality of the refugee characters heightened participants' sense of distance from the depicted suffering. In turn, it invited them to reflect more thoroughly on issues of authenticity, narrative structure, ethical considerations, and even the perceived overall absurdity of creating a game-like simulation based on another group's suffering. Indeed, the above excerpts and statements such as "it's a bit like a zoo" (Paul, session 5) attest to this awareness that every act of representation is also an act of power, as it inevitably defines and thus disempowers the one who is represented.

#### **2.4.7 *My Life* as humanitarian branding**

The critical attitudes that participants expressed towards *My Life* did not seem to reflect badly on UNHCR as a humanitarian organization. In fact, the UN agency appeared to enjoy substantial goodwill and, for the most part, participants did not primarily engage with *My Life* as a piece of humanitarian marketing. The following quote captures well what might have been the thinking among most participants:

MICHAEL: I mean of course, you can think it's promotion but they are an NGO, so it's fine (session 1)

The generally favourable attitude notwithstanding, whenever the role of UNHCR actors in the narratives was discussed, the significance of the fine line

between showing their important work on the ground, and loudmouthed self-promotion became apparent. For Charlotte, the narratives in the app at times risked crossing that line:

CHARLOTTE: It felt like it was really distracting from the point of the game. It's good to...that they show what they're doing, but just maybe more subtle, so that it doesn't feel like an advertisement, but they still promote what they're doing.  
(session 1)

A number of participants shared this slight irritation that UNHCR had presented themselves too favourably, as the only source of hope in an otherwise hostile and violent environment:

PAULA: They are kind of portrayed in the game as heroes. Now I'm thinking back to it, you might not be thinking about it, but you unconsciously notice it.  
JvE: And is that a bad thing? Or a good thing?  
PAULA: Well, I don't actually know if they are.  
TIM: I don't think it's very realistic. Because it's not...I don't think they will always be there to the rescue of any refugee. If one specific woman faints, and I don't think that all of the sudden a whole group of UHC...  
JvE: UNCHR.  
TIM: Yeah, that they would all of a sudden appear and save her and save the day.  
(session 4)

This sense that UNHCR was telling their own hero-story was reinforced by the impression that all of the positive endings of the narratives involved some sort of assistance by the UN agency.

NICK: To me it seemed ok, up to the point where I decided to play once again, with another character. It was a pregnant woman. And that's where I decided not to go to the organization, but rather go to work. But after a few clicks I got sent back to the organization. So, I was like, well, there aren't any other options apparently. So that was... yeah, they're putting it too hard. (session 3)

Like Paula and Tim, Nick would have preferred a more subtle approach to promoting the favourable “aura” of UNHCR as a brand. It should, however, be noted that almost all of these critical comments about UNHCR’s self-portrayal were voiced only after I prompted participants to think about how the organization appeared in the narratives. The fact that these comments hardly

ever came up spontaneously as a source of irritation, then, suggests that the critical position participants took on when discussing the many weaknesses of *My Life* did not translate into an overly critical attitude towards the organization behind the app.

Similarly, no unprompted discussion emerged in any of the groups about the appearance of Angelina Jolie in the app. This, however, seemed to be mainly because the prompt to watch the video with Jolie had not appeared at all, or because participants thought it was an external ad and closed it before even considering watching it. In fact, in only one group did participants recall seeing the video of Angelina Jolie at all. Richard recalls his spontaneous reaction when this happened:

RICHARD: It was really strange because I was thinking about very heavy things in life, like, why would I leave my brother here, in the African bush, without any help. And then there is this fun fact, like, 'Angelina Jolie is one of our ambassadors'. Good for you Angelina, but I'm saving a life here! [laughter] (session 6)

For Richard, there is a disturbing dissonance between the severity of the narrative and the perceived banality associated with celebrity Angelina Jolie – an experience that is also recognized by other participants:

SIMONE It takes away the seriousness.

VANESSA Yeah, it feels like really anticlimactic. Like you survived, or you just died, and then there is Angelina Jolie - a rich, white person – telling you... [interrupted] (session 6)

Like Richard, Simone and Vanessa not only perceive the appearance of the “rich, white person” to be out of place, but to actually threaten the “seriousness” of the app as a whole. Once more, this excerpt illustrates how sincerely participants engaged with the app. Evidently, by asking them to participate in a focus group, I encouraged a mindset of critical inquiry. Nonetheless, it was striking to see how participants were constantly seeking ways to connect to the depicted suffering and expressed irritation at those properties of the app or



elements in the narrative that they felt foreclosed the possibility of that connection. Far from seeking mere enjoyment or moral/emotional gratification, participants appeared to try their best to make the app “work” in the way they thought it was intended and showed great self-reflection in discussing when and why it did not.

## 2.5 Conclusion

It is easy to take a look at *My Life* and see a worthy target of Chouliaraki’s critique of post-humanitarianism. Quite literally, the user is invited to mirror the experiences of the suffering other, to feel some of his or her emotions conveyed through the “playful” genre of a mobile app. However, the findings presented in this chapter also underline the need for more empirical work on audiences in the field, as they show that participants do not fully and uncritically embrace the app’s post-humanitarian affordances.

Possibly the most distinct constitutive feature of post-humanitarian communication as described by Chouliaraki is its parting with realism as the exclusive mode of depicting suffering. It is here that the break with conventional *shock-appeals* and *positive imagery* is most evident. As this break goes to the very heart of what it means to witness distant suffering, it may not be surprising that *My Life’s* non-realist aesthetics proved to stir up lively discussions. During these discussions, participants often lamented rather than embraced the app’s post-humanitarian “shift away from photorealism as a vehicle of authentic witnessing” (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 69) and the lack of visual depictions of actual refugees. Importantly, however, it seemed that participants looking for more immediate realism did so not merely as an effort to do justice to the graveness of the actual suffering, but also to make it easier for themselves to identify with the refugee characters. Discussions showed an overall uneasiness among many participants that *My Life’s* current lack of realist depictions of suffering in effect

removes them too far from the fate of both the fictional characters and the actual refugees.<sup>21</sup>

By stepping into the genre of simulation, *My Life* undeniably illustrates the post-humanitarian shift away from “truth-claims of suffering as external reality, validated by objective criteria of authenticity, to suffering as subjective knowledge, validated by psychologically grounded criteria of authenticity” (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 173). However, while participants were willing and able to engage with *My Life*'s non-realist aesthetics, they were in fact also routinely in want of more “objective criteria of authenticity” than the app provided for.

A second dominant theme of contestation was the complexity and scope of the refugee's individual stories. As we have seen above, the app's largely de-contextualized narratives are in line with what we would expect to see within the paradigm of post-humanitarianism. But not unlike its non-realist aesthetics, *My Life*'s narrative simplicity was routinely experienced by participants as unnecessarily limiting their engagement with the character's fate. Specifically, participants called for stories to be more personal (i.e. providing more background about the character), more complete (i.e. not limited to acute suffering but including pre- and post-crisis normalcy) and to provide more context (i.e. naming country names and providing larger picture). For many participants, the “chronotopic estrangement” (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 69) and radical particularization of suffering in *My Life* did in fact obstruct, rather than foster their engagement with the app.

Overall, it appeared that many of those characteristics of *My Life* that participants perceived frustrating their efforts for engagement were those that are best described as post-humanitarian – the app's non-realist aesthetics, simple narratives and radical particularization of suffering. These findings thus underline the pressing need to complement the rich theoretical work on distant

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<sup>21</sup> At the same time, also the idea was voiced that the non-realist mode actually rendered the depicted suffering less gruesome and more easily accessible. While clearly a minority position, this argument is particularly interesting as it resonates with Chouliaraki's (2013) warning of post-humanitarianism's political impotence as its aesthetics fail to push western publics “beyond their comfort zone” (p. 76).

suffering with more systematic audience research. Only then can we hope to assess the empirical applicability of concepts such as post-humanitarianism, and their value for describing actual forms of audience engagement with distant suffering.

The focus group discussions also showed that two aspects were crucial for stirring up some form of engagement: the level to which participants were able to identify similarities between themselves and the refugee characters, and the interactive nature of the app. These two aspects speak most explicitly to a core feature of post-humanitarianism, i.e. its ostensible self-directedness. While the paradigms of *shock appeals* and *positive imagery* asked for the other's otherness to be kept intact (or even to be exacerbated), post-humanitarianism invites us to discover ourselves in the other, so that our emotional experiences of solidarity are no longer other- but essentially self-oriented.

As participants were looking for characters that were similar to themselves or seeking the experience of distress induced by time pressure, this might indeed be seen as signifying a communitarian narcissism that prioritizes personal emotional experience over other-oriented engagement.

However, the human tendency to care more for those whom we perceive as more similar to us is by no means a novel or "post-humanitarian" phenomenon, as shown by research in moral psychology (e.g., Loewenstein & Small, 2007). As Batson and Shaw (1991, p. 114) put it, "cognitive categorization (e.g. perceived similarity) has the power to produce we-feeling because it extends emotional and evaluative ties originally developed through personal contact". Cialdini et al. (1997) developed the concept of one-ness to conceptualize how much of ourselves we see in a suffering other. In a series of experiments, this one-ness was shown to be correlated with compassionate responses and to be a significant predictor of a willingness to help.

The finding that similarity mattered for participants' engagement with the character's fate might thus not be that surprising. Much more interesting, then,

are the manifold ways in which participants actively sought out these “empathic hooks”. It might be these active efforts to become more engaged, to feel more, to care more that are most at odds with Chouliaraki’s notion of the Ironic Spectator.

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### 3 VIRAL HUMANITARIANISM

#### AND THE IRONIC SPECTATOR<sup>22</sup>

##### AN EMPIRICAL EXPLORATION OF KONY 2012

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*“Arresting Joseph Kony will prove that the world we live in has new rules.  
That the technology that has brought our planet together  
is allowing us to respond to the problems of our friends.”*

*Kony 2012 campaign video*

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<sup>22</sup> An earlier version of this chapter has been published as: Von Engelhardt J. & Jansz J. (2014). Challenging humanitarian communication: an empirical exploration of Kony 2012. *International Communication Gazette*, 76(6), 464-484.

### 3.1 Introduction

On March 5<sup>th</sup> 2012, the American charitable organization Invisible Children (IC) released a campaign video calling for the arrest of Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony. Part of IC's ongoing efforts to raise public awareness for the atrocities committed by Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) such as torture, mass rape and the enslavement of children, *Kony 2012* soon became the fastest spreading internet video of all times. Within the first six days after its release, the 30-minutes clip was accessed more than 100 million times, spreading more quickly than any Internet video had before (Visible Measures, 2012). Within days of its unparalleled online success, broadcast and print media picked up the story, yet soon shifting their attention to voices of criticism that attacked the video's form, message, and makers.

While *Kony 2012* has received some substantial academic attention from the fields of human rights and development studies (e.g. Drumbl, 2012; Gregory, 2012; Hickman, 2012; Karlin & Matthew, 2012; Waldorf, 2012) much less had been published in its aftermath within journalism and media studies (Madianou, 2012; Nothias, 2013). The existing works have tried to embed the rise and fall of *Kony 2012* in ongoing theoretical debates, discussed its media coverage and expert reactions, or scrutinized the video itself as a novel form of engaging western publics through humanitarian communication. What is suspiciously absent, however, from this literature on *Kony 2012* are empirical data on viewers' behaviour and perceptions.<sup>23</sup> This is striking, as an audience-focused exploration of the *Kony 2012* phenomenon should be of considerable interest to media scholars of distant suffering for at least three reasons.

Firstly, and most evidently, *Kony 2012* is by far the most publicized online humanitarian campaign ever produced. The video was particularly successful in reaching its chief target group, i.e. young Internet users in the US. According to a

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<sup>23</sup> A telephone survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in the days immediately after the release of *Kony 2012* (Pew Research Center, 2012) focused mainly on basic background variables of the audience.

Pew Research Center telephone poll conducted in the days after the release of the video, 58% of US participants younger than 30 years stated that they had heard about *Kony 2012*, and almost one in four said they had watched at least part of the video (Pew Research Center, 2012). Secondly, the immense online success of a piece of humanitarian communication that addresses a violent conflict in Africa might be construed as debasing claims of a general moral apathy or a *Compassion Fatigue* among western audiences (Moeller, 1999). Thirdly, the massive critical backlash that followed the release of *Kony 2012* is indicative of the new challenges faced by humanitarian organizations as storytellers of distant human suffering. As detailed in the previous chapter, these challenges have been understood as brought about by increasingly critical media consumers and a general public disenchantment with humanitarian organizations (Chouliaraki, 2013; Cottle & Nolan, 2007).

In this chapter, I explore in some detail the moral pressure that the video succeeded in exerting on its viewers. The study was initially motivated by the immense critical backlash that followed the release of the video. I therefore investigate how the moral pressures built up by *Kony 2012* might have been mitigated through criticisms of the video and the organization IC. Given the unprecedented viral success of *Kony 2012*, its study offers an opportunity to contribute to larger scholarly debates on western audiences faced with representations of suffering in non-Western countries. Before I present the theoretical framework that guided the empirical work, I first provide some background on the context, content and public reception of *Kony 2012*.

## 3.2 Background and theoretical framework

### 3.2.1 Invisible Children and *Kony 2012*

Founded in 2004 by a group of young American film makers, IC's stated aim is to raise public awareness for the LRA's human rights abuses and in particular their use of child soldiers in Uganda and other Central African countries. While IC also runs and directly supports humanitarian projects on the ground, the production and distribution of highly engaging communication material has always been at the very core of the organization's activities (Brough, 2012; Swartz, 2012).

IC makes extensive use of various social media platforms in all aspects of their communication efforts. Since its formation, the organization has thus been successful in rallying support and recognition for its brand through various online campaigns, the distribution of merchandise such as t-shirts and wristbands, the setting-up of university / high-school working groups and the organization of public events across the US. At the time of the release of *Kony 2012*, IC could rely on an extensive network of members and highly engaged supporters in the US (Karlin & Matthew, 2012; Swartz, 2012).

As Swartz (2012) has shown, the strategic use of narrative, and in particular the telling and re-telling of IC's "founding tale" is at the core of IC's success. It is this "founding tale" which is presented to the viewer at the beginning of the *Kony 2012* video to introduce the work of IC. The narrator and main protagonist of the video is IC co-founder Jason Russel, an American filmmaker in his early thirties who, while traveling in Uganda with his friends, learns about the atrocities committed by the LRA. The video provides a documentary-style account of how Russel talks to former LRA child soldier Jacob, who recounts his ordeal of fleeing from the LRA and witnessing his brother being slaughtered by LRA soldiers. Disturbed and moved by Jacob's story, Russel makes a promise on camera to stop the LRA. The video continues to tell the story of how, once back in the US, Russel and his friends rally support to stop the LRA and how – through the power of



social media – a grassroots movement rises, aiming at fulfilling the promise made to Jacob. The video then documents IC’s efforts to “make Kony famous” by engaging popular artists and pressuring US policy makers in order to ensure the continuation of US military support to find Joseph Kony.

A key figure for the narrative structure of the video is Russel’s son Gavin, in his role as the carefree American counter-part to Jacob, the former child soldier, as well as a conversation partner and bridge character to



Two stills from *Kony 2012* (below, Russel's son Gavin)

whom Jason explains the conflict – and thereby to an assumingly equally uninformed audience. As a piece of humanitarian communication, *Kony 2012* sticks out as an exceptionally professionally produced, fast-paced, highly emotive short-film. Indeed, as Waldorf (2012) aptly remarks, it “looks more like an episode of ‘America’s Most Wanted’ than a children’s charity appeal” (p. 469).

At first sight, the core message of *Kony 2012* is about the need to create awareness for atrocities committed by Joseph Kony and to have him tried by the International Criminal Court. However, this message is embedded in and made effective by a larger narrative about global human solidarity brought to its full potential through the power of technology. This is a narrative about how, through social media, a young western public now not only knows and cares about what is happening in the world, but also has the means to make a difference (see also Madianou, 2012). It is emblematic that the first narrated sentence in the video addresses the pervasiveness of Facebook and not Joseph Kony’s atrocities: “Right now, there are more people on Facebook than there were on the planet 200 years ago”.

### 3.2.2 Critical backlash

Soon after its release, *Kony 2012* and its makers were confronted with a plethora of criticism, mostly from professionals in the humanitarian field, journalists, academics and bloggers in Central-Africa (see e.g., Chalk, 2012; Nothias, 2013). As the critical reception of *Kony 2012* plays a central role in the present study, this section provides a brief overview of the main themes of criticism that emerged in public discussions.<sup>24</sup>

In his analysis of the video, Hickman (2012) shows how *Kony 2012* seamlessly draws on almost all established modes of documentary film making to engage the audience with the narrative and to promote action in the form of sharing the video, donating money, ordering a *Kony 2012* action kit and contacting politicians in order to “make Joseph Kony famous”. However, one mode, the “observational mode”, is noted as suspiciously absent: “[W]hat is missing from the film is any sustained first-hand exploration of the war itself, in the villages of northern-Uganda and other places directly affected by Kony’s atrocities” (p. 477).

This observation ties into one of the main points of criticism dominating the public discussion quickly after the film’s rise to online fame: the focus on western heroism and the near absence of African voices in a video about an African conflict. Consequently, allegations were voiced that the video is firmly rooted in neo-colonial discourses of superior and active western heroes – contrasted against the passive and incompetent African victim “as completely disempowered and in need of western intervention” (Madianou, 2012, p. 10).

This charge was further corroborated by the fact that almost all of the Africans depicted in the movie are children, the “ideal victims” in the representation of distant suffering (Höijer, 1999; see also Moeller, 2002). Related issues of agency were also at the core of much of the criticism coming

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<sup>24</sup> For an extensive archive of the debate in the days after the release of *Kony 2012* see <http://storify.com/zhanliusc/kony2012-campaign-responses-march-5-10-2012>

from Uganda, as voiced by Ugandan journalist Rosebell Kagumire in one of the most widely spread critical video responses from the region:

You shouldn't be telling my story if you don't believe that I also have the power to change what is going on. And this video seems to say that the power lies in America, and it does not lie with my government, it does not lie with local initiatives on the ground – that aspect is lacking.<sup>25</sup>

Another key point of criticism was directed at the way the video simplified a long-running and complex conflict, by seemingly reducing the problem to one locality (Uganda), a single root cause and a sole incarnation of evil in the person of Joseph Kony. Finnström (2012) even asserts that the video “conveniently reduces a very complex conflict, with northern Uganda as its historical epicentre, to a colonialist ‘Heart of Darkness’ stereotype of primitiveness” (p. 128). Along the same lines, Drumbl (2012) criticizes the video’s flawed and simplified depictions of the complexities surrounding the issue of child soldiers fighting in African conflicts.

Equally forceful criticism was launched at the action that is promoted in the video. The propagated US military support for the Ugandan army was attacked as naïve and short-sighted; as obscuring real US interests in the region; and as ignoring the notoriously bad human rights records of the Ugandan army (see also Finnström, 2012).

Besides the video itself and the actions it propagated, it was the organization IC that soon also became the target of harsh criticism. These attacks were mainly based on allegations that the organization had in the past spent a disproportionate amount of raised money on advocacy work, traveling and producing campaign videos, rather than on its programs in Central Africa (Chalk, 2012). In addition, the general trustworthiness of IC was questioned as reports

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<sup>25</sup> <https://youtu.be/KLVY5jBnD-E>

emerged that in 2011, a US-based charity rating agency had given the NGO a mere two-out-of-four rating for financial transparency and accountability.<sup>26</sup>

In retrospect, it is evident that no one, least the makers of *Kony 2012*, had anticipated either the video's initial success nor the massive backlash. As one of the founders of IC pointed out, *Kony 2012* was not meant to become an object of critical analysis by intellectuals, journalists and bloggers worldwide: "Our films are made for high school children. Our films weren't made to be scrutinized by the Guardian".<sup>27</sup>

Those who had shared the *Kony 2012* campaign through social networking sites, were soon ridiculed for engaging in just another form of online slacktivism, i.e. a low-intensity, low-commitment and low-impact form of political engagement (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2012).

At the same time, these criticisms should not disguise the fact that the scale of engagement created by *Kony 2012* – as shallow, uninformed, self-complacent and fleeting as it might have been – was unprecedented in the field of online humanitarian communication. While critical towards the content of the video, Waldorf (2012) therefore rightly warns against overlooking an enormous and possibly untapped potential: "*Kony 2012* offers a militant and millenarian version of human rights. Such triumphalism is deeply problematic, but it's a whole lot more galvanizing than pity" (p. 471).

Also characteristic for this new "version of human rights" and undoubtedly partly responsible for its appeal, is the fact that *Kony 2012* presented not merely a neatly demarcated and carefully isolated problem definition, but also a set of clear-cut and seemingly straightforward solutions. As Bratich (2012) argues, this is part of what sets *Kony 2012* apart from more open-ended and unpredictable online movements such as the Occupy Wallstreet Movement. Bratich draws our attention to the simple but important point that *Kony 2012* very rigorously pre-

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-news-blog/2012/mar/07/kony-2012-video-viral-invisible-children?intcmp=239>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.good.is/posts/a-kony-2012-creator-defends-the-film/>

defined certain types of actions as viable and appropriate (share the video, buy the action kit, put up posters, etc.) thus discouraging audiences to engage in other and more radical means of fighting global injustice and pushing for political change.

Bratich's argument echoes criticism against online slacktivism as supposedly diverting political energy away from other means of participation that can have more substantial impact (Christensen, 2011; Morozov, 2010). As Chouliaraki (2013) has laid out, post-humanitarian appeals such as *Kony 2012* may "be mobilizing a momentary activism but do so at the expense of cultivating a deeper understanding of why humanitarian action is important" (p. 76). Similarly, in a more radical version of the same argument, Dean (2010) makes the case that these forms of online media activism typically perpetuate global inequalities of the status quo, rather than challenge them.

### **3.2.3 Representation of suffering and media-induced cosmopolitanism**

As a piece of humanitarian communication, *Kony 2012* aims to build up a sense of moral responsibility and pressure to act among its viewers. Various attempts are made throughout the video to connect the suffering in Central Africa to the live world of Americans, for example by contrasting the care-free live of Russel's son Gavin with that of children abducted by the LRA. The viewer is prompted to not merely take notice of the accounts of suffering, but to regard them as carrying a personal moral obligation to act. For example, we see Russel driving through a camp for internally displaced children hiding from the LRA, expressing his moral indignation: "I cannot believe this [...]. If this happened one night in America, it would be on the cover of Newsweek" (Invisible Children, 2012, 5:47).

The video hereby finds part of its moral rationale in what Höijer (2004) calls a discourse of "global compassion", that assumes "a moral sensibility or concern for remote strangers from different continents, cultures and societies" (p. 514).

Despite its focus on care and moral responsibility for victims of distant suffering, Madianou (2012) argues that *Kony 2012* is not what she calls a “cosmopolitan project”. More to the point, Madianou (2012) notes that the call for action conveyed in the video is “not embedded in an understanding of the suffering and a moral orientation towards distant others” (p. 13). In line with this, much of the propagated actions – sharing the video, buying *Kony 2012* paraphernalia – are directed towards one’s own (online) peers and are thus arguably more oriented towards about a communitarian “us” than a cosmopolitan “them”.

And indeed, part of what makes *Kony 2012* such a worthwhile object of study for media scholars is that its narrative is not solely rooted in a discourse of global compassion. Rather, the video constructs the image of a new “we”, a generation of connected, young, morally engaged and cosmopolitan individuals, who supposedly possess the will and – through the power of social media – the means to act effectively on the suffering of the distant other. As with all representations of distant suffering, *Kony 2012* thereby constructs and relies on notions of an “us” as well as of a “them”. This image of a new generation, of an “army of young people” (Invisible Children, 2012, 16:25) is contrasted against those who are not regarded part of this alleged global community of technologically-savvy youngsters.

### **3.2.4 Crisis in humanitarianism**

Any attempt to reflect on the phenomenon *Kony 2012* – both its content and its reception – would be futile without considering the changed environment in which humanitarian organizations find themselves today. As I discussed in some detail in the previous chapter, the immense growth of the number of western NGOs concerned with humanitarian crises in less wealthy, less politically stable and less peaceful parts of the world has led to increased levels of professionalization and bureaucratization in the sector, as well as fierce competition for visibility and public support (e.g., Cottle & Nolan, 2007;

Chouliaraki, 2013). Simultaneously, rising public distrust towards humanitarian organizations and their financial transparency and political agendas have created new challenges for organizations such as IC.

In his seminal work, Luc Boltanski (1999) speaks of a “crisis of pity”, manifested in a public disenchantment with humanitarian organizations and their political motives. Boltanski also observes a heightened level of public suspicion towards the authenticity and truthfulness of representation, accompanied by a sense of powerlessness in the face of colossal injustices and humanitarian disasters of a complex post-Cold-War world. This public disenchantment with the humanitarian sector, the radical marketization of the field and the appropriation of new communication technologies have given rise to new sets of visual and narrative strategies to attract the attention, money and time of western audiences (Brough, 2012; Chouliaraki, 2013; Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Vestergaard, 2008;). I have shown in the previous chapter how Chouliaraki uses the concept “post-humanitarianism” to characterize these features of contemporary disaster reporting and humanitarian communication.

Indeed, it has been convincingly argued elsewhere that *Kony 2012* is emblematic for this shift in humanitarian communication (Madianou, 2012; Nothias, 2013), one that is equally a move “from realism to postmodern mash-ups, spectacles of suffering to spectacular happenings, and sufferers/beneficiaries to activist/donors” (Waldorf, 2012, p. 470). In some ways similar to the *My Life as a Refugee* app, *Kony 2012* – with its “playful textualities” – does not aim to provide “truthful’ or “objective” depictions of suffering and skilfully avoids a systemic critique of historical or global socio-political injustice. For the most part, lived realities of rape, torture and murder are invisible, or seamlessly fictionalized and sanitized through artistic means.

It is also evident, however, that while the suffering other is rendered voiceless and largely invisible, part of the video’s persuasive power in fact relies on norms of global solidarity and moral universalism. Throughout the video,

various attempts are made to bring the distant other closer to the western audience – however simplistic and condescending these attempts might appear.

### **3.2.5 Critical audiences of humanitarian communication**

Within post-humanitarianism as the dominant paradigm in approaching and representing the suffering other, Chouliaraki (2013) describes contemporary media audiences as highly sceptical towards representation, less likely to buy into moral grand narratives of global inequality, and more than ever aware that humanitarian organizations fiercely compete for their attention, engagement and money. As I discussed in the previous two chapters, she conjures the image of the Ironic Spectator who is habitually sceptical towards truth-claims of representation and highly conscious of the marketing strategies of humanitarian organizations. It is the individual's search for moral gratifications rather than moral imperatives of global solidarity that guide his or her decision to become engaged for a given cause. Chouliaraki (2013) characterizes the Ironic Spectator as “an impure or ambivalent figure that stands, at once, as sceptical towards any moral appeal to solidary action, and yet, open to doing something about those who suffer” (p. 2).

I argue that for the case of *Kony 2012*, the image of the Ironic Spectator is particularly useful not just for making sense of the video's initial enormous success online but also the massive critical backlash that followed. After all, an Ironic Spectator is likely to be absorbed by Kony's apolitical, and issue-specific narrative and swayed into self-referential actions of liking and sharing the video. And it is the same Ironic Spectator who, when given opportunity and space, would display equal levels of enthusiasm in the public bashing of a piece of humanitarian communication, questioning its truth claims, and its makers' moral, financial or political intentions. As Brough (2012) notes in her reflections on IC's communication strategies (*before* the release of *Kony 2012*), “[IC's media] are creating a space for idealism that works within the context of postmodernism and neoliberalism, which is precisely its promise and its peril” (p. 188).



### 3.3 Research Questions

This study on *Kony 2012* aims to explore whether the “ironic” appraisals of humanitarian communication have had implications for the moral reception of the video. As Boltanski (1999) has suggested, “criticism of representation can [...], if not prevail over concern about what is represented, at least encourage a suffering to be bracketed off and a doubt to be raised about its reality which [...] no longer appeals to a demand for action with the same force” (p. 177). Scepticism towards representation, employed methods of persuasion, and an organization’s aims and integrity, might thus serve to partially divert an appeal’s moral call for cosmopolitan solidarity.

In a series of focus groups, Seu (2010) explored these aspects of being a critical consumer vis-à-vis humanitarian communication. Seu found that when confronted with humanitarian campaign material that included a call for action, participants showed various methods of escaping the moral pressure created by the depictions of distant suffering. Seu observed three main discursive repertoires employed to justify inaction that were manifested in three “strategies of denial”: 1) *the medium is the message*, where criticism is launched at the communication message as such, its form and truthfulness; 2) *shoot the messenger*, where the trustworthiness and credibility of the source of the communication message are challenged; 3) *babies and bathwaters*, where the validity of the action propagated by the appeal, such as donating money, are questioned. Based on her analysis, Seu (2010) concludes that by relying on these three discursive repertoires, participants were able to neutralize the moral pressure and “effectively justified their refusal to donate and their general passivity in response to the appeal, whilst retaining a position of human rights supporter and warding off potential doubting of their moral stance” (p. 452).

Apart from being a rare example of systematic empirical work on audiences’ reception and appropriation of mediated distant suffering, what makes Seu’s work particularly valuable for the present study is the fact that the

wave of criticism launched at *Kony 2012* and IC seemed to be structured along the main themes of Seu's three strategies of denial.

First, the way the conflict as a whole and the suffering of the individual were depicted was criticized as feeding into a discourse that essentially contrasts western superiority and heroism against African passivity and lack of agency (*the medium is the message*). Second, quickly after the release of the video, IC found itself under heavy criticism for spending an allegedly disproportionate share of their resources on travel and campaigning, at the expense of their programs on the ground (*shoot the messenger*). Third, the actions which were propagated in the video for the individual (donate money / buy action kit), and western political leaders (support of Ugandan army) came under fierce scrutiny (*babies and bathwaters*).

These three main lines of being critical are at the centre of the present study. Empirically, this chapter thus builds for a large part on the three rhetorical repertoires identified by Seu (2010). In the construction of the survey, I borrowed from these rhetorical responses to mediated suffering that facilitate and justify the audience's inaction – especially as this grouping has proven to capture well the most prominent sub-themes in the critical backlash of *Kony 2012*.

In particular, I explore in this chapter the impact of being critical towards *Kony2012* on the individual's perception of moral responsibility. As theorized by Boltanski (1999) and empirically demonstrated by Seu (2010), taking a critical stance towards humanitarian communication as an integral element of ironic spectatorship (Chouliaraki, 2013) might serve to obscure the reality of distant suffering and thus reduce moral pressure on audiences.

This chapter is thus guided by the following two research questions:

1. *To what extent did the Kony 2012 video evoke in its viewers a sense of personal moral responsibility to act?*
2. *To what extent do critical appraisals of Kony 201 and Invisible Children mitigate this sense of personal moral responsibility to act?*

### 3.4 Method and data

I conducted an online survey to empirically address the two research questions. Invitations to participate in the survey were distributed on 04 April 2012 through various Email lists and communication channels of two large Dutch universities. As an incentive, participants could win one of 30 book vouchers. In total, 204 participants completed the survey. The sample varied considerably on age with a median of 24 ( $M = 28.0$   $SD = 8.8$ ) and included slightly more women (54.2%). The majority of participants were students (59.6%).

The survey consisted of six main sections. The first section included questions on background and demographics. The second section focused on general media usage patterns while the third section comprised questions on social and political engagement. In the fourth section, participants were asked how and how much they had heard about *Kony 2012* and if they had watched (part of) the video themselves. In the fifth section, a number of knowledge questions about information presented in the video were posed. In the sixth and last section, participants were asked about emotional responses and attitudes towards the video, the issue of moral responsibility to act, as well as potential behavioural consequences such as sharing the video online or looking up additional information about the issue.

One of the key variables for the present study is the question about perceived moral responsibility to act after having watched (part of) the video. Using a 5-point Likert scale, participants were prompted to disagree or agree with the statement "After watching the video I felt that I had a moral responsibility to act". This wording is an adopted version of items used for measurements of moral responsibility in psychology studies (Small, Loewenstein & Slovic, 2007; Cameron & Payne, 2011).

Besides asking through which channel participants had heard about *Kony 2012*, I wanted to know if participants had actually watched (part of) the video.

Given that the video is relatively long by internet standards (30 minutes), I expected that many participants would only have watched part of it.<sup>28</sup>

As indicators of the three themes of criticism, four self-constructed items were used to capture the critical stance taken by participants. All four items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. As outlined above, the items that sought to measure the level to which participants took a critical stance towards the video were constructed along the lines of the three rhetorical repertoires identified by Seu (2010). Specifically, the items pertained to the degree in which participants took a critical stance towards the truth value<sup>29</sup> and form of the video<sup>30</sup> (*the medium is the message*), the propagated action<sup>31</sup> (*babies and bathwaters*) and the organization Invisible Children<sup>32</sup> (*shoot the messenger*).

## 3.5 Results

### 3.5.1 Hearing about and watching Kony 2012

Out of the 204 participants who had completed the survey, a mere two reported to not have heard about *Kony 2012*. More than half (53.4%) reported to have heard a lot about the video, and a slightly smaller proportion said that they only heard a little (45.6%). The large majority had heard about *Kony 2012* through social media platforms (72.3%), followed by those who had heard about it through television (11.8%).

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<sup>28</sup> I provided the following response categories: 'I have not watched the video', 'I have watched no more than 5 minutes of the video', 'I have watched more than 5 minutes but not more than 15 minutes of the video', 'I have watched more than 15 minutes but not the complete video', 'I have watched the complete video once', 'I have watched the complete video more than once'.

<sup>29</sup> 'I believed that the facts presented in the video are true.'

<sup>30</sup> 'I disliked the way in which the video approached the topic.'

<sup>31</sup> 'I believed that donating money to the organization that produced the video could help to change the situation for the better.'

<sup>32</sup> 'I trusted the organization behind the video to spend the money they raise in a responsible manner.'

**Table 3.1** Percentage of sample that had watched (part of) *Kony 2012*.

Has not watched the video	12.3% (25)
Watched no more than 5 min	7.4% (15)
Watched more than five but no more than 15 min	29.4% (60)
Watched more than 15 min, but not the complete video	8.8% (18)
Watched the complete video once	34.3% (70)
Watched the complete video more than once	6.9% (14)

*Note.* Values in brackets are absolute numbers.

As shown in table 3.1, about four in ten participants who had heard about *Kony 2012* stated that they had watched the whole video at least once (41.2%), while another 29.4% had watched between 5 and 15 minutes. The 25 participants who had not watched the video at all are excluded in all following analyses.

### **3.5.2 Moral responsibility**

In order to contextualize the moral responsibility variable, I first explored age and gender differences. I found a significant positive correlation between age and perceived moral responsibility to act ( $r = 0.37, p < 0.01$ ), that is, older participants experienced a higher moral responsibility to act after viewing the video than younger participants. The gender comparison did not yield any significant differences between men and women.

In order to be able to make statements about the video's capacity to exert moral pressure, I then conducted a comparison between participants who differed in how much of the video they watched. The expectation was that the narrative structure of the video is constructed in such a manner that it progressively builds towards a steadily increasing moral pressure on the viewer. While much of the first half of the video is used to present the atrocities of the LRA and to create a sense of urgency, the second half focuses on how individuals can make (and have made) a difference in ending the conflict.

In consequence, if the video had failed to put any moral pressure on participants, the level of perceived moral responsibility should not be dependent on the duration of watching. As mentioned above, the watching duration variable was measured as an ordinal variable with five categories. I conducted a one-way Analysis of Variance which yielded overall significance ( $F(4, 173) = 7.045, p < 0.001$ ). In line with expectations, Scheffe's post-hoc test showed that those who had watched no more than 5 minutes ( $M = 2.80, SD = 1.21$ ) had experienced significantly less moral pressure ( $p < 0.01$ ) than those who had watched between 5 and 15 minutes ( $M = 3.79, SD = 0.71$ ). Surprisingly, however, the post-hoc test also showed that this latter group scored significantly higher on perceived moral responsibility than those who reported to have watched the whole video ( $M = 3.04, SD = 1.04$ ). Those who had quit watching within the first 15 minutes therefore developed a stronger sense of moral responsibility than those who had watched the complete video.

### **3.5.3 Moral responsibility and critical appraisals**

One of the main concerns of the present study was to investigate to what extent taking on a critical position would serve to reduce a sense of personal responsibility (Research Question 2).

To explore the role of the three themes of criticism, I first conducted three simple correlation analyses of perceived moral responsibility with the critical stance towards of the message, the proposed action, and the organization.

All relevant items except "I disliked the way in which the video approached the topic", showed significant correlations with perceived moral responsibility (see table 3.2). Distrust in the integrity of the organization, doubts about the truth claims made in the video and disbelief about the efficacy of the proposed action were all related to lower levels of personal moral responsibility evoked by the video.

**Table 3.2.** Correlation between indicators of criticism and perceived moral responsibility to act after watching *Kony 2012*.

After watching the video...	I felt that I had a moral responsibility to act.	I believed that donating money to the organization that produced the video could help to change the situation for the better.	I disliked the way in which the video approached the topic.	I believed that the facts presented in the video are true.
I believed that donating money to the organization that produced the video could help to change the situation for the better.	,655**			
I disliked the way in which the video approached the topic.	-,037	,005		
I believed that the facts presented in the video are true.	,480**	,605**	-,140	
I trusted the organization behind the video to spend the money they raise in a responsible manner.	,640**	,804**	-,048	,642**

Note. Values are Person's r correlation coefficients. \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.0001

In a following step, I conducted a regression analysis to investigate the effects on personal responsibility, while controlling for gender, age, NGO membership and the duration of viewing<sup>33</sup>. The full regression model yielded an adjusted  $R^2$  of 0.46 ( $F(11, 165) = 14.538, p < 0.001$ ). Table 3.3 first shows the partial model without the themes of criticism indicators included (model 1). Results initially confirmed the previous finding that age has a significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.27, p < 0.01$ ) and as well as the previously identified pattern regarding viewing duration, with strongest moral pressuring found in participants who had watched between 5 and 15 minutes.

In the second model, I added the indicator variables of the different themes of criticism. The evaluation of the trustworthiness of the organization ( $\beta = 0.30, p < 0.01$ ) and of the effectiveness of the proposed action ( $\beta = 0.34, p < 0.01$ ) showed significant effects in the expected directions. However, judgments about the truthfulness of the video and the way the video approached the topic did not significantly impact the level of moral pressure. In other words, the analysis showed that the level of perceived moral responsibility was not significantly impacted by the way the story was told or by whether the representation was perceived as truthful. At the same time, moral responsibility as perceived by the audience was affected significantly by the credibility of the organization and the evaluation of the act of donating as propagated in the video.

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<sup>33</sup> The different categories of this variable were included as dichotomous dummy variables. The dummy 'I have watched no more than 5 minutes of the video' is omitted from the model as baseline category.



**Table 3.3.** Results of OLS regression models predicting perceived moral responsibility to act after watching *Kony 2012*.

	Model 1				Model 2			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Donor of an NGO (no = 0 yes = 1)	-.14	.17	-.06	-0.82	.00	.14	.00	-.01
Gender (man = 1)	.04	.15	.02	0.28	.19	.12	.10	1.60
Age	.03	.01	.28	3.30**	.01	.01	.07	.92
Watched more than 5 but less than 15 minutes	.82	.27	.39	3.03**	.46	.23	.22	2.05*
Watched more than 15 but not whole video	.69	.33	.21	2.10*	.43	.27	.13	1.62
Watched whole video	.42	.27	.20	1.55	.33	.22	.16	1.50
Watched whole video more than once	.80	.35	.22	2.28*	.43	.29	.12	1.50
Believed that donating money to the organization that produced the video could help to change the situation for the better					.27	.08	.34	3.27**
Disliked the way in which the video approached the topic					-.04	.05	-.05	-.75
Believed that the facts presented in the video are true					.04	.08	.03	.44
Trusted the organization behind the video to spend the money they raise in a responsible manner					.26	.09	.30	3.04**
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.19				.49			
<i>F</i>	5.82				14.54			

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

### 3.6 Conclusion

The phenomenon *Kony 2012* showcases the “crisis of pity” that characterizes the contemporary environment that western humanitarian organizations have to deal with in their role as storytellers of suffering. These organizations encounter an increasingly sceptic public, and a need for novel ways of engaging audiences with humanitarian causes. From the onset, *Kony 2012* clearly attempted to circumvent some of the pitfalls that are characteristic for this new environment. It is no coincidence that the story that is presented is first and foremost that of an individual – Jason Russel – rather than one of an organization (whose name is only mentioned once in *Kony 2012*). In effect, viewers are discouraged from dwelling on organizational political agendas, on overhead costs, on travel and administration expenses. The focus is on Jason Russel – loving father, passionate campaigner and attractive male<sup>34</sup> – who acts as personal mediator between the distant suffering other and the western viewer. Nevertheless, IC soon found itself in the defence, struggling fiercely to defend their campaign methods, projects and integrity. The organization even felt the need to release a second *Kony* video addressing these criticisms.<sup>35</sup>

As a post-humanitarian appeal, *Kony 2012* was initially immensely successful in rallying support for its cause and making millions of people watch, share and talk about the video. In my sample of 204 participants, only two had not heard about *Kony 2012* and a large majority had seen at least part of the video. Evidently, these figures need to be interpreted with some caution as data were drawn from a convenience sample comprising mostly students and university staff, a population that one might expect to be relatively well informed about current affairs.

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<sup>34</sup> See Cameron and Haanstra (2008) for a discussion of how ‘sexy’ has found its way into humanitarian communication.

<sup>35</sup> See “*Kony 2012 II -Beyond Famous*” at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c\\_Ue6REkeTA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_Ue6REkeTA)

### 3.6.1 Ironic Spectators and moral responsibility

No longer primarily based on notions of common humanity, the depoliticized calls for action formulated in post-humanitarian appeals such as *Kony 2012* rely on the spectator's need for moral self-actualization (Chouliaraki, 2013) and eagerness to engage in the "conspicuous consumption of humanitarianism" (Brough, 2012, p. 176). At the same time, these appeals do put a moral claim on audiences to act in response to the suffering of distant others.

To explore the degree to which viewers felt a moral responsibility to act as a consequence of watching the video, I compared participants according to how much of the video they had actually seen. As expected, the level of moral responsibility to act was generally higher for those who had watched more of the video. Strikingly, however, those who had watched no more than 15 minutes felt a greater sense of moral responsibility than those who had watched the full 30 minutes video. While counter-intuitive at first, the finding was rendered more plausible once we consider in more detail the narrative structure of the video.

It is within the first 15 minutes of the video that the viewer learns about the conflict and the brutalities of the LRA: first, through the documentary-style footage of Russel's first encounter with Jacob at a refuge facility in North Uganda; then, through the carefully constructed double mirror of a conversation between Russel and his five year old son Gavin; and finally, through a narrated story – now directed at the viewer – about the crimes committed by the LRA. Even though the video does not seek to make claims of authenticity in representation through realist depictions of the other's life world, its first half does confront the viewer with a situation of grave human misery.

Conversely, most of the second half of the video focuses on celebrating the "grass-root" movement of engaged, young Americans determined to fulfil Jason's promise, on the progress that had been made and on how to support IC's work. It is this part of the video that the suffering other all but disappears and the video unapologetically embraces the post-humanitarian "narcissistic indulgence in the authenticity of the self" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 18).

These findings suggest that while the extensive and skilful celebration of a caring and acting “us” during the second half of the video undoubtedly contributed to the appeal and online success of the video, it mitigated to some extent the level of moral responsibility towards the suffering other that was built up during the first half of the video.

However, such causal interpretations derived from survey research should always come with a caveat. While it indeed seems plausible that the moral pressure that viewers perceived peaked somewhere half-way through the clip, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevent me from eliminating alternative explanations. One of those alternative explanations might be that those who were not particularly morally engaged to begin with, simply lost interest more quickly and therefore stopped watching. But it should also be clear that, while intuitive at first, this interpretation appears more difficult to reconcile with the non-linear nature of the relationship between the two variables described above.

A second notable finding with respect to moral responsibility was the absence of significant gender differences. This is noteworthy as previous studies have consistently shown women to express higher levels of compassion towards others and particularly towards *distant* others (Dyregrov & Raundalen, 2005; Höijer, 2004; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005; see also chapter 4).

While one has to take caution in basing conclusions on non-significant findings, it is possible that this result is due to specific narrative features of *Kony 2012*. As opposed to pity-based appeals, the post-humanitarian moral message of *Kony 2012* is embedded in the notion of a new “we”, a western audience of technologically-savvy young individuals, both willing and capable of fixing single, clearly identified humanitarian issues. Through this story and the foundational tale’s core values that it carries (see Swartz, 2012), IC might have succeeded in reaching out also to those groups that would have shown little engagement with a more realist aesthetics in the representation of distant suffering. In addition, Jason Russel, in his various roles as loving father, on-the-

road adventurer and charismatic movement leader, provides for a compelling and modern male role model, which in turn could increase male viewers' willingness to engage with the moral claim presented to them.

In addressing the second research question, this study also explored the relationship between the degree to which individual viewers as Ironic Spectators felt critical towards *Kony 2012* and the level of perceived personal responsibility to act upon the suffering. Right after its rise to online fame, the video and its makers faced massive criticism for grossly oversimplifying and distorting the facts on the ground, for presenting a black-and-white version of "human rights on steroids" (Waldorf, 2012, p. 471), for stripping victims of their agency and for essentially celebrating a western "us" rather than relating to a non-Western "them". Previous research (Seu, 2010) led me to investigate whether participants felt less moral responsibility to act when directing criticism towards the form of the video, the humanitarian organization and the propagated action. However, findings suggest that this was only partly the case.

As expected, the level in which participants believed that donating money to IC would lead to change for the better did affect moral responsibility. The same was true for the degree to which IC was perceived as trustworthy in spending the donated money in a responsible manner. However, analysis also showed that being critical about the form and truth-value of the communication message did not significantly impact the level of perceived moral responsibility to act.

In order to make sense of this finding, it might be useful to return to Chouliaraki's conceptualization of the Ironic Spectator. In fact, in this apparent detachment of the appraisal of form and that of message, one might see the Ironic Spectator's critical and distanced position towards representation. Being aware of and critical towards the persuasive strategies employed in humanitarian communication also implies a heightened awareness of the distinction between content and form, i.e. between the depicted reality of suffering and being critical towards its representation. Indeed, this can be seen as a key characteristic of the Ironic Spectator. As Chouliaraki (2013) explains, the irony of the Ironic Spectator

refers to “a self-conscious-suspicion vis-à-vis all claims to truth, which comes from acknowledging that there is always *a disjunction between what is said and what exists*” (p. 2, emphasize added). In other words, as audiences today habitually contest authenticity- and truth-claims of representation, the perceived actuality of suffering and its moral implications might stay intact despite objections against how that suffering is represented.

In sum, the findings presented in this chapter suggest that the post-humanitarian narrative in *Kony 2012* has been successful in creating a sense of personal moral responsibility, also among the typically less engaged male participants. At the same time, the urgency of this moral responsibility appears to have been eased by the celebration of a western “us” in the second half of the video. Lastly, even though much criticism was voiced in public debate about *Kony 2012*’s narrative of an African humanitarian crisis, findings suggest that on an individual level, this has not mitigated the sense of personal responsibility to act.

While varying in their implications, these findings all tap into the more general question of how post-humanitarian appeals can succeed in exerting short-term moral pressure or even cultivating a long-term cosmopolitan disposition towards distant others. Conceptually, this study showcased the utility of Chouliaraki’s Ironic Spectator in making sense of how audiences engaged with *Kony 2012*. Empirically, it provided some support for the notion that issues of objectivity and authenticity played no substantial role in the moral appreciation of *Kony 2012*. This study also demonstrates both the difficulty and the value of researching fleeting online campaigns from an audience perspective. As social media based online campaigns are typically short-lived – and as humanitarian organizations can be expected to make increasing use of these platforms – media researchers may need to react more quickly to explore these moving targets.

At the time of writing, Joseph Kony is still on the run. While *Kony 2012* was successful in making Joseph Kony “famous” and raising an estimated \$20 million for IC, its makers did therefore not achieve their primary goal. At the same time,

the public impact of *Kony 2012* (together with IC's other advocacy work) indisputably contributed to heightened public awareness of ongoing, yet less frequent, LRA atrocities.

Another significant outcome of the rise and fall of *Kony 2012* should be seen in the fact that in the direct aftermath, considerable journalistic attention was redirected at the ways in which western media organizations have in the past depicted African suffering in general, and the LRA in particular. As Nothias (2013) has shown, not only became journalists keen on actively seeking out "African voices" in their immediate coverage of the phenomenon, the felt need to engage with voices of criticism also led to a remarkable level of reflexivity on western representational practices. What remains to be seen is whether this moment of heightened reflexivity among journalists, humanitarian organizations and the public will have lasting implications for the ways in which stories of distant suffering others are told to western audiences.





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## 4 REPRESENTING THE SUFFERING OTHER<sup>36</sup>

### THE EFFECTS OF AGENCY, DISTANCE AND JUST WORLD BELIEFS ON AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

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<sup>36</sup> This chapter is currently under review for publication in an international journal.

Different parts of this chapter's theory section have previously been published in:  
Von Engelhardt, J. (2015). Studying Western audiences vis-à-vis mediated distant suffering. A call to venture beyond media studies. *International Communication Gazette*, 77(7), 695-707.  
Von Engelhardt J., & Jansz, J. (2015). Distant suffering: The mediation of humanitarian disaster. In R. Anderson (Ed.), *World Suffering and Quality of Life* (pp. 75-87). New York: Springer.

## 4.1 Introduction

As we have seen in chapter 1, the field of distant suffering has for long been hampered by a scarcity of audience research. In the previous two studies, I therefore engaged empirically with prominent concepts within the field – most notably Chouliaraki’s *post-humanitarianism* and Bruna Seu’s *strategies of denial* – to better understand audience engagement in the context of two specific cases of representation: an app and an online campaign video.

In this chapter, I shift my empirical focus to the role of two specific elements in depictions of the distant, suffering other: first, whether the other is presented as possessing agency in the face of hardship or not; second, whether the life worlds of the viewer and that of the other are presented as distant or as proximate.

As we will see below, both of these aspects have received considerable attention in the theoretical literature on distant suffering. And while much has been written about how these aspects might facilitate or foreclose audience engagement, their empirically observable implications have remained largely unstudied. This is symptomatic for an academic debate that, as Orgad and Seu (2014) point out, is “informed largely by text-based suppositions about the effects of messages and the process of mediation” (p. 19). To explore these effects with respect to agency and distance, I conducted a large-scale online experiment – among the LISS panel administered by CentERdata – in which participants were exposed to edited versions of a television news item about a humanitarian crisis at the Horn of Africa.

With the study described in this chapter, I respond to calls to integrate concepts and methods from the field of moral psychology (Seu, 2010; von Engelhardt, 2015; Huiberts & Joye, 2015; Huiberts, 2016). As we will see below, a key assertion shared by moral psychology and the literature on distant suffering is that moral responses to suffering are not a given, but should be studied as contingent on enabling or limiting circumstances.

I argue that complementing the media studies literature on distant suffering with insights from moral psychology about how audiences engage with morally relevant stimuli, allows us to capitalize on the disciplines' strengths while offsetting some of their respective limitations. Limitations that, as Bruna Seu (2010) has observed, have hampered evidence-based understanding of audience engagement with distant suffering, as “[s]tudies of representations are based on textual and visual analyses of communication and do not tend to involve audiences. On the other hand, the vast majority of psychological studies on audiences are based on surveys and laboratory experiments that use media representations as neutral stimuli” (p. 440).

In the following section, I introduce the field of moral psychology, and show how drawing on this discipline has at least three concrete implications for studying audiences of distant suffering: to consider the experimental method; to pay empirical attention to audience characteristics; and to demarcate and operationalize different forms of audience engagement. I then discuss the prominent roles that agency and distance have taken up in scholarly debates on distant suffering, before proceeding to present this study's hypotheses and methodology.

## **4.2 Theoretical framework**

### **4.2.1 Moral psychology**

Moral psychology originally emerged as a branch of developmental psychology concerned with moral growth in children as part of their cognitive development. Today, moral psychology has a much broader scope and draws on social psychology, evolutionary psychology and neuroscience to investigate moral behaviour such as helping, moral emotions such as empathic concern or guilt, and moral reasoning (Haidt, 2007, 2008).

Within the field of moral psychology, the way in which we make sense of and respond to others in pain is typically understood to be regulated by the interplay of two distinct but interdependent systems of perception and processing. The first is the analytic system that runs on the rational, conscious evaluation of the moral demands of a given situation and calls for reliable evidence to justify helping behaviour. The second is the experiential system, which primarily runs on affect and performs unconsciously, intuitively and associatively (Haidt, 2003, 2007; Loewenstein and Small, 2007). When confronted with situations that exert some degree of moral pressure, whether and how this pressure is perceived and coped with, is thus conceptualized as the result of the interplay between moral reasoning and affect-based intuition.

Employing an Alice in Wonderland analogy, Loewenstein and Small (2007) describe this interplay as that between our “scarecrow” – who can merely feel but not reason – and our “tinman” – who can merely feel but not reason. Their extensive literature review leads the authors to conclude that each system alone is equally inadequate when it comes to caring for and acting towards others in need: reason without affect is unbiased but rarely pushes people into action; affect without reason, on the other hand, is unstable and too easily swayed by situational factors that are – as cold reason would be able to tell us – morally irrelevant.

While the relative significance of moral reasoning and moral intuition in moral responses remains contested<sup>37</sup>, leading moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2003, 2007) argues that it is typically the latter that takes the lead. He presents a growing body of studies proving that moral judgments are primarily based on instant moral intuitions that manifest themselves in moral emotions such as compassion. Moral rationalizations for engagement or indifference typically come into play at a much later stage, as “[m]oral reasoning, when it occurs, is usually a post-hoc process in which we search for evidence to support our initial

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<sup>37</sup> For this discussion, see Pizarro & Bloom (2003), Haidt (2001; 2003).

intuitive reaction” (2007, p. 998). The way to look at human morality, then, is as an “emotional dog” that wags its “rational tail” (Haidt, 2001).

For the media scholar of distant suffering, Haidt’s argument about the primacy of moral intuition is of importance, as it can just as easily be read as one about the primacy of representation. From Haidt’s perspective, how we respond to large-scale humanitarian disaster in distant countries will be much less determined by moral reasoning that feeds on facts and figures (number of victims, historical/economic responsibility of own country, etc.), but primarily by moral affect that is swayed by morally irrelevant elements in representation (Which victims are depicted? How happy/sad do they look? Have you ever been to that country?, etc.). The broader promise that insights from moral psychology then hold is to help advance our understanding of how the two systems work together when it comes to representations of distant humanitarian disaster.

In fact, to a casual observer it might be surprising that insights from moral psychology have as of yet failed to systematically inform studies on responses to *nonfictional* distant suffering<sup>38</sup>, particularly as these insights have by now been picked up by the media psychology literature on the reception of *fictional* entertainment media (see Tamborini, 2011).

Most likely, the main reason that there have been only few systematic attempts of intellectual exchange with moral psychology (Seu, 2010; Huiberts & Joye, 2017) lies in the fields’ ontological roots in constructionism that do not sit well with the experimental method. As Huiberts (2016) points out, “from a strictly social constructionist approach, it may be difficult to accept a study that shows the general effects of humanitarian broadcasting messages of distant suffering on a general audience” (p. 4331).

It is thus clear, that bringing moral psychology into the field of distant suffering inevitably affects the way that research into audiences is to be

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<sup>38</sup> One notable exception here is the work of Bruna Seu, who draws heavily on psychological and psychoanalytical works to study the rhetorical strategies that people employ to evade the moral pressures put on them by representations of human rights violations (2010).

conducted. In particular, inviting moral psychology to the table has at least three major implications: considering the experimental method; paying more empirical attention to audience characteristics; and demarcating and operationalizing audience effects. In the following, I discuss each of these three implications and show how they informed the design of the current study.

#### *4.2.1.1 Considering the experimental method*

Embracing moral psychology for research on distant suffering means considering the experimental method as a valid epistemological tool to better understand how audiences respond to representations of humanitarian disaster. Experimental studies in moral psychology have shed light on a wide range of questions of enacted morality, showing inter alia, how a victim's physical characteristics affect compassionate responses (Lishner et al., 2008), how perceived distance and proximity affect moral evaluations (Eyal, Liberman & Trope, 2008) or how individuals are inadequately equipped to comprehend and respond to depictions of the suffering of large groups (Slovic, 2007; Dickert, Västfjäll, Kleberd & Slovic, 2014).

Typically, these psychological experiments, while of evident relevancy for the field of distant suffering, are not meant to address questions about journalistic choices of media coverage. And yet, any media scholar's reading of these studies would conclude that they are, indeed, all about representation. After all, the suffering to which participants are invited to respond to is almost by definition not unmediated, and differences between the conditions are introduced by manipulating elements in the stimuli, i.e. different representations of human misery.

Nevertheless, findings from this body of empirical work have not yet systematically informed the field of distant suffering and neither have there been systematic attempts to make empirical use of the methods and operationalizations developed within moral psychology.

The current study turns to the experimental method to study the distinct effects of two much-discussed aspects in representations of suffering: agency and distance.

#### *4.2.1.2 Paying empirical attention to audience characteristics*

Most of the current media studies literature on the conditions that facilitate various responses to distant suffering is concerned primarily with characteristics of text, rather than those of media audiences. While the immense value of critical media text analyses for theoretical advancement and evidence-founded media criticism is evident, this attention disparity – both empirical and theoretical – threatens to leave the field with insufficient tools to make sense of the wide spectrum of individual responses to media text. As Orgad and Seu (2015) observe, “investigating how representations shape and inform knowledge and action exclusively on the basis of textual and visual analysis, is limiting, and can be dangerously misleading. It also introduces the risk of reinforcing a mechanistic and simplistic view of the relationship between media texts and reception, as being a stimulus-reaction—a view that audience research has shown to be reductive and misleading” (p. 17). The authors therefore encourage scholars to explore responses to distant suffering in the context of biography, personal morality and psychological traits.

Indeed, there are indications from existing studies that even basic demographic characteristics can go some way to explain the diversity in responses to mediated distant suffering. For example, Höijer (2004) showed that men and women differ in the way they respond and Kyriakidou (2015) observed that younger focus group participants were more likely than older ones to express moral-emotional detachment with humanitarian disaster. However, there has not yet been a systematic effort to disentangle the role that basic sociodemographic variables such as age and gender play in the reception of mediated distant suffering, in part because most of the available studies are focus group based.

For the current study, age and gender are therefore included in the statistical analyses as control variables, also given that both have proven significant effects on donation behaviour (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Wiepking & Bekkers, 2012).

Beyond gender and age, the moral psychology literature also calls attention to the role of psychological constructs. Arguably the most evident one is trait empathy, i.e. the degree in which individuals feel for others in their everyday lives. In contrast to empathic responses such as empathic distress and empathic concern that will be discussed below, trait empathy describes a character trait that plays a substantial role in how individuals react to specific instances of suffering (see e.g., Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Wiepking & Bekkers, 2012). Trait empathy is therefore included in the current study as a control variable.

The second psychological audience trait included in the current study is Just World Beliefs. First developed by Lerner (1980), the “Just World” theory describes a tendency in some people to believe that bad things happen for a reason and that people usually get what they deserve. A considerable body of research on the Just World theory has since then aimed to explore this phenomenon, its origins, consequences and between-subject variance (for an overview, see Hafer & Bague, 2005; also see Furnham, 2003). It has been shown in experimental studies that even in the face of evident and grave injustice, various strategies are employed to protect Just World Beliefs. For example, after reading a story of a rape offender who did not receive punishment for his acts, those with stronger Just World Beliefs were more likely to put blame on the rape victim, thus protecting the belief that the world is an essentially fair place (Hafer & Bague, 2005). For those without strong Just World Beliefs, the question of whether the offender was punished or not did not matter for the attribution of blame.

Similarly, there is some evidence that individuals with a stronger belief in a Just World are more likely to think about poverty-related suffering in developing



countries in terms of dispositional characteristics of people, rather than structural forces (Campbell, Carr & MacLachlan, 2001; Harper & Manasse, 1992).

While there has been some recognition of this concept's "status as an important and rather unexplored variable in cultivation theory, and communication research in general" (Appel, 2008, p.78), there have hardly been any empirical efforts to explore its role in responses to mediated distant suffering. A notable exception here is Bruna Seu's study (2016) on responses to NGO communication material, as she uses the concept in the analysis of her focus group findings.

Besides age, gender and trait empathy, Just World Beliefs is the fourth audience characteristic that is include in the current study.

#### *4.2.1.3 Demarcating and operationalizing different forms of audience engagement*

Given the largely theoretical and/or text-focused nature of the current literature on distant suffering, it is not surprising that little effort has been put into developing empirically applicable distinctions between possible forms of responses to representations of human misery, let alone quantitative indicators. For example, while the term compassion (see Höijer, 2004; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001) has been used widely within academic discourse on mediated distant suffering, how it is demarcated from related concepts like empathy or pity typically remains unclear. Similarly, Chouliaraki's extensive work on cosmopolitanism (with its strong normative grounding) has proven to be only of limited use for studying audiences of distant suffering (Orgad & Seu, 2014).

Turning to moral psychology might thus contribute to conceptual clarity. For example, compassion as a prototypical moral emotion (Haidt, 2003) is defined within moral psychology as "the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help" (Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas, 2010, p. 351) and typically used as synonymous with the concept of sympathy (Eisenberg, 2000; Haidt, 2003). In contrast to compassion, experiencing empathy involves understanding another's affective

state (cognitive component of empathy) or an actual vicarious emotional experience (affective component of empathy) (Davis, 2006; Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffman, 2000). Importantly, this understanding and experiencing of the other's affective state is not a necessary component of compassion/sympathy, as “[s]ympathy does not so much involve experiencing the emotions of another as an effort to understand the difficulties faced by another and to emit supportive and caring responses” (Turner and Stets, 2006, p. 554). Audience studies on distant suffering could benefit substantially from these conceptual and empirical demarcations of different moral responses (see also Huiberts & Joye, 2017).

For the purpose of the current study, I draw on this literature on moral emotions as well as the media studies literature on distant suffering (in particular Moeller, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Höijer, 2004) to identify four types of responses: first, empathic responses to the depicted suffering that include a feeling of distress at the sight of the other's suffering (empathic distress) and a feeling of care and compassion towards the other (empathic concern); second, the extent to which the suffering other is perceived as being similar or different to oneself; third, the degree of moral responsibility felt for the distant suffering; and fourth, the extent to which the viewer is willing to do something and engage in costly helping behaviour. Details about the operationalizations of these are provided in the methods section.

#### **4.2.2 Agency and distance in the literature on distant suffering**

The current study sets out to explore audience effects of journalistic choices regarding the representation of distant, suffering others. It focuses on two representational elements with particular significance in the literature on mediated suffering: agency, i.e. to what extent the other is presented to us as an active and acting agent; and distance, i.e. how the locality of suffering is construed in terms of proximity /distance to the audience. Strikingly, the interest that media scholars have paid to *agency* and *distance* has resulted almost exclusively in theoretical reflections, rather than systematic empirical enquiry.

With the current study, I set out to empirically explore the effects of these two properties in representation on audience responses to distant mediated suffering.

#### 4.2.2.1 Agency

A common theme of criticism found in the current literature on distant suffering relates to how those affected by humanitarian disasters in non-Western countries are portrayed. As we have seen in chapter 1, western media are accused of providing simplistic depictions of victims as passive, helpless and devoid of agency – thereby underexposing local resourcefulness, resilience and creativity. For example, Joye (2009) shows how distant sufferers are “portrayed as passive victims, powerlessly undergoing the forces of nature” (p. 52). A specific version of this criticism is directed at the excessive use of children in the visual representation of natural disaster and war. A disproportionate visibility of children as “ideal victims” (Höijer, 2004) that are devoid of agency has been condemned for further buying into narratives of passive helplessness rather than active resilience (Cohen, 2001; Moeller, 2002; Höijer, 2004; Campbell, 2012).

The issue of agency is also central to Chouliaraki’s analytics of mediation that, as briefly mentioned in chapter 1, allows Chouliaraki to identify three ideal types in the reporting on humanitarian crises.

In *adventure news*, distant suffering is presented without attention for any historical, social or political context. Large-scale events of human misery are shown as “random singularities”. If affected individuals appear at all, they are depicted as helpless, lacking agency and fundamentally different to the audience. *Adventure news* thus very much corresponds to the picture painted by the critical literature on disaster representation reviewed in the theoretical overview of chapter 1. According to Chouliaraki, this type of reporting – with its often purely aesthetic visuals of suffering – dramatically limits the audiences’ possibility to relate to those who are suffering and to include them in their moral horizons. In

contrast, *emergency news*, is based on more complex narratives and imagery, providing context, showing some degree of victim agency, and creating room for moral engagement of the audience. Lastly, *ecstatic news* is news of highly disruptive and traumatic catastrophes. Dissecting coverage of the 09-11 attacks, Chouliaraki theorizes how this type of reporting “reserves the spectator’s capacity to connect to those who are like ‘us’ while blocking this same capacity for the largest majority of world sufferings – those experienced by distant ‘others’” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 181).

For Chouliaraki, recognizing the distant other as a wilful self who possesses and exercises agency in the face of personal loss and pain is thus about more than just a professional journalistic duty to do justice to the complexities of the world. She argues that depicting the agency of the distant other is decisive for an imagination of the other as a complete human being who exists beyond victimhood. The distant other can thus only be perceived as human to the extent that he/she is granted agency. As Chouliaraki (2006) explains, “humanization is a process of identity construction that endows sufferers with the power to say or do something about their condition, even if this power is simply the power to evoke and receive the beneficiary action of others” (p. 88). She therefore posits that “[t]he humane sufferer is the sufferer who acts” (ibid.)<sup>39</sup>.

Chouliaraki is not alone in arguing that that we are less inclined to feel compassionate and morally responsible towards sufferers when their agency is underexposed in representation (Moeller, 1999; CARMA, 2006; Bankoff, 2011). In fact, as Orgad (2008) observes, “most of the contributors to this literature [on distant suffering] argue that presenting sufferers as active agents is crucial to the viewers’ capacity to develop compassion and to encourage them to act to alleviate sufferers’ misfortune” (p. 2).

Empirical support for this, however, is sparse and circumstantial at best. In Scott’s focus group/diary study (2014), participants tended to talk of distant

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<sup>39</sup> For a careful and empirically-grounded dissection of the closely related concept of victim deservingness, see Seu (2015).

sufferers in television news in passive or even dehumanized terms – a repertoire that did indeed often go hand-in-hand with a sense that there was nothing they as audience member could do to change the situation. There is also some experimental evidence (Zagefka, et al., 2011) that victims of humanitarian disasters are seen as more deserving of donations than victims of human-made humanitarian crises, a difference at least in part mediated by the perception of the former as more resilient.<sup>40</sup>

However, the notion that depicting the other's agency is vital to elicit audience engagement and willingness to help is not uncontested. Orgad (2008) has argued that showing victims as acting and possessing (conditional) agency might in fact lessen compassionate responses in audiences as “the consequence of this [focus on agency] may be that readers are encouraged to deny rather than acknowledge the suffering they encounter in the media” (p .22). In building a similar argument, Orgad and Seu (2014) reinterpret the findings of Höijer's focus group study (2004) to provide support for the idea that the most helpless victims tend to be the ones who can count on the most compassionate responses. As Seu (2015) points out, the proven tendency of people to care and give more for victims of natural disaster – who are perceived as more helpless than those of man-made disasters – also appears to support this claim.

Given that the concept of agency has featured centre-stage in theoretical reflections as well as representation studies in the field, is it striking that so little is known about its empirically observable implications for audience responses to distant mediated suffering. The current study aims to start addressing this lacuna.

#### 4.2.2.2 *Distance*

Scholars that investigate disaster coverage also commonly criticize western media reporting of distant suffering for drawing on mental binary oppositions

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<sup>40</sup> For similar differences in donations between “natural” and “man-made” disasters within the Dutch context, see also Wiepking and van Leeuwen (2013).

between “us” and “them”. As these authors agree, media representations of disaster that dichotomize the world into detached zones of danger and of safety are not just overly simplistic but also misleading in that they fail to highlight existing links and interdependencies between the life worlds of those who watch and those who are being watched (Joye, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2006; Konstantinidou, 2008).

Chouliaraki (2006) also pays much theoretical attention to the way that representation constructs degrees of distance or proximity to the spaces of suffering. As she explains, her analytics of mediation, “looks into the construal of the scene of suffering within a specific space–time that separates safety from danger” (p. 85). On the one end of the spectrum, Chouliaraki finds instances of adventure news employing representational practices that evoke a “radical distance from the location of suffering” (p. 98). She posits that adventure news disaster coverage thus “fails to engage the spectators in an emotional and reflexive way” (p. 106). In contrast, coverage that shows the permeability of “their” and “our” worlds can allow the audience to recognize “multiple connections between safety and danger” (ibid.). In Chouliaraki’s view, the visibility of connections between spaces of danger and safety can be considered necessary (albeit not sufficient) representational conditions to create spaces for cosmopolitan engagement with the distant other.

While in *adventure news*, the safe world of the audience is hermetically sealed off from that of the distant victim, *emergency news* may draw attention to parallels and connections between those worlds, thereby also paving the way for an effective call for action. In fact, work on journalistic domestication of distant disaster (Joye, 2015; Huiberts & Joye, 2017) shows how television news constructs oftentimes far-fetched connections with the life world of the target audience in an attempt to boost an item’s appeal.

While there is indeed some evidence from qualitative research that highlighting connections and interdependencies between the worlds of the viewer and that of the distant suffering might lead people to care more about

those in distress (Philo, 2002), no systematic attempt has been made to investigate this relationship in more detail. As the first study of its kind, the current experiment thus explores the effect that providing or withholding such a “connection between safety and danger” has on audiences’ responses to representations of humanitarian disaster.

### 4.2.3 Hypotheses

With respect to agency, I follow the dominant position within the literature on distant suffering in formulating four hypotheses:

*H1: Portraying higher levels of victims’ agency will evoke increased empathic responses.*

*H2: Portraying higher levels of victims’ agency will evoke increased perceived similarity.*

*H3: Portraying higher levels of victims’ agency will evoke increased perceived personal responsibility to help.*

*H4: Portraying higher levels of victims’ agency will evoke increased willingness to donate.*

The literature review above also leads me to expect that suggested proximity, by ways of intersection of life worlds, will have a positive effect on audience responses, as expressed in the following four hypotheses:

*H5: Portraying the life worlds of victims and audiences as more proximate will evoke increased empathic responses.*

*H6: Portraying the life worlds of victims and audiences as more proximate will evoke increased perceived similarity.*

*H7: Portraying the life worlds of victims and audiences as more proximate will evoke increased perceived personal responsibility to help.*

*H8: Portraying the life worlds of victims and audiences as more proximate will evoke increased willingness to donate.*

The last set of hypotheses concerns not the effects of the experimental manipulations, but those of participants’ Just World Beliefs. As shown above, Just World Beliefs are considered relatively stable even in the face of undeniable injustice. While previous research has focused on blaming-the-victim strategies to protect Just World Beliefs when exposed to undeniable injustice, I expect a

different mechanism in the current study through which Just World Beliefs affect the viewer's response to distant suffering.

From their extensive literature review, Hafer and Begue (2005) conclude that those with strong Just World Beliefs might be able to hold on to these beliefs in the face of suffering elsewhere, by “see[ing] targets of injustice as belonging to a different world than their own; thus, for example, individuals can separate their own just world from the unjust or random world of innocent suffering” (p. 146). In this way, Just World Beliefs might be protected even in the face of blatant but distant injustice.

When it comes to mediated distant suffering, a tendency to understand the world as essentially orderly and just could thus encourage a mode of reception that essentially pushes those mediated distant zones of danger out of the realm of the factual. In other words, those with stronger Just World Beliefs should be more likely to distance themselves from the depicted suffering.

This expectation is expressed in the following four hypotheses:

*H9: Participants with stronger Just World Beliefs will show less empathic responses towards the refugees shown in the clip.*

*H10: Participants with stronger Just World Beliefs will feel less similar to the refugees shown in the clip.*

*H11: Participants with stronger Just World Beliefs will feel less perceived personal responsibility to help.*

*H12: Participants with stronger Just World Beliefs will be less willing to donate.*

## **4.3 Method**

### **4.3.1 Participants and recruitment**

This paper presents experimental data gathered using the LISS panel administered by CentERdata. This long-standing online panel comprises of a



representative sample of the Dutch population above 18 years.<sup>41</sup> For the purpose of the present study, a pre-selection was applied to include only those panel members who had completed a multi-item trait empathy measurement in an earlier panel round. This precondition for inclusion was introduced in order to be able to use the trait empathy measurement in analysis without sacrifices in effective sample size.

From this group, a random sample of 1,191 panel members was drawn and approached. Out of these, 1,010 followed the link to the study. Removing participants who dropped out before completion or experienced technical difficulties while participating, resulted in an effective sample size of 822 (48.8% women; age  $M = 55.7$ ,  $SD = 16.6$ , min = 19, max = 91).

#### **4.3.2 Procedure**

The study was conducted in November 2014 as an online experiment. Participants who agreed to partake in the study were informed that they would now watch a clip about the situation at the Horn of Africa during a severe food crisis. They were asked to make sure to switch on the sound on their computer or tablet. No further instructions or information was provided at this point. Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of the four different versions of the news item which is described below in more detail. Right after watching the video, participants were asked to share their spontaneous thoughts and feelings through an open-ended question. This generated a large body of rich qualitative data that will be thematically analysed in the next chapter.

The open question was followed by closed items on empathic responses, perceived similarity with the refugees, perceived moral responsibility to help, and other concepts. Details about all measures relevant for the current study are provided below.

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<sup>41</sup> Computers and internet connections are provided to those panel members who could otherwise not participate.

After the core questionnaire, a debriefing text informed participants that the video had been edited for the purpose of the study and that it contained some fictional details. In addition, two links to humanitarian organizations were offered for more information about the current situation in Somalia and Somali refugees in the Netherlands. The questionnaire concluded with a number of meta-questions about participants' thoughts and opinions about the general topic and the survey questions.

### 4.3.3 The stimulus

The stimulus used in this study is an edited version of an actual news item broadcasted by Dutch Public Service news provider NOS in 2011. It shows the suffering and personal struggles of Somali farmers that have fled to the Kenyan Dadaab refugee camp in order to escape war and drought in their own country. The short (1.45min) clip depicts the severe humanitarian situation in the camp, caused by malnutrition, lack of adequate shelter and clean drinking water. Part of the item recounts the ordeal of a Somalian farmer whose five-year old son just died at the camp of exhaustion and dehydration. All of the footage of the clip is filmed in the refugee camp and the journalist does not appear in front of the camera. The journalistic narrative is provided through a voice from the off that accompanies, explains, and contextualizes the footage.

I created four different versions of the news item. To keep full control over the extent and nature of the experimental manipulation, the four different versions of the clip were visually identical. Variation was introduced exclusively in the voice-over narratives that were manipulated on the two dimensions agency and intersection.

In the *high agency* conditions, references are made throughout the video to the resilience and resourcefulness of the refugees. For example, the voice-over mentions how people in the camp *help* and *support* each other; how a family of Somali refugees had, in the past, always *managed to survive* drought and civil war; and how parents are *struggling* to care for their undernourished children.

In the *low-agency* conditions, these references are omitted or more passive verbs are used to describe the same actions. Refugees are described as having *ended up* in the refugee camp, and as *dependent* on food aid.

In the *intersecting live worlds* (reduced distance) conditions, the viewer learns that the farmer who has just lost his son has an uncle who has been living in the *Netherlands* for many years and who was going to send money so that Osman Ali's son could go to school. In the *non-intersecting live worlds* (high distance) conditions, the same uncle who was going to pay for the child's tuition fees, lives in *Kenya*.

Other elements of the narrative such as the descriptions suffering of the refugees was kept constant across the different versions of the text in as much as possible. Transcripts of all four versions can be found in Appendix A.

Limiting the changes to the voice-over audio allowed me to purposefully and carefully insert and omit the desired elements in the narrative. The choice for this rather subtle form of experimental manipulation derives from the view that it is often the spoken word that offers context and interpretation for the suffering that is shown. As Chouliaraki (2006) explains: "The verbal establishes the sense of reality that the story evokes for the spectator. [...] In ordering and organizing the spaces and temporalities of events, the verbal narrative of the news performs fundamental classificatory activities. It includes and excludes, foregrounds and backgrounds, justifies and legitimizes. It separates 'us' from 'them'" (p. 77).

To ensure that the stimuli clips would be perceived by participants as genuine news items, substantial effort was put into producing the voice-over audio. The different versions of the voice-over were recorded in a studio by a professional voice actor who is a well-known voice on Dutch television. As the original news item had to be stripped off all of its audio, I carefully reproduced background sounds such as wind and crowd noises.

#### **4.3.4 Measures**

As argued above, introducing psychological concepts and measures can contribute to empirical rigour and conceptual consensus to the field of audience research on mediated suffering. In particular, moral psychology offers a considerable body of works on how we respond to other human beings in need (see e.g. Haidt, 2003; 2007). I therefore turn mostly to moral psychology for the operationalizations that follow.

##### *4.3.4.1 Empathic responses*

To assess the level of empathic responses, I made use of the Emotional Response Questionnaire (ERQ) (Coke et al., 1978). Specifically, I included the ERQ items that measure two related, yet distinct types of vicarious responses.

The first empathic response measured using the ERQ is empathic distress, also referred to as Distress at another's distress (DAAD, see Haidt 2003). As the action tendencies associated with empathic distress are not primarily and necessarily directed at improving the other's well-being, empathic distress is generally not considered a moral emotion proper (Haidt, 2003).

The eight empathic distress items in the ERQ asked participants to rate on a seven-point scale the degree in which they felt "alarmed", "grieved", "troubled", "distressed", "upset", "disturbed", "worried" and "perturbed".

The second empathic response is empathic concern, an emotional response of care to the suffering of others that elicits helping behaviour and is closely related to the moral emotion of compassion (see e.g. Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Haidt, 2003). Six items in the ERQ were included that measure empathic concern. The items prompted respondent to rate to what extent they felt "compassionate", "sympathetic", "moved", "warm", "soft-hearted" and "tender" towards the refugees in the news item.

The Dutch translations of the nine EQR items that I used in the current study are based on translations previously used in a series of empathy studies

conducted in the Netherlands (Niezink, et al., 2012).<sup>42</sup> Two adjustments to these translations were made. First, the translation of one of the items was deemed somewhat awkward and was thus adapted.<sup>43</sup> Second, the translation of two items that were initially part of the empathic distress scale shifted their meaning in such a way that they were now primarily other- rather than self-oriented. I therefore decided to move these two items into the empathic concern scale.<sup>44</sup>

The adjusted empathic concern and empathic distress items were entered in separate principal component analyses (PCA), yielding single component solutions with all factor loadings above .70.<sup>45</sup> Cronbach's alpha showed good internal consistency of both empathic concern (0.88, six items) and empathic distress (.92, eight items). For both scales, the PCA was used to calculate regression-based component scores.

#### 4.3.4.2 *Perceived similarity*

To measure the extent to which participants feel similar and connected to the depicted refugees, I used the Perceived Homophily Measure (PHM) (McCroskey, McCroskey & Richmond, 2006). Specifically, five 7-point semantic differential items of PHM's attitude and behaviour subscales were employed.<sup>46</sup> The PHM items were translated by myself and checked by colleagues for face validity.

A principal components analysis showed that all five PHM items loaded on a single factor, with all items except one yielding factor loadings above .65. The

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<sup>42</sup> Translations were kindly provided to me by first author Lidewij W. Niezink.

<sup>43</sup> The original term was "warm" and was changed to "welwillend".

<sup>44</sup> This concerns the items "bezorgd" and "zorgelijk".

<sup>45</sup> Component selection for all PCAs that are discussed in this section is based on the common eigenvalue > 1 criterion, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>46</sup> "The refugees in the clip think like me/do not think like me'  
'...are from a social class similar/different from mine'  
'...are different from me/not different from me'  
'...act the way I would act/do not act in the way I would act'  
'...are similar to me/are not similar to me'

item with the lowest factor loading (.33) was an item with evidently limited applicability for the used stimulus: “Refugees belong to the same/a different social class as me”. This item also showed a mild flooring effect, as more than half of the participants (54.5%) placed themselves in the two most outer categories of the “different social class” side of the 7-point semantic differential scale. I thus omitted the item from the construction of the scale. Rerunning the PCA with the remaining four PHM items again resulted in a single factor, with factor loadings of .70 and above and the adapted scale also showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .74$ ). A regression-based component score variable was calculated based on the factor loading values.

#### 4.3.4.3 *Just World Beliefs*

The Just World Belief measurement that I used in the present study is based on the Global Belief in a Just World scale items by Lipkus (1991) and their Dutch translation of Lodewijkx, et al. (2005). The scale I used consists of six five-point Likert scale items.<sup>47</sup>

A principal component analysis initially yielded two components. However, the second component only just about met the inclusion criterion with an eigenvalue of 1.06 and the scree plot elbowed at the second component, suggesting a single component solution. Removing two items from the scale resulted in a single component with all items loading above .55.<sup>48</sup> Cronbach’s alpha showed good internal scale consistency ( $\alpha = .71$ ). A scale variable was calculated using regression-based estimations of component scores.

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<sup>47</sup> “In general, I feel that people get what they are entitled to have in life.”  
“...that people who meet with misfortune have themselves to blame.”  
“...that people are treated unfairly in life.”  
“...that a person's efforts are noticed and rewarded.”  
“...that the world is a fair place.”  
“...that people get the rewards and punishments they deserve.”

<sup>48</sup> These items were “I generally feel that people are treated unfairly in life” and “I generally feel that a person's efforts are noticed and rewarded”.

#### 4.3.4.4 *Additional single-item measures*

In addition to the multi-item scales for empathic responses, perceived similarity and Just World Beliefs, the questionnaire also included a number of related single item measures. Two questions assessed the level of perceived responsibility (governmental and individual respectively) to do something to help refugees such as those in the refugee camp. Another item assessed perceived efficacy to be able to help refugees such as the ones depicted in the news item. All three of these single items measures are Dutch translations based on questions used in previous studies (Cameron & Payne, 2011; Small, Loewenstein & Slovic, 2007).

Participants were also asked if they would be willing to donate 15 euros to a humanitarian organization that helps refugees in need. In an effort to reduce social desirability bias in responses, this question was intentionally worded in a way which suggested that participants might be held to their promise at the end of the survey (which was not the case).

To assess the critical appraisal of the news item as representation, another question asked participants to what extent they thought that the news item offered a realistic depiction of the situation on the ground. A final item in this section assessed the level to which participants generally felt overwhelmed by the amount of suffering in the world.

#### 4.3.4.5 *Demographics and trait empathy*

Besides the measurements administered as part of this study, my analysis also drew on data gathered during earlier panel rounds. These included trait empathy, gender and age.

Trait empathy was measured with a set of eight seven-point Likert scale items, adapted from the emotional empathy scale developed by Mehrabian and Epstein (1972, in Keller & Pfattheicher, 2013).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "It upsets me to see helpless old people."

"I cannot continue to feel OK if people around me are depressed."

"I get very angry when I see someone being ill-treated."

I conducted a principal components analysis which initially produced two components. The second component seemed to be induced mostly by the item “I become nervous if others around me seem to be nervous”. As this item is the only one in the scale that arguably measures something more akin to emotional contagion, rather than empathy, I omitted it from the scale. Removing the item resulted in a single component solution, with all factor loadings above .65.

Cronbach’s alpha indicated good internal consistency for the adjusted trait empathy scale ( $\alpha = .86$ ). A scale variable was created in the PCA, calculating regression-based component scores based on the factor loading values.

## 4.4 Results

### 4.4.1 Main analyses

Five main OLS regression models were run, with as dependent variables the empathic concern and distress scales (Table 4.1), the perceived similarity scale and the single-item variables perceived personal moral responsibility and willingness to give (Table 4.2). The predictors in all models were the two dummy-coded experimental manipulations agency and intersection, their interaction term, the Just World Beliefs scale<sup>50</sup>, the trait empathy scale, gender and age.

In the empathic distress model, the effect of the agency manipulation approached significance ( $\beta = -0.07, p = .097$ ), with participants exposed to the

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“I tend to get emotionally involved with a friend’s problems.”

“I am very upset when I see an animal in pain.”

“It makes me sad to see a lonely stranger in a group.”

“I become nervous if others around me seem to be nervous.”

“Seeing people cry upsets me.”

<sup>50</sup> Previous research has shown Just World Beliefs to be stable across time and remarkably immune to counterevidence (Hafer & Begue, 2005; Furnham, 2003). Nonetheless, I conducted a one-way analysis of variance to test whether the experimental manipulations affected Just World Beliefs. As expected, results showed no significance mean differences across conditions ( $p = .69$ ).



agency cues showing less distress ( $M = -.051, SD = 1.012$ ) than the rest ( $M = .053, SD = .986$ ).<sup>51</sup>

The experimental factor intersection showed no significant effect, nor did the interaction term. Empathic distress was positively and significantly affected by trait empathy ( $\beta = 0.29, p < .001$ ) as well as age ( $\beta = 0.21, p < 0.001$ ). Just World Beliefs yielded no significant effect. Gender differences were found ( $\beta = 0.13, p < .001$ ), with women reporting significantly more distress ( $M = .152, SD = 1.016$ ) than men ( $M = -.145, SD = .963$ ). The proportion of variance explained in empathic distress was 17.9%,  $F(7, 814 = 25.28), p < .001$ .

For empathic concern, the agency manipulation again approached significance ( $\beta = 0.08, p = 0.087$ ), with participants scoring lower when they had seen a news item that highlighted agency ( $M = -0.06, SD = 1.01$ ) than if they had not ( $M = 0.06, SD = 0.98$ ).<sup>52</sup>

The effects of the intersection manipulation and the interaction term were both non-significant. Just World Beliefs did prove to have a significant and negative effect on empathic concern ( $\beta = -0.07, p < .05$ ). Trait empathy had a significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.29, p < 0.001$ ), as did age ( $\beta = 0.19, p < .001$ ). Finally, gender significantly affected empathic concern ( $\beta = 0.13, p < 0.001$ ), with women scoring higher ( $M = 0.15, SD = 0.96$ ) than men ( $M = -0.14, SD = 1.02$ ). The model as a whole explained 17.9% of the variance in empathic concern,  $F(7, 814 = 25.36), p < .001$ .

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<sup>51</sup> Note that all multi-item scale variables are standardized PCA scores with a grand mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. Even though their (group) means and standard deviations are thus of limited utility, they are reported throughout this section for the sake of completeness.

<sup>52</sup> It should be noted that the effect of agency did in fact become significant when the factor interaction term – which did not contribute to a significant  $R^2$  change in this model – was omitted. However, for the sake of consistency, all models were run with the interaction term included.

**Table 4.1.** Results of OLS regression models predicting empathic distress and concern

	Empathetic distress				Empathetic concern			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Agency	-.15	.09	-.07	-1.7 <sup>+</sup>	-.15	.09	-.08	-1.7 <sup>+</sup>
Reduced Distance	-.07	.09	-.04	-.80	-.13	.09	-.06	-1.4
Agency X Reduced Distance	.05	.13	.02	.41	.04	.13	.02	.32
Trait Empathy	.29	.03	.29	8.9 <sup>***</sup>	.29	.03	.29	8.7 <sup>***</sup>
Just World Beliefs	.00	.03	.00	-.12	-.71	.03	-.07	-2.2 <sup>*</sup>
Age	.01	.00	.21	6.4 <sup>***</sup>	.01	.00	.19	5.8 <sup>***</sup>
Gender (woman=1)	.26	.07	.13	4.0 <sup>***</sup>	.25	.07	.12	3.8 <sup>***</sup>
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.18				.18			
<i>F</i>	25.28 <sup>***</sup>				25.36 <sup>***</sup>			

Note. N= 822. <sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , <sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$ , <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ , <sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 4.2.** Results of OLS regression models predicting perceived homophily, perceived moral responsibility, and donation willingness

	Perceived homophily				Perceived responsibility				Willingness to donate			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Agency	.05	.10	.03	.55	-.35	.16	-.10	-2.3 <sup>*</sup>	-.43	.19	-.11	-2.3 <sup>*</sup>
Reduced Distance	.15	.10	.08	1.5	-.25	.16	-.07	-1.5	-.44	.19	-.11	-2.3 <sup>*</sup>
Agency X Reduced Distance	-.18	.14	-.08	-1.3	.30	.22	.08	1.3	.63	.26	.14	2.4 <sup>*</sup>
Trait Empathy	.07	.04	.07	2.0 <sup>*</sup>	.33	.06	.19	5.7 <sup>***</sup>	.28	.07	.14	4.1 <sup>***</sup>
Just World Beliefs	-.14	.04	-.14	-3.9 <sup>***</sup>	-.17	.06	-.10	-3.0 <sup>**</sup>	-.19	.07	-.09	-2.8 <sup>*</sup>
Age	.00	.00	.01	.42	.02	.00	.21	6.2 <sup>***</sup>	.02	.00	.15	4.4 <sup>***</sup>
Gender (woman=1)	.18	.07	.09	2.6 <sup>**</sup>	.13	.11	.04	1.1	-.04	.14	-.01	-.27
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.04				.13				.08			
<i>F</i>	5.00 <sup>***</sup>				16.34 <sup>***</sup>				9.52 <sup>***</sup>			

Note. N=822. <sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , <sup>\*</sup>  $p < 0.05$ , <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.01$ , <sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < 0.001$ .

When regressing perceived similarity, the two experimental manipulations and their interaction had no significant effect. Trait empathy did yield a significant and positive effect ( $\beta = 0.07, p < .05$ ), while participants' Just World Beliefs showed a significant negative effect ( $\beta = -0.14, p < .001$ ). In contrast to the previous two models, age did not significantly affect perceived similarity. Gender differences were significant ( $\beta = 0.09, p < .01$ ), with women perceiving more similarity between themselves and the refugees ( $M = 0.111, SD = 0.98$ ) than men ( $M = -0.11, SD = 1.00$ ). The explained variance of the model was 4.1%,  $F(7, 814) = 4.96, p < .001$ .

As the items included in the perceived similarity scale had been sampled from different sub-dimensions of the original PHM instrument, I also regressed the four single PHM items separately. I found that reducing distance by intersecting life worlds had a significant positive effect on the degree in which participants thought that "the refugees in the clip were similar to me" ( $\beta = 0.10, p < .05$ ), as well as a positive effect bordering on significance on the degree to which they thought that "the refugees in the clip think like me" ( $\beta = 0.09, p = .06$ ).

In the regression model for perceived moral responsibility, agency was found to have a significant negative effect ( $\beta = -0.10, p < .05$ ), with those who were placed in the agency conditions expressing less perceived moral responsibility ( $M = 4.09, SD = 1.71$ ) than those who were not ( $M = 4.29, SD = 1.68$ ). The effects of the other experimental factor as well as the interaction term were not significant. The effect of Just World Beliefs was negative and significant ( $\beta = -0.10, p < .01$ ) and that of trait empathy positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.20, p < .001$ ). While no significant gender differences were found, age showed a significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.21, p < .001$ ). The model explained a total of 12.4% of the variance in perceived moral responsibility,  $F(7, 814) = 16.39, p < .001$ .

For willingness to donate, significant negative main effects were found for both of the experimental factors agency ( $\beta = -0.11, p < .05$ ) and intersection ( $\beta = -0.11, p < .05$ ). Participants in the agency conditions were less willing to give €15

euros to a refugee organisation ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ) than those in the other conditions ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ) and this willingness to donate was significantly lower when a link to the Netherlands was provided ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) than when that link was absent ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.98$ ). The interaction term of the two experimental factors also had a significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This means that even though introducing agency and life world intersection both had a negative main effect on willingness to donate, the condition with both agency and intersection had a significantly higher donation intention mean than the one in the other conditions combined.

Just World Beliefs yielded a significant negative effect on donation intention ( $\beta = -0.09$ ,  $p = .01$ ). As in all of the main models, trait empathy had a significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Age had a significant positive effect ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and the role of gender was found to be non-significant. The model explained 7.6% of the variance in willingness to donate,  $F(7, 814) = 9.52$ .

#### **4.4.2 Additional analyses on Just World Beliefs**

Given the substantial role that participants' Just World Beliefs proved to play in affecting the main response variables<sup>53</sup>, I sought to explore in some more depth the implications that these beliefs might have had for the current study. If the perception of mediated distant suffering is indeed shaped by one's Just World Beliefs, so should the general experience of watching the news item and of participating in the study.

I therefore conducted a number of auxiliary regression analyses using as dependent variables a set of five meta-questions that are routinely asked at the end of each LISS study (e.g. "Did you think that the topic of this study was interesting?") as well as a question about the authenticity of the representation

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<sup>53</sup> To ensure that Just World Beliefs are not just a proxy of political orientation, I also included a simple left-right self-positioning variable in all the model. This did not render insignificant any of the significant Just World Beliefs effects that are reported in this chapter. The political orientation variable is thus omitted in the reported models.

that was included in the study. The same predictors and covariates as in the previous analyses were entered in the model, but my interest was now primarily focused on the effects of Just World Beliefs.

Results showed that those with stronger Just World Beliefs found the topic of the study significantly less interesting ( $\beta = -0.10, p < .01$ ) and were significantly less likely to state that the study had made them think about the issue of the survey ( $\beta = -0.15, p < .001$ ). Higher Just World Beliefs were also associated with participants finding the survey questions less clear ( $\beta = -0.10, p < .01$ ) and reporting more difficulties understanding them ( $\beta = 0.07, p < .05$ ). However, Just World Beliefs did not show a significant effect on how much participants reported to have enjoyed participation in the study. The strongest effect of Just World Beliefs among these auxiliary regressions was on perceived authenticity of the news item. Participants with higher Just World Beliefs were significantly less likely to think that the clip had depicted the situation of the refugees in a realistic manner ( $\beta = -0.26, p < .001$ ). It is also noteworthy to report that in the auxiliary regression models described here, the only two variables besides Just World Beliefs that showed any significant effects were trait empathy (with positive effects on making people think about the topic, finding the topic interesting and trusting the clip's authenticity) and age (with older participants finding it more difficult to answer the questions and having more trust in the clip's authenticity).

## **4.5 Conclusion**

The aim of this study was two-fold. First and foremost, I set out to investigate how agency and distance in representations of distant suffering affect audiences' empathic responses, perceived similarity, moral responsibility and willingness to donate. Secondly, I aimed to explore the role that personal characteristics play in these responses to mediated humanitarian disaster. Besides testing the effects of age, gender and trait empathy, I was particularly

interested to see how a strong belief in a Just World affects the reception of and responses to distant – and blatantly unjust – suffering. In the following, I will first discuss the effects of the experimental manipulations, before turning my attention to personal characteristics.

#### **4.5.1 The experimental manipulations: agency and distance**

As Orgad observes, “the main argument in the existing literature has been that it is through action that the sufferer becomes humane and that the presence of agency [...] is important for the establishment of moral proximity between the audience and distant sufferers” (2008, p. 25). In line with this dominant assumption, I hypothesized that foregrounding agency in the news item would lead to stronger empathic responses (H1), more perceived similarity (H2), higher perceived moral responsibility (H3), and an increased willingness to donate (H4).

None of these hypotheses were confirmed. In fact, with estimates bordering on significance, agency had a negative effect on both empathic distress and empathic concern. Furthermore, the level to which participants felt morally responsible to act was significantly lower when refugees’ agency was stressed. Similarly, the willingness donate €15 was significantly lower when the refugees were presented as acting and resilient individuals.

In line with Orgad and Seu’s (2014) reading of Höijer’s focus group findings, the current study therefore “contradict[s] the received wisdom in contemporary debates on the representation of suffering (influenced by Boltanski) that depicting sufferers as having agency (rather than passive and helpless) is key to their humanization and, therefore, to audiences’ sense of agency and ability to care for distant sufferers” (p. 19). When refugees in the camp exhibited a certain degree of self-sufficiency and resilience in their struggle with disaster and hardship, their suffering was perceived as less touching and less worthwhile of action. It is thus tempting to conclude that when trying to make people think that

they have to do something about the situation, one is ill-advised to depict those affected as anything by passive and dependent.

There are, however, important caveats that call for caution. First, the small size of this specific effect should remind us that – while significant – the role of the agency manipulation was very subtle and by no means universal. Furthermore, the study’s experimental design only allowed for measurement of dependent variables through self-reported assessments right after a single exposure to a specific instance of representation. The current study thus leaves unanswered the crucial question of how more complex narratives of humanitarian crises can, in the longer run, cultivate a more critical and reflexive engagement with global inequality and moral responsibility.

Therefore, the demonstrated statistical effect of agency does not necessarily challenge Chouliaraki’s (2006) assertion that “[t]he humane sufferer is the sufferer who acts” (p. 88). The current findings do not disprove the notion that a discursive environment in which strength and resilience rather than passivity and victimhood are foregrounded can eventually contribute to a disposition of caring for distant suffering others. They do, however, force us to acknowledge that stressing agency in representation might in fact weaken spontaneous emotional and moral responses.

In these interpretations, it is also necessary to keep in mind the small effect sizes of the observed effect sized of the experimental factors. Most likely, these reflect the subtleness of the experimental manipulations: all participants were exposed to the same footage with only a number of variations in the voice-overs. It therefore appears reasonable to claim that the differences between stimuli were actually less pronounced than across-outlet differences one might encounter in actual disaster reporting. This also means that while experimental effects are small, there is reason to be rather confident about the external validity of the findings.

Given the small effect sizes, not only should future studies attempt to explore whether these effects of agency are replicable under varying

circumstances, but also whether they might in fact be moderated by other factors. A recent study by Cao and Jia (2017) found that using the picture of a happy instead of a sad child in a charity appeal resulted in willingness to donate decreasing in participants with low involvement with the given cause, but increasing in those with high involvement. This finding confirmed the authors' expectations that those who already know and care about the cause and the severity of suffering, can be approached with more positive imageries that do not need to convey misery. Those who were less involved needed the negative victim images to be pushed into action. It is conceivable that when it comes to showing passive victimhood Vs agency in representations of distant suffering, similar processes might be at play.

The literature on distant suffering also led me to expect that by creating a link between the Dadaab refugee camp and the Netherlands – and thus by reducing the distance between the spaces of sufferer and audience – participants would be more likely to feel, care and act. Drawing attention to the interpermeability between “there” and “here” was hypothesized to lead to stronger empathic responses (H5), more perceived similarity (H6), higher perceived moral responsibility (H7), and an increased willingness to donate (H9). Again, none of the hypotheses could be confirmed.

The only significant main effect of the intersection manipulation was a negative impact on the willingness to donate. Like in the case of agency, it is conceivable that this effect is related to narrative predictability, as the worlds of suffering and safety are not expected to be bridged.<sup>54</sup> In other words, people might be more inclined to donate if the story fits preconceived ideas than if it is being complicated by a link to their own life worlds.

An alternative or complementary explanation for the direction of the effect can be found in the specific operationalization that was used. As described above,

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<sup>54</sup> It should be noted here that data gathering took place at the end of 2014, just before substantially increased mass migration to Europe literally brought victims of war and terror much closer to the life worlds of the Dutch public.



the versions of the news item differed on the deceased boy's uncle as either living in Kenya or the Netherlands. Participants also learned that he had intended to pay for the boy's school fees. It is therefore conceivable that when the uncle lived in the Netherlands, participants were primed to think about financial aid coming from the Somalian diaspora in Europe and thus felt a lesser sense of urgency to give money themselves (despite the fact that the same story was used when the uncle lived in Kenya).

#### **4.5.2 The role of audience characteristics**

Besides exploring the effects of the experimental manipulations, this study also highlighted the role of a range of audience characteristics in responses to the distant suffering. One of the most consistent findings is that age mattered substantially for how participants reacted to the news item. Older people were more distressed by the suffering that was depicted, experienced more empathic concern for the people in the video clip, had a stronger sense of personal moral responsibility, and were more prepared to donate money. While the latter result confirms the empirically well-established positive relationship between age and charitable giving (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011), the remaining age-related findings at first seem somewhat at odds with studies showing older people actually being equally or less empathic in general (Grühn et al., 2008).

However, the limited empirical evidence on age and distant suffering includes some suggestions that older people are more emotionally and morally engaged when it comes to mediated humanitarian disaster (von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014; Kyriakidou, 2013, Höijer, 2004), either because younger audiences more easily take on detached positions of "mere spectator" (Kyriakidou, 2014), or because "[e]lderly people are not symbolically threatened in their own identities by suffering others in the world, and they have a deeper knowledge of the world and greater life experience. Therefore they may be more open to both their own feelings and to global suffering" (Höijer, 2004; p. 520).

Gender also proved to have significant effects for all responses except perceived responsibility and donation intention. Women were more distressed after watching the video clip, reported to experience more empathic concern and also saw more similarities between themselves and the refugees. However, gender differences disappeared when it came to perceived responsibility and willingness to donate. Women's stronger instant responses to the misery of the refugees did therefore not translate into heightened moral reflections or increased action tendencies.

These findings can be brought in line with studies indicating that while women generally tend to score higher on self-reported empathy-related measurements (Rueckert, Branch & Doan, 2011) and emotional responses to distant suffering in particular (e.g., Höijer, 2004), gender differences are less easily discernible when it comes to perceived moral responsibility for distant suffering (see previous chapter) and charitable giving (Wiepking & Bekkers, 2012).

To be sure, the fact that the current findings on gender differences are in line with previous research, does of course not mean that we really have understood what is happening here, i.e. why men and woman differ in their responses. Moving beyond the general idea that for women, showing emotions is perceived more acceptable, Höijer (2004) put forward the thesis that men might in fact feel threatened in their male identity by representations of distant suffering, as this suffering is often cause by male violence. Therefore, men regulate their empathic responses more rigorously, as they "must steel themselves in order to protect themselves against the myth of violence as a specific male characteristic, that is, against their fear of becoming a perpetrator of violence themselves" (p. 526). Future empirical efforts should be directed at teasing out the individual factors that underlie these gender differences.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> To avoid unhelpful gender essentialism, the aim should therefore be to unpack what it is about men and women that makes them respond differently to these representations. For example, within the quantitative effects paradigm this would mean identifying and adding to the causal models those gender-related individual characteristics that also co-vary with the response measures (such as trait

The single personal factor that mattered most for participants' responses to the mediated suffering was their level of trait empathy. In fact, participants' empathic disposition was the only explanatory variable whose effect proved significant across all response measures. Also, when controlled for gender, those participants who are more empathic are more likely not just to feel and care about the distant other, but also to see more similarities with themselves, feel more moral pressure, and be more willing to donate.

The last and theoretically most interesting personal characteristic that was included in this study is the level of Just World Beliefs one holds. While the role of Just World Beliefs in the reception of mediated suffering has not been studied before, I developed a set of hypotheses based on the assumption that these beliefs would be challenged by the news item and would thus have to be protected through a strategy of distancing.

In accordance with the hypotheses I found that those with stronger Just World Beliefs reported less empathic concern after watching the item (H9) and were less likely to note similarities between themselves and the refugees (H10). Also confirming the hypotheses, Just World Beliefs had a negative effect on participants' personal moral pressure to do something (H11) and on their willingness to donate money (H12).

Taken together, these findings are consistent with the idea that exposure to the undeserved suffering of the refugees posed a threat of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) to those who firmly believe in the world as a fair place. As Just World Beliefs are generally not given up easily and as the depicted victims can hardly be blamed for the draught and the civil war that forced them out of their country, this threat could be mitigated effectively only by the "fictionalizing" of the distant suffering – by mentally reiterating the imagined chasm between one's own zone of safety and the other's distant zone of danger. When interpreting the

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empathy). The aim then should be to eventually render the gender effect insignificant as the added set of individual characteristics capture between them all of the variance in responses that was previously "explained" by gender.

results in this light, it is also not at all surprising that perceived similarity was in fact the dependent variable that was affected negatively most strongly by Just World Beliefs.

This interpretation is supported and supplemented by the auxiliary analyses. Here we saw that participants with stronger Just World Beliefs expressed a distinctively negative attitude towards the study, the survey questions, and the subject matter. It appears that the whole experience of partaking in this study has been rather frustrating for those with strong Just World Beliefs – as we would expect for an experience that challenges a fundamental belief about the nature of the world. Furthermore, and also in line with the above, holding stronger Just World Beliefs was associated with less confidence in the way the misery in the refugee camp was depicted. Presumably, such strategies of “interpretative denial” (Cohen, 2001) offer another way of protecting Just World Beliefs in the face of grave, mediated and undeserved suffering.

Importantly, however, one of the hypotheses about Just World Beliefs was not confirmed. Contrary to expectations, empathic distress was not significantly affected by Just World Beliefs. This is not a trivial finding. After all, the fact that participants with strong Just World Beliefs were no less prone to negative emotions while watching the item appears to contradict the argument that those participants tried their best to keep the suffering at a distance.

However, this seeming contradiction can be resolved when considering the specific characteristics of this outcome variable. At least two plausible explanations for the lack of a significant effect on empathic distress are conceivable.

Firstly, it is possible that since empathic distress is the least cognitive and most intuitive of the response measures used in this study, its experience would precede the regulatory intervention required for the safeguarding of one’s Just World Beliefs. Secondly, a closer look at the operationalization of empathic distress could throw doubt on the precise causes of distress. In the

questionnaire, participants were asked to report to what extent they experienced a set of emotions while watching the clip. The items on empathic distress include terms such as distressed, upset and troubled – negative emotions that pertain to one’s own well-being. Considering the disturbing impact that we would expect the depicted suffering to have on someone holding strong Just World Beliefs, this non-significant finding is no longer that surprising.

In other words, while those holding strong Just World Beliefs experienced equal levels of distress in the face of human misery, their distress might not have been caused primarily by a vicarious emotional experience. Rather, their source of distress might be found in a cognitive dissonance caused by the grave and unjust suffering that threatened to challenge one of their core assumptions about the world.

Furthermore, participants with extreme Just World Beliefs might experience annoyance and distress at the seeming incapacity of the depicted people to work themselves out of their misery. As a first attempt to explore the role of Just World Beliefs for audience engagement with distant suffering, this study suggests that thinking of the world as essentially just, substantially affects the way we feel and think about others in need.

In a more general sense, then, the findings presented in this chapter illustrate how methodological and theoretical insights from the field of moral psychology might help to better understand how our experiences of distant suffering are mediated not just through representation but through who we are and how we relate to the wider world.





## 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I examined the effects of agency, distance, and personal characteristics on different forms of audience engagement with distant suffering. For this purpose, an experiment was conducted in which participants were prompted to fill in numerous quantitative survey items to measure various reactions such as empathic concern or perceived similarity.

As indispensable as such closed questions are for statistical analyses, as inadequate they are when trying to explore the spontaneous thoughts and emotions evoked by an instance of mediated suffering. By providing a limited number of deductively derived survey items, not only did I pre-determine the dimensions on which participants were to express what they felt and thought, I also forced them to quantify what undoubtedly are complex and possibly even contradictory cognitive and affective reactions.

To partially counterbalance for this, the post-stimulus questionnaire also invited participants to “Write down your spontaneous thoughts and feelings that you experienced when watching the clip”.<sup>56</sup> This open question – which appeared right after they had watched the clip and thus prior to any of the closed questions – was filled in by 809 out of the 822 participants.

Since participants were asked to freely express their thoughts and feelings directly after seeing the clip, their reactions were not guided by the content of the survey items or the researcher’s interest. As we will see below, this resulted in a remarkably rich body of associations and ideas connected to mediated distant suffering.

What makes this empirical material particularly valuable is the combination of its open and associative nature with the fact that it comes from a sample that is representative of the Dutch population. The body of responses are thus both qualitative and (largely) representative – two empirical qualities that

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<sup>56</sup> “Schrijft u hieronder uw spontane gedachten en gevoelens op die in u zijn opgekomen bij het zien van het filmpje.”



are typically encountered in a trade-off relationship. Analysing this material therefore allows me to both explore the entire spectrum of individual responses to distant suffering and to make meaningful quantitative statements about the frequencies of themes that appear in these responses. As Huiberts (2016) has pointed out, the advantage of using both qualitative and quantitative methods for studying audiences of distant suffering is “that one can gain qualitative insights about and acknowledge the diversity of media users, while more can be said about trends and regularities in a general, demographically representative population” (p. 4325).

It should be noted that this chapter is of a decisively more descriptive nature than the preceding ones. In the other empirical studies, I attempted to test specific hypotheses about particular responses to representations distant suffering (chapters 3 and 4) and explored audience engagement with a very distinct and novel form of depicting humanitarian disaster (chapter 2). In contrast, the aims of the current and somewhat shorter chapter, are broader and also more inductive: to describe and systematize the spontaneous open responses of a cross-section of Dutch society when confronted with a specific instance of distant suffering.

With this last empirical study, I therefore aim to sketch the spectrum of audience engagement that will also serve as a backdrop for bringing together the various findings of this dissertation in the general conclusion (chapter 6).

In the following sections, I present key concepts from previous research that informed the preliminary list of relevant themes that I could expect to appear in the open responses. This list – after being adapted and extended based on a reading of the material – formed the basis of a codebook that I used to conduct a content analysis of the thoughts and feelings expressed by the participants.

## 5.2 Theoretical framework

In chapter 1, when providing an overview of the available audience research within the field of distant suffering, I introduced a distinction between *atomistic* and more *holistic* studies. The former concentrate on a specific aspect either of representation or perception. For example, as I discussed in some detail in chapter 3, Seu (2010) dissected the ways audiences employ rhetorical tools to mitigate or escape the moral pressures of distant suffering. Similarly focussed in scope, Huiberts and Joye (2017) show how participants engaged with the specific journalistic practice of domestication in disaster reporting.

The clearly defined focus of such studies contributes to their theoretical relevance as it enables them to speak to specific scholarly debates rather than hover above them on a cloud of generalities. However, for the current purpose of developing an analytical tool to analyse open responses to an instance of mediated suffering, the utility of these studies is limited.

I therefore now turn in some more detail to two more *holistic* contributions that stand out in their effort to explore and systematize the overall spectrum of responses to distant suffering in general: the mixed-method research by Höijer (2004) and the focus-group research by Kyriakidou (2015). As the design of both studies were already briefly described in chapter 1, I focus here only on those aspects that are of immediate relevance for the present study: their taxonomies of responses to mediated humanitarian disaster.

### 5.2.1 Taxonomies of audience responses to distant suffering

In studying viewers' responses to televised humanitarian crises through surveys and focus groups, Höijer (2004) identified four compassionate modes through which participants engaged with distant suffering. While for some, emotional engagement was limited to empathic responses such as pity (what Höijer calls "tender-hearted compassion") for others, it was tied to expressions of indignation and anger ("blame-filled compassion"). This latter group not

merely felt for those who suffer but expressed contempt for those who are perceived as causing or as failing to stop that suffering.

Höijer also describes compassionate responses tied to shame. As she explains, this “shame-filled compassion” is rooted in experiencing an unsettling “ambivalence connected with witnessing the suffering of others in our own comfortable lives” (p. 523). Lastly, Höijer observed participants expressing what she calls a “powerlessness-filled” compassion. Here, the compassionate concern for distant others is compounded with a perceived inability to help these others.

Besides these four variations of compassionate engagement, Höijer encountered different forms of distantiation. In its most extreme variant, the truth claims of the shown images are denied, in line with one of the audience strategies described by Seu (2010; see also Cohen, 2001). The more moderate version of distantiation through media critique that Höijer describes happened when viewers “criticize the news in general for commercialism and sensationalism” (p. 524). The second – and according to Höijer more common – form of distantiation was an emotional distancing not unlike what Moeller described as Compassion Fatigue. As Höijer concludes, “[j]ust becoming numb or immune to the pictures and reports about human suffering on a large scale is [...] quite a common reaction” (p. 525).

Similar in her aims but working from the concept of “media witnessing”, Kyriakidou (2015) develops a categorization of different ways of responding to mediated suffering. Not claiming to be exhaustive or definitive, Kyriakidou’s taxonomy is meant to “allow us [to] think about audience engagement with distant suffering in its plurality and diversity of expressions” (p. 228). Also based on a series of focus groups, she describes four different forms of audience engagement: affective, ecstatic, politicized and detached witnessing.

“Affective witnessing” is characterized by a strong empathic engagement of the audience with the depicted suffering and individual victims. Similar to Höijer’s “tender-hearted compassion”, in affective witnessing, “[t]he sufferer, as

a face that renders the pain imaginable, becomes an object of concern, reflection and emotional engagement” (p. 221).

“Ecstatic witnessing” is expressed in a complete and unquestioning immersion in the emotionality of human drama. While overlapping with affective witnessing, ecstatic witnessing – named in reference to Chouliaraki’s (2006) use of the term (see chapter 3) – goes beyond the empathic engagement with individual victims. As Kyriakidou summarizes, it involves “intense emotional involvement with the events witnessed; unconditional empathy with the people suffering; and unquestioning acceptance of the media coverage” (p. 223).

Going one step further, “politicized witnessing” engages not merely with the depicted suffering but also with its larger context and assumed causes. Not unlike Höijer’s blame-filled compassion, it is expressed primarily in “the search for causes and the attribution of blame and political responsibility for the events witnessed” (p. 224). In contrast to both affective and ecstatic witnessing, this mode thus invites reflections on “relations of political and social power and inequality both at the global and the local level” (ibid.).

Lastly, “detached” witnessing is characterized by an explicit lack of emotional and moral engagement. Here, the audience is not invested in the human misery, or in considerations of responsibility. Essentially, this mode of witnessing brings about an “experience of the suffering of others as something remote or ultimately irrelevant to the viewers’ everyday life” (p. 226). As with the more extreme manifestations of distantiation in Höijer’s participants, detached witnessing thus renders distant suffering moral irrelevant.

These taxonomies by Höijer and Kyriakidou provided the starting point for developing the codebook used in the content analysis of the open response. In an effort to systematize the various types of responses the two authors describe, I distilled five preliminary themes that formed the basis of the initial codebook. As detailed in the next section, I then expanded and refined the codebook, based on repeated readings of the open responses.

The five preliminary themes are:

- Expressing varying degrees of empathic responses (“affective/ecstatic witnessing” in Kyriakidou; “tender-hearted compassion” in Höijer)
- Reflecting on the discrepancy between depicted hardships and comfort of own life (“shame-filled compassion” in Höijer)
- Expressing concern for the geopolitical/domestic/historical causes of the depicted suffering (“politized witnessing” in Kyriakidou)
- Distancing from the depicted suffering, rendering it morally irrelevant (“detached witnessing” in Kyriakidou)
- Questioning the authenticity of representation (“distantiation” in Höijer)

### **5.3 Method**

Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). For the current analysis, the “inference” that Krippendorff describes is thus from the written responses to a statement about how participants thought and felt about the news item.

The first version of the codebook was based on the five preliminary themes identified above. After an initial exploratory reading of the material, I refined and extended this list of codes. This step was necessary to ensure that the codebook would capture most frequently occurring and theoretically interesting themes and also that themes were formulated specific enough to make relevant distinctions.

For example, a first reading of the responses led me to add the theme that suffering in Africa will never end and also to distinguish between domestic and international causes of the suffering. Another modification was to create separate sub-codes for empathic responses with and without an element of identification. These sub-codes were introduced as it seemed useful to distinguish between statements that simply express an empathy-induced

emotion (e.g. “How sad”) and those that suggest some effort of the respondent to put themselves in the other’s shoes (e.g. “Just imagine losing everything you have”).

The final codebook consists of eleven binary codes to indicate if a certain theme was present or not in the participant’s response. A detailed description of each code can be found in the codebook (see Appendix B).

The eleven codes are:

1. *Includes an empathic response*
  - a. *That does not entail identification/perspective-taking*
  - b. *That does entail some form of identification/perspective-taking*
2. *Expresses explicitly a lack of any moral/emotional response*
3. *Suggests that suffering in Africa will never end*
4. *Includes the notion that there is nothing the respondent him-/herself can do*
5. *Includes the notion that rich countries are obliged to help (more)*
6. *Questions the effectiveness of humanitarian organizations / of international aid*
7. *Mentions global inequality between rich and poor parts of the world*
8. *Suggests that there are international causes for the depicted suffering*
9. *Suggests that there are domestic causes for the depicted suffering*
10. *Includes some form of media critique*

It should be noted that this list of codes is neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. The codes are non-exhaustive in the sense that they do not cover all that was mentioned in the responses. Rather, the eleven codes are constructed to capture a theoretically relevant set of themes in participants’ spontaneous reactions to the news item. Furthermore, the codes are not mutually exclusive since a single response might – and often did – contain more than one of the

themes. The single exception here are the two sub-codes of empathic response which are – by their definition – mutually exclusive.

The codebook was pre-tested on a subset of the material and refined. Intercoder reliability was assessed by having a second coder code a subsample of 200 responses. After unsatisfactory reliability coefficients on some of the items, the codebook was adapted and additional instructions were added. This final codebook was used to code the entire material a second time and assess intercoder reliability again. This time, Krippendorf's alpha suggested satisfactory inter-coder reliability, with all but one item scoring above .65. The code "international cause for suffering" did not occur within the first 200 responses that were used for intercoder reliability analysis and no coefficient could thus be calculated.<sup>57</sup>

## 5.4 Results

Out of the 822 participants that took part in the study, 809 provided an answer to the open question. Some responses are very short (15% wrote no more than a single word, such as "terrible") while others are rather extensive (20% wrote more than 30 words). The median number of words is 14 and the mean is 20. For a number of responses, none of the codes turned out to be applicable. This often happened when participants only provided a short and neutral reaction such as "interesting", or when they merely recounted what they had just seen without any judgment or emotional evaluation. Out of the 809 valid responses, 580 were assigned at least one code, and a considerable number were assigned more than one code (see graph 5.1).

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<sup>57</sup> Krippendorf's alpha values by code: empathic response without identification: .74, empathic response with identification: .73, suffering in Africa will never end: .67, lack of moral/emotional response: .79, nothing I can do: .88, rich countries obliged to help: .61, questions effectiveness of donations/aid: .71, global inequality: .92, international causes: did not occur in inter-coder dataset, domestic causes: .81, media critique: 1.00

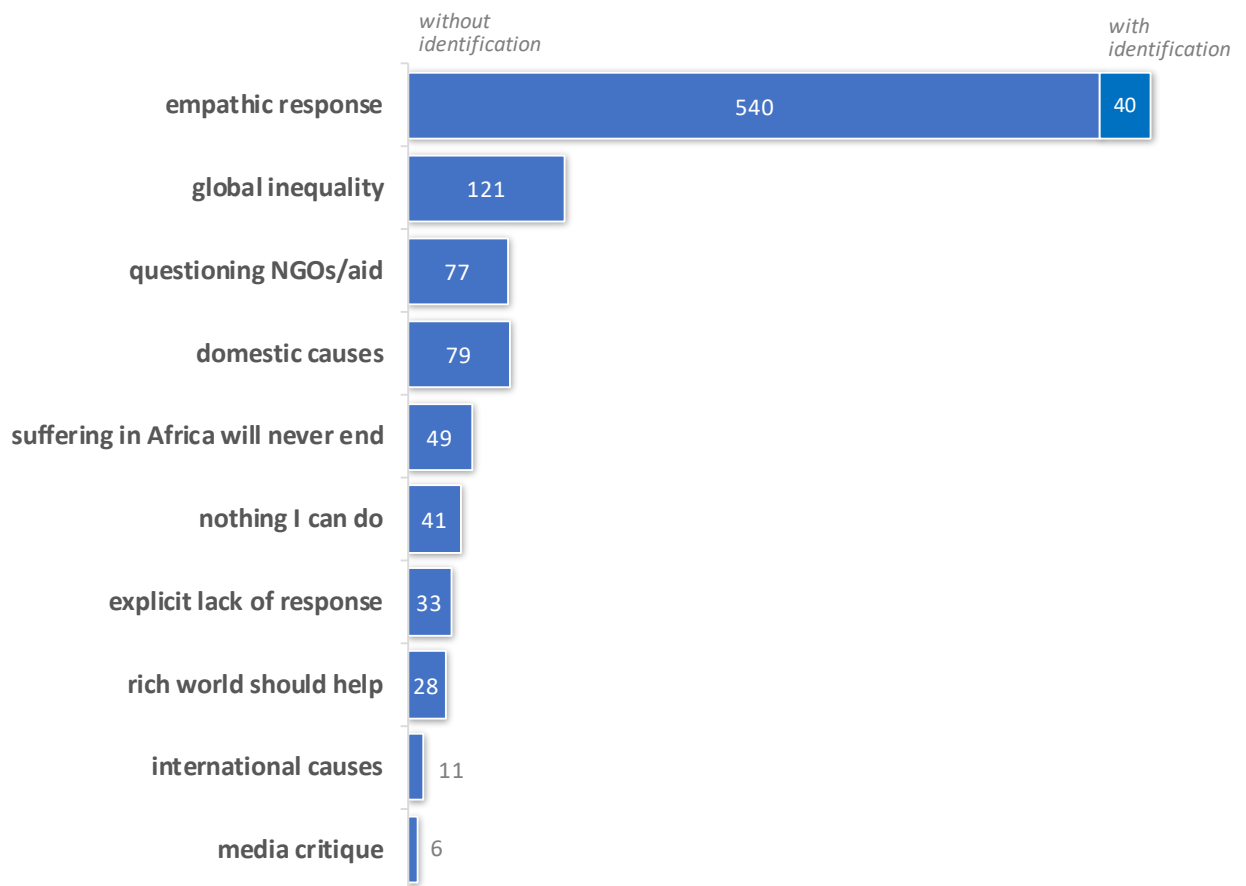
As part of the experimental set-up of the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions and exposed to four slightly different versions of the clip (see also the methods section of previous chapter). However, rather than asking questions about effects, this chapter aims to provide a descriptive exploration of the thoughts and emotions evoked by the news item. For this reason, and also given the fact that the different versions of the item only differed slightly in the spoken audio and not the visuals, I treat the entirety of 809 responses as a single body of material in the analysis that follows.

The responses quoted below are all translated to English by myself, each with the original Dutch text in a footnote. Spelling mistakes, as well as unconventional punctuations and capitalizations are kept intact in the Dutch version. I made careful adjustments to punctuation in the English version only when necessary for comprehension. To retain context, the quoted responses are provided in their entirety rather than in excerpts. Because only complete responses are quoted, no two quotes used below stem from the same participant.



**Graph 5.1.** Number of responses assigned one or multiple codes





**Graph 5.2.** Distribution of code frequencies

## 5.4.1 Discussion of themes

### 5.4.1.1 Empathic responses (codes 1a and 1b)

As Graph 5.2 shows, most of the 822 participants express some form of empathic response to the distant suffering (n=580). It is important to stress, however, that expressions coded as empathic vary immensely in their length and detail. This holds true even when considering only those responses that do not contain an element of identification. Some participants express their spontaneous reaction in no more than a single word or short phrase, such as “horrible”<sup>58</sup> (female, 55) or “utterly sad”<sup>59</sup> (male, 67). Others feel the need to

<sup>58</sup> “vreselijk”

<sup>59</sup> “in en in triest”

share more context to their emotions or even to try to explain what had touched them and why:

“This is all so terrible. I admire these people for keeping up the spirit and for continuing to struggle and survive.”<sup>60</sup>  
Female, 73

“harrowing, the personal drama speaks to me more than the gigantic figures on food shortages”<sup>61</sup>  
Male, 62

While many responses that were coded as empathic refer to the specific instance of suffering depicted in the clip, some also express anger, sadness or guilt about the fact that this type of suffering was happening at all:

“I think it is terrible that something like this can happen.”<sup>62</sup>  
Female, 80

“sad that there still is hunger in the world – it also makes me very angry and sad.”<sup>63</sup>  
Female, 63

About 6% of all responses coded as empathic include some element of identification with the people in the refugee camp. In most cases, these relate to the experience of living in extreme poverty, of food shortages or – most frequently – to the fate of losing one’s child:

“very sad. No parent should have to bury their child!”<sup>64</sup>  
Male, 39

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<sup>60</sup> “Dit is alles zo verschikkelijk. Deze mensen bewonder ik om de moed er in te houden en steeds te blijven doorgaan om te overleven.”

<sup>61</sup> “schrijnend, het persoonlijk drama spreekt meer aan dan de gigantische cijfers van voedselschaarste”

<sup>62</sup> “Ik vind het verschikkelijk dat zo iets mogelijk is.”

<sup>63</sup> “triest dat er nog steeds honger is in de wereld - het maak mij ook erg boos en verdrietig.”

<sup>64</sup> “zeer verdrietig. Geen ouder zou zijn kind moeten begraven!”

“I tried to imagine how it would be if I had to bury my own daughter of four, because I could not find food for her”<sup>65</sup>  
Female, 37

“I can understand that the people from Somalia try to get to Europe.”<sup>66</sup>  
Male, 53

“The chills, especially because our son is now 3 years old. Horrible that people lose their child like that.”<sup>67</sup>  
Female, 33

For many participants with small children, the story about the father who buried his young son clearly has a strong impact. In particular women talk of the pain they would feel if their young child died under such horrible circumstances. For these participants, their own private experience of being a parent seems to help them to relate to the otherwise distant suffering, not unlike the “empathic hooks” used by the focus group participants in chapter 2.

But even when participants do not bring up their own parenthood, the suffering of children the clip showed is a frequently reoccurring theme. In fact, the word “child”/“ children” appears in almost 10% of all 809 responses.

#### *5.4.1.2 The absence of an empathic response (code 2)*

On the opposing end of the spectrum to the bulk of participants who express various empathic responses, we find a small minority who make a point of stressing that the depicted suffering failed to touch them in any way. Within this group, a rough distinction can be made between two types of responses. On the one hand there are those who express a lack of empathy with the distant other in a strikingly emphatic and unapologetic manner:

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<sup>65</sup> “Ik probeerde me voor te stellen hoe het zou zijn wanneer ik mijn eigen dochter van 4 zou moeten begraven, omdat ik geen voedsel voor haar zou kunnen vinden.”

<sup>66</sup> “Ik kan wel begrijpen dat die mensen uit Somalië naar Europa proberen te komen.”

<sup>67</sup> “De rillingen, vooral omdat ons zoontje nu 3 jaar is. Verschrikkelijk dat mensen op deze manier hun kind verliezen.”

“Just another documentary about problems abroad. Let’s start looking at our own backyard. People suffer from hunger in our country as well. Food banks have to close and people can’t get any food from there either.”<sup>68</sup>

Male, 42

“Another one of those clips that try to get to your wallet. But they do have money for weapons. I won’t give them a dime.”<sup>69</sup>

Female, 66

“Oh well, does not really concern me. Also lots of misery close by. The Netherlands are too small to save/fix the world.”<sup>70</sup>

Female, 53

On the other hand, there are those who – while often equally empathic in expressing their lack of emotional response – offer some explanation or even justification, such as over-exposure to mediated suffering:

“A video like many. Seen this too many times before.”<sup>71</sup>

Male, 48

“Known material, nasty for those people, but doesn’t really concern me, sorry.”<sup>72</sup>

Male, 56

“Terrible, but seen so many times – personally I don’t care too much about it”<sup>73</sup>

Female, 57

“Unfortunately, I don’t care about this anymore, even though what is happening there is horrible.”<sup>74</sup>

Male, 63

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<sup>68</sup> “De zoveelste reportage over problemen in het buitenland. Laten we eens beginnen met niet voorbij onze eigen neus te kijken. Ook in ons land lijden mensen honger. Voedselbanken moeten sluiten en mensen krijgen daar ook geen eten meer van.”

<sup>69</sup> “Weer zo'n filmpje om mensen geld uit de zak te kloppen. Ze hebben wel geld voor wapens. Ik geef er geen rooie cent aan.”

<sup>70</sup> “Ach gossie, ver van mijn bed. Dichtbij ook veel ellende. Nederland is te klein om de wereld te redden/verbeteren.”

<sup>71</sup> “Een film als zo veel. Veel te vaak gezien.”

<sup>72</sup> “bekende kost, vervelend voor deze mensen, toch ver van mijn bed, sorry”

<sup>73</sup> “erg maar al zo vaak gezien - persoonlijk trek ik het mij niet zo aan”

<sup>74</sup> “Ik heb hier helaas niets meer mee, terwijl het vreselijk is wat er gebeurt.”

Whether they feel the need to provide some sort of justification or not, these participants clearly reject what they assume to be the premise of the clip: that the audience should not just take notice of but care about the depicted misery. Overall, however, no more than 4% of the 822 (n=33) participants express this explicit refusal or inability to care for a distant other.

#### 5.4.1.3 *Nothing I can do / Suffering in Africa will never end (codes 3/4)*

Another relatively small proportion – about 5% of all participants (n=41) – mention the thought that there is nothing they themselves can do about the sort of suffering that is shown in the news item. This idea takes on various forms. While for most, the perceived powerlessness is experienced as a burden, a smaller proportion state it as a simple fact of life:

“I really feel for these people. Someone needs to help. I feel powerless”<sup>75</sup>  
Male, 67

“This is horrible. I am grateful that I live in the Netherlands. I would like to do something, but don’t really know what because I think that I am scared. And I think that money is often taken by the government.”<sup>76</sup>  
Female, 23

“sadness, powerlessness, there must be another way.”<sup>77</sup>  
Female, 50

“Unfortunate and shocking, but what can I do about it? There is so much misery in the world that it is impossible to fix it all.”<sup>78</sup>  
Male, 52

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<sup>75</sup> “ik heb heel erg te doen met deze mensen. Hier moet hulp komen. Ik voel mij machteloos.”

<sup>76</sup> “Wat erg. Ik ben dankbaar dat ik in Nederland woon. Ik zou wat willen doen, maar weet niet goed wat want ik denk dat ik te bang ben. En geld wordt denk ik vaak door de regering ingenomen.”

<sup>77</sup> “verdriet, onmacht, er moet een andere manier zijn”

<sup>78</sup> “betreurenswaardig en schokkend, doch wat kan ik eraan doen? er is zoveel ellende in de wereld dat het onmogelijk is om dat allemaal op te lossen.”

Thematically related to this code is the idea that the suffering in those parts of the world will never end. This theme is mentioned by 6% of all participants who watched the clip (n=49). Some of these responses simply posit that the problems of Africa are too large or too complex for the suffering of war, forced migration and food crises to ever end:

“Terrible problem that simply won’t/can’t be fixed.”<sup>79</sup>  
Male, 34

“What a mess, what a hopeless situation. This will never be turned around.”<sup>80</sup>  
Female, 45

Others base their apparent resignation on the perception that during their lifetime there has always been so much suffering in developing countries that there is not much reason to expect this to change:

“They should wage less wars there, everything is there broken there, we have been sending money there for years (I remember an aid rally at primary school when I was +/- 10 and it hasn’t helped anything)”<sup>81</sup>  
Male, 48

“The sad thing about this clip is that it has been like that all my life and nothing is being done about it. That makes me think that these people simply cannot be helped because one way or another someone continues to earn money out of it.”<sup>82</sup>  
Male, 52

#### 5.4.1.4 *Global inequality / Rich countries obliged to help (codes 7/5)*

A theme that appears more than twice as frequently as expressions of resignation is the notion that there exists an immense – and for many unsettling

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<sup>79</sup> “Schrijnend probleem wat maar niet opgelost wordt / kan worden”

<sup>80</sup> “Wat een ellende, wat een barre omstandigheden. Dit komt nooit goed.”

<sup>81</sup> “ze zouden daar minder oorlog moeten voeren, alles gaat kapot daar, we sturen al jaren geld daar na toe (ik weet nog van een actie op de basis school toen ik +/- 10 was en het heeft niks geholpen)”

<sup>82</sup> “Het droevige van deze film is dat het al mijn hele leven zo is als in de film te zien is in er wordt ook al mijn hele leven niets aan gedaan. Dan kom ik maar tot een conclusie in die is dat deze mensen gewoon weg niet mogen worden geholpen omdat er op een of andere manier iemand er heel veel geld aan blijft verdienen.”

– inequality between the different parts of the world. When this theme of global inequality comes up, participants oftentimes contrast the comforts and luxuries of their own lives with the hardships shown in the clip:

“Tragedy that is not given enough attention. What are we complaining about in the Netherlands!?”<sup>83</sup>

Male, 23

“It is a big disgrace that we here in the Netherlands (and in more than half the world) throw away enormous amounts of food and people in other parts of the world have nothing/almost nothing to eat and die from malnutrition/hunger.”<sup>84</sup>

Male, 63

“I realize how much misery there is in the world and how lucky I am to live in the Netherlands.”<sup>85</sup>

Female, 22

“Sad. We here have problems like obesity and over there people are dying from dehydration and hunger. It’s a bad thing that there are still so many people whose biggest worry it is to survive because of lack of food, while the ‘West’ worries about people who are overweight etc.”<sup>86</sup>

Female, 26

Overall, a reference to global inequality is made by no less than 15% of all participants (n=121). In contrast, a mere 3% mention the notion that rich countries should help (more) to alleviate the type of suffering shown in the clip (n=28):

“More aid to Somalia. More money.”<sup>87</sup>

Female, 66

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<sup>83</sup> “Drama waar niet genoeg aandacht aan geschonken wordt. Waar zeuren wij over in Nederland!?”

<sup>84</sup> “Het is een grote schande dat we in Nederland (en meer van de halve wereld) enorm veel voedsel weggooien en mensen in andere werelddelen niet/nauwelijks te eten hebben en sterven door ondervoeding/van de honger.”

<sup>85</sup> “Ik realiseer me hoeveel ellende er is in de wereld en hoe veel geluk ik heb dat ik in Nederland woon.”

<sup>86</sup> “Triest. Wij hebben hier problemen als obesitas en daar gaan mensen dood aan uitdroging en honger.slechte zaak dat er nog zoveel mensen zijn wiens grootste zorg is te overleven door gebrek aan voedsel terwijl het ‘westen’ zorgen heeft over mensen met overgewicht etc.”

<sup>87</sup> “Meer hulp naar Somalie. meer geld.”

“The Netherlands have to improve the lives of these people, with food and clean drinking water.”<sup>88</sup>  
Male, 66

“Help as much as possible, through the government, and/or through private aid.”<sup>89</sup>  
Male, 79

It seems that even though the large majority of participants express some empathic reaction (see above), the duty of richer countries to give more aid is not a spontaneous thought evoked in many. In this context, however, it is important to remember that the clip does not contain a call to action directed at the viewer. In fact, the news item does not specify whether there is an acute shortage of aid in the camp and includes also shots of refugees distributing or consuming food.

#### *5.4.1.5 Questioning aid and the causes of suffering (codes 7/8/9)*

About one in ten participants expresses the view that private donations and institutional aid might be ineffective in mitigating the suffering (n=77). Again, we find a considerable diversity between responses that were assigned this code. Some participants simply express a general suspicion that donations and aid in general do not reach their destination:

“A horrific situation for these people, but when money is raised where does that end up?”<sup>90</sup>  
Male, 80

“Horrible to see this, but nonetheless I am always afraid that the money will not reach the people.”<sup>91</sup>  
Female, 67

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<sup>88</sup> “Nederland moet voor deze mensen het leven verbeteren d.m.v. voedsel en schoon drinkwater.”

<sup>89</sup> “Zo veel mogelijk helpen, via de overheid, en of via particuliere hulp.”

<sup>90</sup> “Een schrijnende toestand voor die mensen, maar als er geld ingezameld word waar komt dat soms terecht.”

<sup>91</sup> “vreselijk als je dit ziet, maar ben toch altijd bang dat het geld de mensen niet zal bereiken.”



Others who question the effectiveness of donations and financial aid are more specific, typically blaming either NGOs or governments in the developing world:

“This is really terrible but I don’t really feel like I can do something about it. Money does not reach these people anyway, but the managers of organisations...”<sup>92</sup>  
Female, 21

“It’s terrible, but sending money does not make much sense. It does not end up where it needs to be. Also, organizations spend too much of it on expensive salaries and buildings. Send material and experts to build up things there.”<sup>93</sup>  
Male, 54

“Very regrettable, but unfortunately the money always ends up in the wrong hands, and the aid organizations use it to pay their managers so there is already not much left for the people who need the help, the governments of these countries rather buy weapons than help the people.”<sup>94</sup>  
Male, 60

Besides this mistrust towards NGOs and governments, some participants also talk of factors that contribute to humanitarian crises such as the one depicted in the clip: about 10% of all participants (n=79) bring up domestic causes, while just above 1% mention international causes (n=11). The domestic causes mentioned most frequently are corrupt leaders, lack of education and absence of birth control among the population:

“The depicted circumstances show again that the leaders of these countries are not good at governing. Corruption, tribal conflicts and religion are the main

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<sup>92</sup> “Ik vind het heel erg maar ik voel me niet echt bij machte om er wat aan te doen. Geld komt toch niet aan bij de mensen zelf maar bij directeuren van instanties.”

<sup>93</sup> “het is erg, maar geld sturen heeft weinig zin. het komt niet daar waar het zijn moet. plus organisaties steken te veel in eigen zak aan dure salarissen en gebouwen. stuur materiaal en vakmensen om iets daar op te bouwen.”

<sup>94</sup> “Heel jammer, maar helaas komt het geld altijd in verkeerde handen ,en de helpende organisaties betalen er directeuren van en dan blijft er al niet veel meer over voor de mensen die hulp nodig helpen, de regeringen van die landen kopen liever wapens als mensen te helpen”

culprits. Only financial aid will never be enough...”<sup>95</sup>  
Male, 91

“Birth rates should be brought down. It is horrible that people are dying but this is mainly because of the current governments, and the civilian population is paying the price.”<sup>96</sup>  
Female, 29

“My first thought is: Why do these people decide to have children? There is future, no food, no escape from misery.”<sup>97</sup>  
Male, 35

#### 5.4.1.6 *Media critique (code 10)*

A total of six participants use the open question to express doubt about the authenticity of the clip, or about the reasons for showing these particular images. The more moderate of these responses interrogate the true intentions of those who produced the clip:

“The voice-over sounded familiar, I wonder for what purpose this clip is used and if it’s purely informative.”<sup>98</sup>  
Female, 23

“Typical clip about a problem – far removed from my world, tries to evoke an emotion, but does not affect me.”<sup>99</sup>  
Male, 29

In two cases, however, participants go so far as to actually question the truth claims of the item:

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<sup>95</sup> “de getoonde toestanden laten telkens weer zien datleiders van deze landen geen goede bestuurders zijn. Corruptie, stammenstrijd en religie zijn de grote boosdoeners. Alleen financiële hulp zal het nooit redden...”

<sup>96</sup> “Men zou aan geboortebeperving moeten doen. Het is heel erg dat de mensen sterven maar het komt vooral door de zittende regeringen waar de burgerbevolking het slachtoffer zijn.”

<sup>97</sup> “Mijn eerste gedachte is: Waarom nemen deze mensen kinderen? Geen toekomstperspectief, geen voedsel en geen uitweg uit de ellende.”

<sup>98</sup> “De voice-over klonk bekend, ik vraag me af voor welke doeleinden dit filmpje gebruikt wordt en of het puur informatief was”

<sup>99</sup> “Typisch filmpje over een probleem - ver van de belevingswereld af staat, probeert gevoel op te wekken bij kijker, maar raakt mij niet.”

“Don’t know if these are real images. During the previous famine, friends of us worked there. They didn’t know that there was a famine, there was food being sent to them from the Netherlands while they worked on very fertile plantations and exported food.”<sup>100</sup>

Female, 62

“I always wonder to what extent the real truth is shown. When it’s about money, I think right away about the big earners and those getting the bonuses and the money-grabbers of our society. Let them donate. They can then even deduct it from their taxes.”<sup>101</sup>

Male, 66

As a whole, findings suggest that participants are far from uncritical in their perceptions of the news item. It therefore might appear striking that when asked to share their spontaneous reactions to the news item, no more than six participants – i.e. less than 1% of the sample – take any issue with aspects of representation. What is more, within this group, only two explicitly doubt the authenticity of the images.

In summary, the results discussed so far suggest that for a large majority of participants, the principal spontaneous reaction is not one of distantiation, rejection or denial. Rather, most express some form of empathy with the victims or engage with and reflect on the causes of the depicted suffering.

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<sup>100</sup> “Weet niet of het echte beelden zijn. Bij de vorige hongersnoodramp waren vrienden van ons er werkzaam. wisten niet dat er hongersnood was, vanuit Nederland werd hun voedsel gestuurd, terwijl ze zelf op zeer vruchtbare plantages werkten en het voedsel uitvoerden.”

<sup>101</sup> “Vraag mij altijd af in hoeverre de echte waarheid wordt getoont. Als het om geld gaat denk ik meteen aan de grootverdieners en de bonisonvangers en de graaiers van onze maatschappij. Laat die maar geld storten. Kunnen ze nog afschrijven ook.”



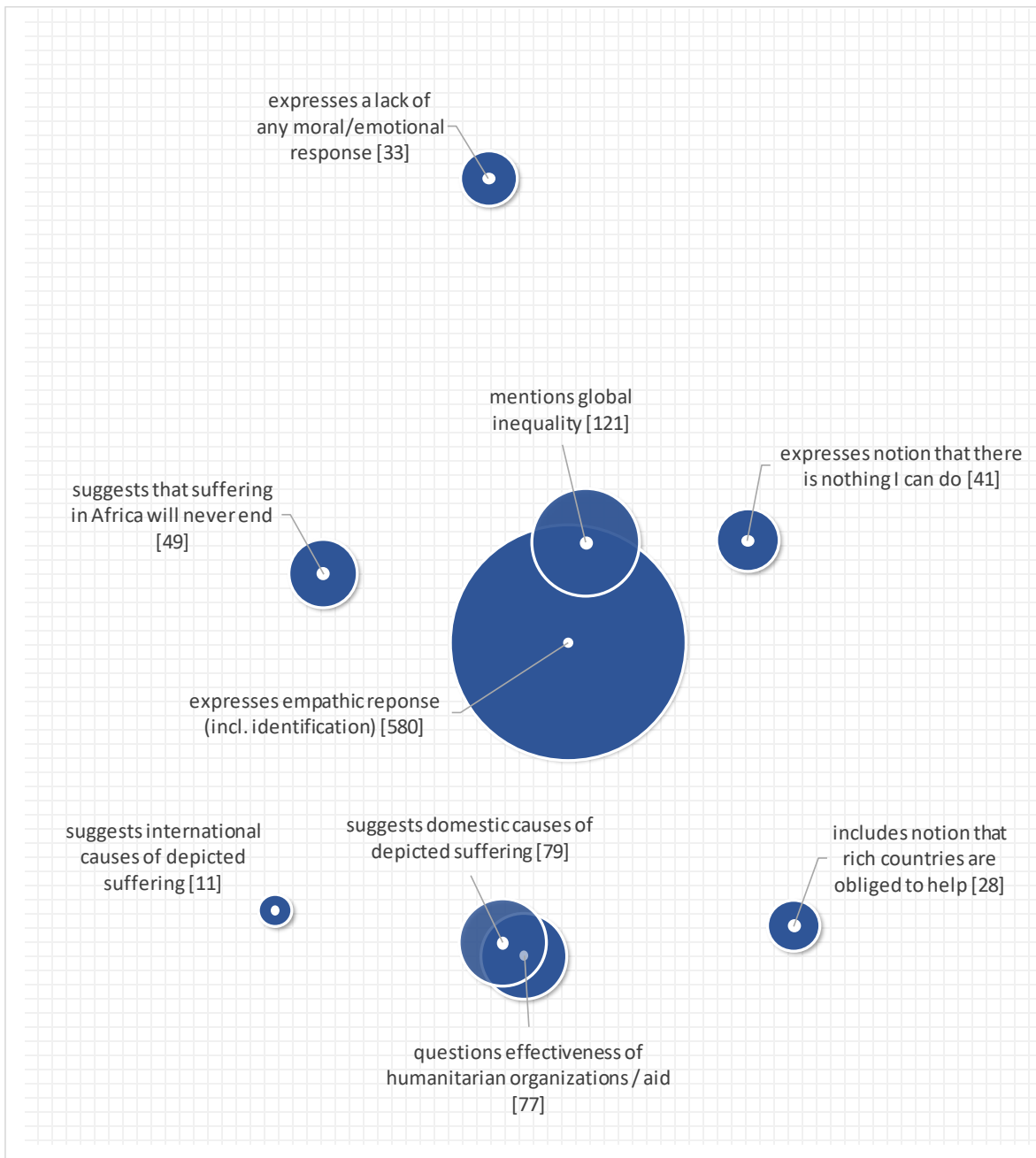
pair of codes – a similarity coefficient value. The code media critique was excluded as it only cooccurred twice with another code. Also, the two sub-codes 1a and 1b were combined in order to meaningfully position them within the same space. The values of the similarity matrix were calculated to represent the relative frequency of two codes cooccurring within the same responses.<sup>102</sup> The interpretation of the stress scree plot suggested a two-dimensional solution.<sup>103</sup> Examining the resulting common space visualization also confirmed the two-dimensional solution as meaningful and interpretable (normalized raw stress = 0.065).

Graph 5.4 shows the position of the 9 themes in the MDS space. Besides the themes' coordinates in the MDS space, I added an additional layer of information by varying the blue marker surfaces according to the overall frequencies of the corresponding themes (these also provided in square brackets). The result is a graph in which larger markers represent higher overall occurrence of that theme, while the distance between two marker centres indicate how often both of these themes were encountered together with the same responses. When interpreting the graph, it is important to remember that the relative distances between the marker centres do not reflect similarity of the codes in terms of the sentiment they convey, but rather how often they cooccurred. For example, the concept of global inequality and the call for more aid from western countries might seem closely related, but their relative positions in the MDS space suggest that they were in fact rarely mentioned together in the same response.

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<sup>102</sup> There is a wide range of similarity and distance measures available that can be used for running MDS on a set of binary variables. The choice of the most suitable measure to quantify the similarity/distance of two items is not a trivial one and depends on how the coefficient should take into account the number of joint absences (neither of the two codes apply), the number of mismatches (only one of the two codes apply) and the number of co-occurrences (both codes apply). Since the number of joint absences in this case does not hold information about similarity, I made use of a measure that varies independently of joint absences: the unweighted ratio of the number of co-occurrences to the number of mismatches (known as the Kulczynski 1 similarity measure).

<sup>103</sup> The stress screeplot is a visual tool to determine the dimensionality of the MDS solution. The graph plots how well (or badly) the algorithm is able to represent the empirical data within each of the n-dimensional solutions. As an increase in dimensionality typically always leads to a better fit of the data, the screeplot helps to find the most parsimonious solution. In the current analysis, a substantial slope decrease ('elbow') could be observed at two dimensions, suggesting a two-dimensional solution.



**Graph 5.4.** Position of codes in two-dimensional MDS solution

The graph shows that participants who speak of global inequality also frequently express some form of empathic response. Oftentimes, contrasting the “here” with the “there” thus goes hand in hand with perceiving the distant suffering as worthy of concern, as in the following example:

“How terribly sad, what an inhumane situation. And we are thinking about what to buy for Sinterklaas”<sup>104</sup>  
Female, 28

These participants construct the depicted pain as linked and relevant to their own lifeworld. By way of comparison and opposition, they allow the distant suffering and their own comfort to exist in the same space.

In contrast, the notion that suffering in Africa will never stop does not necessarily entail such a connection. There is no construction of a common space as the frame of comparison is temporal (it was/will be always like that), rather than spatial. Consequently, as shown in the graph, this theme cooccurs less frequently with an empathic response than global inequality. This is not to say, of course, that those who suggested that suffering in Africa will never end could not simultaneously express empathic concern, as the following response illustrates:

“Horribly sad, but also the thought ‘will the situation in Africa ever change?’”<sup>105</sup>  
Female, 32

The graph also draws attention to a second dyad of cooccurring themes: discussing domestic causes of the depicted suffering and questioning the effectiveness of aid or NGOs in general. Oftentimes, these two themes appear together as part of one narrative that attempts to explain why the hardships depicted in the clip still exist. As local actors (such as governments) are

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<sup>104</sup> “Wat vreselijk verdrietig, wat een mensonterende situatie en dan denken wij over wat we nu weer voor Sinterklaas moeten kopen....”

<sup>105</sup> “Vreselijk triest, maar ook de gedachte 'gaat de situatie in Afrika ooit veranderen!'.”

frequently seen as misallocating or embezzling humanitarian aid, pointing to these as domestic causes of suffering also means questioning the effectiveness of aid in general:

“Yes, it’s all very sad but more often than not all of the aid arrives too late in those countries and is often spent on rifles and other weapons.”<sup>106</sup>  
Female, 60

Furthermore, the graph suggests that those who express an explicit lack of empathic responses are not very inclined to also bring up any of the other themes. A number of exceptions notwithstanding, these participants often do not go much beyond stating that the clip failed to touch them emotionally, with some offering a form of explanation (see above). It seems that placing the suffering outside of one’s sphere of concern forecloses much further engagement, be it in the form of feelings or of reflections.

## 5.5 Concluding remarks

Turning to Kyriakidou’s (2015) taxonomy to describe these findings, one can state that the dominant modes of witnessing manifested in the open responses are affective and ecstatic witnessing (these two were not distinguished in the content analysis). The majority of participants spontaneously react with some sort of – albeit often brief and undetailed – expression of empathic engagement. But there is also a substantial proportion of responses that could be described as variations of politicized witnessing.

Manifestations of this mode can be found in remarks that bring up global inequality (15%), speak of domestic or international causes (11%) and arguably also in those who question the effectiveness of aid or the humanitarian organizations (9%). The mode that is clearly least represented in the open

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<sup>106</sup> “ja,t is allemaal heel zielig maar alle hulp komt meestal te laat aan in dat soort landen en word vaak voor geweren en ander oorlogstuig, gebruikt.”



responses is that of distanced witnessing. Merely 4% of participants explicitly state that they are unaffected by the misery in the news clip.

Much of the literature on distant suffering shares a relatively bleak view of western audiences' engagement with representations of humanitarian disaster in developing countries. In fact, many of the key concepts that have shaped the field, such as the notion of Compassion Fatigue (Moeller, 1999), the Crisis of Pity (Boltanski, 1999) or the Ironic Spectator in times of post-humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2013) carry a clear sense of discontentment with the perceived failure on the side of the audience to live up to a given normative standard. Consequently, much academic attention has been focused on moral apathy, denial and distantiation (see Orgard & Seu, 2014).

The findings of the current study, however, have shown that when a cross-section of Dutch society is asked to share their thoughts and feelings about a news item on the hardships of refugees in the Horn of Africa, these type of reactions – while present – are expressed only by few.

To be sure, a response coded as empathic such as “This made me very sad” does not necessarily signal a moment of meaningful engagement with the depicted suffering. What is more important, however, is what such a spontaneous response is *not*: an expression of cynicism, emotional distantiation or denial. So while the current results do not warrant sweeping conclusions about how Dutch audiences relate to distant suffering *in general*, they do show that the large majority of participants does in fact not report the type of non-empathic responses that are so often at the centre of academic inquiry.

To conclude this chapter, two potential issues with the current study and the interpretation of its findings need to be addressed.

First, it is necessary to acknowledge that audience research on distant suffering is particularly susceptible to social desirability bias. Arguably, findings such as the ones described in this chapter tell us more about how people want to be seen by others, than about what they think and feel.

I argue, however, that the specific mode of data collection of the current study has helped to mitigate this problem. All LISS panellists know that the confidentiality of their responses is insured, as they have signed an informed consent agreement that guarantees data protection. Furthermore, participants were allowed to fill in the questionnaire in the privacy of their own homes and – in most cases – on their own computers. It is thus reasonable to assume that social desirability bias is in fact less severe than in studies that involve the direct social interaction of a face-to-face or focus group interview.

Secondly, it is conceivable that combining the open responses of the four experimental groups in the analysis might have had undesirable consequences for the results. However, since the four different versions of the news item are but slight variations of the same clip (varying only in the voice-over audio), the responses of the different groups were deemed sufficiently comparable. And since the purpose of this chapter was not to investigate experimental effects, disaggregating the results by group would not have been an apt strategy. More importantly, it would not alter the key findings of this study: that apathy, cynicism and denial make only a marginal appearance in the spontaneous responses to this instance of mediated distant suffering.

## 6 GENERAL CONCLUSION

The aim of this dissertation was to explore the various conditions that facilitate or limit audience engagement with representations of distant suffering. I presented four empirical investigations into the ways people respond to and make sense of mediated humanitarian disaster, each with a different methodology and analytical focus.

In the first empirical chapter on UNHCR's *My Life as a Refugee* app, I analysed how focus group participants engaged with post-humanitarian representations of suffering. The survey research on *Kony 2012* then shifted the focus towards audience positions of 'being critical' and 'denial', and how such positions towards humanitarian communication affect levels of personal moral responsibility. In the large-scale online experimental study that followed, I attempted to isolate the effects of representational factors and audience characteristics on a range of cognitive and affective responses. In the last empirical chapter, I investigated the qualitative richness as well as quantitative distributions of spontaneous expressions of audience engagement with distant suffering. As I hope to demonstrate in this conclusion, the picture that the findings from the different studies paint is multifaceted, but far from incongruous.

To start pulling together the main results that came out of this dissertation, I draw on two accounts on distant suffering that Chouliaraki (2006) describes as the outer ends of the scholarly debate's spectrum: the "optimistic" and the "pessimistic" narrative about the media's potential to engage audiences with distant suffering. While Chouliaraki argues that both of these extremes are equally theoretically flawed and empirically ungrounded, they do provide me with a useful frame of reference for bringing to the fore common themes in the various main results of this dissertation. In the following, I therefore first discuss how my findings speak to these "optimistic" and "pessimistic" accounts.

After that, I will reflect on the implications of my findings for the debate around Chouliaraki's concepts of post-humanitarianism and the Ironic Spectator. Finally, I will propose a number of themes for future audience research in the field of distant suffering.

## **6.1 The optimistic account**

In the most simplistic version of the optimistic narrative, the mere exposure to images of human misery is deemed sufficient to foster a sense of care and responsibility to act in audiences. Within this narrative, "[t]he constant flow of images and information on our screens [...] inevitably opens up the local world of the spectator to the sight of the 'other'" (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 28). The optimistic account thus places great trust in the media's capacity to foster the audience's ability and willingness to care and act towards distant others.

Various results in this dissertation can be read to challenge such an account. In fact, all four studies have each brought into focus a range of factors that might inhibit audiences' engagement with a distant suffering other.

The first of these factors relates to the limitations inherent in the technologies of mediation. This is most vividly exemplified in the focus group study (chapter 2). Here, participants voiced their frustration at how the technical limitations of the app prevented them to feel and care more. For many, the app's game-like features and small screen inhibited more meaningful engagement. As I have shown, some of these inhibiting features were precisely those that are characteristic of a post-humanitarian style of communication.

This dissertation also provides empirical insights on the potentially inhibiting role of specific elements in the representation of suffering. Specifically, the experimental results in chapter 4 suggest that emphasizing agency can in fact *decrease* perceived moral responsibility and willingness to donate. However, as I have also stressed, these findings should be interpreted as what they are: experimental short-term effects based on closed survey questions. Importantly,

they do not speak to issues on how discursive constructions of others as acting and resilient might render them more humane and thus their suffering more morally relevant. In this context, it is instructive to also bring to mind that the focus group participants in chapter 2 were in fact explicitly seeking more – not less – complete and contextualized accounts and often perceived the app’s narratives as too narrow and simplistic. In their own view, reducing the story to one of individual hardship and victimhood hindered their engagement with the fictional character. Some therefore even suggested to let the app’s story commence *before* the crisis, at a point where the characters go about their everyday lives and have not yet become “victims”. Even though the participants in this study came from a very specific population – undergraduates in an international media programme – these findings do contest the notion that audiences of distant suffering can be engaged only by way of reductionist narratives.

Another factor that has proven to inhibit audience engagement is perceived hopelessness about the depicted suffering and – closely related to that – a lack of perceived personal efficacy. In the *Kony 2012* study described in chapter 3, the level of individual moral responsibility to act was strongly related to a sense that oneself or the NGO Invisible Children could have a positive impact. But not only the Kony study, also the analysis of the open LISS responses illustrated the potentially paralyzing effect of hopelessness. As one participant writes: “horrible situation, heart-wrenching, but it also makes you dispirited! Powerlessness!”. Importantly, however, many participants who believed that neither they (nor anyone) could do anything to reduce poverty and violent conflict in Africa appeared to perceive this thought as tragic – and had thus not turned cynical. Nonetheless, this belief in the inevitability of suffering often seemed to lead to inaction or avoidance.

The experimental study in chapter 4 also shed some light on a number of individual characteristics that might limit the willingness or capacity of engagement with representations of distant suffering. The most robust and

arguably least surprising is limited trait empathy. Those who tend to be less affected by the hardships of people around them also tend to care less about the misery of distant others, feel less obliged to act, and even recognize less of themselves in those suffering on the screen. In fact, in the experimental analysis, trait empathy was the only predictor that proved significant across all five main models (regressing empathic distress, empathic concern, perceived similarity, perceived responsibility, and willingness to donate). Low trait empathy can thus be considered the most robust obstacle to engagement with distant suffering that came out of this dissertation.

Besides trait empathy, another – and theoretically more intriguing – inhibiting factor that this dissertation draws attention to is Just World Beliefs (Hafer & Begue, 2005; Furnham, 2003). A moderate level of Just World Beliefs manifests itself in the faith that, in the larger scheme of things, there is more justice than injustice in the world and that, in general, good things happen to good people. In its more extreme form, Just World Beliefs can lead to a complete disregard of the circumstantial factors that contribute to an individual's misfortunes. As one participant remarked after seeing the news item about the emaciated Somali farmers, driven out of their villages by violence and drought: "Everyone gets what he deserves; improvement comes from within"<sup>107</sup> (This particular participant was in the top 5% on the Just World Belief scale).

I hypothesized that those with stronger Just World Beliefs are more likely to distance themselves from depicted misery that is blatantly cruel and unjust (Hafer & Begue, 2005). And indeed, the experimental results showed that Just World Beliefs did have small but significant negative effects on empathic concern, perceived similarity, perceived responsibility to act, as well as the willingness to donate.

On balance, the findings presented in this dissertation challenge a naively optimistic account by highlighting potential obstacles to audience engagement

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<sup>107</sup> "Ieder krijgt waar hij recht op heeft; verbetering komt uit je zelf"

within three domains: the limited affordances of specific communication technologies; the choices of representation; and audience characteristics.

## **6.2 The pessimistic account**

On the other side of the spectrum, the pessimistic narrative rejects the idea that representations of suffering can ever meaningfully engage audiences with human misery taking place beyond one's direct vicinity. Within the pessimistic narrative, technologies of mediation "deprive on-screen suffering of its compelling physicality and shift the fact of suffering into pixel fiction" (Chouliaraki, 2006, p.24).

As we have seen before, different versions of the pessimistic narrative have long enjoyed considerable academic support, and the field's "[c]oncern with the various inadequacies of representation has animated and dominated much of the research to date" (Orgad & Seu, 2014, p. 29). Correspondingly, a rather pessimistic view of audiences prevails in the literature as the "response to mediated distant suffering is framed [...] as a 'problem': compassion fatigue, desensitization, voyeurism, failure to engage, and so on" (ibid.).

The findings of this dissertation do not provide much support for this dominant narrative of pessimism. Looking at the whole of the findings, it seems clear that – while diverse – the overall picture it paints is not that of an audience that has become numb or cynical in the face of distant suffering. As the analysis of the open LISS responses showed, a majority of participants expressed some form of empathic reaction after watching the news item. Conversely, explicit manifestations of apathy or of desensitization were found in only a small fraction of these spontaneous responses. In fact, rather than distancing themselves emotionally from the depicted hardship, participants were much more likely to accentuate the depicted injustice by way of contrasting it to the relative carefreeness of their own lives.

This rhetorical move frequently functioned as a strategy for participants to make sense of a reality that is so radically removed from their own. In the focus group study (chapter 2), participants often expressed frustration with what they perceived as *My Life's* limited empathic affordances and with its failure to engage them more successfully. Participants in both the focus group study and the LISS study (chapter 5) were actively seeking out commonalities that would allow them to connect to the suffering other. Unable to draw on much experiential overlap between their own life worlds and those of the depicted others, participants turned to the most basic of human conditions such as parenthood or having siblings to identify what I have called *empathic hooks*.

The idea of audience members actively seeking out *empathic hooks* in representations does not fit well within what Seu and Orgad (2014) have called the field's long-standing tradition of *despair*. At the same time, this idea is not completely foreign to the literature either. In fact, in their recent work on audience strategies of domestication, Huiberts and Joye (2017) made similar observations. Based on a series of focus group discussions, the authors conclude that

[a]udiences domesticate the distant event and make it relevant and real to themselves by imagining how they would react to the event based on pre-existing perceptions and their own experiences. Indeed, the second level domestication strategies that were used and proved to be most effective for the audience were those that aimed to imagine or create a shared experience, either emotionally by narratively focusing on someone from the home country or by familiarizing the unfamiliar. (p. 12)

Future research should try to disentangle the conditions of representation that allow audiences to relate with the distant other. Particularly since, as Cohen (2001) reminds us, instances of distant large-scale suffering such as a drought or civil war, typically induce “a fathomless distance, not just the geographical distance from the event, but the unimaginability of this happening to you or your loved ones” (p. 169).



The findings of this dissertation also challenge the narrative of despair by way of what they do *not* show. Previous research has drawn attention to the ways audiences put substantial effort in criticising the portrayals of suffering rather than engaging with its actuality and moral implications (e.g., Scott, 2015; Seu, 2010). It is thus noteworthy that this strategy for evading moral pressure did not emerge as a dominant theme in any of the studies presented here. Specifically, in the *Kony 2012* study, the level of moral responsibility perceived by participants remained unaffected by objections to the form and specific truth claims of the campaign. Similarly, the analysis of open responses in the LISS study showed that the news item itself was hardly ever the target of any form of criticism or suspicion. Similarly, illustrative in this context are the results of the focus group study. The young and tech-savvy participants were highly critical of *My Life's* technical, aesthetic and narratological shortcomings. Importantly, however, this critical stance towards the way the app conveyed realities of suffering through fictional narratives did not seem to impinge on their moral reflections about the plight of actual refugees.

Overall, the results from the different studies thus support a finding that Höijer described as early as 2004, namely that “[t]he audience very rarely questions the reality status of documentary pictures, or sees them as constructions of situations or events” (p. 524). This simple but important observation could serve as a useful reminder for current academic debates on distant suffering. As Stan Cohen (2001) refreshingly puts it: "Aside from the few thousand academics who take post-modernist epistemology literally, no sane person seriously 'interrogates' truth-claims about, say, infant mortality in Bangladesh" (p. 187).

The findings presented here also contest the notion of a universal or even widespread apathy or Compassion Fatigue (Moeller, 1999). In the 822 open LISS responses by participants from all strata of Dutch society, hopelessness, cynicism or emotional apathy were not the dominant forms of reaction that I encountered. In fact, the findings from the different studies suggest that substantial parts of

the audience are willing and able to be emotionally touched by mediated distant suffering, and to reflect on its causes and moral relevance. But they also highlight the need of representation to contextualize and offer *empathic hooks*, as well as the important role of individual personality traits.

To be sure, the findings presented here are ill-suited to support claims about meaningful or lasting engagement with a distant other, and much less the cultivation of a cosmopolitan disposition (Chouliaraki, 2006). Also, above interpretations of the results should not suggest that cynicism, desensitization or even denial play no part in audience responses to distant suffering and are thus no worthy objects of future academic inquiry. Rather, I hope that this dissertation can contribute to a more empirically-grounded discussion about the various facilitators and obstacles of audience engagement.

In this sense, I hope that this dissertation can contribute to what Orgad and Seu (2014) have called “post-despair research”: empirical efforts that are “driven not by hopelessness about distant suffering, but by the desire to explain and address what enables and inhibits understanding, response, and action” (p. 29).

### **6.3 The post-humanitarian account**

In the *Ironic Spectator* (2013), Chouliaraki describes what she observes as a paradigmatic shift towards post-humanitarianism in both news and NGO communication. She argues that while in the past, the production and reception of representations of suffering were structured around authenticity, global inequality and other-oriented morality, those themes have become secondary in post-humanitarianism. The audience in Chouliaraki’s post-humanitarianism is no longer swayed by narratives of injustice and has become highly suspicious towards all truth claims of representation. Engagement with post-humanitarian communication has become transactional as it serves a need for emotional experience, which then in itself can become a subject for self-reflection.

But as I have stressed in chapters 1 and 2, this notion of a rise of the *Ironic Spectator* has largely remained empirically untested.<sup>108</sup> One of the aims of the first two studies of this dissertation was therefore to empirically engage with the notions of post-humanitarianism and the Ironic Spectator. While the two studies used different methods and asked different questions, both explored audience engagement with what can be described as examples of post-humanitarian communication: UNHCR's *My Life as a Refugee* app and Invisible Children's *Kony 2012* online video clip.

In chapter 3, I suggested that with respect to the *Kony 2012* clip, some of the statistical findings could be interpreted as consistent with the idea of a post-humanitarian – i.e. ironic – public. Results seemed to suggest that participants' perceived moral responsibility remained largely unaffected by their critical stance of the Kony campaign as a piece of representation. The absence of this statistical relationship, I argued, might be read as an indication of the Ironic Spectator's "self-conscious-suspicion vis-à-vis all claims to truth, which comes from acknowledging that there is always a disjunction between what is said and what exists" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 2). Beyond this somewhat conjectural statistical interpretation, however, this dissertation as a whole provides little empirical support for the idea of a post-humanitarian or ironic audience.

For a start, only a very small proportion of LISS participants (chapter 5) expressed the type of suspicion about the authenticity of the images or the credibility of the source that would be congruent with the Ironic Spectator's general mistrust of representation that Chouliaraki describes. But maybe even more telling are the results from the focus group study (chapter 2). Here, participants were oftentimes struggling with, rather than embracing, the app's post-humanitarian features. De-factualization and de-contextualization were perceived as unnecessarily inhibiting more sustained engagement. When

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<sup>108</sup> Chouliaraki (2013) herself stresses that she should not be misunderstood as "claiming that the [post-humanitarian] genres determine the responses of the publics in fully predictable ways" which – as she is quick to add – is "a question open to empirical research" (p.180).

reflecting on how the app could be improved to get people more involved in the plight of refugees, participants often suggested to cut down, rather than intensify the app's post-humanitarian features: providing *more context* to the depicted suffering, including stories of hardships of *actual* refugees, and using *more realist* representations. Rather than embracing and indulging in the app's post-humanitarian affordances, it seemed that participants often longed for what might be seen as more conventional modes of representation.

Participants also actively struggled to navigate the tensions they experienced with this post-humanitarian piece of representation. Possibly the most palpable manifestations of this were those moments of disagreement among participants about the level to which an app like *My Life* should be enjoyable and immersive. These discussions highlighted a conflict between on the one hand recognizing the empathic affordances of interactive media, and on the other hand questioning the appropriateness of turning a distant other's suffering into play and entertainment.

At the same time, this dissertation has showcased the analytical utility of post-humanitarianism and the Ironic Spectatorship for research on distant suffering. These concepts indeed proved useful to put into context novel practices of representation and to make sense of and distinguish between different forms of audience engagement. But as a whole, my findings do not support the idea of an overall rise of the Ironic Spectator, and thus a paradigmatic shift from pity to irony in the way we relate to the distant suffering other.

## 6.4 Where to go from here

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the field of distant suffering has long been characterized by a striking scarcity of audience research. Fortunately, recent years have seen a growing recognition of this deficiency (Ong, 2009; Orgad & Seu, 2014; Huiberts & Joye, 2017; Scott, 2014; Joye & von Engelhardt, 2015) and of the necessity to “investigate – systematically and rigorously – how things are rather than only discussing how things ought to be” (Orgad & Seu, 2014, p. 28).

In the debate on the direction(s) that such an *empirical turn* in studies about audience of distant suffering should take, some have called for more multi-method and interdisciplinary approaches to studying audiences of distant suffering (Orgad & Seu, 2014; Joye & Huiberts, 2015; Huiberts 2016). In particular, it has been proposed to turn to the discipline of moral psychology for new theoretical and methodological impulses (Joye & Huiberts, 2015; von Engelhardt, 2015). Indeed, this is what I have done in chapter 4, using insights from moral psychology to inform my experimental audience research on distant suffering.

But such calls for bringing in other research traditions are also met with some hesitation, as Huiberts (2016) has shown. In a series of interviews with leading scholars of distant suffering, Huiberts did find a growing interest in engaging in cross-disciplinary and multi-method approaches. Not surprisingly, however, she also encountered considerable reluctance among some of her interviewees to embrace survey research or experiments as epistemologically valuable. As she points out, “generalized findings about audiences’ reactions to mediated distant suffering are, from a constructionist point of view, a violation – or at least a negligence – of all the diverse and unique ways that people can think about and react to distant suffering” (p. 4332).

Clearly, these are fundamental epistemological differences that cannot be brushed aside by generic calls for interdisciplinarity. Rather, the researcher’s

responsibility lies in examining these differences carefully and pragmatically, with the aim of identifying areas of common ground that can allow, if not for agreement, for the start of a conversation. As audience research on distant suffering will increasingly be taking its cues from outside of media studies, such an openness to move beyond one's methodological and theoretical comfort zone might in fact turn out to be one of the biggest challenges of the field.

In response to my call for drawing on conceptualizations of moral emotions developed within moral psychology (von Engelhardt, 2015), Chouliaraki (2015) reflects on this central issue of epistemological compatibility:

If the constructivist paradigm to mediated suffering, as von Engelhardt [(2015)] rightly suggests, rests on a performative ontology of emotions as constituted through the meaning-making practices of its spectacles ('regimes of pity'), the question of compatibility here becomes how such ontology can be reconciled with a view of audience emotions as 'instant moral intuitions', in the paradigm of experimental psychology. (p. 709)

Importantly, Chouliaraki does not just leave it at merely identifying the apparent incompatibilities. Instead, she encourages scholars to work towards positions that might allow to transcend them, such as that of a *discursive* psychology which – in opposition to mainstream psychology – would embrace the “constructivist conception of the self as constituted through the symbolic resources of its social context” (p. 710).

I believe that such attempts at integration and synergy will prove vital for the future of audience research on distant suffering. As I hope the different studies presented here have shown, there is much to be gained by thinking about specificity and generalizability in research not as opposing, but rather as complementing each other.

There is a clear need for more qualitative investigations of the varied ways in which individuals create meaning from different representations of suffering; make sense to themselves and others of their thoughts and emotions (or lack thereof); find ways to connect to the depicted misery; or reflect on their indifference and moral apathy.

At the same time, it is through large-scale, and most likely quantitative, studies that we gain knowledge about how *common* different forms of engagement are within a larger population and how they relate to specific audience characteristics. Engaging in this type of empirical work can and should be done in full awareness that there is no such thing as a single, monolithic audience and that any general statement about *the audience* to some extent disguises as simple and universal what in fact is complex and messy.

Nonetheless, empirical studies that make use of representative samples will be of much value for the field of distant suffering. In particular, as I believe that media scholars have in the past tended to overestimate how much of their own distanced reflexivity and need for critical deconstruction is shared by those outside of academia. To me, it was as surprising as it was encouraging to see that explicitly distanced, blasé or cynical expressions did not feature prominently in the analysis of the open responses.

Evidently, introducing new research approaches into this field that has traditionally been characterized by theoretical reflection and small-scale qualitative audience research will not be an easy task. But it seems to me that such efforts to overcome methodological and disciplinary divisions will be critical in working towards a fuller, more nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of what it can mean to be confronted with the suffering of a distant other.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Voice-over texts of the news item manipulations used in the LISS experimental study

Low agency	High agency	Low distance	High distance
In de driehoek tussen Kenya, Somalië en Ethiopië hebben zeker 11 miljoen mensen voedselhulp nodig.			
Honderdduizenden mensen zijn terecht gekomen in vluchtelingenkampen zoals Dadaab, in het Noorden van Kenya.	Honderdduizenden mensen zoeken hun toevlucht in vluchtelingenkampen zoals Dadaab, in het Noorden van Kenya		
Het is een droevige dag voor Osman Ali en zijn vrouw nu ze hun zoon van vier moeten begraven, gestorven aan uitdroging.			
Hardwerkende boeren waren ze, op een klein stukje grond in Somalië – mensen die hun bestaan in het verleden altijd wisten te bevechten, ondanks burgeroorlog en extreme droogte. Maar deze keer moesten ze hun dorp achterlaten en de lange en zware tocht maken naar het vluchtelingenkamp Dadaab.	Boeren waren ze, op een klein stukje grond in Somalië - een land dat al decennia lang door burgeroorlog en extreme droogte geteisterd wordt. Gevlucht uit hun dorp zijn ze uiteindelijk in het vluchtelingenkamp Dadaab beland.		
<i>[interview Osman Ali]</i>			
De vluchtelingen in het kamp kunnen rekenen op elkaars hulp en steun. Zo ook bij een begrafenis. In deze tijden van extreme nood werkt men samen om te overleven.	De vluchtelingen in het kamp zijn aan de elementen en de beschikbare noodhulp overgeleverd. Ook begrafenissen moeten geïmproviseerd worden.		
		Een paar weken geleden had Osman Ali nog met een oom gebeld die al sinds jaren in Nederland woont en daar een klein bedrijf heeft.	Een paar weken geleden had Osman Ali nog met een oom gebeld die al sinds jaren in Kenya woont en daar een klein bedrijf heeft.
Zijn oom zou hem geld sturen, zodat zijn zoontje naar school kon gaan. Nu moet hij hem in Dadaab begraven.			
De kinderen in het vluchtelingenkamp die de zware tocht wel hebben overleefd, zijn ernstig verzwakt.			

<p>Elke dag opnieuw gaan ouders de strijd aan om voedsel en schoon water voor hun kinderen te zoeken, om ondervoeding en uitdroging te voorkomen. Zo proberen de vluchtelingen de grootste nood te verminderen door samen te werken en onderling hulp te coördineren.</p>	<p>Het zijn vooral de kinderen die aangewezen zijn op voedselhulp om uitdroging en ondervoeding te voorkomen. Deze hulp van buitenaf voorkomt vaak het ergste en vermindert de grootste nood.</p>		
		<p>Osman Alis oom in Nederland heeft beloofd om alsnog wat geld te sturen.</p>	<p>Osman Alis oom in Kenya heeft beloofd om alsnog wat geld te sturen.</p>
<p>Maar of het geld hem hier in het vluchtelingenkamp zal bereiken, is erg onzeker.</p>			

## Appendix B: Codebook for content analysis of open LISS responses

#	Code	Explanation	Examples (fictional)
1a	Includes an empathic response that does not entail identification / perspective-taking	Response includes the expression of moral emotion such as compassion/pity/shame. Note that this code should not be used for a mere description of the depicted situation (see negative example). Note: Do not use this code for expressions of identification.	'sad to see this" 'I feel horrible" 'Just terrible" NOT: "many people suffering" NOT: "children are dying because there is no shelter"
1b	Includes an empathic response that does entail identification / perspective-taking	Response includes expression of identification with the depicted refugees. This also includes any <i>attempted</i> identification as well as any other instances of perspective taking.	'I simply can't imagine this sort of life" 'Just imagine losing your own child" 'Must be terrible to lose a child' 'We can't even imagine what that's like'
2	Expresses explicitly a lack of any moral/emotional response	Response includes an explicit expression of the absence of empathic feelings or an expression of Compassion Fatigue.	'It really does not affect me" 'I have seen these images so many times before"
3	Suggests that suffering in Africa will never end	Response includes the idea that people in Africa will always suffer. This code does not require an explicit prediction of the future, but should also be applied to responses that include the idea that those parts (Africa/developing world) have always been a mess/that there has not been an improvement in the recent past.	'Things there will probably never change" 'Even when I was a child, people were already starving in Africa"
4	Includes the notion that there is nothing the respondent him-/herself can do (inefficacy)	Response includes the notion that there is nothing the respondent him-/herself can do to alleviate this suffering – irrespective of whether this is perceived as a burden or not.	'I feel powerless to do something about this" 'There is nothing I can do anyhow"
5	Includes the notion that rich countries are obliged to help (more)	Response explicitly mentions that the Netherlands/Western world needs to help/give (more) to alleviate this type of suffering.	'The Netherlands should help these people" 'Rich countries are not doing enough"
6	Questions the effectiveness of humanitarian organizations / of international aid	Response suggests that private donations and international aid might not be effective / that funds are being misallocated. Use this code for any expressed doubts regarding the effectiveness of giving money and of the work and integrity of Western NGOs in general.	'The money will never reach those people anyhow" 'Those NGOs only spend the money on their own salaries"
7	Mentions global inequality between rich and poor parts of the world	Response references to global inequality, i.e. the observation that there is a great discrepancy between "our" world and "theirs" in terms of wealth and stability.	"So much wealth in the West" 'And we are living in so much wealth and peace" 'Why do they have to starve if other parts of the world are so rich?"
8	Suggests that there are international causes for the depicted suffering (politics/trade/climate change/colonial history)	Response explicitly mentions that suffering is (partly) caused by international politics / international trade agreements / globalization / climate change / colonialization.	'Europe really messed these countries up" 'If they could sell their products in Europe, they would not starve"



		Note that this code is about the big-picture <u>causes</u> of the suffering, not about a failure of the world/West to solve this acute crisis. The latter instance might be coded as 'West obliged to help'.	
9	<b>Suggests that there are domestic causes for the depicted suffering</b>	Response explicitly mentions failures of domestic political leaders or citizens that contribute to suffering, such as domestic politics / corruption / greed / laziness / incompetence / too many children. Do <u>not</u> apply this code to general references to civil war/drought/climate.	<i>'Horrible how their leaders are letting them down' 'These people just have too many children'</i>  <i>NOT: 'All this war/drought is making life impossible there'</i>
10	<b>Includes some form of media critique</b>	Response includes explicit expressions of the notion that media/humanitarian communication do not portray distant suffering in truthful/objective/adequate manner or that representation is distorted by the organizations' own agendas (e.g. attract audiences/donations). This can either be with respect to the news item they just watched, or to news/humanitarian communication in general.	<i>'They are always only showing the children anyway' 'I don't think it's as bad as they make it seem' 'Why do we never see the middle-class Africans riding cars?'</i>



## SUMMARY

During the previous decades, most of those affected or killed by large-scale humanitarian disasters lived in the so-called ‘developing world’. How ‘we’ – as western audiences – relate to the human suffering caused by drought, civil war, by famine, or forced migration is therefore derived mostly from various forms of representation. What is shown and what is omitted, how a distant other is represented, how a narrative is constructed – all this feeds into our experience, and thus into our cognitive, moral and affective relationship with the suffering other. In that sense, representations of distant suffering do not simply inform us about – some of – the world’s misery. They compel us to position ourselves towards that misery by “inviting and instantiating a moral universe in which boundaries of community [...] are variously redrawn and bonds of solidarity correspondingly invoked” (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle, 2012, p. 49).

Until very recently, academic debates on distant suffering have been informed largely either by empirical studies on *representation* (such as content or discourse analyses) or *theoretical* reflections on the audience-sufferer relationship. The research presented here adds to the small – albeit growing – body of studies that investigate empirically how *audiences* engage with representations of humanitarian crises.

This dissertation thus fall under what Orgad and Seu (2014) have described as “post-despair research”: “driven not by hopelessness about distant suffering, but by the desire to explain and address what enables and inhibits understanding, response, and action” (p. 29).

### **Empirical Studies**

The aim of this dissertation is to contribute empirical insights about the conditions that can facilitate or limit audience engagement with the suffering of distant others. The four studies presented here explore audience engagement

with distant suffering in three very different contexts: an interactive app (chapter 2), an online video campaign (chapter 3) and a television news item (chapters 4 and 5). While the different studies all are situated within the same theoretical framework, each of them addresses a different set of empirical questions and employs a different methodology.

The study described in chapter 2 engages with Chouliaraki's (2013) concept of post-humanitarianism. Through a series of focus group discussions, the chapter explores audience engagement with a mobile phone app called *My Life as a Refugee*. The app was launched in 2012 by the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR to convey the hardships of forced migration. Empirically, the study shows how a young, tech-savvy audience engages with this unconventional and interactive form of representing distant suffering. In the thematic analysis of the focus groups, I pay particular attention to the various ways in which the app's post-humanitarian aesthetics and narratives succeeded or failed in eliciting different forms of engagement.

The survey study of chapter 3 explores audience engagement with *Kony 2012* – a campaign video on child soldiers in Uganda, produced by a US-based humanitarian organization. In March 2012, *Kony 2012* became the most viral video in the history of Youtube at the time, with 100 million views worldwide in the first six days after its online release. Based empirically on an online survey conducted in the weeks after the release of the video and theoretically steeped in Seu's work on denial (2010) and Chouliaraki's post-humanitarianism (2013), this study focuses on perceived moral responsibility evoked by the video. Specifically, it aims to dissect how the clip managed to create a sense of pressure to help those in need, and how taking on a position of 'critical consumer' might – for some – have served to evade this pressure.

Chapter 4 explores the effects of specific elements in media representations of suffering. Drawing heavily on insights and methods from the field of moral psychology, this large-scale experimental study (n=822) was conducted among members of the Dutch representative panel of the Longitudinal Internet Studies

for the Social Sciences (LISS). The LISS panel data are collected by CentERdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands) through its MESS project funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. For the purpose of this study, a news item on a humanitarian crisis at the Horn of Africa was edited and re-dubbed by a professional Dutch voice-over actor. The experiment was set up to explore the effects of two factors that so far had received much theoretical but little empirical attention in the current literature: portraying the distant others as active agents or passive victims; and presenting the life worlds of audiences and sufferers as detached or interconnected.

Finally, chapter 5 investigates a body of rich qualitative textual material that was also generated as part of the LISS study described hereabove: the spontaneous and unstructured thoughts and emotions that participants shared right after watching the news item. A content analysis was conducted of this large body of diverse expressions of audience engagement – or lack thereof.

## **Findings**

The diverse findings presented in the empirical chapters highlight a number of potential obstacles to audience engagement with distant suffering, in particular with respect to limited affordances of specific communication technologies; the choices of representation; and audience characteristics.

At the same time, the picture painted by the findings is not at all one of a western audience that has become numb or cynical in the face of distant suffering. For example, most participants in the LISS study spontaneously expressed some form of empathic reaction after watching the news item. Conversely, explicit manifestations of apathy or of desensitization were found in only a small fraction of responses.

Overall, it appeared that rather than distancing themselves emotionally from the depicted hardship, participants were much more likely to accentuate the depicted injustice by way of contrasting it to the relative carefreeness of their

own lives. In both the focus group and the LISS studies, participants were actively seeking out commonalities that would allow them to connect to the suffering other. Unable to draw on much experiential overlap between their own life worlds and those of the depicted others, participants often turned to the most basic of human conditions such as parenthood or having siblings to identify what I have described as *empathic hooks*.

Previous research has shown how audiences might put substantial effort in criticising the portrayals of suffering rather than engaging with its actuality and moral implications (e.g., Scott, 2015; Seu, 2010). However, such strategies for evading moral pressure do not emerge as a dominant theme in any of the studies presented here. At the same time, the results do show that those who hold a strong view of the world as being essentially just and fair (Just World Beliefs, see Hafer & Begue, 2015) are more likely to distance themselves from and even fictionalize the unfair distant suffering that could otherwise threaten this perception of a Just World.

Theoretically, this dissertation also explored the analytical utility of post-humanitarianism and the concept of the Ironic Spectatorship (Chouliaraki, 2013) for research on distant suffering. While these concepts indeed proved useful to put into context novel practices of representation and to make sense of different forms of audience engagement, the findings as a whole do not support the idea of a paradigmatic shift from pity to irony in the way we relate to the distant suffering other. In particular in the focus group study, rather than embracing and indulging in the app's post-humanitarian affordances, it seemed that participants often longed for what might be seen as more conventional modes of representation.

In fact, the results suggest that substantial parts of the audience are willing and able to be emotionally moved by depictions of humanitarian disaster, to express their engagement in various – often unpredictable – ways, and to even reflect on causes and moral significance of mediated distant suffering.

While this dissertation also brings to the fore some of the limitations of engagement, the findings presented here suggest primarily that a position of excessive pessimism regarding audiences of distant suffering is not just unproductive but also unwarranted.

## NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING

De grote meerderheid van de mensen die in het afgelopen decennium door humanitaire rampen zijn getroffen, leefden in zogenaamde ‘ontwikkelingslanden’. Hoe ‘wij’ – als westers publiek – ons verhouden tot het menselijk leed van droogte, burgeroorlog, hongersnood of gedwongen migratie, wordt noodgedwongen grotendeels bepaald door verschillende vormen van representatie. Wat wij te zien krijgen, wat niet, en hoe de ander wordt neergezet – dit alles beïnvloedt onze ervaring, en daardoor ook onze cognitieve, morele en affectieve relatie tot het leed van die ander. Representaties van *distant suffering* hebben niet alleen een informerende rol door ons – een deel van – de ellende in de wereld te laten zien. Ze dwingen ons ook een positie in te nemen ten opzichte van het afgebeelde leed: “inviting and instantiating a moral universe in which boundaries of community [...] are variously redrawn and bonds of solidarity correspondingly invoked” (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen & Cottle, 2012, p. 49).

De academische discussie rondom *distant suffering* was tot kort geleden vooral gestoeld op studies naar representatie (zoals inhouds- of discoursanalyses) of theoretische reflecties over de relatie tussen het mediapubliek en de lijdende ander. Het hier gepresenteerde onderzoek levert een bijdrage aan het kleine – maar groeiende – veld van empirische studies die zich richten op de vraag hoe het *mediapubliek* omgaat met representaties van humanitaire rampen.

De studies in deze dissertatie vallen zodoende onder het soort onderzoek dat Orgad en Seu (2014) “post-despair research” noemen: “driven not by hopelessness about distant suffering, but by the desire to explain and address what enables and inhibits understanding, response, and action” (p. 29).



## Empirische studies

Het doel van deze dissertatie is om een bijdrage te leveren aan het inzicht in de omstandigheden die betrokkenheid met gemedieerd leed kunnen belemmeren of juist bevorderen.

In vier studies onderzoek ik de betrokkenheid bij *distant suffering* in drie soorten media: een interactieve app (hoofdstuk 2), een online campagnefilmpje (hoofdstuk 3) en een televisienieuwsitem (hoofdstukken 4 en 5). Hoewel de vier studies uitgaan van hetzelfde theoretische kader, richten zij zich op verschillende empirische vraagstukken en maken daarbij gebruik van uiteenlopende methoden.

De studie die in hoofdstuk 2 wordt beschreven is gestoeld op Chouliaraki's (2013) concept van *post-humanitarianism*. In een reeks focusgroep-discussies onderzoek ik verschillende vormen van betrokkenheid onder gebruikers van de app *My Life as a Refugee*. Deze app werd in 2012 door de vluchtelingenorganisatie van de Verenigde Naties, UNHCR, uitgebracht met het doel om de ellende van gedwongen migratie over te brengen. Ik onderzoek hoe een jong, technisch bekwaam mediapubliek omgaat met deze onconventionele en interactieve vorm van representatie van leed. In de thematische analyse van de focusgroepen concentreer ik mij voornamelijk op de vraag hoe de app er al dan niet in slaagt om betrokkenheid te wekken met het afgebeelde leed, en hoe dit zich verhoudt tot de 'post-humanitaire' eigenschappen van de app.

Hoofdstuk 3 beschrijft een surveyonderzoek naar *Kony 2012* – een campagnefilmpje over kindsoldaten in Oeganda, geproduceerd door een Amerikaanse humanitaire organisatie. In maart 2012 werd *Kony 2012* het meest virale YouTube filmpje: binnen de eerste zes dagen na de online publicatie werd het 100 miljoen keer bekeken. In de week na de publicatie van *Kony 2012* hield ik samen met een collega een online survey naar de mate van individuele gepercipieerde morele verantwoordelijkheid die het filmpje aanwakkert. Theoretisch is deze studie gebaseerd op Seu's werk over ontkenning (2010) en

Chouliaraki's *post-humanitarianism* (2013). Ik ontleed in hoeverre het filmpje erin slaagt om mensen het gevoel te geven in actie te moeten komen, en hoe dit effect – door sommigen – ontkracht kon worden door het innemen van een positie als 'kritische consument'.

Hoofdstuk 4 richt zich op de effecten van specifieke elementen van representaties van leed. Dit grootschalige online experiment (n=822) gebruikt inzichten en methoden uit de morele psychologie. De deelnemers aan de studie waren afkomstig uit het representatieve panel van het Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social Sciences (LISS). De LISS-paneldata worden vergaard door CentERdata (Universiteit Tilburg) en gefinancierd door de Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijke Onderzoek (NWO).

Voor deze studie is een nieuwsitem over een humanitaire crisis in de Hoorn van Afrika bewerkt en voorzien van een nieuwe voice-over, opgenomen door een professionele voice-overacteur. Het experiment onderzoekt de effecten van twee factoren, die al wel eerder theoretisch besproken zijn, maar nog nauwelijks empirisch onderzocht. Ten eerste: het weergeven van de verre ander als actief handelend mens of als passief slachtoffer. Ten tweede: het weergeven van de leefwerelden van het mediapubliek en van de getroffen en als gescheiden of als met elkaar verbonden.

Hoofdstuk 5, ten slotte, beschrijft een studie naar het rijke kwalitatieve materiaal uit de LISS-studie die hierboven is besproken: de spontane en ongestructureerde gedachten en emoties die de respondenten direct na het zien van het filmpje konden delen. Door middel van een inhoudsanalyse analyseer ik dit omvangrijke corpus aan expressies van betrokkenheid en distantie.

## **Bevindingen**

De resultaten van de empirische studies belichten een aantal potentiële hindernissen voor het aanwakkeren van betrokkenheid onder het mediapubliek. Die hindernissen hebben betrekking op de beperkte mogelijkheden van

specifieke communicatietechnologieën, de keuzes in representatie, en eigenschappen van het mediapubliek.

Tegelijkertijd tekenen de bevindingen geenszins een beeld van een mediapubliek dat verlamd of cynisch is geworden bij het zien van *distant suffering*. Bijvoorbeeld toonden de meeste deelnemers in de LISS-studie spontaan een empathische reactie na het bekijken van het nieuwsitem. Slechts een klein gedeelte van de reacties bevatte duidelijke uitingen van apathie of afstomping.

Over het geheel bleek dat respondenten niet zozeer probeerden om zich emotioneel te distantiëren van het weergegeven leed, maar eerder verbindingen legden door het leed te contrasteren met hun eigen leven, dat relatief zorgenvrij is. Zowel in de focusgroep als in de LISS-studies gingen respondenten vaak actief op zoek naar gemeenschappelijke kenmerken met de lijdende ander, door mij *empathic hooks* genoemd.

Eerder onderzoek heeft laten zien hoe mensen geneigd zijn om kritiek te leveren op representaties van humanitaire rampen, in plaats van betrokkenheid te tonen met het afgebeelde leed en de morele implicaties hiervan (bijvoorbeeld Scott, 2015; Seu, 2010). Maar dit soort strategieën om aan morele druk te ontsnappen kwamen niet als dominante strategie naar voren in het huidige onderzoek.

Wel laten de bevindingen zien dat diegenen die een sterk geloof hebben in de rechtvaardigheid in de wereld (Just World Beliefs, zie Hafer & Begue, 2015) eerder geneigd zijn om zichzelf van het afgebeelde ongerechtvaardigde leed te distantiëren. Leed dat anders dit geloof zou kunnen bedreigen.

Deze dissertatie heeft bovendien de analytische meerwaarde getoetst van de concepten *post-humanitarianism* en *Ironic Spectatorship* (Chouliaraki, 2013) binnen onderzoek naar *distant suffering*. Hoewel deze concepten inderdaad waardevol bleken om nieuwe vormen van representatie en publieke betrokkenheid te contextualiseren, wijzen de bevindingen niet op een paradigmatische verschuiving van *pity* naar *irony* in hoe wij ons verhouden tot

*distant suffering*. Met name de participanten in de focusgroep-studie lieten zich niet meeslepen door de post-humanitaire kwaliteiten van de app, maar leken vaak juist te verlangen naar meer conventionele vormen van representatie.

Zoals deze dissertatie laat zien, is een groot deel van het mediapubliek bereid en in staat om emotioneel betrokken te raken door representaties van humanitaire rampen. Velen uiten hun betrokkenheid, op uiteenlopende en soms onverwachte manieren, of reflecteren zelfs op de oorzaken en morele relevantie van *distant suffering*. Hoewel deze dissertatie ook de grenzen van betrokkenheid belicht, lijkt er dus geen reden voor overdreven pessimisme.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Johannes von Engelhardt (1981) was born in Göttingen, Germany. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Communication Science and a Research Master's degree in Social Sciences from the University of Amsterdam (both cum laude). His Research Master thesis explored processes of *facing the past* in Serbian media, politics, and public discourse (co-authored with Nenad Golčevski).

Since 2007, Johannes has taught various courses in communication science and political science at the University of Amsterdam and, since 2009, at the International Bachelor for Communication and Media (IBCoM) at Erasmus University. Within IBCoM, Johannes gave the lectures for *Introduction to Statistics* which he coordinated together with Joyce Neys. Together with Emy Koopman, he developed and taught the selective seminar *Human Suffering in Media and Arts*.

Currently, Johannes is a lecturer in statistics and research methods at the University of Amsterdam (PPLE college). Outside of academia, he works as a freelance researcher and methodology consultant for various humanitarian organizations.

## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THIS PROJECT

- Von Engelhardt, J. (2015). Studying Western audiences vis-à-vis mediated distant suffering. A call to venture beyond media studies. *International Communication Gazette*, 77(7), 695-707.
- Joye S. & von Engelhardt, J. (2015). Audiences in the face of distant suffering: An introduction to the special issue. *International Communication Gazette*, 77(7), 603-606.
- Von Engelhardt J., & Jansz, J. (2015). Distant suffering: The mediation of humanitarian disaster. In R. Anderson (Ed.), *World Suffering and Quality of Life* (pp. 75–87). New York: Springer.
- Von Engelhardt, J. (2015). Leid und Mitleid: Mediendarstellungen humanitärer Katastrophen und deren Wirkung. *Das In-Mind Magazin*, 5.
- Von Engelhardt J. & Jansz J. (2014). Challenging humanitarian communication: an empirical exploration of Kony 2012. *International Communication Gazette*, 76(6), 464-484.
- Verdonschot, I., & von Engelhardt, J. (2013). Representaties van leed tussen 'adventure' en 'emergency'. Een 'critical discourse analysis' naar de representatie van de watersnoodramp in Pakistan (2010) in het NOS-journaal. *Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap*, 41(1), 62-81.

# PORTFOLIO

## Courses followed during the PhD project

### Academic/methodological

- Summer School Ethics and Practical Philosophy at Erasmus University: “Ethics and the Empirical Sciences: Emotions and Moral Agency” (August 2015, 5 ECTS).
- PhD Class at Erasmus Graduate School for Social Sciences and Humanities: Multilevel Modelling (May/April 2015, 5 ECTS).
- RISBO English Academic Writing for PhD students (January/February 2012)

### Didactic

- University Teaching Qualification, RISBO (2014)

## Courses taught during the PhD project

### 2011/2012

- Introduction Statistical Analysis (lecture, 3 tutorials)
- Qualitative Research Methods (2 tutorials)
- Master thesis supervision (3 students)
- Internship supervision (3 students)

### 2012/2013

- Introduction Statistical Analysis (lecture, 3 tutorials)
- Master thesis supervision (2 students)

### 2013/2014

- Introduction Statistical Analysis (lecture, 3 tutorials)
- Elective seminar: Human Suffering in Media and Arts

### 2014/2015

- Introduction Statistical Analysis (lecture, 3 tutorials)

### 2015/2016

- Introduction Statistical Analysis (lecture, 3 tutorials)
- Internship supervision (2 students)

## CONFERENCES AND ACADEMIC MEETINGS DURING THE PHD PROJECT

*Crossroads in Cultural Studies*, Tampere, Finland (01st – 04th July 2014).

Presented paper: Challenging humanitarian communication - an exploration of Kony 2012. (von Engelhardt, J. & J. Jansz)

*Etmaal voor de Communicatiewetenschap*, Wageningen, The Netherlands (02nd – 3rd February, 2014). Paper presented by E. Huiberts: “They don’t deserve that” - Moral responsibility in the face of mediated distant suffering. (Huiberts, E. & von Engelhardt, J.)

*International Communication Association Conference*, London, UK (17th – 21st July 2013). Organized panel session: Audiences in the face of distant suffering: new challenges for old idea(l)s?

Presented paper: Facing the mediated pain of others. New directions for the empirical study of audiences of distant suffering. (von Engelhardt, J. & Jansz, J.)

*Media, War & Conflict Fifth Anniversary Conference*, London, UK (11th – 12th April 2013). Presented paper: Caring for distant victims of violent conflict – an empirical investigation of the significance of Kony2012. (von Engelhardt, J. & Jansz, J.)

*Etmaal voor de Communicatiewetenschap*, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (07th – 08th February, 2013). Presented paper: Facing mediated distant suffering: a first step towards an empirical framework.(von Engelhardt, J. & Jansz, J.)

*European Communication Conference*, Istanbul, Turkey (24th – 27th October 2012). Presented paper: Regarding the pain of others: The role of victim representation in compassionate responses to mediated suffering. (von Engelhardt, J. & Himmit, S. & Jansz, J.)



*International Association for Media and Communication Research*, Durban, South Africa (15th – 19th July 2012). Presented papers:

Western audiences in the face of distant suffering. A call to bring moral psychology to the table. (von Engelhardt, J. & Jansz, J.).

Proximate and distant suffering: A comparative content analysis of the coverage of the 2011 Horn of Africa crisis in Western and East-African media. (von Engelhardt, J. & Hoffmann, J.)

*University for Peace*, Costa Rica (2nd November 2011). Brown bag lecture:

Regarding the Pain of Others: making sense of distant mediated suffering.