

Do the media render us into spectators of human suffering? If so, what are the implications for humanitarian campaigns?

Introduction:

Globalisation as a phenomenon has connected the world in an unprecedented manner in the past 200 years. Whether it be through the deterritorialisation of people and capital, the hybridisations of culture or the rapid developments in media and a mediated individual existence, it is possible to say that globalisation has created a more ‘connected,’ ‘conjunctive,’ and ‘collaborative’ world. Global capital, culture and ideologies are all available for discourse at the touch of a finger and so is global suffering.

Much like everything else, conflict has become a more mediated and readily ‘viewable’ phenomenon. This mediation of conflict has also led to the mediation of the suffering it brings about – conflict reportage has changed from being about military strategies and government initiatives to being about the devastation caused, its victims and criticism (in most cases) of these sufferings (Höijer, 2004). Suffering no longer remains just a painful repercussion of conflict and disaster; it is also a spectacle, befitting of primetime news reels and the central jewel of internet activism – played up for the entertainment and information of a viewer to invoke compassion and hence, their humanitarianism.

This essay aims answer the questions of whether the media renders us into spectators of human suffering and what implications that has for humanitarian campaigns. The first section of the essay establishes the concepts of compassion, empathy, and pity, as well as the politics of pity which allow the media to render us into spectators. It also elaborates on how suffering is turned into a spectacle through domestication strategies and imagery. The third section will talk about the implications of this mediation on humanitarian campaigns. Finally, the last section will conclude the essay.

Mediatized Suffering and the Politics of Pity:

Compassion can be defined as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help.” (Goetz, et al., 2010, p. 351). It is the wish to help someone after viewing their pain and then moving on – there are no connotations or judgement attached with compassion, it is merely about witnessing and fulfilling the desire to help the suffering. The concept of compassion can be further developed by studying it through its more emotional (empathy) and cognitive (sympathy) aspects (Huiberts & Joye, 2017).

Empathy is characterised by the deep understanding of another’s emotional state or an actual experience that emotionally connects a person to another’s experience. It involves stepping into the shoes of the sufferer and experiencing exactly what they must feel at a given moment in time (Huiberts & Joye, 2017). The closer a person feels to the sufferer – in terms of their location, their ethnicity, social/cultural experiences, etc – the more likely they are to be able to exactly imagine the emotional experience of any situation. Sympathy on the other hand, is the act of trying to establish this understanding of another’s emotional state. It is the cognitive, cerebral step towards empathising with a sufferer – instead of stepping into the victim’s shoes, sympathising anticipates their needs.

“It thus leads to a sense of care that requires an action to help. In other words, sympathy involves the kind of reasoning that can, in the end, lead to an idea of one’s own moral code of conduct in relation to the victim” (Huiberts & Joye, 2017).

Compassion, then, is dependent on the imagination of suffering and the needs of those who are suffering. It also hinges upon the idea of the existence of a fortunate and an unfortunate. Thus,

“The principal characteristic of compassion is that it is directed towards particular individuals, particular suffering beings, without seeking to develop any ‘capacity for generalisation’” (Arendt 1963, cited in Boltanski, 2009).

So long as an individual can empathise with the ‘suffering beings’ and anticipate their needs, they shall offer help.

In order to develop this further, it is important to understand the distinction between compassion and pity. Compassion is characterised by the individuality and proximity of a situation, while pity is characterised by its generalisation and distance (Boltanski, 2009). What this means is that compassion is immediate – it is evoked and accomplished when someone witnesses a sufferer in their proximity. Pity, on the other hand, is evoked for victims far away, for whom the cognitive aspects of compassion are possible, but empathy remains lacking.

Now, according to Hannah Arendt, the existence of the fortunate and the unfortunate is central to the politics of pity: someone’s suffering needs to be seen and observed by another who is not suffering for compassion to exist (Arendt, 1963 in Boltanski, 2009). The politics of pity hinges on this differentiation between the two classes and the observation of the unfortunate by the fortunate. The evocation of pity emerges from the beneficial position that the fortunate occupy and the distance from which they witness this suffering. The further the distance, the less a singular victim is seen and “helped.” Observation becomes more about victimisation and victimhood – the fortunate, then, observe the generalised unfortunate in their suffering, less attached to the individual and more to the portrayal of victimhood, rendering the suffering into a spectacle and the observers into spectators.

Media render their audiences into spectators of suffering by being the medium through which the observation of the sufferers occurs. It introduces a newer, more global compassion, marked by “a moral sensibility or concern for remote strangers from different continents,

cultures and societies” (Höijer, 2004). They link the audience (who want to help) to the depicted sufferers and those that can help the sufferers (humanitarian organisations, governments, etc) by providing depictions of suffering, related developments, and public opinion.

“Media witnessing is underlined by two main characteristics: first, its affective nature, due to its relation to human vulnerability, pain and trauma; second, its cultural endowment with a sense of responsibility to interfere with and act upon the suffering witnessed” (Kyriakidou, 2014).

The media, in order to mitigate the distance and increase the appeal of their reportage, engage in domestication strategies to make international news and affairs more appealing to local audiences.

The domestication of mediatised suffering can be understood through four strategies: emotional domestication (eyewitness accounts and emotional narration), aid-driven domestication (calls for help and aid), “familiarizing the unfamiliar” (using narrative styles to invoke familiarity) and “what are the stakes” (link the risks of the distant event to the local) (Huiberts & Joye, 2017). This domestication allows the audience to interact with distant suffering not just as the depiction of a real-life event, but also as content – the audience themselves begin using domestication strategies.

It also allows audiences to engage with the distant suffering emotionally or rationally, depending on which of the four strategies are used. The audience can also be able to ‘deny’ or be unaffected by the suffering by domesticating the suffering themselves. This renders the suffering into a spectacle and the audience into the spectator – they can sympathise (affective witnessing), empathise (ecstatic witnessing), blame (politicised witnessing) or deny (detached witnessing) the suffering (Kyriakidou, 2014).

To the audience then, the suffering is only real and present so long as it is witnessed through its mediatisation. Once the live broadcast/news reel stops, they can choose to switch off away from it. As spectators of suffering through media, audiences are not primary witnesses, rather, they witness and receive the accounts of someone else (in this case the journalist) from their homes. Thus, the degree of involvement they feel in this spectacle is dependent on the effectiveness of the media in reducing the physical and ideological distance between the spectator and the victim.

In more recent times, social media has become central to witnessing the spectacle of suffering. Previously what was viewable only through the television, is pervasive everywhere now. It is possible for spectators to witness the spectacle of suffering first-hand and to engage more directly by sharing, liking, or commenting on the post. Digital media has allowed for a new kind of transformation of media and its audiences – it has introduced a new kind of immediacy and availability to communication and interactions.

Implications for Humanitarian Campaigns

The digital world has seen an increase in the amount of communication related to the spectacle of suffering via different media platforms, types, and organizations. Audiences have become more politically aware and involved since the growth in digital media platforms and interest and participation in humanitarian organizations has grown too. The spectatorship has changed from being passive to participatory – with humanitarian organisations able to reach people more directly and constantly on their personal devices, people are constantly aware of the spectacle of suffering. What makes them more involved is the constant flow of images, videos and content that cement the view of suffering pushed for by these organizations – compassion occurs where there is imagination of suffering and imagination is dependent on vivid imagery (Orwin, 1996).

This is indicative of an increasing ‘mediatization’ of the world – where society “is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic” (Hjavar, 2008, cited in Vestergaard, 2014). Humanitarian organizations have always depended on mass media to interact with the global public and bring human suffering to light. Increasingly targeted campaigns regarding the impact of disasters, wars, and calamities are wrapped up within vivid and grotesque imagery to evoke the compassion of the ‘fortunate,’ so that these organizations can get legitimize their calls for support and funds.

Lilie Chouliaraki (2010, p. 109) equates the history of humanitarian communication to a history of the critique of the aesthetics of suffering: whether the imagery used is positive or negative, it is the aesthetics of suffering that encourage the spectator to support action. This aesthetic also implies their being an ideal victimhood, i.e., some people are more deserving of help and support than others for they are innocent/weaker/unable to care for themselves, etc. Children, women, and the elderly make up this ideal victimhood (Boltanski, 2009).

Humanitarian communication has historically perpetuated the idea that victims lack agency and are completely dependent on the support offered by the ‘fortunate.’ This was then replaced by positive images which, rather than showing images of suffering, depicted how contribution helped change the circumstances of the victims. Digital media, as stated earlier, has enabled a more direct approach to humanitarian communication. It has seen both forms of humanitarian campaigns too – social media is saturated with the imagery of war and suffering, while also being rife with stories of strength and resilience in the face of adversity.

“But also intertwined with this shift is the development of a new kind of war – digital war – which is fought through and on the same media platforms and devices that have enabled mass public participation.” (Hoskins, 2020).

Andrew Hoskins (2020, p. 120) talks about the about how in the digital era, the difference between those suffering, those fighting and those commenting is becoming increasingly unclear, as more and more actors indulge in depicting the spectacle of suffering. With the rise in user generated content, reduced trust in mainstream media and an overwhelming amount of imagery of suffering available at a click, the effect each depiction has on its audience has reduced. It can be argued that the increased mediatization of suffering has led to a higher amount of public mistrust in both, the media, and the humanitarian campaigns.

The audience is becoming increasingly critical of the way suffering is sensationalised in and by the media to evoke a reaction and aid. As stated before, compassion emerges from proximity, empathy, and a need to help, but the oversaturation of depictions has desensitised people to the very suffering they are moved by. For example, the usage of domestication strategies to evoke empathy can be perceived as formulaic and result in ‘compassion fatigue.’

“They put forward that the message is too typical and the format so recognizable that they would have trouble being emotionally moved or even interested because they had seen these kinds of messages too often and had become desensitized” (Huiberts & Joye, 2017).

It can be seen as diminishing the suffering of the “other” by trying to focus on the impact on home audiences and expats (Huiberts & Joye, 2017). What mediating suffering in an increasingly digitised world also does is increase the presumption that somebody else is offering the needed assistance to those in need, leading to what Hoskins (2020, p. 129) calls ‘networked contagion.’ This means that the impact of the aesthetics of suffering is steadily reducing – there is so much documented suffering that is so readily available that evoking compassion becomes an increasingly harder task.

What rendering audiences as spectators of suffering in the digital age also does is create a cyclical tradition of sharing content to express outrage and aid its virality, only for the virality to induce desensitisation to the issue. The sharing of content online also comes with its own repercussions and implications for humanitarian campaigns – there is an equation of virality and high social media engagement with visibility and hence, increased impact. While virality certainly does draw in more eyeballs, its impact on systemic changes and decisions is erratic at best (Hoskins, 2020). The increased circulation perpetuates the idea that a difference has been made, any actual changes are rarely, if ever seen.

As stated before, the mediatisation of conflict is about generalisation and distance. Digitality introduces a new dimension to the distance – one of abstraction. While in terms of mass media portrayals of suffering, a depicted victim became the face of a calamity, digital existence delivers the victim another nuance. From being the representation of suffering, the victim also becomes the face of statistical and quantitative data as well as proof of the existence of countless similar depictions of calamity.

Naturally, a rise in abstraction and criticism of sensationalism also gives rise to a delegitimizing of humanitarian campaigns and organizations. They increasingly face questions of accountability, legitimacy, and effectiveness – how does one know that the donated funds are received by the intended? How does one know that their support can bring about change?

Vestergaard (2014, p. 523) suggests that “this mistrust in the motivation and effectiveness of humanitarian action is addressed not by trying to reinstall trust in the authority of humanitarian organizations to determine where, how and why to help sufferers, but by nurturing the symbolic relations between the humanitarian participants on a moral dimension rather than pragmatic ones.”

Conclusion:

The above discussion began with an overview of compassion and pity – it focussed on the emotional and cognitive aspects of compassion. Comparison between compassion and pity highlighted the idea that pity needs generalisation and distance to foster and develop in terms of the depictions of distant suffering. The politics of this very pity and the mediatization of distant suffering ensure that the audience or those that are fortunate becomes spectators of the suffering of the distant unfortunate victims. This spectatorship develops a certain power dynamic of pity, wealth, and moral obligation between the fortunate and the unfortunate, which humanitarian campaigns are looking to exploit.

Modern forms of digitised media mean that the spectatorship of suffering, as embodied by the audience, becomes more participatory and yet somehow less effective. It begins to raise questions on the legitimacy of humanitarian campaigns and undermines their effectiveness as a result of the compassion fatigue that their dependence on the spectacle of suffering causes in the audience that it is meant to affectively and ecstatically witnessed by.

References

- Arendt, H., 1963. *On Revolution*. 1 ed. New York: Penguin Books.
- Boltanski, L., 2009. *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. 2 ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chouliaraki, L., 2010. Post-humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a politics of pity. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13(2), pp. 107-126.
- Goetz, J. L., Keltner, D. & Simon-Thomas, E., 2010. Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis and Empirical Review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(3), pp. 351-374.
- Hjavard, S., 2008. The Mediatization of Society, A Theory of the media as agents of social and cultural change. *Nordicom Review*, 29(2).
- Höijer, B., 2004. The discourse of global compassion: the audience and media reporting of human suffering. *Media, Culture and Society*, 26(4), pp. 513-531.
- Hoskins, A., 2020. Media and Compassion after Digital War: Why Digital Media Haven't Transformed Responses to Human Suffering in Contemporary Conflict. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 102(913), pp. 117-143.
- Huiberts, E. & Joye, S., 2017. Close, but not close enough? Audience's reactions to domesticated distant suffering in international news coverage. *Media, Culture and Society*, 40(3).
- Kyriakidou, M., 2014. Media witnessing: exploring the audience of distant suffering. *Media, Culture and Society*, 37(2).
- Orwin, C., 1996. Distant Compassion: CNN and Borrioboola-Gha. *The National Interest*, 43(Spring), pp. 42-49.

Vestergaard, A., 2014. Mediatized Humanitarianism: Trust and Legitimacy in the Age of Suspicion. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 120(4), pp. 509-525.