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The symbolic power of transnational media

Managing the visibility of suffering

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ABSTRACT

This article explores systematic patterns in the visibility of suffering in satellite news, from the footage of 11 September 2001 to citizen-generated content from the 2007 anti-government demonstrations in Myanmar (Burma), so as to illustrate the role of transnational media as agents of symbolic power. It argues that the symbolic power of transnational broadcasting consists primarily in its capacity to manage the visibility of suffering so as to reproduce the moral deficiencies of global inequality. However, under certain conditions, technological as well as symbolic, satellite news stories might be able to produce a sense of moral agency that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, thereby constituting cosmopolitan communities of emotion and action.

KEY WORDS

cosmopolitanism ■ distant suffering ■ ethics ■ satellite news ■ transnational publics ■ visibility

The global visibility of suffering

This article explores systematic patterns in the visibility of suffering in satellite news from the footage of 11 September 2001 to the citizen-generated content from the 2007 anti-government demonstrations in Myanmar (Burma), so as to illustrate the role of transnational media as agents of symbolic power.¹ Symbolic power refers to the capacity of the media to selectively combine resources of language and image in order to present distant suffering as a cause of emotion, reflection and action for Western media audiences.

The ways in which the media portray and narrate the suffering of far-away others has always been controversial. In the past, it has raised critical questions about the power relations between the West and the

'rest', about stereotypes of the 'poor South' and about compassion fatigue among Western audiences (Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001). In the global media age, the symbolic power of the media to represent suffering reformulates these issues into a crucial ethical and political challenge: the extent to which satellite media enable the expansion of moral imagination beyond existing communities of belonging, national or regional.²

By studying examples of ordinary (news bulletins) and extraordinary (rolling footage) satellite reporting, in national and in international contexts, this article argues that the management of the visibility of distant suffering most often amounts to the reproduction of a communitarian imagination. At the same time, it tentatively points to the potential of citizen-generated content to provide a different management of the visibility of suffering, thus potentially challenging, though not necessarily transcending, the Western imagination of community.

The moral claim of distant suffering in transnational television

There are two responses to the question as to whether satellite broadcasting may be expanding our scope of responsibility beyond the West: whereas the optimistic response claims that the global visibility of suffering inevitably brings with it the potential to care for distant others, the sceptical one challenges the idea that visual immediacy may lead to anything more than care for those who are 'like us' (Curran, 2005: 5–6).

The optimistic argument takes its point of departure from the global scope and instantaneous reach of satellite broadcasting as key dimensions of symbolic power that may give rise to new communities of belonging: the 'global village' or 'global civil society' (Thompson, 1995; Tomlinson, 1999; Beck and Sznaider, 2006). Three distinct but interconnected arguments point in this direction. First, a consequence of the CNN effect, there is an increase in the broadcasting of distant disasters and in audience awareness about suffering others (Livingston and Bennett, 2003; Livingston and Van Belle, 2005); second, there is a heightened visibility of war atrocities and new rituals of death and torture, such as the Iraq war, internet beheadings and Abu Ghraib pictures, placing the spectacle of suffering at the centre of a contemporary media ethics agenda (Mirzoeff, 2006; Silverstone, 2006); finally, there is an increase in citizen-generated footage, such as the demonstrations by Buddhist monks in Myanmar in 2007, which bypasses traditional gate-keeping mechanisms and enables the world to watch spectacles of violence otherwise inaccessible to the media

(Gillmor, 2004; Cooper, 2007). Thanks to satellite networks, the argument has it, we are now closer to distant suffering than ever before, thereby bearing the moral responsibility of witnessing and, with it, the burden of complicity: in the age of mediated abundance, we cannot, any longer, say we did not know (Ellis, 2000: 1). The optimistic argument on the ethical force of satellite reporting is essentially an argument about the symbolic power of transnational media to generate a new moral imaginary, that of cosmopolitan citizenship – a disposition to act on distant others without the obligation of reciprocity or the certainty of the outcome of our action (Keenan, 1993: 135; Peters, 1999: 51–62; Barnett, 2003: 9–21). This civic disposition draws on two historical modes of engagement, which mediate our relationship to the spectacle of suffering and shape our moral agency towards vulnerable others: indignant denunciation against the injustice inflicted upon the sufferers by their persecutors, or tender-hearted empathy with the misfortune and pain of the sufferers (Boltanski, 1999).

In contrast to the optimistic position, the sceptical argument challenges the function of transnational media as agents of global connectivity and insists that satellite broadcasting, far from facilitating the globalization of civic dispositions, clusters transnational populations around their already existing communities of belonging. Satellite television, in other words, brings together multi-country markets linked by geography, language and culture (Straubhaar, 1997: 285). There are two overlapping perspectives to the sceptical argument: fragmentation and marketization.

Satellite media, the fragmentation perspective has it, may be global in technological scope but designed to be regional in cultural reach, serving the interests and desires of specific media publics, such as the Arab community in the case of Al Jazeera (Sakr, 2005) or the Anglo-American world in the case of CNN or BBC World (Curran and Park, 2000). As such, they are less about globalizing moral sensibilities and more about reproducing ‘satellite realms’, that is insulated publics that transcend the national but never quite become global (Sakr, 2001).

The marketization perspective addresses the impact of financial oligopolies on satellite content.³ In so far as news on suffering and violence sells, it remains a priority in international reporting but only on the condition that it is subject to the demands of infotainment (Thussu, 2007). There are three aspects to the infotainment perspective on distant suffering: sensationalism, whereby suffering is presented in terms of its dramatic details in order to grasp audiences’ attention (Seaton, 2005: 49–80); sanitization, where suffering is ‘cleansed’ of its

graphic dimensions in order to protect the audiences' emotions (Thussu, 2003; Campbell, 2004) and, finally, de-contextualization, where suffering is rarely explained as a complex event so as not to appear demanding on the cognitive capacities of media audiences (Moisy, 1997).

Satellite broadcasting, in summary, maximizes the presence of distant suffering on television screens, yet it does so in an ambivalent manner. Whereas optimists claim that it enables greater proximity with vulnerable others, internationalizing the moral consciousness of the West, sceptics argue that news on suffering is not represented in accordance to its political or humanitarian magnitude but on the basis of its relevance to, and infotainment capacity for, Western publics.

News and their publics

Whereas both sides of the argument draw upon theoretical discourses and empirical evidence to support their claims, neither of the two engages in a systematic examination of the symbolic properties of satellite broadcasting. As a consequence, it is difficult to identify the cultural resources, in the form of aesthetic registers and ethical discourses, through which satellite news stories contribute to the formation of collective dispositions (Corner, 1995: 43). Importantly, these arguments tend to oversee the capacity for change inherent in the making of news stories themselves. Indeed, although journalistic change is largely about ownership patterns and institutional structure, it would be misleading to ignore the fact that the potential for change also lies in the relative malleability of the representational practices of news embedded, as they are, in broader trajectories of technology and power.⁴

Following a case-based methodology, I focus on the study of the symbolic properties of selected news stories on distant suffering in satellite broadcasting.⁵ My aim is dual:

- (i) to trace down the representational practices through which each case manages the visibility of distant suffering, and, in so doing,
- (ii) to show how each case simultaneously evokes a normative claim as to who it is important to care for.

The study of the symbolic power of satellite broadcasting to act as an ethical force emerges out of this dual analytical attention to the particular properties of each news story and simultaneously to the universal claim each story makes about which sufferings are worthy of emotion and action for Western media publics (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 70).

In this sense, the discussion on the management of the visibility of suffering is also a discussion on the civic sensibilities the media invite us to develop (Schudson, 2005: 104). Far from naively assuming that what the media invites us to become is what we ultimately become, the link between the two, news stories and civic sensibilities, should rather be seen as a performative one: news stories do not only represent the world, they constitute our dispositions to act in this world precisely at the moment that they claim to simply represent it (Scannell, 1989: 135–66). In this sense, we should not think of the news as a genre of information but also as a genre of imagination. Through their routine choices of image and word, they help us imagine what we cannot experience: the reality of other people's suffering and where we stand in relation to them (Silverstone, 2006: 43–55). The question therefore of how the news manages the visibility of suffering, through an amateur documentary of the tsunami or the sublime spectacle of war bombing, is also a question about the civic sensibilities the news encourages us to enact; for the cultural representations and aesthetic tropes the media use, to paraphrase Geertz, are not mere reflections of pre-existing sensibilities, they are positive agents in the organization and maintenance of a sensibility (1973: 451). It is fair then to ask: which spectacles of suffering does satellite news invite us to contemplate? Which aesthetic properties do these spectacles have? And which imagined communities does satellite news invite us to belong to? Do they connect us together in a global village or do they reproduce a Western community easily 'fatigued' by distant others?

In the light of these methodological considerations, I explore the symbolic process of the imagination of community in satellite broadcasting by focusing on six case studies of news on suffering. Whereas the first four cases cluster around a Eurocentric imagination of community, constituting what we may call communitarian publics, the final two cases suggest that alternative ways of managing the visibility of suffering may lead to an expansion of the Eurocentric imagination – a possibility, however, inevitably grounded on the premises and practices of Western publics.

Transnational publics: communitarian and cosmopolitan imaginations

I focus on two categories of satellite news, 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' news, and I examine each one of these in two different contexts of broadcasting, the national and the international.⁶ The category of

'ordinary' news is reflected in the genre of the news bulletin, which I examine in the national context of the National Greek Television (Floods in Bangladesh, 2004), and in the international context of BBC World (Boat accident in India, 2002). The category of 'extraordinary' news is reflected in the genre of rolling footage, which I examine in the national context of the Danish National Television (11 September 2001) and in the international context of BBC World (Iraq war footage, 2003).⁷ My emphasis in the study of these four cases falls primarily on the aesthetic quality of each piece of news, that is on the visual and verbal properties of their spectacle of suffering, and on the moral agency of the news, that is the options for action on suffering each piece proposes to us as relevant and effective.

Communitarian publics

I first discuss the category of 'ordinary' news in the two contexts of broadcasting, transnational and national, before turning to the category of 'extraordinary' news.

The management of visibility in 'ordinary' satellite news

The first piece of news is about a boat accident in India (BBC World, 2002). This is a brief story with a descriptive narrative: a river-boat capsized in the river Baytarani, in the Indian province of Orissa – 40 people were feared drowned, most of them office workers and school children. Despite the fact that the BBC is a major transnational news service with an extensive network of technological and human resources as well as a long tradition of reporting in the region, the management of visibility in this case is minimal. It does not involve on location reports, but rather the use of maps: one of the Indian province of Orissa situated among its neighbouring provinces and another one of India situated in the northern hemisphere. The aesthetic register here is cartography, a decontextualized representation of geographical space that abstracts the event of suffering from its experiential circumstances. This management of visibility involves no people, no action, no emotion. Such absences correspond to choices over where, when, and with whom the suffering is shown to occur, which, in turn, give rise to a particular type of moral agency: do nothing, care not. The geographical distance between Western Europe and the river Baytarani is coupled onto another kind of distance, an emotional and moral distance between us and the Indian sufferers.

The second example is a piece of news on floods in Bangladesh (on National Greek Television, 2004). It combines the visualization of the scene of suffering, as it reached national television via satellite, with a brief voiceover added for the Greek public.⁸ Two symbolic features constitute the aesthetics of this piece of news: the panoramic point of view and the lack of action. The panoramic point of view provides us with an overview of the flooded landscape from afar and above; at the same time, it universalizes the scene of suffering: this could have been elsewhere, at any other time, involving another population. In so doing, the panoramic landscape creates an aesthetic distance from lived reality: the scene is all about water, trees and human figures in a static composition. This is not the footage of a catastrophe which covered 60 per cent of the nation but a 'tableau vivant', inviting distanced contemplation of the flooded land rather than engagement with the urgency of suffering. In terms of agency, there is no purposeful action, no voice: these people lack appellative power, the power to communicate the condition of their misfortune. In Boltanski's words, these Bangladeshi sufferers are portrayed as radically without will and their dehumanization, echoed in the voiceover's dramatic but brief text about the 'biblical catastrophe', further participates in the aestheticization of this news story, effectively producing a spectacle of difference between cultures that lie beyond the possibility of contact.

Despite their diverse contexts, the national and the international, these two examples of 'ordinary' news share three key features: the minimal narration of suffering, the refusal to humanize the sufferers and the interruption of emotion, denunciation or empathy vis-a-vis the events of suffering. Such symbolic features constitute the majority of our regular diet of daily news reports, on the grounds of the pragmatic argument of selectivity: the media do not always have access to sites of distant suffering nor can they report on every event in the same order of importance.⁹ Yet, what these pieces of news throw into relief is that the interruption of emotion involved in this professional logistics is not only a necessity but simultaneously a moral claim in its own right. They remind us of the fact that emotion is a scarce resource and that part of the capacity of news to present the world is its capacity to reserve the potential for emotion for some sufferers; to locate others outside our own community of belonging and to place their suffering beyond the remit of our action.

The management of visibility in 'extraordinary' satellite news

There are, however, news stories with a different management of visibility, though these are admittedly not the majority. These exceptional stories include aesthetically complex representations that invite our exclusive and sustained engagement with suffering. The key feature of extraordinary news is the shift from the news bulletin to the rolling footage, which involves the suspension of an ordinary sense of temporality and the introduction of what has been called 'a historic time': moments when a minute lasts a lifetime, or when a week seems to fly by in next to no time – the shock and disbelief at the moment of the second plane crash on the World Trade Centre. Let me briefly discuss the September 11 footage in the national context of the Danish National Television, before I move to the global media spectacle of the Iraq war, in the transnational context of BBC World.

I concentrate on three distinct sequences from the September 11 footage on Danish television: the eye-witness account, the update of events and the panorama of the Manhattan cityscape. The eye-witness account is a right-here-right-now exposition of events. We are together with the expert panel at the Copenhagen studio and, at the same time, connected via telephone link with the Danish Consul in New York. Satellite images show ambulances and people walking away from the scene of catastrophe, whereas the Consul gives a first-person account of chaos and mayhem in Manhattan. The aesthetics of this sequence is that of raw documentary. Camera and human voice combine in a complex act of witnessing that invites Danish spectators to experience the events as if they were there at the location and to share the intensity of emotion as if they were themselves present at the scene of the disaster. As a consequence of this intense proximity, moral agency is cast in the topic of empathy, inviting us to engage in real-time with the tragic fate of American people and to feel for their unexpected vulnerability.

The update of the morning of September 11 events was inserted into the flow of the footage at regular intervals during the rolling footage. The management of visibility takes us everywhere where action took place: New York with the WTC attacks; Washington DC with Pentagon burning; Georgia with Bush's first appeal to the American people. The manner in which these sequences are linked, particularly using Bush's speech to conclude the update, already situates the attacks, terrorism and the promise of retaliation in one meaningful narrative. In terms of aesthetic quality, this sequence differs from the previous one in that it is not about events-as-breaking-news but rather about already authoring September-11-as-history. The moral agency emerging from this manage-

ment of visibility is cast in the trope of denunciation: it focuses on the tragic loss of human lives, separates perpetrators and victims and evokes the collective demand for justice as the only possible response to this instance of suffering (we're going to hunt down those folks who committed that act).

The Manhattan panorama is an extended sequence, which provides us with a long shot of the cityscape in grey smoke, turning the scene of suffering into a phantasmagoric spectacle. The confrontation with the awe-provoking dimension of the imagery of suffering removes the urgency of the here-and-now and opens up a space of analytical temporality, where the events can be debated and reflected on (Boltanski, 1999: 121). Indeed, the moral agency of this sublime aesthetic is devoid of empathy or indignation and turns to tentative deliberations on the attacks: the voiceover consists of the expert panel explaining the causes and discussing the political implications of the event.

In sum, the September 11 satellite footage, characterized by a hectic alternation of aesthetic registers, complicates the moral agency of a specific national public, inviting the Danes to engage with this spectacle of suffering in multiple ways: to empathize, to denounce and to reflect on it as a human tragedy and as a political act. Importantly, the sufferers of September 11 are presented as thoroughly humanized and historical beings; as people who feel, reflect and act on their fate. They are, in short, people like 'us' who happen to live far away. We are united with them in denouncing the evil-doers (recall *Le Monde's* headline, 'We are all Americans', 12 September 2001) or in supporting them in alleviating their misfortune (the political legitimacy of the 'war on terror' was also, partly, due to extraordinary quality of world reporting on the September 11 attacks; Reynolds and Barnett, 2003: 85–101).

The shock and awe bombardments of Baghdad (BBC World, March–April 2003), one of the most visually arresting spectacles of warfare, were broadcast live on BBC World at approximately 19:00 CET and they were, subsequently, inserted as regular 'updates' in the channel's 24/7 live footage flow – the examples described here focusing on the updates' common patterns throughout their three-week broadcasting span (Chouliaraki, 2006b).

The point of view is from afar and above with a steady camera capturing Baghdad in its visual plenitude. Filmed at night, the sequences turn the screen into a dark surface animated by yellow explosions and green flashes at the sound of bombing fire. The visual effect is that of a digital game, endowing the spectacle of war with a fictional rather than a realist quality – a similar quality to the Gulf War visuals that made

Baudrillard (1994) famously conclude that the war never happened. The voiceover functions indexically to the visual, following action closely, and uses the first person perspective of the eye witness to draw attention to its detail. The extracts contain no visualization of human beings on the ground: no sufferers in their homes, in the streets or in hospitals. At the same time, the linguistic choices that verbalize the sufferer and the bomber deprive both these figures of any sense of humanness: the sufferer is mostly a collective entity ('city') or a non-living being ('compound') and the bomber is either diffused in the activity of airwar ('planes', 'missiles') or erased from the narrative. By cancelling the presence of the bomber and the sufferer, the footage presents the bombardment of Baghdad as a site of intense military action without agency.

This particular management of the visibility of suffering evokes a sublime aesthetic, which, as we saw, constitutes distant suffering less through emotions towards the sufferer and primarily through a distanced appreciation derived from the awe of the spectacle of warfare itself. Together with the embedded journalists' reports, the sublime register of the bombardments of Baghdad re-worked and perfected visual testimony as the dominant genre of war footage. The moral agency emerging from this first-person genre engages with the war in the mode of impartial contemplation, as a spectacle to watch rather than as a political act to take sides on. Despite the claim to objectivity that this process of sublimation conveniently issues, the BBC footage of the bombardments remained Western in its perspective, in so far as it consistently de-humanized the Iraqi population under attack in Baghdad and, in so doing, potentially blocked the moral agency of empathy towards the victims or of denunciation against the bombing of civilians or, indeed, against the whole project of the war in Iraq.

The imagination of communitarian publics

I have discussed a number of satellite news cases, 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary', in both national and international contexts. These differ substantially from one another. 'Ordinary' news is about stories that we hardly ever remember; 'extraordinary' news is about stories that are hard to forget. Despite radical differences in their management of the visibility of suffering, however, these stories share a key feature: they address their audiences, both national and international, as an already constituted community. This is a community that is united in blocking out emotions for 'irrelevant' sufferings or united in fully empathizing

with sufferers who are 'like us'. As a consequence, neither type of news can invite their audiences to engage in public action towards suffering that occurs beyond the West. Those who celebrate the creation of global communities through television viewing find justification in the empirical reality of 'extraordinary' news in a national context, such as September 11 footage, where the far away appears too close to us to ignore. Those concerned with indifference and compassion fatigue find partial justification in the empirical reality of 'ordinary' news, such as the Indian accident or the Bangladesh floods, where suffering never becomes humane enough to move us to a response. Neither of these classes of news provides us with a quality of connectivity that brings with it a responsibility towards suffering outside Western communities of belonging.

These positions represent a key aspect of the Eurocentric bias at the intersection between transnational and national satellite flows – a bias that comes to confirm the fragmentation claim I discussed earlier. Far from a 'globalization of content', those patterns of visibility suggest that what occurs in satellite broadcasting is a 'regionalization' of global content, whereby transnational media may be broadcasting globally but still 'remain within their own particular worlds' (Hafez, 2006: 71). They demonstrate, in particular, that, despite the increased visibility of spectacles of terror, all content is inevitably subject to a process of hierarchical particularization that defines whose suffering matters most for Western spectators:¹⁰ sufferers in North America are closer to us than those in east Asia.

The bias further confirms the marketization thesis that links satellite news content to transnational commercial interests. An illustrative example of this is the case of Iraq war reporting, which combined previous formats with new visual genres, evoking Western testimony and sensational spectacle as the primary definers of satellite war footage. Such features point to a mutation of war reporting from 'hard' to 'soft news' (Baum, 2005) – a mutation that serves both commercial interests and political agendas. Aestheticized warfare, as we saw, erases the humanity of Iraqi civilians whilst upholding journalistic objectivity, whereas embedded journalists appear to produce authentic reports from the battlefield but ultimately operate under the tight control of their military hosts.

Satellite news then produces communitarian publics. It does so through national satellite broadcasting, where it follows a localized transnational agenda that places distant suffering in a hierarchy of domestic relevance, but also through transnational broadcasting, where

news follows a regionalized transnational agenda that may report on distant suffering but remains unable to cultivate a culture of solidarity beyond the West.

Cosmopolitan publics

There are cases of satellite news, however, that can push civic sensibilities beyond the community of the West. The main feature of these cases of news is that they raise the demand for action on distant suffering here and now – hence their ‘emergency’ quality.¹¹ By incorporating the element of urgent action in its representation of suffering, emergency news re-configures, though not necessarily transcends, national and transnational contexts of satellite broadcasting. At the same time, in accommodating different degrees of urgency on suffering, emergency news keeps the ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ news distinction in place. Let me discuss two examples of emergency news: news broadcasts on the Myanmar (Burma) demonstrations in 2007, as a case of ‘ordinary’ news, and the rolling live footage of the tsunami emergency 2004–2005, as a case of ‘extraordinary’ news.

The management of visibility in ‘ordinary’ emergency news

The demonstrations by Buddhist monks in Myanmar in September 2007, which involved the violent crackdown on peaceful marches against the authoritarian military regime, became an emergency story in both transnational and national television contexts. Two symbolic elements contributed to the construction of this story as an emergency: (i) the citizen-generated imagery of the peaceful demonstrators vis-a-vis the brutal violence of the state army, which invoked both empathy for the suffering yet defiant monks and denunciation against the perpetrators of their suffering; and (ii) the intertextual chains of this imagery across types of media, from mobile phones to broadcasting and to internet blogs and websites, which not only expanded the public visibility of the events but further contextualized them in powerful discourses of resistance against the military junta.

Drawing on the aesthetics of raw documentary, the footage gained significant news value in recording the long lines of saffron-robe dressed monks marching quietly through army-populated city streets and in capturing on camera the killing of a Japanese journalist by riot police on September 27, in a demonstration where nine other people were also shot dead. Illegal in its country of origin, this amateur and erratic

footage acted as a transnational counter-narrative of power against official accounts of events – for example, when Danish National Television juxtaposed Burmese satellite footage from MRTV3 to scenes from the streets of Rangoon, throwing into global visibility what would have otherwise remained a local and obscure crisis. As Cooper put it, the pictures were often grainy and the video shaky, but in media terms, they were gold dust . . . thanks to them, we saw pictures of monks marching through the streets of Rangoon, and heard crackly phone calls with a chilling soundtrack of gun shots (2007: 6).

This documentary aesthetics of ‘clandestine testimony’, the grainy and shaky images or crackly telephone calls with their chilling soundtrack, is part of the strong appeal to authenticity that citizen-generated footage makes. Submitted to media networks by participant-observers in risky circumstances (Beckett, 2008), such footage renews the journalistic authority of first-person testimony – an authority, let us recall, highly disputed in Iraq war footage. It does so by displacing the journalist, potentially corrupted by state or private interest, with the citizen as the source of authentic information. In so far as the latter owns the basic technology to record, reporting on human suffering at the peril of oneself is no more the heroic privilege of the professional, but ordinary practice for everyone who happens to be in the scene of the action.¹²

The aesthetics of clandestine testimony simultaneously enacts and invites a particular type of moral agency that we have not encountered so far: the dual agency of ‘seeing and saying’ (Peters, 2001: 717–23). This form of agency recognizes, in the passive act of witnessing, the active obligation to speak out in the name of those whose capacity to respond to injustice is limited and ineffective – to speak, in other words, in the mode of denunciation. ‘Now with the internet and the whole world watching, it is a very different story’, says a Burmese activist in his comparison of the 1988 with the 2007 revolts, emphasizing the radically different conditions of visibility and moral agency that frame two similar events (BBC 24, 26 September 2007). The act of seeing is indeed able to shift to the act of saying, only because of the intense media activism of civil society organizations, which appropriated and re-contextualized the images of the monk’s demonstrations in a discourse of human rights and international solidarity – in Boltanski’s words, they managed ‘to address the spectator’s ability to consider himself as a speaker’ (1999: 40). By capitalizing on the United Nation’s democratization initiative in Myanmar, these civil society organizations managed to mobilize civic sensibilities across the world and to place Myanmar at the heart of a global and intense, even if short-lived, wave of activism.

The management of visibility in 'extraordinary' emergency news

The tsunami catastrophe, 2004, invokes a different quality of urgency, one that resembles the 'truly historical' temporality of the September 11 news. Given the magnitude and multi-dimensionality of the disaster, the rolling footage of this event involved a continuous alternation of locations, types of information and genres of reporting, making the tsunami one of the most complex journalistic ventures ever (Downman, 2005). Similar to the September 11, this news story also engaged Western spectators with a wide range of civic dispositions – feeling for and acting on the suffering of distant others. The result was an unprecedented amount of aid donations for the tsunami survivors – what Kofi Annan, then Secretary General of the United Nations, celebrated as 'a unique manifestation of global unity' (BBC World, 9 January 2005).

Another unique dimension of the footage, however, was the number of tourist video recordings that reached the websites of major news networks, making the tsunami a crucial turning point in the use of citizen-generated content by news networks (Gillmor, 2004). The first-person perspective of such visual material lent to the event an intense right-here-right-now quality and offered a powerful resource of identification for Western spectators. Whereas the Myanmar demonstrations footage capitalized on a 'clandestine' quality of witnessing unfamiliar to the Western world, the tsunami material capitalized on the 'all too familiar' quality of witness accounts by people 'like us'.

In a characteristic amateur recording, shown across a number of networks around the world, the tsunami wave is approaching while the British tourist filming it from his hotel balcony shows no awareness of its imminent catastrophic consequences. What we see and hear on video is stuff reminiscent of what families do on holidays: the rough quality of the image; the casual conversation; the carefree attitude; the fascination with the exotic. The close-to-home aura suddenly snaps, as the recording culminates in fear and awe at the powerful wave blow, throwing into relief the immense identification capacity of citizen footage on distant suffering. This aesthetic combination of the banal with the sublime created, in a way different to September 11, another sense of collective identification for Western spectators (Hellman and Riegert, 2006).

Whereas satellite television played a major role in disseminating citizen footage, networks like the BBC integrated such visual material into their websites, providing multimedia and Web-video and Web-log facilities. This complex media ecology managed to issue forth a massively empathetic moral agency, which sought to cope with overwhelming facts and emotions in the aftermath of the catastrophe and,

at the same time, engaged intensely in mediated forms of charity donation and aid relief coordination. This moral agency makes use of multi-media technology both to contribute to public action that makes a difference in the lives of distant sufferers and to participate in the therapeutic process of 'working through' the trauma of witnessing (Ellis, 2000).

The imagination of cosmopolitan publics

It is not that the cases of emergency news do not evoke the West as the imagined community where we belong to. They certainly do. It is rather that emergency news presents us with some demand for engagement that does not exclusively follow from the pre-commitment to implicit obligations; from the communitarian bond. We are neither the apathetic spectators of 'ordinary' news of distant suffering nor the over-engaged spectators of 'extraordinary' news on the suffering of the West. We are simply confronted with the question of suffering as a problem to be solved. We are invited to consider our commitment to it as a matter of our own judgment. Are the Myanmar demonstrations a cause worthy of our action? What can we do to help the orphans of Banda Aceh? In posing these questions for our own reflection, emergency news also opens up a space that pushes us, even momentarily, beyond the concerns of our communities of belonging; beyond the obligations of the communitarian bond (Boltanski, 1999: 35–8; Chouliaraki, 2006a: 188–9). But there is a difference between the two.

The 'extraordinary' emergency of the tsunami involves an intense management of visibility in transnational, multi-media environments, which became possible largely because of Western tourists' use of technology and their subsequent involvement in the dissemination of images and narratives; in Kofi Annan's words, it has to do with the fact that the whole world witnessed the tragedy. Importantly, however, the extraordinary quality of this suffering is also due to the fact that, among the hundreds of thousands who lost their lives, nine thousand were citizens of Western Europe on Christmas holidays: the tsunami emergency is proximal suffering at a distant location (Olsson and Riegert, 2005). There is a Eurocentric bias in this construction of moral agency, which ultimately throws into relief the very conditions of possibility for 'global unity': the care for the suffering of distant others expands beyond the West only in so far as the West is part of this suffering, both experiencing and witnessing it. The Reuters' agency observation that the tsunami 'attracted more media attention in the first

six weeks after it struck than the world's top 10 "forgotten" emergencies did over a whole year' (quoted in *The Guardian Media*, 11 March 2005), confirms the fact that the sensibilities it mobilized constitute a global 'risk community' (Beck, 2006) rather than a cosmopolitan public of empathy and solidarity.

The 'ordinary' emergency of the Myanmar demonstrations comes closer than any other example to what we might call cosmopolitan agency – a proposal to public action on distant suffering without reciprocity or guarantees. This is partly the consequence of a particular management of visibility, clandestine testimony, which used new media technologies to shed public light on a military regime suppressing popular protest. Crucially, however, cosmopolitan agency is also the consequence of the voices of transnational governance and civil rights groups that strategically employed these new media to campaign and coordinate protests across the world.¹³ Civil rights organizations, in this sense, enact the moral imperative of cosmopolitan citizenship in a dual sense: as a moral sentiment and as a political project (Kaldor, 2000). It is precisely the capacity of this news, embedded as it was in a complex ecology of mediated communication, to appeal to a civil ethics of witnessing, in the scenes of violence and death, and to make the claim to justice, in the calls for action to 'free Burma', that brought forth the moral agency of international solidarity. The management of visibility in this particular piece seems to suggest that the cosmopolitan alternative may be a rare exception (Hafez, 2006: 111–17), but it is certainly a possibility in the transnational milieu of satellite and interactive media.

The symbolic power of transnational visibility

There is ample evidence in the study of the symbolic power of satellite broadcasting to confirm the sceptical argument, which challenges the capacity of transnational media to expand the moral imagination of Western publics. On the one hand, we saw that the national and international reporting of 'ordinary' news tends towards regional fragmentation, by way of suppressing emotional engagement and minimizing moral agency towards distant suffering. At the same time, 'extraordinary' news provides resources for identification and action that selectively reproduce cross-border publics with exclusively Western affiliations; they do so, either by fully humanizing the distant sufferers of the West, as if they were 'us', or by de-humanizing non-Westerners, as if their pain or death were not relevant to our moral consciousness.

On the other hand, we saw that both 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' satellite news across contexts tend towards particular generic formats, the first-person documentary and the sublime spectacle, in order to render distant suffering a dramatic but emotionally acceptable media story.¹⁴ Both formats are important for the management of the visibility of suffering, because their aesthetic properties work to accommodate the spectators' emotions in the face of the spectacle of suffering: a spectacle that confronts us with the immediacy of human pain without offering options for action. These formats, however, become integral aspects of the marketization of satellite news, in so far as they ultimately come to participate in the narrative economy of infotainment: the first-person documentary, as we saw, tends to sensationalize the stories of suffering at the expense of complexity and explanation (eye witness accounts in the tsunami videos or the embedded journalists' reports), whereas the sublime introduces a contemplative distance that sanitizes the spectacle of suffering, maximizing its drama but keeping the spectators' emotional engagement with it at a minimum (Baghdad bombardment, Bangladesh floods).

If these features of satellite news throw into relief a description of the transnational media milieu as a 'sphere of global infotainment' (Thussu, 2007: 7–8), then the question is whether distant suffering on satellite television can be more than just a fleeting spectacle; whether, in line with the optimistic argument, it may also act as a substantial message about the frailty of the human condition – the only feature of the human condition that can make a claim to universality (Arendt, 1958). It is the category of emergency news that seems to bear the potential to expand existing imaginations of community in Western media. Whereas both 'extraordinary' and 'ordinary' emergencies articulate the necessity for action, it is in particular the category of 'ordinary' emergency news that puts forward the normative claim of cosmopolitanism, namely caring for the vulnerable other, without expectations for reciprocity or gratification.

Specifically, the symbolic features of 'ordinary' emergency news point to two key dimensions of the construction of a cosmopolitan disposition: (i) the renewal of the claim to mediated authenticity, grounded on an ethics of the citizen witness; and (ii) the embeddedness of this claim in discourses of international solidarity.

Even though the aesthetics of first-hand documentary is as present here as it was in previous examples, its symbolic environment and, therefore, its normative discourse is different. The immediacy and sensationalism of violence is now framed by a claim to clandestine testimony, by an awareness of the conditions of terror under which the

recordings reached a global audience – here, the ‘whole world is watching’ quote is not simply a statement of technological capacity but a moral claim inherent in the aesthetics of citizen journalism itself. At the same time, the call for action does not reside in the satellite spectacle of suffering, and its inherent impasse of inaction, but comes through mediated voices of civil society in their blogs and websites, which provide concrete options for local action: signing a petition, participating in a protest. Without resorting to an uncritical celebration of the role of such media in enabling action (see notes 11 and 12), it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the multiply-mediated dimension of practices of solidarity, online and offline, that ultimately manages the shift from watching to acting, from spectatorship to protest.

The civic disposition in ‘ordinary’ emergency news, then, should be seen as emerging in a broader multi-media environment of satellite and interactive technologies. Such an environment shifts the spectacle of suffering away from sensationalism and sublimation and uses it to articulate an urgent and authenticated claim to justice and a form of moral agency that transcends the West as its exclusive terrain of responsibility and action – enabling what Gilroy calls a ‘worldly, cosmopolitan activism’ (2006: 90). The value of this piece of news, even if it is only a fleeting occasion, lies precisely in its capacity to provide the symbolic resources for an imagination of the world that goes beyond the spectacles of global infotainment and presents the West with spectacles of human vulnerability, of the world as a small, fragile and finite place (Gilroy, 2004: 90) – and thereby issues forth a form of moral agency that can make a difference in the lives of those who need it.

Conclusion

This article empirically explores variations in satellite content on human suffering, taking as its point of departure the assumption that satellite broadcasting is a matter not only of territorial power entitlements over access of space and technology, but also of symbolic power and entitlements over claims and representations that mobilize the imagination of community in the global media age. It concludes that the symbolic power of transnational broadcasting consists primarily in its capacity to manage the visibility of suffering so as to reproduce the moral deficiencies of global inequality. However, under certain conditions of possibility, technological as well as symbolic, satellite news stories may be able to produce a sense of moral agency that transcends the West, thereby constituting cosmopolitan communities of emotion and action.

Notes

- 1 Conceptually, the focus on visibility is motivated by an Arendtian definition of the public sphere as a 'space of appearance' (1958), where image and aesthetic performance (rather than language and deliberation) are also seen as constitutive of civic dispositions. For similar conceptions, see Peters' distinction of mediated public space as a space of 'world disclosure' rather than 'information exchange' (1999: 33–62); Butler, for the formation of regimes of emotion and action in the mediated space of visibility (2004); Silverstone, for the ethical dispositions towards distant others shaped in the *mediapolis* (2006); and for historical accounts, see also Sontag (2003), Boltanski (1999: 1–19) and Chartier (1999: 20–37). Methodologically, the focus on visibility offers a coherent field of empirical study comprising the global flows of news images as they appear in transnational and national media networks (Machin, 2004: 316–66; Curran, 2005: 9).
- 2 For the link between imagination and (national and post-national) publics, see Anderson (1983), Alexander and Jakobs (1998: 28–32), Dayan (2001: 743–65) and Barnett (2003: 81–107). In political theory, see Linklater (1998: 77–100, 2006: 19–36) and Archibugi, 2001 (<http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/archibugi.htm>); see also Archibugi et al. (1998).
- 3 For the role of news agencies, such as Reuters or APTV, as key gate-keepers of transnational information flows, see Hafez (2007: 143–9); for the role of images and the management of visibility via global image banks, see Machin (2004: 316–36).
- 4 The embeddedness of media texts in the power relations of technology and society is a common assumption in a number of critical hermeneutic approaches, which ask the question of how media texts participate in the formation of media publics (Alexander and Jakobs, 1998: 28–32; Corner, 1999: 6–8; Dayan, 2001: 743–65; Seaton, 2005: 102–32; Silverstone, 2006: 43–55).
- 5 For the value of the case study approach in critical social research, see Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992); for the combination of contemporary research on public ethics, based on case studies, and the Aristotelian 'phronetic' approach in the study of ethics as situated practice, based on examples, see Flyvbjerg (2001: 110–28).
- 6 The case studies were selected on the basis of the 'maximum variation' principle (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 79–81) from an extended body of empirical material consisting of news stories collected between 2001 and 2007 from three different European countries: the UK, Greece and Denmark. Each case illustrates a particular position in the spectrum of variations in satellite broadcasting: from the absence of visibility at one BBC World news story (a case chosen deliberately to illustrate the ethical implications of this option), to 'ordinary' imageries of the scene of suffering in the news, to, finally, the global media spectacles of September 11, the Iraq war and the tsunami catastrophe.
- 7 For different versions of analysis on 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' satellite news, see Chouliaraki (2006a, 2006b).
- 8 Due to the low image quality of the original television footage, the picture used was obtained from Google Image on the 2004 Bangladesh floods; the iconography is identical to the National Greek Television footage.
- 9 For news selection principles see Tuchman (1972: 660–79), Merrill (1984: 104–30) and Cohen (2001: 173–7).

- 10 For a similar argument, see Braman and Sreberny (1996), Sreberny-Mohammadi et al. (1997), Chalaby (2005) and Hafez (2006).
- 11 For the term emergency, see Calhoun (2003: 531–53); for the link between emergency and solidarity, Calhoun (2001: 147–72; 2005).
- 12 For sceptical arguments regarding the unreliability of the citizen-journalist see Beckett (2008) and Cooper (2007); for the problematic relationship between professional and citizen journalism see Gillmor (2005); for the elitism inherent in the use of technology as a means of activism see Hafez (2006); for more general sceptical arguments towards a new media determinism, which tends to celebrate new technology as a catalyst for social change see Curran (2005) and Mansell (2002).
- 13 For discussion on the use of new media and the development of civil society activism, see Bryan et al. (1998: 1–17), Tambini (1999: 305–29), Dahlgren (2001: 64–88) and Fenton (2008: 37–57).
- 14 See Hafez (2006: 71), for the globalization of format vs localization of content argument; Thussu (2005: 131–56), for the globalization of formats and its impact on the journalistic culture of India; see also Moran (1998), for the negotiations of cultural identity produced through the globalization of generic formats.

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