

**The London School of Economics and Political
Science**

*Watching the Pain of Others: Audience Discourses of
Distant Suffering in Greece*

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis explores the moral implications of watching suffering on the media. In particular, it addresses the question of how audiences construct their moral agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others they witness through television news.

Theoretically, the thesis takes as a point of departure the concept of mediation as media practices. Based on an underlying assumption of moral agency as discursively constructed and articulated, I have drawn an analytical framework which employs the discursive practices of media witnessing and media remembering to explore the ways audiences talk about distant suffering and position themselves in relation to it. The thesis is empirically grounded in the context of Greece and based on focus group discussions with members of the Greek audience.

The empirical analysis indicates that viewers engage with distant suffering in a multiplicity of ways that are not exhausted in feelings of empathy or compassion and their diametric opposites of apathy and compassion fatigue. These forms of engagement are filtered through both the nature and extent of media reports of suffering, and discourses about power and politics entrenched within the national culture.

In this context, the analysis demonstrates that viewers position themselves as witnesses vis-à-vis news reports of distant suffering in four different modes, which are described as “affective”, “ecstatic”, “politicised” and “detached” witnessing. The exploration of the practice of media remembering illustrates the construction of a moral hierarchy in the way viewers remember distant suffering, where some events are constructed as banal and others become landmarks in audience memory. Finally, the viewers’ positioning as public actors with regard to media stories of human pain is shown to be, on the one hand, conditional upon the media staging of humanitarian appeals, and, on the other hand, embedded within and limited by frameworks of understanding civic participation in public life.

The thesis contributes to a growing body of literature on the mediation of distant suffering. It especially addresses the largely neglected empirical question of audience engagement with media stories of human pain, offering both empirical evidence and an analytical framework for the study of this engagement.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The 26th of December 2004 was marked by one of the biggest disasters in world history: an earthquake that occurred in the west coast of Sumatra in Indonesia became the cause of a gigantic tsunami, which hit a significant number of neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia, resulting in an unfathomable death toll of 250,000 victims and devastating entire areas. Media around the world reported the disaster as soon as it occurred in the form of breaking news followed by lengthy media coverage, which included footage from the wave as it erupted, live reporting from the affected areas and stories of human tragedies as they unfolded along with the increase in the counting of the victims. These marathon broadcasts were accompanied by humanitarian appeals made through national media around the world, raising unprecedented aid pledges for the affected populations. With the background of the Christmas celebrations in the Western world, and great numbers of tourists from Western countries holidaying in the area at the time and losing their lives in the disaster, the South Asian tsunami monopolised the interest and attention of the media and their audiences all around the world. This disaster and in particular the apparent impact of its reporting on its audiences was also the inspiration for the present thesis.

As luck had it, I spent the Christmas of 2004 in London and completely isolated from the media and people alike. The events of Boxing Day were completely unknown to me, until I arrived in Greece a couple of days later, on December 28th. As I was exchanging greetings with my family at the airport, I was confronted with an unintelligible question: "What do the British say about the

tsunami”? Tsunami was a word hitherto unbeknownst to me; as it turned out, it was the word in everyone’s mouth for quite some time after I first heard it. For a couple of days I had to attend endless discussions among friends and family about the events that had taken place and exchanges of human stories of loss and suffering that the media had reported. Apart from a few exclamations of surprise and awe, I was unable to take part in the conversations, let alone comprehend the full intensity and devastating power of the disaster. It was only until I saw the footage of the wave taking over entire areas and destroying buildings and natural environment alike, and I got more information about the events, that I managed to fully understand the specifics of this incredible disaster.

This personal experience was an opportunity to reflect on two issues: first, the extent to which an event that had taken place somewhere so remotely from the lifeworlds of the people in my hometown, in the north of Greece, became such a significant part of their lives for some time, to the degree that it virtually monopolised their everyday discussions; second, the degree to which I was excluded from these media-instigated and media-sustained discourses, due to my temporary isolation from the media for just a few days. It felt as if I had missed out on a mediated experience the whole world had taken part in; as if there was a mediated space of social life that I was excluded from because of my short lack of exposure to the media. And this space expanded well beyond the immediacy of the local. This was more than a theoretical reflection on the mediation of everyday life; it was an actual experience of the extent to which the domain of the everyday is infiltrated with the distant through the media in a

way that isolation from the media, however short in time, can actually entail isolation from social experience.

These reflections were gradually translated into the research concerns that led to the present thesis. The initial research question was inspired by the remarkable flow of discussions on the Tsunami and its victims and the infiltration of the local experience by the distant and the global that led me into thinking whether the media and television in particular could form the basis of a sense of belonging in a wider global community, a sense of *cosmopolitanism*, based on relations of commitment and care for the distant other, the suffering of whom audiences encounter on their media screens. As my interest and theoretical investigation of this question developed, the media-centrism of it became clearer, as well as the fact that a more accurate question would be what kind of relations with the distant these discourses revealed and whether these actually expressed any kind of commitment and care in the first place. It eventually became apparent that a more useful point to start was to explore discussions similar to the ones that inspired the research and through them the ways people position themselves in relation to media images of distant suffering and the faraway victims. What kinds of things do people say in relation to the suffering of distant others they encounter through the media? How is their sense of self articulated in these discourses and how do they position themselves with regard to the media images of distant victims of disasters and crises? How do they negotiate the moral implications of watching human suffering from afar? These became the broader research questions that led the design and conduct of this research project.

1.1. Conceptual assumptions

Ultimately, this is a thesis about the way viewers discursively construct their agency with regard to distant others whose suffering they become aware of through the media. It is, in particular, a study about the mediation of the moral agency of Greek audiences vis-à-vis distant suffering. Agency, as approached and explored here, entails the expression of affective involvement and judgement, as well as its manifestation through social action in response to distant suffering. It is articulated through the ways audiences think about and engage with the media that report this suffering. The concept of the moral is not adopted here within the normative constraints of an abstract deontology that would define how the viewer *ought to* feel and act vis-à-vis the suffering of others. It is employed on the premise that, in the case of distant suffering, whatever the viewer feels, says or does in relation to the media reports is always *oriented towards others*, the distant sufferers. In so far as the viewer's agency is expressed in relation to other people, it is of a moral significance (Silverstone, 2007). As such, the concept of the 'moral' here is a category to be empirically explored rather than normatively confirmed or defied.

The media are understood here as both technologies and symbolic forms. Although the thesis focuses on the discourses and practices of media users rather than specific media and the moments of consumption of media texts, the research is underlined by a primary interest in television, as will be evident by the use of the terms "viewers", "audiences" and "spectators" throughout the thesis. This privileged position of television is accounted for on two grounds. First, due to its inherent qualities, both technological and discursive, the

medium of television positions its viewers as “witnesses” of the events reported (Ellis, 2000), an experience instrumental to the construction of the spectator’s agency vis-à-vis distant suffering, as will be further explained in Chapter 2. Second, despite the intrusion of new media in everyday lives and the public discourses surrounding them, it is a premise of this thesis that television still holds a privileged position as an unquestioned part of the fabric of everyday life (Silverstone, 1994). This is even more so the case in Greece, which constitutes the context of the research, where with internet penetration amounting to hardly 40% of the total population and extremely low numbers of newspaper readership, television is the indisputably reigning medium in the country¹. This will also become evident in the empirical chapters of the thesis, where the discussions explored centre around television reports of distant suffering.

The focus on Greece as the research context for the study reflects the initial conceptualisation of the research topic, which was born as a response to the discourses of Greeks discussing the Tsunami. At the same time, Greece constitutes a context of study of how the Western spectator relates to the far away other, which is ultimately the question underlying the mediation of distant suffering. The assumption is that with regard to suffering there is a clear distinction between zones of safety and danger, with the Western world occupying the former (Chouliaraki, 2006: 10). The concomitant question that has preoccupied the relevant theoretical and empirical work is, therefore, how mediation overcomes – or recreates, for that matter – this distinction by

¹ Information obtained through the European Journalism Centre (http://www.ejc.net/media_landscape/article/greece/, page accessed in May 2011) and the Eurobarometer EB72.5 E-Communications Household Survey (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_335_fact_el_en.pdf, page accessed in May 2011)

bringing the distant closer at hand. Greece, constituting part of the safety zone, offers a context of the empirical exploration of such questions.

Greece is also, however, a context with its own national, cultural, and political specificities, which will become apparent in the empirical discussion of the thesis (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). These specificities formulate a unique political, social, and media context (Chapter 3, section 3.3.), which underlines the ways Greek audiences engage with public life overall, and the suffering of distant others in particular. As the empirical chapters will illustrate, this context challenges some of the assumptions made in the literature of distant suffering, which tends to assume a unified Western perspective on the ways spectators relate to trauma and humanitarian crises.

Focusing on the question of how the spectators of suffering position themselves in relation to it, the study explores audience discussions about distant suffering. Through a number of focus group discussions with Greek viewers I study the ways they discursively construct their agency with regard to the pain of distant others they witness through the media. The underlying assumption of the thesis and its methodological choices (discussed in detail in Chapter 3) is the discursive construction of the self, namely that individual identity and agency are socially constituted and articulated through discursive practices and social interaction (Billig, 1987; Edwards, 1997; Harré, 1998). Looking, therefore, into how people talk about others' misfortune, allows for the exploration of their agency vis-à-vis this suffering.

The open-ended discussions covered a number of media stories of suffering viewers were asked about but also brought up unprompted as relevant to the

issues addressed. There were three disasters participants in the groups were explicitly asked about as triggers for the initiation of the discussions. The first one is the Southeast Asian Tsunami of 2004, which has been the defining moment in terms of the inception of the thesis. The other two are Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake of 2005, which closely followed the Tsunami just a few months later. Hurricane Katrina hit – mainly – the area of New Orleans in Louisiana in the last days of August 2005. The severe floods claimed virtually 2,000 victims and devastated extensive areas rendering Katrina one of the deadliest and most catastrophic hurricanes in U.S. history and an event that was extensively covered by foreign media around the world for weeks. The coverage of Katrina was followed by media reports of another major disaster just a couple of months later, when an earthquake of 7.6 hit the Pakistan part of Kashmir on the 8th of October 2005. The death toll of the disaster amounted to virtually 80,000 victims and the following media reporting around the world resulted in remarkable international humanitarian response for the relief of the affected areas.

To be sure, the three disasters named here, the Southeast Asian Tsunami, hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake, were radically differed in nature, aftermath, recovery plans and mode of reporting². They also touched and involved audiences around the world in different ways and with different aims. The reasons behind the inclusion of the three disasters as triggers in the focus groups' topic guide lie, first, in the relative recent occurrence of the three

² For an overview of the Western media coverage of the three disasters, see CARMA, 2006; Franks, 2006; for the coverage of the Tsunami, see Robertson, 2010; for the coverage of hurricane Katrina see Tierney et al., 2006 and Sommers et al., 2006. For a discussion of the Tsunami and Hurricane Katrina as media rituals, see Cottle, 2009.

disasters with regard to the time the discussions were conducted. Being relatively recent in audience memory and also diverse, the three events were judged to be suitable in order to prop lively discussions among the participants. Furthermore, the inclusion of three events is based on the choice to discuss human suffering not in relation to isolated incidents but with regard to a media “landscape” of reports of suffering around the world. This landscape consists of different events entailing different aspects of human suffering and an alternating repertoire for their reporting. Furthermore, the thesis does not aim at being a “reception study” exploring how viewers “react”, “respond” or “consume” specific images of suffering. As Chapter 2 will further discuss, the interest here lies with how viewers “move about” and navigate themselves in a mediated environment where the vulnerability of the other is a frequent occurrence (Couldry, 2006; Silverstone, 2007). To that end, as it will become evident in the empirical chapters of the thesis, despite the choice of these three events as triggers, the conversations were much broader, including other disasters and instances of distant suffering participants in the focus groups found significant and relevant.

The choice to use natural disasters as triggers for the focus group discussions was a deliberate one, stemming from an attempt to avoid initiating the discussions with ideologically charged issues, which would claim the attention of the viewer on the basis of some pre-existing political or cultural bias, as might be the case with regard to suffering caused by political conflict and wars. To be sure, this distinction is overdetermined; catastrophes and crises are rarely self-contained events that can be neatly captured by clear-cut categorisations and

monolithically attributed to single causes (Cottle, 2009: 16)³. Furthermore, the expectation about the discussions was that they would expand beyond the events used as triggers in a way that distinctions between natural disasters and other events would be blurred. Starting the discussions with events that did not involve suffering related to an apparent political or partisan cause was considered to be appropriate in order to ensure the opening up of the discussions towards the directions the viewers themselves considered relevant.

As this thesis engages with the relationship between television audiences and the distant sufferers they encounter on their screens, it is embedded within and aims at enriching a significant and increasingly expanding body of work on the mediation of distant suffering, which has preoccupied media theorists, sociologists and philosophers alike. The management of the visibility of suffering and the possibility of bridging the moral distance between faraway victims and Western spectators corresponds to the urgent question of the ethical role of the media in a globalised and increasingly mediated world. This work has offered significant critical insights into the reproduction of symbolic inequalities and representational hierarchies through the media's mainstream practices (Shaw, 1996; Philo, 1993b; Philo and Berry, 2004; Butler, 2004; 2009; Chouliaraki, 2006), the characteristics of the media as a moral space and their potential role in the construction of a mediated cosmopolitan civic space (Bauman, 1993; Tester, 1994; 2001; Couldry, 2006; Silverstone, 2007). Despite the rich theoretical insights and continuous debate this work has given rise to,

³ Indeed, as Cottle aptly points out, disasters caused by natural phenomena are always implicated with structural failures, insofar as they "represent the failures to deal with hazards and are therefore contingent on the social structure and relations that mediate them and the available resources directed at their prevention, mitigation and response" (Cottle, 2009: 44).

however, what is strikingly surprising is the absence – a few notable exceptions aside, to be sure – of considerable amount of empirical work investigating and supporting the relevant theoretical arguments. In this context, the present thesis offers an empirical footing to a hitherto largely theoretical debate by focusing on the audiences of distant suffering and the ways they relate to the far away other. At the same time, it provides a further understanding of the process of mediation and its role in the articulation of viewers' agency, exploring the place of media representations of suffering in audience discourses. The following section will briefly map out the academic debate on distant suffering simultaneously contextualising the present study and underlining its contribution to the broader field.

1.2. Literature review

The reporting of distant suffering, disasters and trauma has long been on the agenda of media scholars, who approached the issue through different theoretical and empirical perspectives. Early media research recognised disasters and catastrophes as events that often appear on the news, as they readily conform to the journalistic criteria of newsworthiness (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Ostagaard, 1965; Gans, 1980). In their seminal research project on “the structure of foreign news”, Galtung and Ruge highlight the western bias in international news, where events concerning elite nations and people are more probable to become news items (Galtung and Ruge, 1965: 67), whereas “lower rank” countries mostly attract news coverage at times of crises and disasters and only when satisfying a threshold of criteria in order to be considered newsworthy (Galtung and Ruge, 1965: 84). The research evidence thus supports

the existence of hierarchies of place and life in the coverage of foreign news, as constructed through the choices and practices of Western journalists.

Such hierarchies in the coverage of international news, aptly encapsulated in the cynicism that “one dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth fifty Arabs, who are worth five hundred Africans” (Boyer, 1985), has since preoccupied academic debate and research (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1984; Stevenson and Gaddy, 1984; Adams, 1986, Chang et al., 1987; Singer et al., 1991). A common theme among these studies has been the observation that the severity of a disaster based on the number of victims can only marginally explain the extent of its coverage; organisational factors and social and cultural affinities play a significant role in determining the coverage a foreign disaster will attract (Adams, 1986). These studies on the ways professional practices of Western journalism affect the reporting of suffering and catastrophe around the world dovetail with accounts of the political economy of international news media, which highlight the global dominance of western news agencies and networks in the global media market (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen, 1998; Thussu, 2003, Schiller, 2005). This dominance, it is argued, is reflected on the agenda of the global news, as well as its form, which is increasingly homogenised according to Western models (Thussu, 2003).

More recently, Livingston and van Belle in their study of foreign news in US media have argued that technological advances have increased the possibility of the coverage of disasters from remote areas (Livingston and van Belle, 2005). This greater visibility of the distant, however, is not to be uncritically celebrated as a challenge to established hierarchies of reporting the world. A report on the

“Western Media Coverage of Humanitarian Disasters” published by CARMA has concluded that “there appears to be no link between the scale of a disaster and media interest in the story” (CARMA, 2006: 6). The report indicates that Hurricane Katrina, although claiming considerably fewer lives in comparison, received far greater attention than the Kashmir earthquake, the death toll of which approached the 80,000 victims. This discrepancy is attributed to the impression of “Western self-interests” on the coverage of different areas of the World (CARMA, 2006: 5).

A turning point in the debate about the reporting of distant suffering on the media has been the media coverage of the Ethiopian famine of the early 1980s (Philo, 1993b; Tester, 2001). Although the famine began in 1982, it was not until it became a story on the BBC television news by Michael Burke and Mohamed Amin in the summer of 1984 that it raised global public concern (Philo, 1993b). A succession of more news coverage and outburst of public response followed, culminating to the Live Aid concert, broadcast live to “80% of the total number of television sets in existence through the world” (Live Aid, 1985: 13). The media coverage of the Ethiopian famine thus exemplified the potential of connecting the Western spectator to people suffering in the other side of the world and initiating public action and solidarity across geographical borders on the basis of feelings of compassion and empathy⁴. It also expanded the relevant debate to concerns beyond the organisational and structural factors of the coverage of suffering to issues of content and form of the coverage. This agenda has been at the forefront of two relevant and interrelated debates, one explicitly

⁴ For a critical reading of Buerk’s documentary as sensationalistic and lacking in causal clarification of the famine, see Harrison and Palmer (1986).

focusing on the politics of representing suffering, especially in relation to humanitarian communication, the other more theoretically concerned with the social role of the media, and especially television, in engendering and sustaining moral relationships among spectators and sufferers.

The debate on the politics of representation has engaged with issues of both advocacy (the degree to which the distant sufferers are able to represent themselves) and stereotypical reporting (Shaw, 1996: 80). The focus of the discussion has mainly been on humanitarian campaigns and the use of photographic imagery in order to raise public awareness and attract donations. Underlining the choice of this imagery is the ethical dilemma posed by the need to use shocking images for impact, on the one hand, and the degrading of the dignity of the victims, on the other hand, in order to instigate feelings of empathy and compassion (Bethnall, 1993; Save the Children Fund, 1998; Lidchitt, 1999; Dogra, 2006; Barnett and Weiss, 2008; Kennedy, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2010a). These issues have further posed broader critical questions about the power relations between the West and the “rest” (Hall, 1992) reproduced through the stereotypical representation of the dependent South. Critical studies of the coverage of war and political conflicts around the world (Brooks et al., 2003; Lewis, 2004; Butler, 2004; 2009; Chouliaraki, 2005) have also exposed the construction of hierarchies of life in media reports, where the voices of non-Westerns are symbolically annihilated or “radically effaced” (Butler, 2004: 247).

These discussions are embedded within but do not exclusively exhaust the broader theoretical debate over the potential of the media, and especially

television, to establish relations of moral commitment between spectators and sufferers. The relevant arguments have been mainly polarised around what Chouliaraki has named the “pessimistic” and the “optimistic narrative”, each one underlined by opposing assumptions about the ethical role of the media and their role in forging relationships of commitment and solidarity between Western spectators and distant others (Chouliaraki, 2006: 23).

On the one hand, the pessimistic thesis generally argues that television as a technology and as a medium cannot bridge the physical and symbolic distance between the scene of suffering and its spectators. Within the premises of a postmodern approach to the mediation of suffering, the “reality” constructed by the television images has been described as nothing but a “hyperreality”, which effaces authentic experience (Baudrillard, 1983; 1995), whereas the strangers on the screen, lacking in physical presence, “appear solely as objects of enjoyment, no strings attached” (Bauman, 1993: 178). In the context of a viewing experience, where “the catastrophic and the banal are rendered homogeneous and consumed with equal commitment” (Robins, 1994: 475), television, the argument goes, fails to essentially commit its audiences to the distant world. Furthermore, the screen, being another part of the domestic environment where the viewer is situated, functions as a physical barrier that shields the spectator from the represented reality (Robins, 1996). The actual distance between the scene of suffering and its spectator is, thus, further accentuated at the symbolic level through the juxtaposition between the unfortunate others and the comfort and safety of the quotidian. Distance becomes fathomless because of “the unimaginability of this happening to you or

your loved one” (Cohen, 2001: 169). Underlying is the assumption of the “existential priority” of the space of immediate experience both as the horizon of experiences and concerns (Tomlinson, 1999: 178) and as the space of “ethics of care and responsibility” (Silverstone, 2002: 761).

A more popularised version of the pessimistic approach is expressed in the “compassion fatigue” thesis, which assumes that the continuous flow of images of human suffering leads to the viewers’ emotional overload to a point where suffering and pain become banal, impossible to instantiate any emotion and undermining any impulse for action (Moeller, 1999). Images of horror have become frequent in audience experience and therefore treated by viewers’ as “banal” due to their “over-familiarity” and “inevitability” (Tester, 1997: 39). Journalistic conventions and the rules of news production along with the time restraints of news bulletins allow only for a superficial presentation of news stories, including those of suffering in distant places. At the same time, it is argued, the need for audience attention favours sensationalism expressed in the mere horror of images of pain without the necessary explanations of the factors that resulted in this horrific outcome. “Television”, Moeller argues, “is essentially a headline service” (Moeller, 1999: 29). In this context, images of suffering become overly familiar, similar to one another, failing to engage the audience.

On the other hand, the “optimistic narrative” (Chouliaraki, 2006: 26) celebrates the integrative role of the media as introducing new forms of proximity and bridging the distance between the sufferers and their spectators. Living in a mediatized world, Thompson argues, has created new kinds of global

responsibilities towards distant others (Thompson, 1995: 258). The author names this process “the democratization of responsibility”, in the sense “that a concern for distant others becomes an increasing part of the daily lives of more and more individuals” (Thompson, 1995: 263).

At the same time, the worldwide broadcasting of news of suffering triggers “empathetic experiences”, which in their turn instigate “an upsurge of fellow feeling” (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 196) towards fellow spectators around the globe. Images of distant atrocities, disasters and suffering expand the viewers’ moral space beyond barriers of citizenship, religion, race and geography, promoting an “internationalisation of conscience” (Ignatieff, 1998: 57). In this optimistic approach the symbolic power of the media is celebrated as generating a new kind of cosmopolitan moral imaginary (Chouliaraki, 2008: 331), whereby cosmopolitanism is expressed as a form of “ethical glocalism”, in the sense of the expansion of the moral horizons of the locally situated lifeworld (Tomlinson, 1999: 196).

Both approaches have important limitations in their own right. There is an assumption of moral universalism in the optimistic narrative, assuming that empathy is an automatic response to images of human suffering, therefore taking for granted what should be the object of investigation. The pessimistic approach, on the other hand, presumes a distinction between the mediated and the real which seems obsolete. A common problem between the two opposing narratives, however, is that both approaches neglect the constructive character of mediation as “a transformative process in which the meaningfulness and value of things are constructed” (Silverstone, 2002: 761). They seem to assume

that meaning resides in the text or the medium itself and, as a consequence, spectators' responses are automatic outcomes of the media. There are two interrelated weaknesses stemming from such a premise. First, there is an assumption of a uniformity of media images of suffering on which spectators' responses depend, ignoring the heterogeneity of the media representations of suffering and the way these situate the viewer (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006). Second, what is largely neglected in the above arguments is an empirical examination of the ways audiences actually engage with reports of distant suffering (Tester, 1994: 83; Höijer, 2004: 513; Cottle, 2009: 133).

Empirically informed studies on the mediation of distant suffering have illustrated the role of media discourse, as technology and as text, in differently situating the viewers in a moral relationship to the distant victims by making different demands on their political and emotional sensibilities (Chouliaraki, 2006; Cottle and Rai, 2008; Joey, 2009). Chouliaraki, employing a semiotic analysis to study television news of distant suffering, what she calls "the analytics of mediation", identifies three different "regiments of pity" based on three different modes of reporting, namely "adventure", "emergency" and "ecstatic" news (Chouliaraki, 2006). These types of reporting make different moral claims to the spectator: adventure news only registers information without inviting emotion (Chouliaraki, 2006: 106), emergency news proposes "a frame of action to the spectators themselves" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 119) and ecstatic news constructs a relationship of identification between the viewer and the sufferer (Chouliaraki, 2006: 175).

The complexity of communicating distant news has been also illustrated by Cottle and Rai in their study of the ways “leading world news channels communicatively present the voices, views and values of contending interests and identities from around the world” (Cottle and Rai, 2008: 157). The authors identify a variety of communicative frames of reporting the world, which they analytically differentiate as “reporting”, “dominant”, “contest”, “contention”, “campaigning”, “exposé/investigative” and “reportage frame” (Cottle and Rai, 2008; Cottle, 2009). Within this typology, disasters and trauma can be covered by the media in a variety of ways, ranging from “basic description” within the “reporting frame” (Cottle, 2009: 139) to the “more in-depth, analytically elaborate and emotionally inflected package” of the reportage frame (Cottle, 2009: 140).

These studies elaborately confirm that the mediation of distant suffering and the moral positioning of the viewer is a much more complex and varied process than the theoretical arguments that frame the relevant debate seem to imply. The question of how the meanings constructed by the different news stories of suffering, however, are actually employed and elicit responses among their audiences largely remains untested. Much is speculated and assumed about the audience of suffering but very little is empirically known. Highlighting the significance of the audience, Ignatieff argues that “images of human suffering do not assert their own meaning; they can only instantiate a moral claim if those who watch understand themselves to be potentially under obligation to those they see” (Ignatieff, 1998: 11-12).

Noting this gap in the literature, Höijer has explored audience reactions to the “discourse of global compassion” constructed by the media through the reporting of humanitarian crises, wars and political conflicts and their focus on their innocent victims (Höijer, 2004). Her research, based on empirical material gathered through interviews and focus groups in Norway and Sweden, studies viewers’ reactions to media reports of war and violent news and has indicated that compassion is most often directed to particular images of suffering and varies in its forms and expressions. Höijer’s general conclusion describes the complexity of audience responses to suffering as a “a two-sided effect of global compassion on the one hand, and ignorance and compassion fatigue on the other” expressed through “different forms of compassion as well as different forms of indifference” (Höijer, 2004: 528).

Focusing on the audiences of humanitarian appeals, Seu also employed focus groups in a UK-based research to explore audience responses to NGO campaigns and news stories of human rights violations (Seu, 2003; 2010). Her analysis, focusing on the issue of audience (in)action and drawing upon the principles of psychology, psychoanalysis and rhetoric, illustrates the different ways people discursively distance themselves from the suffering of others and justify their unresponsiveness to human rights appeals.

In an interesting, albeit much broader in its scope and concerns study, the Glasgow Media Group as part of their research for the Department for International Development⁵ conducted extensive focus groups in order to

⁵ This study follows previous work of the group which had focused on the Rwandan refugee crisis in 1994 and the war in Zaire in 1996 exploring the major themes and explanations offered by the U.K. news coverage in response to the respective crises (Philo, 2002: 173-4).

“identify patterns of understanding and belief [about the Third World] and to trace the origins of these” in the media, the education system or peer groups (DFID, 2000: 174). Focusing mostly on the theme of political conflict in African countries, the group discussions indicate a link between inadequate explanation provided by the media and audience misinformation but they are mainly illustrative of how audiences bring their own frameworks of understanding in their interpretation of media texts and fill in the gaps with their assumptions about African people and “neo-colonial beliefs”, such as preconceptions of tribalism (Philo, 2002: 176) and the political inability of Africans (Philo, 2002: 185).

A more recent and specific in its focus study explored the television news coverage of September 11 and the attacks on Afghanistan that followed it, as well as the consumption of this coverage by transnational audiences in Britain (Michalski et al., 2002; Gillespie, 2006). The audience study, in which the majority of participants were multilingual, indicates a great degree of scepticism against mainstream media, as well as the use of rumours and alternative media as competing frames for analysing British and U.S. news (Michalski et al., 2002: 33).

Interesting in their own right, these research projects constitute exceptions in a field of study which has hitherto largely ignored audiences of mediated suffering. In this respect, the present thesis aims at enriching this stream of studies and expanding their research insights. At the same time, however, it aims at moving beyond a narrow focus on audience “reactions” to media reports and news of human suffering, either as merely affective responses to specific

news stories, as in Höijer's study (Höijer, 2004), or translated in terms of action at a distance and contribution to relief efforts (Seu, 2003; 2010). Both of these empirical interests, the thesis argues, constitute aspects of the mediation of viewers' agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others. However, this agency is not only constituted through what the viewer sees and how she or he feels in relation to suffering; it is also expressed through how viewers remember and tell stories about suffering witnessed through the media; it is further mediated by the audience beliefs about the media and the trust they attribute to them. The DFID study (2000) and the study of transnational audiences' response to September 11 (Michalski et al., 2002; Gillespie, 2006), more in accordance to the interests of this thesis, approach audiences as situated within an environment of different resources of knowledge about distant suffering, where the media constitute an indispensable but not the only or even the major part of this environment.

More recent theoretical work has problematised the nature of the audience not as mere "respondents" or "receivers" of media messages of distant suffering but as *participants* in a mediated global civic space, where the visibility of the vulnerability of distant others may form the basis of moral relationships and solidarity across geographical and cultural borders (Silverstone, 2007). In this context, the emotional and moral implications of watching the suffering of others has been theorised not only in relation to responses to particular media texts but as a generalised experience of the audience as *witnesses* rendered possible by mediated encounters with images of faraway others (Ellis, 2000; 2009; Frosh, 2006; 2011; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009b). In this context, the

focus moves from viewers' relationship to particular texts to the possibilities of *agency* opened up by the media as resources of knowledge about the distant other (Couldry, 2006).

Albeit largely theoretical, this body of work offers useful insights and conceptual tools for thinking about the construction of the moral agency of the viewer vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others. Drawing upon these theoretical tools, the present thesis aims at exploring how the audiences make use of the resources provided by the media in order to understand and get involved with the distant other but, at the same time, is interested in illustrating how these media resources are implicated in other discursive frameworks audiences employ to make sense of the suffering of others, as well as how media stories become embedded in broader public discourses.

1.3 Research questions

Taking as a point of departure an understanding of the media as constituting a space that manages the visibility of the suffering of distant others and thus provides the viewer with the resources for imagining and understanding the faraway sufferer, the thesis does not focus on how audiences *react to* or *read* news of distant suffering but rather asks:

In what ways do Greek audiences construct their moral agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others through processes of mediation?

This is the primary research question of the thesis which is based on the assumption that viewers as agents are not mere *receivers* of media texts – no matter how “creative”, “oppositional” or “active” this process of reception is –

but constitute *participants* in the mediation process (Silverstone, 2007: 107). For that reason, the present study moves beyond an exploration of the close relationship between media texts of distant suffering and their spectators. Empirically, this was achieved through the open discussion of different disasters and instances of human suffering as mentioned earlier and further discussed in Chapter 3. Theoretically, this study takes as a point of departure a conceptualisation of mediation as audience practices (Coulrdy, 2004; 2006) and argues for the exploration of viewer's agency through the concept of media practices (Chapter 2). Practices are flexibly understood here as both talk about the media and actions instigated by the media, ranging from the expression of compassion, to donations to relief appeals or even the switching off of the television set. This is, therefore, a study not about the "consumption" or "reception" of media representations of suffering but a study about the possibilities of agency this mediation renders possible for the spectator of suffering.

The viewer's agency is of central significance with regard to the mediation of distant suffering, as watching the pain of others bears moral implications for the spectator; it poses questions about what can be done to alleviate this pain and, more importantly, what can the viewer *do* to help the faraway victims. Watching suffering is, therefore, fundamentally different from any other audience experience, as it assumes, more often implicitly than explicitly, a moral obligation to act upon the suffering. In order to explore the construction of viewers' agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others, the study suggests an analytical framework which employs the concepts of witnessing (Ellis, 2000;

Peters, 2001; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009a) and remembering (Halbwachs, 1992; Edwards and Potter, 1992) as media practices. The secondary research questions that guided the analysis are, therefore, the following:

(a) How do viewers position themselves as witnesses of the suffering of others made visible through the media?

(b) How do audiences remember distant suffering?

(c) How do viewers describe themselves as actors in relation to the suffering of people they witness through the media?

Exploring how viewers position themselves as *witnesses* allows for the illustration of the moral implications audiences themselves attribute to their experience of watching the pain of faraway others and their emotional involvement with the scene of suffering and its victims (Chapter 4). The way the memories of these witnessed events are constructed through the practice of *media remembering* reflects the ways distant suffering becomes part of broader discursive frameworks beyond the moment of the audience viewing of the event and, therefore, part of the domain of the viewers' lifeworld (Chapter 5). These two practices, media witnessing and media remembering, through which the moral agency of the viewer is articulated, are implicated in the kinds of *actions* viewers take and consider available to them with regard to the suffering of distant others (Chapter 6).

The question of moral connectivity between spectator and distant sufferer ultimately pertains to the question of the mediation of cosmopolitanism as an audience disposition. Cosmopolitanism is understood here as a "concern" and

“willingness to engage with the Other” (Hannerz, 1990: 239) ⁶. In Beck’s word’s such a “cosmopolitan outlook” requires “dialogical imagination in everyday practice”, namely “situating and relativising one’s own form of life within other horizons of possibility” and seeing “oneself from the perspective of cultural others” (Beck, 2006: 89). The question of mediated cosmopolitanism problematises the role of media in constituting the resources for such a dialogical imagination as to allow for relationships of responsibility and commitment among distant others to emerge on the basis of a common humanity and the subsequent construction of a shared global space of responsibility and agency (Beck and Sznaider, 2006; Robertson, 2010). It also explores the conditions for the formation of a cosmopolitan public on the basis of expressions of solidarity and responsibility towards suffering distant others (Chouliaraki, 2006). These broader issues, to which the thesis empirically contributes, will be revisited in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

1.4. Thesis Chapter Plan

The thesis is presented in seven chapters of which this introductory chapter is the first one. **Chapter 2** will present the theoretical approach and analytical framework employed in the study. It argues that the moral agency of the viewer is articulated through the discursive practices of media witnessing and media remembering and begins by considering television as a space for the mediation of these practices, as it provides the resources for imagining and understanding

⁶ The concept of cosmopolitanism has been approached in a variety of ways and by different disciplines mostly to theorise normative ideals and practices and has been highly contested in most of these approaches (Pollock et al., 2000). For a discussion of the concept within the context of political theory, see Held, 2010; Archibugi, 2003. For philosophical conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism, see Nussbaum, 1996; Appiah, 2007. For a discussion of sociological cosmopolitanism, see Skrbis et al., 2004; Beck, 2006; Beck and Sznaider, 2006.

the distant other. However, due to the symbolic unevenness of this space and the hierarchies of pity established through the representational practices of reporting suffering, the mediation of the moral agency of the viewer is underlined by three fundamental tensions: between the viewer's involvement and detachment, hospitality and indifference towards the distant other, as well as complicity with the media and responsibility of the spectator.

Considering the viewer as an agent moving along these tensions takes as a point of departure an understanding of mediation as media practices, namely as what people *do* and *say* in relation to media texts reporting distant suffering (Couldry, 2004; 2006). The two audience practices of media witnessing and media remembering are discussed in the last sections of the chapter. The former encapsulates the particularities of the spectatorship of suffering, entailing moral and emotional claims to the sensibilities of the viewer, whereas the latter refers to the viewers' discursive reconstruction of the events witnessed. The two practices, themselves underlined by the three tensions in the formation of the moral self, illustrate the way viewers position themselves vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others and mediate the actions they might take with regard to this suffering.

The methodological choices and tools for the exploration of the research questions are explained in **Chapter 3**. The chapter begins with the justification of the methodology of focus groups for the exploration of the research questions, arguing that it offers insights into the construction of commonsense discourses through the interaction of discussion; it is through this interaction that discourses are articulated, negotiated and illustrated. The chapter goes on

to discuss the way the empirical research of the thesis was conducted, briefly contextualising it in relation to the Greek news media landscape. Finally, the way in which the focus group discussions are analysed, drawing upon the principles of discourse analysis, is described.

The empirical findings of this analysis are presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. The structure of the empirical discussion of the thesis reflects the distinction between the two media practices of witnessing and remembering and the question of action at-a-distance, as outlined in Chapter 2. Therefore, **Chapter 4** discusses the practice of media witnessing, **Chapter 5** the practice of media remembering, and, finally, **Chapter 6** focuses on the question of public action vis-à-vis distant suffering. As will be noted later, the three issues are intrinsically interlinked in audience discourses. However, this distinction is analytically employed here in order to allow for an in-depth exploration of the research questions.

In **Chapter 4** the practice of media witnessing is explored. The chapter is structured around a typology of four different modes of witnessing illustrated in the discussions: affective witnessing, ecstatic witnessing, politicised witnessing and detached witnessing. These four types are constructed through the different positions viewers' occupy along the tensions in the mediated construction of moral agency as described in Chapter 2. Overall, Chapter 4 illustrates the practice of media witnessing as multifaceted practice, contingent upon the different discursive positions viewers take vis-à-vis distant suffering, which in their turn are dependent upon the events reported, the way they are reported,

as well as cultural and political discourses that are into play within the context of viewers' everyday life.

Chapter 5 focuses on the practice of media remembering. It illustrates the discursive construction of viewers' memories as a double process of remembering and forgetting. It argues that there is an implicit moral hierarchy of remembering disasters. At the bottom end of this hierarchy are events that have faded from viewers' memory. A small category of events, the "ecstatic news" (Chouliaraki, 2006) of the South Asia Tsunami and September 11, are constructed as iconic in viewers' memories. At the top of the moral hierarchy is the earthquake that hit Turkey in 1999, which is discussed within the frames of a reflexive cosmopolitan outlook. Finally, the chapter explores how events remembered as global disasters can be theorised as global media events, forming the basis of a cosmopolitan collective memory. It argues that, on the one hand, by constructing events as global disasters viewers simultaneously position themselves as members of a global audience; on the other hand, national and local frameworks of memory enter the discussion of global events, "localising" their significance.

The way the viewers' agency is enacted in relation to the suffering of distant others is explored in **Chapter 6**. The chapter addresses the question of action at a distance and examines what kinds of agency audiences attribute to themselves as public actors vis-à-vis the suffering witnessed through the media. It is argued that this agency is indeed very limited. The kinds of action viewers take are of a limited variety and heavily dependent on appeals orchestrated by the media, mostly in the form of telethons. There are two argumentative strategies viewers

employ in justifying this limited agency: first, their mistrust of humanitarianism and especially the mediators of humanitarian efforts; second, their sense of powerlessness both to affect events that are geographically distant but mostly as public actors in the public stage, be it national or global.

The concluding **Chapter 7**, revisits the research question as to how the moral agency of the viewer is constructed vis-à-vis the news stories of distant suffering and relates it to the secondary questions as these were illustrated through the empirical discussion. The theoretical and empirical contributions of the study are addressed, both in terms of theories of mediation and the literature on distant suffering and cosmopolitanism, as well as the new directions towards which this thesis could move the relevant academic debate forward.

The findings of this thesis illustrate the articulation of the viewer's agency vis-à-vis the distant other as conditional both on the nature of the suffering and the way it is reported by the media and local and nationally-specific frameworks of understanding. As the local and the national are the primary arenas for public action, it is mostly them that also considerably affect – or, most often, limit – viewers' sense of agency in relation to distant others, irrespective of their engagement with the scene of suffering and their relationship to the media.

Chapter 2 Conceptualising the viewer as a moral agent

Confronted with disturbing images of distant suffering on their media screens, there are a number of things viewers might do. They often switch off the television set or change channels; they might sit down and watch filled with compassion or anger; they can also get motivated to contribute to relief efforts; they might keep discussing about what they saw with their peers or they might as well forget about the pain of others soon after having witnessed it. All these options for action are available and performed routinely by audience members; all these actions are also endowed with moral meaning, as watching suffering differs fundamentally from any other kind of audience experience: the image of the sufferer is not a mere spectacle to be consumed but also makes moral demands on the viewer to *do* something with the knowledge of this suffering.

The present chapter outlines the theoretical approach taken in this study to explore what viewers do with this knowledge and how processes of mediation are implicated in the way viewers construct their agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others. The main theoretical argument of the present thesis is that the agency of the audience with regard to media reports of suffering is articulated through the discursive practices of media witnessing and media remembering, in other words the way viewers witness and remember the suffering reported by the media. The following sections will unpack this premise and will gradually construct the framework for the design and conduct of the study.

I start by considering the role of the media as discursive resources for the construction of the viewers' sense of self in relation to the distant other. By

offering the basis for this relationship between viewer and sufferer, television also constitutes a moral space expanded at the level of the global. As this space, however, is characterised by biases and unevenness due to the material and symbolic characteristics of media institutions and forms, I argue that the mediation of the agency of the viewer towards distant sufferings is also a dynamic process, inevitably underlined by relevant tensions.

The second section of the chapter focuses on a more specific conceptualisation of the viewer as an agent within this mediated global space. Initially contextualising this project in the context of audience approaches in media studies, the discussion moves on to the development of a theoretical framework which is based on an understanding of mediation as practices and argues for the study of viewers' agency through an exploration of what people do and say about the media (Couldry 2004; 2006). Two such practices are suggested here for the study of audience agency vis-à-vis distant suffering, namely the practices of media witnessing and media remembering.

These two concepts are explored in the last section of this theoretical chapter. Media witnessing, as the discursive articulation of the viewer's position as a spectator of suffering, encapsulates the specificities and peculiarities, moral and affective, of watching actual human pain on the television screen. Media remembering, as the discursive reconstruction of stories of suffering witnessed through the media, throws light into how these stories are embedded over time in broader discursive frameworks and within the viewers' local lifeworlds. The two practices, media witnessing and media remembering, are suggested here as

a conceptual framework for the study of audience agency in relation to the distant sufferer.

2.1 The media as a moral space

The theoretical starting point of the thesis is the concept of mediation as the process of the production of meanings about human suffering reported on the media. As such mediation becomes a moral force, providing “a framework for the definition and conduct of our relationships to the other, and especially the distant other – the other who only appears to us within the media” (Silverstone, 2002: 762). I am using the word “moral” to refer to the distinction between right and wrong with regard to practices oriented towards other people (Appiah, 2008: 37; Tester, 1994: 83). In this understanding of the concept, morality is “practical”; “it is about what to do and what to feel; how to respond to our own and the world’s demands” (Appiah, 2008: 22). The media constitute a moral space in so far as they provide the resources for our relationship with the distant and otherwise invisible other. As they are the means through which their audience see and make sense of the distant sufferer, they also “invite (claim, constrain) an equivalent moral response” from the viewer (Silverstone, 2007: 7); as such, they constitute the resources and the space within which the moral agency of the viewer is constructed.

As briefly discussed in the introductory chapter, the field of the theoretical arguments on the moral role of the media has been polarised between the optimism of the closing of moral distance between spectators’ and sufferers, which concomitantly guarantees the engagement of the former in the predicament of the latter (Thompson, 1995; Tomlinson, 1999), and the

pessimism that regards mediated relationships as inherently amoral (Bauman, 1993; Robins, 1994; Tester, 1994). Both optimistic and pessimistic accounts, it was argued earlier, fail to take into account the processes of mediation underlying the relationship between spectators and unfortunates, and reflect on *how* these can both open up as well as close the moral distance between the viewer and the distant other. The next sections will illustrate the way mediation constructs a space for imagining and understanding the distant other, a space that is, however, underlined by tensions and disjunctures.

2.1.1 Mediation: a theoretical framework

The concept of mediation theoretically encapsulates the role of media in the production and circulation of meaning through technological, discursive and institutional practices. It emphasises the social place of the media not as merely technological infrastructures or symbolic texts and images, but rather as practices, which most importantly entail the practices of the producers of media content and their audiences, themselves embedded within specific social, cultural and economic contexts. Silverstone defines mediation as “a fundamentally dialectical notion, which requires us to address the process of communication as both institutionally and technologically driven and embedded” (Silverstone, 2005: 189). Mediation thus defined points towards a study of the media not as a strictly distinguished social institution, but as a complex field intrinsically interwoven with all influential institutions in society, which have themselves been transformed and reconstituted by the involvement of the media and communications (Livingstone, 2009: 2). Media are, therefore, both constituted and constitutive of the social world (Silverstone, 2007: 6);

modern media are meaningful because they are the product of human activity within specific socio-cultural contexts and, at the same time, “people understand the world and their position in it through the media” (Livingstone, 2009: 5).

In analytical terms, this poses difficulties in strictly separating objects of analysis and tracing origins or constructing explanations for mediated phenomena under study (Silverstone, 1999: 13). In its operationalisation within the context of different empirical and theoretical interests mediation has been applied in a variety of ways focusing on different stages and aspects of the mediation process⁷. This thesis approaches mediation to indicate “a shift away from a focus on specific media texts and productions, to a focus on the broader (reception) contexts within which media meanings come to be” (Thumim, 2007: 38). Here, the focus is on the different ways in which the media, and more specifically television, create an environment within which meanings about distant suffering are circulated (Silverstone, 1999) and the ways this environment is implicated within broader cultural and social contexts in which the viewer is situated (Martin-Barbero, 1993). Approaching media as environmental, emphasizes the way they have become “tightly and dialectically intertwined with the everyday” (Silverstone, 2007: 5), in a way that they constitute primary resources through which people understand the world and their place in it. At the same time, it points towards a conceptualization of the

⁷ Thumim (2007) offers a comprehensive typology of the different ways mediation has been employed: as “the role of technology in the making of meaning” (p. 38); as a focus on the reception context (ibid.); as the “close readings of the processes...which shape a representation that is produced and displayed in the media” (p. 39); and, finally, with a focus on who mediates, exploring the possibility of media for communication among the public without the intermediary role of professionals (p. 40).

media as a “space”, technologically created and symbolically reproduced, within which everyday life is lived (Couldry and McCarthy, 2003a).

What is of most significance here is that this mediated space is increasingly constituted by the distant, which has therefore become an irreducible part of the everyday (Thompson, 1995; Silverstone, 2007). In expanding experience beyond the confines of the local, the media frame and mediate social life in a way that is increasingly global in its reach and symbolism. In this context, “living in the world” takes a new meaning, as despite the fact that individuals are still contextually situated in time and space through the constraints of the body, the transformation of place through the intrusion of distance into locality, mainly due to the centrality of mediated experience, has changed “what ‘the world’ actually is” (Giddens, 1991: 187). Although the role of the media in extending and globalising social experience has been largely ignored by sociologists of globalisation (Rantanen, 2005: 12), media scholars have highlighted the primacy of the media in enhancing the reflexive aspect of globalisation as experienced in late modernity, namely the constitution of the globe as the frame for the beliefs of people and social groups (Albrow, 1996: 4). In this highly mediated and globalised context, agency is constructed through the selective incorporation, either consciously or unconsciously, of a variety of elements of mediated experience into everyday life (Giddens, 1991: 188; Stevenson, 1999: 56); in other words, people’s construction of their agency is highly mediated and oriented towards the distant in the same way as it is locally situated.

2.1.2 The media as a global moral space

Roger Silverstone coined the concept of the “mediapolis” to define “the mediated public space where contemporary political life increasingly finds its place, both at national and global levels, and where the materiality of the world is constructed through (principally) electronically communicated public speech and action” (Silverstone, 2007: 31). Despite the criticisms the concept attracted, mainly due to its heavily normative premises (Dayan, 2007), the mediapolis is a useful metaphor for thinking about the centrality of the media in the construction of individual and collective global imaginaries (Steger, 2008) and social relationships with distant others. In other words, it addresses the question of “the possibility of envisaging the media as enhancing a global cosmopolitan culture, one that might not require, indeed will not require, physical mobility, but mobility through the symbolic” (Silverstone, 2007: 12).

At the heart of the argument is the assumption that the media increasingly define what constitutes the social world. And since through the use of the media people are constantly envisaged with images of distant others, the social world consists of globally mediated social relations that transcend cultural and geographical borders (Silverstone, 2007: 4). As such, the mediapolis, according to Silverstone, constitutes the starting point for the creation of a global civic space providing the means for participation in public life that extends to the global and “works for the human condition” (Silverstone, 2007: 33).

In a similar argument, Couldry addresses the need for a discussion about what he names “media ethics” in academic literature and institutional practice. He avoids relating these ethics on specific deontological codes and absolute moral

norms but describes them as “an open-ended process of reflecting on how we need to act so that we live well, both individually and collectively” (Couldry, 2006: 102). This concern for a media ethics stems from the acknowledgment that “we live *with* media, *among* media” (Couldry, 2012: 180; emphasis in the original). For that reason, if we are to think about how life can be lived in a more democratic, just way in a shared world, we have to assess how media can contribute – or how they indeed might prohibit – this kind of life and create a framework for thinking about how we should act in relation to the media (Couldry, 2006: 109).

There are three main virtues of practices related to the media that Couldry recognises as central in a discussion about media ethics, namely accuracy, sincerity and care (Couldry, 2012: 190). The first two address issues of representation and intention mostly related to journalistic practice; the last one stems from the acknowledgement that “media sustain a space that puts us in view of each other” and highlights the fact that “without some degree of mutual recognition as moral agents requiring respect, the chances of us living together sustainably are small” (Couldry, 2012: 195). Questions of media ethics do not exclude audiences as active participants in the process of mediation and consumers of media technologies and texts. Audiences have themselves a sense of media ethics and their (re)evaluation of media as symbolic forms and institutions is central in the process for the construction of a broader media ethics (Couldry, 2006: 104).

These theoretical arguments about the constitution of a mediated global civic space echo in some ways Appadurai’s earlier arguments about media as a global

space. Appadurai employed the term “mediascapes” to refer both to the “distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information” and “the images of the world created by the media” (Appadurai, 1990: 9). Within these mediascapes, local experience is “dematerialised” (Appadurai, 2002: 33) as it is not anymore bound to locality but is intrinsically interwoven with imagination, in the sense of imagined spaces and possibilities of life. Appadurai describes the renewed role of imagination in social life as the most significant cultural dimension of globalisation (Appadurai, 1990; 1996). Due mainly to the increasing prominence of the media at a global scale, modern experience appears to be a “complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (Appadurai, 1990: 10). Although this is not original to modernity, it is only now that it has become part of the “quotidian mental work of ordinary people” entering “the logic of ordinary life” (Appadurai, 1996: 5), as well as “a property of collectives” and not merely “a faculty of the gifted individual” (Appadurai, 1996: 8). This social role of imagination is translated into new forms of social action and collectivities beyond national borders thus constituting a “collective tool for the transformation of the real” (Appadurai, 2002: 34).

Although Appadurai’s original argument is mostly based on works of fiction that “allow scripts for possible lives to be imbricated with the glamour of film stars and fantastic film plots” (Appadurai, 1996: 7), imagination has been more broadly theorised as an instrumental resource for a cosmopolitan engagement with the world (Delanty, 2006; Stevenson, 2003; Robertson, 2010). There are two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitan imagination.

Expanding Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" (Anderson, 1989), the media have been approached as the basis of an imagined community beyond the nation, one that includes the globe (Robbins, 1998; Urry, 2000). "Like nations", Robbins argues, "worlds too are imagined" (Robbins, 1998: 2). This kind of community beyond the nation, as theorised in such accounts, describes the "imagined" community of the Western spectators, constructed through the simultaneous consumption of and engagement with transnational media flows (Chouliaraki, 2006: 10). It is the consequence of imagining "ourselves sharing events, experiences and personalities with many others, with whom we constitute certain kinds of community" (Urry, 2000: 69). This kind of imagination, linking fellow spectators through a sense of common experience, is the imagination of the "communitarian public of the West" (Chouliaraki, 2008), which ultimately misses the moral dimension of connecting the viewer to the distant other, the human being that appears on the screen.

Conceptualised in moral terms, cosmopolitan imagination refers to imagining and understanding the perspective of the distant other (Boltanski, 1999; Arendt, 1994; Chouliaraki, 2006; Beck, 2006; Fine, 2007; Robertson, 2010). It is this kind of imagination, connecting the viewer with the other on the screen, ultimately forming the basis for a cosmopolitan public (Chouliaraki, 2006), that is of interest here. In this context, imagination becomes the moral force for the construction of the agency of the viewer and her relationship with the distant other. Through nourishing the imagination of their audiences, Boltanski argues, media also expand their moral space of care and responsibility by offering descriptions of the internal states of people spectators have no direct access to

(Boltanski, 1999: 51). This takes place by the introduction of symbolic forms and objects one can *think of* with the aim of enjoyment (without necessarily assuming that they exist in the real world) but also “can *think that* are possible in the real universe by putting oneself in the state of mind of someone who makes judgments concerning them” (Boltanski, 1999: 51). Media images of suffering have the potential of rendering human pain imaginable for viewers not only as a thought (*this kind of suffering might exist*) but as a reality experienced by others (*this suffering does exist and is being experienced by other people*). It is by way of the latter that the moral imagination of the spectator gets engaged with the suffering of the distant other. Imagination thus becomes the mediated resource for overcoming the distance separating the spectator from the sufferer (Boltanski, 1999: 38). It becomes the key to understanding the other and his or her predicament.

This kind of understanding requires from the viewer to distance herself from her own position and “see things in their proper perspective” (Arendt, 1994: 323), without bias and prejudice. Allowing for the consideration of the viewpoints of others and moving beyond moral dichotomies and pre-existing categories, understanding constitutes in its turn the basis for the formulation of judgment (Fine, 2008: 166). Following Fine’s reading of Arendt, judgment is understood here as the application of thinking to particular situations in the social world and especially the ability to tell right from wrong independently from pre-existing principles and norms (Fine, 2008: 164). With regard to distant suffering, the formulation of judgment entails “taking a stand” towards the suffering and evaluating it as a cause for commitment, irrespective of pre-

existing communities of belonging, national, religious or political (Boltanski, 1999: 31).

Arendt names this “reflective judgment” and links it to the application of “common sense” (Arendt, 1994: 318) and “enlarged mentality” (Arendt, 1968: 242; Fine, 2008: 167). The former describes the sharing of a common world with others; the latter is world-oriented and moving beyond communal belonging and identification “seeks to behold the world through the eyes of an abstracted generalised other” (Fine, 2008: 167). Reflective judgment as perspective-taking becomes constitutive of a cosmopolitan outlook (Beck, 2006: 7). The media constitute resources for judgment in so far as they provide the basis for imagining a world shared with distant others and the means for the formation of opinion on the social world beyond the confines of local experience (Silverstone, 2007: 44).

If the media are instrumental resources for the nourishment of the viewer’s imagination and the formation of judgment vis-à-vis the distant other, thus contributing to the formation of the viewer’s moral agency, they are at the same time complex and often biased and distorted resources. The media as a moral space is highly complicated and unevenly developed as “the politics of media images and economies are not separate from the politics of space” (Couldry and McCarthy, 2003b: 2). The mediated public space is characterised by inequalities and restrictions, which reflect pre-existing power relations, economic, political and symbolic (Silverstone 2007: 12). It is shaped and defined by the mainstream representational culture of western media, which in its turn reflects the commercial interests of multinational corporations, as well as political

agendas of a national or transnational character (Silverstone, 2007: 12). This is not necessarily the result of purposeful media distortion but rather a consequence of the inherent systemic constraints of media production, which reproduces the uneven spatial distribution in the sources on which it relies on (Couldry, 2000: 53; Wark, 1994: 8-9).

The previous chapter has discussed how the unevenness of the mediated global space is constructed through the Western bias in journalistic practices of reporting the world (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Gans, 1980; Adams, 1986) and the unequal distribution of media structures and resources (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen, 1998; Thussu, 2003, Schiller, 2005). At the symbolic level this is reflected on the biased focus of media representations on the predicament of some sufferers and the absence of others (Butler, 2004; 2009), as well as the construction of hierarchies of life adopted by western media in reporting suffering (Chouliaraki, 2006; 2008, Joye, 2009). These hierarchies define whose misfortune matters (Chouliaraki, 2006) and which lives are “grievable” (Butler, 2004; 2009). They position the viewer in different kinds of proximity and connectivity with the sufferers, constructing maximal distance with some while rendering others as worthy of engagement and commitment (Chouliaraki, 2006: 187). In this context, the symbolic power⁸ of the media in managing the visibility of distant suffering reproduces “the moral deficiencies of global inequality” (Chouliaraki, 2008: 329). As the image of the other is often distorted, partial or even absent in the global media space the engagement of the viewer with her suffering is also under question.

⁸ Symbolic power is understood here as the power of the media to construct reality (Couldry, 2000).

2.1.3 The nation as a moral space

The consideration of the media as a global moral space, where post-national solidarities emerge and are reinforced, implies a movement beyond the nation as a locus of solidarity and community. This is a significant and highly contested claim, considering the strength of the nation in ordering and framing everyday life (Billig, 1995). Indeed, approaches to cosmopolitanism as a form of post-national solidarity and constitution of moral relations across geographical borders have often been criticised for neglecting or even stigmatising the role of the national community as a form of social solidarity and organisation of civic life (Calhoun, 2007). Calhoun alerts against the rejection of nationalism as a “moral mistake” by recent theories of globalisation and cosmopolitanism by arguing that nationalism is still a positive source of meaning for the majority of people around the world, helping them “locate an experience of belonging in a world of global flows and fears” (Calhoun, 2003: 170). As such national identities and royalties are primary structures of social integration within which moral decisions are being made (Calhoun, 2007: 9).

Theories of the nation as a moral community have described the formation of moral obligations and feelings of solidarity as part of the collective affiliation of citizenship, itself embedded within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state system (Shapiro, 2001: 118). The argument is that “the community-like nature of the nation-state” and the sense of common belonging it promotes form the basis for social solidarity and a “feeling, or an illusion, of closeness and shared fate” (Tamir, 1993: 121). In this context, the political affiliations entailed in national citizenship are translated into moral obligations to fellow nationals.

Advocates of nationalism from a normative perspective argue that it is the “democratic forms of local community and civic participation” that form the basis of social moral order (Barber, 1996).

At the same time, approaches to nationalism as a discursive framework, namely as *“a particular way of seeing and interpreting the world, a frame of reference that helps us make sense of and structure the reality that surrounds us”* (Özkirimli, 2005: 30; see also Calhoun, 1997; 2007; Skey, 2011), highlight the moral order reproduced by nationalist frameworks of thinking. What nationalism as a discursive framework does first and foremost is categorising people, “both as a way of looking at the world as a whole and as a way of establishing group identity from within” (Calhoun, 2007: 39). This practice of categorisation simultaneously places moral primacy to one’s own national community, both in terms of claims to solidarity among the people belonging in the same nation and obligations to the nation as a whole (ibid.). In these terms, “the language of national or ethnic identity is indeed a language of morality. It is an encoded discourse about inclusion and exclusion” (Herzfeld, 1997: 43).

These discourses are also reproduced by national media, as part of their daily routine. A number of earlier studies have highlighted the role of media in relation to the emergence and reproduction of national discourses and identity and belonging. Besides Benedict Anderson’s seminal study on the formation of the “imagined community” of the nation on the basis of common media consumption of the novel and the press and the construction through this of a common space and past (Anderson, 1989), a number of authors have addressed the significance of the standardisation of language through printing for the rise

of nationalism (Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1964; Eisenstein, 1979), as well as the importance of modern media in the reproduction of national discourses in different national contexts (Martin-Barbero, 1988; 1993; Scannell, 1989). Despite the globalisation of mediascapes and the possibilities of the expansion of imagination beyond the local, as described in the previous section, the majority of media institutions and media content remain national in character, also assuming a national audience (Hafez, 2007). In this context, the media are still part of the banal practices of everyday life that reproduce the nation as a discourse and as framework for action (Madianou, 2007; Skey, 2011). In this role, more often than not, their representational practices are ethnocentric, reflecting national beliefs and stereotypes (Hafez, 2007) and, therefore, implicated in the symbolic hierarchies of life addressed in the previous section.

2.1.4 Tensions in the formation of the moral agency

Given the unevenness of the media as a moral space, due to their ethnocentric character, as well as broader technological and symbolic inequalities, the viewers' imagination and formation of judgment are subjugated to the biases and complexities this space entails. What I wish to argue here is that this complex character of the media space as resources of imagination and judgment for the social world is reflected on respective tensions on the formation of the moral agency of the viewer with regard to her relationship with the distant other. The symbolic hierarchies of life underlining the reporting of suffering invite different kinds of audience engagement and allow for different relations with the sufferers. In this context, the articulation of the moral agency of the

viewer becomes a complex process underlined by similar dynamics and tensions as the symbolic space of the media. These tensions concern the engagement of the viewers with the scene of suffering (their emotions and judgments about the events witnessed), their relationships with the distant sufferers (in terms of imagining and committing to their suffering) and their attitude towards the media (their trust and judgment about the media as adequate resources for understanding the other).

The three tensions are described here as (a) the tension between emotional involvement and rationalised detachment from the scene of suffering, (b) the tension between hospitality and apathy towards the distant other, and, finally, (c) the tension between audience responsibility and complicity with the media. These tensions appear on the juncture between the moral claims made on the viewers by the spectacle of suffering, on the one hand, and the distance between the viewer and the scene of suffering both geographical – which the process of mediation attempts to manage – and cultural and moral – which the unevenness of the media space often accentuates – on the other hand. We can understand these tensions as dialectics of the positions which the individual discursively articulates in relation to reports of distant suffering within the process of the mediated construction of their moral agency.

a. Emotional involvement vs. rationalised detachment

The first tension in the construction of the viewers' agency vis-à-vis the suffering of others describes their movement between the positions of emotional involvement and detachment from the scene of suffering. Emotional involvement is defined here as the viewer's affective immersion in the scene of

suffering, which is experienced not through “a bird’s eye view” of people’s misery but at a “deeper level”, the “level of the *heart*”, at which the spectator has to “return into himself, go inwards, and allow himself to *hear* what his *heart* tells him (Boltanski, 1999: 81; emphasis in the original). As such, emotional engagement is based on the faculty of the imagination, itself nourished by the medium’s audiovisual quality to render the viewer a virtual witness of human suffering. Boltanski identifies three positions of the spectator’s emotional involvement with the scene of suffering: indignant denunciation towards the prosecutors of the suffering (Boltanski, 1999: 57), tender-heartedness and sympathy with the unfortunate’s gratitude inspired by the intervention of a benefactor (Boltanski, 1999: 76) and horror in the face of the subliminal spectacle of suffering (Boltanski, 1999: 115). In her research, Höijer identifies two additional forms of audience affective responses, which she names “shame-filled compassion” and “powerlessness-filled compassion”, the former describing the discomfort of watching suffering and the latter the awareness of the limitations of the spectator’s possibilities to alleviate the suffering (Höijer, 2004: 523).

These last two sentiments, powerlessness and shame, however, can also form the basis for the viewer’s rationalised detachment from the scene of suffering (Seu, 2003). If the technology of the audiovisual can form imaginative links with faraway events, the actual physical distance from them still exists and can form the basis of viewers’ disengagement from them. The discomfort of watching other people suffer from the comfort of one’s home, accentuated by the inability to immediately act upon the suffering, can drive the viewer’s gaze away from

the suffering. This disengagement has been conceptualised and widely described in the relevant literature as “compassion fatigue” of the audiences (Moeller, 1999). However, what often happens, Cohen opposes, is “less compassion fatigue than compassion *avoidance*” (Cohen, 2001: 193). He attributes this to a general sociology of “denial and bystanding”, the essence of which is the “the active looking away, a sense of a situation so utterly hopeless and incomprehensible that we cannot bear to think about it” (Cohen, 2001: 194).

Combining emotional involvement with rational reflection, Chouliaraki identifies an ideal moral position for the spectator of suffering, which she describes as “reflexive identification (Chouliaraki, 2006: 46). This is defined as “the capacity of the spectators to, at once, act as if they were within the scene of suffering and as if they were speaking out their views on suffering in public” (Chouliaraki, 2006: 178). As such, the concept describes the viewers’ involvement both in terms of emotional engagement and identification, derived from the emotionally compelling nature of the singular suffering, as well as impartial deliberation and rational judgment, which impartially reflects of the historicity of the event (Chouliaraki, 2006: 179). If the former is necessary to attract audience attention, the latter is a precondition for public action. Reflexive identification, therefore, describes the moral experience of the self both as an emotional agent and a political actor.

However, reflexive identification is not a generalised form of moral experience for the viewer. More often than not, audience members move between the two positions of emotional immersion in the scene of suffering and rationalised

disengagement. Approaching emotional engagement and rationalised detachment as in constant tension in the expression of the viewer as a moral agent vis-à-vis the suffering of others allows for the exploration of the conditionality of these two positions on different moments of mediation and ultimately for addressing the conditions of detachment.

b. Hospitality vs. apathy

The second tension pertaining to the construction of the viewer's moral agency concerns the relationship between the viewer and the distant sufferer, as emerging within the unevenness of the mediated moral space. This relationship moves between the extremes of unconditional hospitality and apathy towards the sufferer. Derrida defines hospitality as a necessary moral imperative of the relationship with the foreigner (Derrida, 2000), in this case the image of the other in the media space. He distinguishes between conditional and unconditional hospitality, the former juridical and reciprocal, the latter an ethical imperative in itself (Derrida, 2005). Employing these ideas in the context of the media, Silverstone places the concept of hospitality in a salient position within his theoretical construct of the mediapolis, to refer to the moral imperative of openness of the media space to the images and voices of distant others, the obligation to welcome the stranger in the symbolic space of the media (Silverstone, 2007: 139). Such an obligation is already acknowledged by the media, which provide reports and images of the world on a daily basis; however, it remains, as it is, conditional on editorial controls and is limited in its tendency to marginalise voices in favour of others (Silverstone, 2007: 141). Within the context of his broader moral vision, Silverstone argues that it is

unconditional hospitality, unconstrained by self-interest and without an invitation, which is required in a cosmopolitan society (Silverstone, 2007: 142). According to the principle of unconditional hospitality, the viewer is to be open and willing to engage with the other, as well as accept the otherwise marginalised on their media screens.

Moving beyond such a normative argument, it is argued here that viewers move between hospitality and indifference towards the image of the other. Hospitality is defined here as the ability and willingness of the viewer first, to welcome the presence of the other on the screen and, second, to understand their predicament. Approached in these terms, hospitality is conceptually close to Beck's definition of 'cosmopolitan empathy' as the increased capacity and willingness to take the perspective of the other, to put oneself into the position of the suffering victims (Beck, 2006: 6).

However, and unlike Silverstone's moral vision, in empirical terms viewers' hospitality is always conditional. First and foremost, it is conditional on the media choices of the events to be reported, and, to a further extent, the way they are reported – on the media's framing role, both in the sense of the media's power to frame the social (Couldry, 2000), and their role in selecting and highlighting different facets of events and issues through rhetorical and stylistic choices (Capella and Jamieson, 1997; Entman, 2004). Within the uneven media space as well as the broader social, cultural and political space, themselves not always hospitable to stranger, the viewer is bound to assume different positions of hospitality. In a media space characterised by symbolic hierarchies of pity (Chouliaraki, 2006: 8), hospitality might be preferentially distributed to

different victims around the world. Therefore, the spectator's engagement with the distant other can vary from empathetic identification or compassion (Höijer, 2004) to the reproduction of cultural stereotypes (Philo, 2002; Philo and Berry, 2004) to hostility and de-humanisation (Butler, 2004; 2009).

c. Responsibility vs. Complicity with the Media

If the media are instrumental in their audiences' relationship with the outside world and the distant other, this is not only because for the majority of the viewers they are the only resource for understanding the world beyond the local; it is also due to the underlying belief in the media's ability, if not to accurately report the world, at least provide a realistic image of it (Silverstone, 1994; Couldry, 2000). This trust in the media's role in reporting the social world is an implicit aspect of the viewer's mediation of agency with regard to distant suffering: whether the image of the other on the screen will engage, move and motivate the viewer is dependent, among others, on whether the viewer takes this image for granted and believes in its representational accuracy. The third tension, therefore, in the mediation of the viewer's agency has to do with the question of trust in the media and is described here as the tension between complicity with and responsibility towards the media. The dimension this tension underlines is the extent to which viewers can critically reflect upon and move beyond mainstream media practices and their ideological implications.

The audience is complicit to media representational failures, according to Silverstone, when "failing to challenge media representations and failing to reflect on those of its aspects, which, by default, risk betraying the world" (Silverstone, 2007: 3). Complicity describes the viewers' failure to acknowledge

that although the media are indeed necessary sources for judgement and understanding of the world, they are by no means sufficient. The appeal and the risk of accepting them as such is that “complicity provides us with comfort, inoculates us against the challenges of the real and against taking responsibility for the other” (Silverstone, 2007: 130).

In similar terms, viewers are in a relation of collusion with the media, when the morally compelling nature of the suffering of others is denied by its audience on the assumption that “the appearance of the other in crisis on the screen is sufficient for us to believe that we are fully engaged with him or her in that crisis” (Silverstone, 2007: 131). Collusion, as described by Silverstone, implies that the suffering of others becomes part of the habitual and mundane everyday routine of media consumption (Tester, 1997: 30), which in its turn can lead to denial, in the sense of ignoring the morally compulsive nature of the suffering (Cohen, 2001).

The antipode of this collusive acceptance of media and their representational practices is audience suspicion of the reality of the representation or the urgency of the suffering, as presented on the screen. Such suspicion can be directed towards “the emotions, desires, and intentions which accompany representations of suffering” but also towards the very existence of the suffering and the unfortunates shown (Boltanski, 1999: 151). This uncertainty, Boltanski argues, is intensified by the increase in the quantity of spectacles of suffering that viewers are confronted with and which make moral claims on them (ibid.). In its turn, this culture of suspicion towards the media can again form the basis

of viewers' denial of the suffering, as a refusal to acknowledge the urgency or even the reality of the suffering (Cohen, 2001: 60-61).

Audience responsibility, in this context, describes the viewer's willingness and ability to move beyond the media text, questioning its representational practices and their concealed motivations, while trying to comprehend the specificities of the suffering reported. It requires critical engagement and the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of mainstream representational cultures to reveal the world in its entirety, as well as of the power inequalities of the media space, which tends to favour particular kinds of representations and voices (Silverstone, 2007: 127). As in the case of audience involvement and hospitality, viewers' critical engagement with the media is approached here as a question of degree rather than in absolute terms. Viewers move between complicity and collusion, on the one hand, and responsibility as scepticism towards the media, on the other hand.

So far, I have described the media as a space, which through the reporting of the distant and the global, enable the generation of discourses about the faraway other, nourishing the viewers' imagination and providing the resources for the formulation of judgement. It has been argued that due to the symbolic unevenness of the mediated space, where some victims are constructed as more worthy of pity than others, the appropriation of the media discursive resources by the viewers to understand and engage with the sufferer is characterised by three major tensions, which are implicated in the spectators' involvement with the scene of suffering, their relationship with the sufferer and their engagement

with the media reports. I will now turn into theorising the viewer as an agent moving within the media space, in its unevenness and tensions.

2.2 The viewer as a moral agent

The previous section discussed how the media constitute resources for the viewer's engagement with the distant sufferer by nourishing the imagination and providing the resources for judgment and understanding. They thus mediate the viewer's moral agency with regard to the suffering of distant others. Underlying assumption of this conceptualisation of the viewer as an agent in the present thesis is that agency is socially constituted and emerges through social interaction (Harré, 1998; Edwards, 1997; Billig, 2009). As such, agency is constructed and articulated through discursive practices.

Discourse is loosely understood here as "all forms of spoken interaction, formal and informal, and written texts of all kinds" (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 7). Discourse is integral in social and cultural practices, as practices are partly discursive but they are also themselves discursively represented (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999: 37). As part of social practices, discourse is both constitutive of and constituted by the social world; it is ideologically shaped by social relations and is built out of pre-existing semiotic resources, while at the same time its use is action-oriented, constructing accounts of the social world, reproducing or challenging social identities and social order (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Fairclough, 1992). When people use language in social interaction, they construct versions of the social world and their position in it (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

In this context, agency is constructed through discursive practices both in terms of performance (people use language to present themselves as agents) and reflection (people discursively represent what they do as part of what they do) (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). This process of self-constitution is embedded within specific cultural and historical contexts that allow and make meaningful particular kinds of interaction (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 89). In analytical terms, this suggests the study of agency through the exploration of discursive practices and discursive interaction, in other words the way “people tell stories about themselves and how they present themselves in talk” (Wetherell, 2001: 186).

Under these premises, the moral agency of the viewer is discursively constructed within a cultural and social context, of which the media constitute an integral part. As has been argued so far, the media provide the discursive resources for the relationship of the spectator with the suffering other, thus mediating the articulation of the moral agency of the viewer. This agency is not only enacted and performed through public action vis-à-vis the suffering, such as donations or petitions. It is also expressed through what the viewers say about the reports of suffering and the kinds of stories they associate with and tell about them. Under this light, the framework of analysing audience agency in this thesis suggests an exploration of the viewers’ agency in terms of how they *talk about* distant suffering. In specific it suggests a focus on what people say about their experience of watching suffering (*media witnessing*), and the way the construct their memories of these media stories (*media remembering*).

Approaching the viewer as an agent assumes his or her conceptualisation as a participant in the mediation process and the mediated global space and a focus on audience practices with regard to media texts. The following sections will illustrate this conceptualisation simultaneously contextualising it within broader approaches to audience theorisation and research.

2.2.1 Moral agency in late modernity

Approaching the viewer as a “discourse-user” (Burr, 1995: 90) draws attention to the discursive practices through which social actors reproduce and reorganise established discourses. At the same time, however, it poses questions about the conditions and constraints allowing for, defining and also limiting these practices. As Phillips and Jorgensen argue, people are “fundamentally socially shaped, and the possibilities we have for reshaping the structures are set by earlier structures” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 38).

Sociological theories of practice (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1979; 1984) have argued that human actors are in a relation of creative appropriation to the social world, while at the same time embedded and constrained within temporal and social contexts. Bourdieu employs the concept of habitus to describe the disposition a person has towards acting and feeling in specific ways, which is developed over time through the internalisation of relationships and social expectations, themselves embedded in the place one has in the social structure (Bourdieu, 1984; 1990). Agency is, therefore, guided to a great degree through common sense knowledge, “the field of doxa” (Bourdieu and Nice, 2006: 166) or “practical sense”, which grants “a central role to the notion of habit, understood

as an active and creative relation to the world” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 122).

Similarly, in his “stratification model” of agency, Giddens negates the opposition between agency and structure and approaches the two as mutually constitutive (Giddens, 1984). In his theory of structuration, agency is constituted through the use of knowledge and resources, themselves embedded within structural contexts; at the same time, agency is transformative of the structures within which it is embedded by making use of structurally formed knowledge in a creative way. His approach to the constitution of agency treats “the reflexive monitoring, rationalisation and motivation of action as embedded sets of processes” (Giddens, 1984: 3). Reflexivity is central concept in the formation of agency, as “the continuous monitoring of action which human beings display and expect others to display” (Giddens, 1984: 3). This monitoring takes place against the background of “tacitly employed mutual knowledge” (Giddens, 1979: 58). This describes agency not only as embedded in structures, temporally and spatially, but also as inherently social and collective.

Reflexivity has been a central concept in the way the constitution of the self has been addressed in the sociology of late modernity. (Giddens, 1991; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Thompson, 1995). One of the implications of modernity is the emergence of new ways of arranging and conducting social life, disembedded from traditional models (Beck, 1994: 14). These are characterised by the centrality of the individual agent in the conduct of social life. In the context of reflexive modernity, characterised by the collapse of traditional roles, continuous doubt of established expertise and proliferation of life-style choices,

the self, too, has to be reflexively made through a process of active intervention and transformation (Giddens, 1991: 3-5). "What to do? How to act? Who to be?". According to Giddens, "these are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity" (Giddens, 1991: 70), since they are no longer to be answered by an established social authority.

Questions of moral nature in this context become part of the self-reflective construction of the self. In his pessimistic account of American life, Lasch argues that excessive consumerism has eroded the moral basis of American society and has created a self-absorbed and narcissistic culture, where self-improvement, as an instrumental ethic of pleasure and hedonism, finds itself at the core of social life (Lasch, 1980). This infatuation with the self has resulted in insensitivity towards and exclusion of others, to the degree that "even the most intimate encounters become a form of mutual exploitation" (Lasch, 1980: 65).

In line with his broader theory of power and discourse, Foucault approaches morality as a form of subjection of social agents to institutional discourses (Foucault, 1997). He distinguishes between morality and ethics. The former describes the set of values and rules of action proposed to individuals by social institutions, especially through family socialisation and pedagogy, as a form of social control. The latter describes how the individual is to constitute herself as a moral subject of her own actions (Foucault, 1997: 263). Ethics, therefore, implies styling one's own existence through self-disciplining and self-fashioning (O'Leary, 2002: 4). For Foucault, "morality as obedience to a code of rules" is disappearing in late modernity; what corresponds to this "absence of morality" is "the search for an aesthetics of existence" (Foucault, in O'Leary, 2002: 1).

Contrary to Foucault, and the widely held assumption that there is no space for morality in modern liberal democracies due to individualism and public indifference, Sznaider argues that morality is central in the constitution of modern societies (Sznaider, 2001). For Sznaider, public compassion, as a “concern with the suffering of others, accompanied by the urge to help” is “part of the cultural system of modernity” (Sznaider, 2001: 119). This is the outcome of two parallel processes, integral of the modern era, namely democratisation and marketization (Sznaider, 2001: 21). If the former has given rise to the idea of civic equality by supporting the belief that others are similar to us, marketization and the expansion of capitalism have defined a universal field of others with whom contracts and exchanges can be made, thus extending the sphere of moral concern (Sznaider, 2001: 11). Sznaider equates the expression of compassion in liberal societies with modern humanitarianism, as a form of “universal benevolence” (Sznaider, 2001: 117).

What all approaches to the relationship between morality and modernity highlight is the diversification of choice and lack of clear-cut social roles and imperatives. However, this does not imply the alleviation of issues of morality from the horizons of social life; rather it implies their reallocation on individual responsibility (Bauman, 1993) and embeddedness in the self-reflective project of the construction of the individual (Giddens, 1991). The moral environment within which the self-construction takes place is also layered with options, sometimes compatible but often incommensurable (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 229). Although this seems to complicate the construction of the moral self, it does not imply that issues of morality have been displaced from social

experience, but it highlights the centrality of individual agency and responsibility. At the same time, the freedom of individual agency is not to be overstated; as already discussed above, agency is as socially constitutive as it is socially constituted. It is in relation of appropriation to the social world and (re)produces it through habitual practices and application of common sense knowledge. The moral agency of the viewer, therefore, in relation to media images of distant suffering is to be addressed as the active engagement of the viewer, which “through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement” (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 970), both reproduces and transforms these images and stories by incorporating them within – and thus also transforming – everyday experience.

2.2.2 Conceptualising the audience

The idea of the agency of the audience has been traditionally linked within media studies with the concept of the active audience. Taking as a point of departure Stuart Hall’s text on the “encoding/decoding” model, which argued that media texts can be read through different textual decodings or interpretations by different readers (Hall, [1973]1980), audience studies and, most dominantly, the reception paradigm have pointed out the ways that the interpretation of media messages is contingent on “cultural differences embedded within the structure of society” (Morley, 1992: 118), reflecting viewers’ “differential involvement and positioning in discourse formation” (Morley, 1980: 142). David Morley has thus theorised how the viewer’s ability to creatively make use of the media as resources is dependent on a set of other resources that are socially constituted and often defined by power relations and

institutions within society. As he observes, “the selection and manipulation of ‘available’ symbolic material, and what is available to which groups is a question of the socially structured distribution of differential cultural options and competencies” (Morley, 1992: 95).

Along similar lines, Livingstone, taking as a point of departure studies of social psychology, engages with the concept of the active viewer, describing her as the person who relates media stories to her own life, critiques conventions of media genres and employs her own knowledge to interpret and make sense of media narratives (Livingstone, 1998). In this context, the viewer is theorised “not only as a resource of knowledge nor simply as a representative of a particular demographic category, but also as a social actor in an interpersonal context” (Livingstone, 1998: 107). Although, however, the viewer as an agent in relation to the media cannot be completely passive, she can neither be utterly wilful, as “the activities of actual audiences lie somewhere in between these poles, and reflect the demands of the text as well as the orientation of the reader” (Livingstone, 1998: 174). This approach highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between the reader or audience member and the media text.

Often, however, audience agency in relation to the media has taken the form of celebratory accounts of the semiotic powers of the audience. This approach, most notably advocated in John Fiske’s argument on “semiotic democracy” (Fiske, 1987), has been criticised for neglecting and obscuring power relations among social groups or indeed the ideological power of media as institutional discourses (Livingstone, 1998: 195). In this context, the claim of the active audience has been described by political economists of the media as “pointless

populism” (Seaman, 1992: 308) or even “another version of the market system’s own claim that the ultimate power lies with the consumer” (Murdock, 1989: 229). Although valid for a number of studies, this criticism does not do justice to the totality of reception research, since the interpretative power of viewers has hardly been presented as equivalent to the symbolic and institutional power of the media to construct the texts that viewers interpret (Morley, 1992: 31).

Following a sociological approach, Couldry addresses audience agency in relation to media power through the concept of “media rituals”, which describes formalised actions organised around key media-related categories or patterns (Couldry, 2000; 2002). Through participation in these media-related rituals, audiences ultimately reproduce media power and, in particular, “the myth of the mediated centre”, namely the belief that there is a social centre in the real world and the media speaks for it (Couldry, 2002). Characteristic of these media practices, as implied by the term “ritualised” is their habitual character. Following Bourdieu, Couldry emphasises the social and political character of habitual practice. Individuals as agents are moving within “the ritual space of media” through patterns of everyday practices such as categorisation (Couldry, 2002: 13). This is not to say that viewers are utterly passive regarding the media; rather what is highlighted is the pervasive impact of media’s symbolic power, as it affects not only audience practices but also their “ability to *describe* the social itself” (Couldry, 2002: 39; emphasis in the original).

By adopting a focus on the audience, the present study attempts to explore media power, understood as the symbolic power of the media to “construct reality” (Couldry, 2000: 4), by studying the way media discourses are

(re)produced by audiences and are implicated in their understandings of the world. The construction of audience members as moral agents is conditional to institutional discourses and structural constraints, as well as media texts. The forms of this conditionality are of interest here. Thinking about the process of mediation as constituted at the intersection of these institutional and social discourses points to a second limitation of reception research, namely, the limited focus on the close relationship between media text and its audience.

Mediation as approached by reception theorists and researchers hardly goes beyond the moment of “reading” of media texts. In this context, audiences are seen as active participants in the mediation process in so far as they make different “readings” or interpretations of the media content. Two relevant challenges have been put forward in relation to this: first, the close moment of reading does little to illuminate the broader role of the media in people’s lives. Second, in an environment of the proliferation of media technologies and forms, where is the place of the audience? How is the latter to be conceived and empirically explored?

Articulating this second challenge, Ang has argued that “the world of actual audience is too polysemic and polymorphic to be completely articulated in a closed discursive structure” (Ang, 1990: 14). In a self-reflective turn, researchers have acknowledged the concept of the audience as a discursive formation intrinsically intertwined with relevant theoretical assumptions (Ang, 1990; 1996; Allor, 1996; Bennett, 1996; Allasuutari, 1999; Schrøeder et al., 2003).

As far as the first challenge of the limited scope and media-centrism of the reception paradigm is concerned, theory and research have attempted to contextualise audience experience within the framework of everyday life, reformulating and reconceptualising the relationship among technologies, texts and receivers (Silverstone, 1994; Bird, 2003). This acknowledgement has given rise to significant ethnographic work seeking “to understand audiences in the larger social, political and cultural formations in which they develop” (Gillespie, 2005: 152).

This ethnographic turn has also become apparent in the literature and research on news audiences and their engagement with public affairs (Bird, 2010). Although earlier research focused on the function of news as information and audience practices of learning and remembering (see, for example, Jensen, 1986; Graber, 1990), more recent studies have focused on the different ways news as a media form is incorporated into practices of everyday life (Bird, 2010; Madianou, 2008; 2010). This work has highlighted the fact that news are not being consumed by audiences as purely informational texts but also as a form of keeping up with the world (Couldry et al., 2007) or even as an attempt to make citizen voices heard in the public domain (Madianou, 2010). It has thus challenged traditionally held dichotomies “upon which the normative assumptions for the news audience are based, that is between public and private, rational and affective, disinterested and interested” (Madianou, 2005b: 99).

At the same time, a number of recent studies have disconnected the idea of the engaged citizen from the viewer of traditional news media and described the

creative, self-actualising ways civic engagement can be expressed through the media, and especially new media (Jenkins, 2006; Jones, 2006; Hartley, 2010; van Zoonen et al., 2010). These studies have also marked a reconceptualisation of the relationship between news, audiences and civic engagement. They have questioned the traditional opposition between audiences and publics, where the former are seen as passive consumers of media texts, and the latter express an orientation to collective action (Livingstone, 2005: 17). As audiences actively engage with the media and appropriate their messages in their everyday life, and publics are increasingly formed on the basis of audience exposure to issues reported in the media (Dayan, 2005: 57), the distinction between audiences and publics is harder to draw. In this context, the factors and forces that precede public engagement are equally important and the public includes a broad variety of experiences and forms of engagement that are both action and non-action oriented (Jones, 2006).

There are two points emerging from this critical discussion of traditional reception research that are of particular significance here. First is the limitation of the question addressed by early reception research, namely “how do audiences interpret particular texts”? This question is even more limited when considered with regard to media texts of distant suffering. The significance of audience response to images of human pain goes well beyond the question of mere “interpretation”: it is a question of moral significance, as argued before, as the experience of suffering, albeit virtual and mediated, bears moral claims on the viewer. It is this specificity of the audience experience of images of suffering that the traditional reception studies questions fail to capture.

Second, following recent approaches to news audiences and their engagement with public affairs, the questions on audience engagement with distant suffering in the present study move beyond the dichotomy between audience and public and the transition of the former to the latter through public action but rather aim to explore the range of ways, affective and rational, engaged and detached, audiences relate to the suffering of distant others. If theoretical arguments on the audience of suffering have so far questioned the possibility of a (cosmopolitan) public on the basis of action at a distance (Chouliaraki, 2006), the present study is also interested in the “context-dependent yet under-determined, plural and hybrid...practices and relationships that must and do shape people’s engagement with others, in private and in public” (Livingstone, 2005: 31). It is suggested here that these questions can be better addressed by adopting the concept of media practice (Couldry, 2004; 2006) and through a conceptualisation of mediation in terms of audience practices.

2.2.3 From audience reception to audience practices

Turning the focus from reception to practice expands the question of reception studies of how audiences interpret media texts to address what the audiences *do* with this interpretation and how the latter becomes meaningful and appropriated in the context of everyday discourses. The adoption of the concept of practice here aims at illustrating what viewers *do* and *say* with regard to the suffering of faraway others, in other words the ways their moral agency is mediated through reports of distant suffering.

Drawing upon sociological theories of practice (Schatzki, 1999; Swidler, 2001; Reckwitz, 2002), as well as the concept of mediation, Couldry argues for a new

paradigm within the field of media and communications, which will adopt as a starting theoretical point media-oriented practice “in all its looseness and openness” (Couldry, 2004: 119). By asking the simple question of what people are “*doing* in relation to media across a range of situations and contexts” (Couldry, 2004: 119), Couldry suggests that this approach could broaden our understanding of contemporary media culture as a whole. There are three important contributions of the incorporation of the concept of “practice” in media theory: first, it allows for the study of “media culture” in terms of specific practices and discourses, an interest concretised in specific questions (“what types of things do people do in relation to the media? And what types of things do people say in relation to media?”) (Couldry, 2004: 121); by keeping the definition of “practice” open and flexible it places audiences as actors in a media saturated world, where their experience of audiencing is not a discrete activity but is intertwined with other everyday practices (Couldry, 2006: 39); finally, practice theory does not neglect issues of power: if practices organise themselves through anchoring and categorisation, then the question of “how and for whom this anchoring works and with what consequences” does not fall out of the agenda (Couldry, 2004: 122).

Overall, addressing questions of media and mediation in terms of “practice” allows us to explore “how media are embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life” (Couldry, 2004: 129). Expanding the theoretical and empirical questions concerning audiences from media reception to media practices highlights the character of mediation as “not just a matter of what appears on the screen, but...actually constituted in the practices of those who

produce the sounds and images, the narratives and spectacles, as well as crucially, *those who receive them*" (Silverstone, 2007: 42; emphasis added).

The concept of practice, therefore, alludes to a conceptualization of audiences as participants in the mediated public space. Thinking about what audiences do with and in relation to the media raises questions about audience agency and its conditionality on media texts as resources. It is in this context that the concept of practice is a useful analytical tool for thinking about how audiences experience themselves as moral and emotional agents in relation to media stories of suffering and trauma. Furthermore, the concept of "audiencing" is useful in illustrating this aspect of audience experience as practice – rather than as mere interpretation or "reading" of media texts. It is through the practice of audiencing that the moral self is mediated in the context of the global mediated public space.

2.2.4 Audiencing and the articulation of moral agency

The concept of audiencing is used here first to illustrate the character of audience experience as practice and of audience members as agents, and, second, to argue that this modality of experience is not a distinct activity but is intrinsically embedded in the practices of the everyday (Abercrombie and Londhurst, 1998: 40) and therefore constitutive of the experience of the self. Abercrombie and Longhurst argue that "being a member of an audience is no longer an exceptional event, nor even an everyday event. Rather is constitutive of everyday life" (ibid.: 68-69).

The authors propose a new paradigm for thinking about audiences, which they name the “Spectacle/Performance” paradigm. This is to replace the “Incorporation/Resistance” paradigm, as they name the bulk of work originating and influenced by the encoding/decoding model, emphasising the focus of previous audience research on the question of whether audiences incorporate or resist to the ideological messages of media texts (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 15). Characteristic of this new paradigm is a redefinition of “what an audience *is* and what it *does*” (ibid., 1998: 39). This novel approach defines audiences as “diffused”. This modality of audience experience does not supersede previous ones, such as the direct or mass media audience but rather coexists with them, offering new ways of looking into the concept of the audience (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 39). The main characteristic of this kind of audience experience is that “everyone becomes an audience all the time” (ibid: 68). The diffused audience encapsulates the idea that the media are everywhere and therefore the audience is also everywhere. What this new kind of audience does is *perform* (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 40).

In a similar vein but in an argument that addresses more extensively questions of power resulting from the ubiquity of the media, Couldry suggests the concept of the “extended audience”, which “requires us to examine the whole spectrum of talk, action and thought that draws on media, or is oriented towards media” in a way that “can broaden our understanding of the relationship between media and media audiences as part of our understanding of contemporary media culture (Couldry, 2005: 196).

Such an approach to the audience and its experience is salient in this study for moving beyond definitions of viewers as “addressed” by the media texts and forms and their close readings of them to point to the broader implications of audience experience in a mediated world. It also highlights the audience as participants and agents in a mediated public space. The experience of being a member of an audience, of audiencing, is not ontologically different from other daily practices and is therefore implicated and embedded within the fabric of the everyday. As such, it is implicated in the experience of the self and the constitution of the moral and emotional agency of the audience.

2.3 Moral agency and public action

With regard to distant suffering, the moral agency of the audience has been more conspicuously questioned in terms of the actions of the viewers in response to media reports of crises and human pain. “In effect”, as Boltanski argues, “when confronted with suffering all moral demands converge on the single imperative of action” (Boltanski, 1999: xv). Two main kinds of such action at a distance are commonly observed, namely “paying and speaking” (Boltanski, 1999: 17; Chouliaraki, 2006: 201).

Paying, as money contributions in the relief efforts for the alleviation of the suffering is the most common – and often desirable, as far as humanitarian organisations are concerned – form of action at a distance (Tester, 2001: 123). The effectiveness of payment as a form of action, however, is dependent upon the existence of intermediary institutions that will both receive the donations and forward them to the unfortunates, as well as the appropriate use of the funds by such institutions (Boltanski, 1999: 17). As a form of action, paying has

the advantages of being easier to be seen as action and therefore making the spectator's investment easier to calculate (Boltanski, 1999: 18). On the other hand, money donations can be critically interpreted as an impersonal and easy way of spectators' ridding themselves of the guilt of watching other people's suffering, obscuring the lack of a real emotional link between viewer and sufferer, as well as the specificities and the singularity of the particular situation (Boltanski, 1999: 18; Tester, 2001: 130).

Speaking, on the other hand, in order to become effective in terms of reducing the suffering of the unfortunates has to take the form of public opinion engaging with political institutions (Boltanski, 1999: 18). This kind of effective speech assumes the element of publicness, in the sense that the spectators intent their speaking to be heard from others (Boltanski, 1999: 186; Chouliaraki, 2006: 45). It also presupposes a "reflexive ability" of the viewers to consider themselves as speakers (Boltanski, 1999: 40, Chouliaraki, 2006: 45). Examples of this kind of effective speech as a form of action at a distance are protests, demonstrations or the signing of petitions. Through these public expressions of political speech suffering is rendered an issue of public concern and a moral cause for the spectators. Speaking, however, as the public expression of moral indignation is often seen as a "safe, cheap and uncomplicated" form of public action (Cohen, 2001: 19).

Paul Frosh argues against the emphasis of the relevant literature on ostensible action as a measure for the moral impact of the media. He argues that approaches to the mediation of moral care have so far been largely limited by an "attentive fallacy", namely "the automatic assumption that moral sensibility has

a *necessary* basis in audience attentiveness, intimacy and involvement” (Frosh, 2011: 385; emphasis in the original). There is, however, an underlying moral dimension in television as a medium of connectivity that is neglected by this fault assumption, which is its function as the basis for a form of union and communion among distant others and an expression of human sociability (ibid.). Frosh uses the term “phatic morality” to describe the moral ground cultivated by television through “the long term, habitual, ambient forms of mediated connectivity rather than the attentive engagement of viewers with particular texts” (Frosh, 2011: 383).

In this context, the moral agency of the viewer is constructed through the habitual familiarisation with the image of the other, “cumulatively across many particular news stories and programmes, in a background framework of televisual non-receprocity, civil inattention and the generalisation of individuals”, which ultimately “produces a *serial aggregate* of the human figure as a shared ‘condition’” (Frosh, 2011: 392). In this account the viewer of distant suffering is not the “engaged spectator” but rather the “diffused audience” (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), whose moral agency is not tied to particular stories but grounded in the social connectivity produced by the media on a constant basis as part of the experience of everyday life (Frosh, 2011: 386).

This discussion is useful in moving beyond the conceptualisation of the moral agency of the viewer as expressed through actions (of giving and speaking) directed to specific causes and in relation to specific events. It is also significant in highlighting that mediation as a low-intensity kind of connectivity with distant others is morally significant in naturalising the presence of distant

others and maintaining a collective civic mood, which constitute the prerequisite background for the performance of moral action at a distance.

If the viewer's moral agency can be measured in terms of responsiveness to the media stories of suffering as "paying" or "speaking", the failure to respond in these ways has been theorised, as discussed earlier, as an indication of "compassion fatigue" (Moeller, 1999) or "moral apathy" (Seu, 2010). Drawing upon the premise of agency as discursively constructed, the present thesis suggests an analytical framework, which focuses on the ways viewers illustrate their own moral agency through their talk about mediated suffering, namely their descriptions about their experience of watching suffering (media witnessing) and the ways they construct stories of suffering witnessed through the media (media remembering). This focus illustrates the different articulations of agency rendered possible through processes of mediation, thus addressing the grey area of the link between watching suffering and acting upon it, neglecting or forgetting it.

In this context, *media witnessing* refers here to the ways people describe themselves as virtual witnesses of distant suffering through the media, with the emotional and moral implications this might imply, thus encapsulating the specificities of the experience of watching human pain. In talking about the media stories of human pain, audiences also give accounts of their media memories of the events. Through the practice of *media remembering*, audiences reconstruct narratives of the events, and through that their sense of agency in relation to them. What is being explored through the study of media witnessing and media remembering goes beyond the different ways audiences interpret

specific news of human vulnerability; it illustrates how discourses of distant suffering are constructed and embedded within the context of the everyday. The theoretical premises for the exploration of these two audience practices will be the subject of the rest of the chapter.

2.4 Media Witnessing

Media witnessing is employed here to refer to the distinct modality of audience experience – or audiencing –, which is particularly tied to media reports and images of distant suffering (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009b). Two are the dominant characteristics of this experience: first, its affective nature, due to its close 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. As such, media witnessing as audience practice is central to the construction of the viewer as a moral and emotional agent.

The specificities of media witnessing need to be viewed in relation to the context of the globalised media environment as discussed above. Sontag defines witnessing as “being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country” through the “cumulative offering by more than a century and half’s worth of those specialised tourists known as journalists” (Sontag, 2003: 18). Electronic media have expanded people’s perception way beyond their immediate experience by confronting them with events, peoples, and places otherwise distant and foreign (Ellis, 2000: 1). The infiltration of everyday life with this kind of distant representations has reformed people’s perception of the world by placing them in the position of witnesses. Although, according to Ellis, witnessing has evolved throughout the twentieth century through the different

electronic media, it is in television that the specific modality of experience is notably exemplified (Ellis, 2000: 10). The overabundance of detail found in the audiovisual, the details of the image and the “atmosphere” of the sound instigate “a pervasive sense of liveness and intimacy” (Ellis, 2000: 12). It is this mediated sense of intimacy that forms the basis of the emotional implications of witnessing. Watching suffering, seeing people in pain, even if only on the screen, is emotionally compelling due to the knowledge that this suffering is real, is actually happening, a sense enhanced by the “real-effect” of the audiovisual.

If the audiovisual mediation of suffering forms the basis for the emotional character of witnessing, its liveness, the fact that it takes place simultaneously to the act of viewing, is what renders media witnessing morally compelling. Simultaneous suffering poses questions about what can be done to alleviate it, urging its viewers to take a moral stance vis-à-vis what they see on the screen and act in the present (Peters, 2001: 721).

Media witnessing is employed in the context of the present study as an analytical concept to explore the ways audiences position and experience themselves as moral agents in relation to mediated suffering, which confronts them on their media screens, implicitly and explicitly making claims to their emotional, moral and charitable sensibilities. Media witnessing in this sense is a second or even third-order kind of witnessing. Journalists, by being there, are the actual witnesses the testimony of whom the audiences come to receive; journalists can also be themselves receivers of the witnessing testimony of the actual victims, the primary witnesses of the disaster and trauma. The witnessing of the audience in this chain of events is restricted to attending to the

testimonies of the journalists, their witnessing texts. Although the focus here is on the audiences as witnesses, the complex relationship between primary and secondary witnessing is not to be dismissed or ignored but is implicated in the complexity of media witnessing as an analytical category.

Witnessing is by definition a semantically challenging concept. It can refer to an actor (who bears witness), an act (bearing witness), a statement or text (witnessing testimony) or the “inward experience that authorises the statement (the witnessing of an event)” (Peters, 2001: 709). In this sense, as Peters puts it, it is intelligible to claim that “the witness (speech-act) of the witness (person) was witnessed (by an audience)” (Peters, 2001: 709). Approaching audiences as witnesses involves tensions and complexities that go beyond the concept of “viewers” or “spectators”. Media witnessing collapses three different practices: audiences become witnesses themselves, vicariously experiencing events that happen elsewhere; they become witnesses of the witnessing victims, the people that give testimony of their suffering on the screen; and, finally, they are witnesses of the witnessing texts, those of the journalists that bear witness to the events taking place. Media witnessing thus conflates but also presupposes this three-fold distinction, highlighted by Frosh and Pinchevski: “between witnesses *in* the media, witnessing *by* the media, and witnessing *through* the media” (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009b: 1). Far from being a mere semantic game, this distinction is central to the complexity and weight of the concept of media witnessing and analytically useful for the exploration of how audiences experience the world through the position of a witness.

Becoming themselves witnesses *through* the media, viewers become confronted with a kind of “painful knowledge”, since it is accompanied by “an aching sense that something must be done” for the alleviation of the suffering witnessed (Ellis, 2000: 11). Knowing about the pain of others implies, in cultural and social terms, complicity in their suffering and the moral obligation to act for its alleviation. Witnessing, thus, goes beyond the act of “seeing” or “watching”; it implies a kind of participation, albeit vicarious and fleeting, to the events presented on the screen (Rentschler, 2004: 298; Peters, 2001: 708). At the same time, as discussed earlier, the geographical distance separating the viewer from the unfortunates undermines the moral impulse to act upon the suffering. The combination of the sense of involvement in the events that knowledge of them provides with the sense of powerlessness that distance perpetuates finds itself at the heart of media witnessing. It is also underlined by the tension between emotional engagement and rationalised detachment, as discussed in section 2.1.3. (a). Exploring the experience of witnessing *through* the media, therefore, poses the question of how viewers position themselves vis-à-vis images of distant suffering and pain, compelling in their sensational visibility but remote in their mediated representation.

As witnesses of the witnesses *in* the media, viewers make imaginative connections with the distant victims whose suffering they watch on their screens. For Ellis this kind of imaginative connections seems to reside in the management of distance through the audiovisual illusions of “thereness” and “liveness” (Ellis, 2001: 1). Silverstone rightfully reminds us that mediated distance is a manageable category dependent on the media representational

practices, which “continually swings between incorporation (that is denial of both difference and distance) or annihilation (that is denial of both common humanity and distance)” (Silverstone, 2002: 770)⁹. Audiences are on a daily basis confronted with distant events that are either framed into recognisable and familiar patterns thus denied of their specificity and “otherness” or deprived of an explanatory framework and therefore exaggerated in their difference and stereotyped as incomprehensible and foreign (Silverstone, 2007: 48). In this context, distance also becomes a moral category, defining the limits and ways of the viewer’s relationship with the distant other. As such it is also implicated in the tension between hospitality and indifference, which underlines the mediation of distant suffering, as suggested in section 2.1.3.(b). There is a degree of required proximity for the nourishment of the imagination that will allow the adoption of the position of the other in a relationship of hospitality and commitment (Dayan, 2007: 117).

Finally, the relationship of viewers as witnesses to witnessing *by* the media pertains to the tension between viewers’ complicity with and responsibility towards the media, as presented in section 2.1.3.(c). Witnessing as a practice entails the transformation of experience to discourse, of private sensation to public words, and as such, Peters argues, is vulnerable to the inescapable losses of such a process and marked by an inherent “veracity gap” (Peters, 2001: 711). The veracity gap becomes even more prominent in the case of broadcasting, where distance accentuates the distrust and doubt in the mediation of

⁹ In line with his broader normative vision, Silverstone uses the concept of “proper distance” to signify the “more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated inter-relationships” (Silverstone, 2007: 47), which sustains both difference with the other and recognizes common humanity (Silverstone, 2003).

experience among people who have no physical proximity or first-hand knowledge of it. This observation points to the complexities of the relationship of the audiences with the “witnessing texts”, posing questions of attributed authenticity and trust, central to the nature of media witnessing as a “cultural achievement” (Frosh, 2006: 270). Such questions are always entangled with the viewer’s experience, not necessarily as readily formulated ontological arguments of disbelief (*Did this really happen?*) but as complexities in the relationship with the media text itself (*Is the image representative of everything that happened? What is left out?*). They are ultimately questions addressing the evaluative assumptions about the media that underline viewers’ positioning towards the suffering witnessed and their trust in media representational practices and intentions.

Media witnessing as an analytical category, therefore, allows for the illustration of the viewer’s moral positioning vis-à-vis the suffering of faraway people through the tensions of mediation discussed earlier. It illustrates the ways the viewing experience of real life suffering is both aesthetically and emotionally different from any other media experience. Discussing their experience as witnesses of incidents of faraway suffering, viewers simultaneously construct their memories of them, formulating judgments and constructing categorizations. This practice of the viewers’ narration of past media reports of distant suffering, named media remembering, will be explored in the next section.

2.5 Media Remembering

Media remembering is defined here as the discursive reconstruction of viewers' memories of the events witnessed through the media. The focus on the discursive emphasizes the practice of *remembering* as much more than a mere reproduction of the stories of suffering as witnessed through the media. As a *reconstruction* of media reports of human pain, media remembering illustrates the process of turning memories of distant suffering into stories through discourse. What is mostly interesting in these stories is not *what* is remembered but rather *how* they are put together, which throws light into the social discourses and resources people employ into reconstructing their memories, as well as the cultural and moral meanings they endow them with. In this conceptualization of remembering, the thesis draws upon the work of Maurice Halbwachs on "collective memory" (Halbwachs, 1992), as well as discursive psychology (Middleton and Edwards, 1990; Edwards and Potter, 1992).

Halbwachs's concept of collective memory highlights the mutually dependent relationship between individuals and society and argues that it is through this interactive relationship that people come to construct their memories as social members. The individual mind, Halbwachs argues, is only capable of the art of recollection, when it places itself within social frameworks of memory (Halbwachs, 1992: 38). As these collective frameworks people draw upon to reconstruct an image of the past reflect the predominant thoughts of society, when people remember, they do not retrieve the past from memory but they actively reconstruct it on the basis of the present (Halbwachs, 1992: 40). In other words, the way people remember past events reflects the way they think

about the present as members of a social group. Collective memory as “a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past...is best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share” (Irving-Zarecka, 1994:4).

This socially constructed nature of memory is also emphasized in the work of discursive social psychology, which describes remembering as a process of diffusion of discourses, personal and collective, past and present, “in a single task through which we construct a discourse that allows us to objectify our experience” (Achugar, 2008: 7). The approach of discursive psychology to the construction of memory emphasizes especially the dependence of the practice of remembering on the particular communicative circumstances in which it occurs (Middleton and Edwards, 1990: 11). According to this account, remembering as formulated through ways of talking is both *constructive* and *action-oriented*; constructive, because it provides a particular version of events, and action-oriented because this version of events aims at doing something, for example arguing, justifying or countering (Edwards and Stokoe, 2004: 2, emphasis in the original). Remembering as a social practice is based on elaborations, rearrangements and even omissions. In this context, remembering and forgetting are both aspects of the same practice of memory construction; they are flexible practices and occasioned by the interaction of the communicative context in which they take place (Middleton, 1997).

Under this light, media remembering becomes a practice not only of recollection but also of passing judgment about the events remembered. It is a reflexive articulation of the past intertwined with personal reaction (Edwards and Potter, 1992). As such, remembering as the re-telling of moments of media witnessing

is filtered through the moral and affective evaluation people associate with that experience. Memories thus become “not only the simple act of recall but social, cultural, and political action at its broadest level” (Zelizer, 1998: 3). Through the articulation of their memories people construct versions of the events, as well as position themselves in relation to the social world and others.

At the same time, being embedded within collective social frameworks, the discursive practice of media remembering also illustrates the ways people place themselves within the *perspective of the group* they are members of (Halbwachs, 1992: 52). This also means that the associations among different events people make in their reconstruction of the past reflect the associations between these individuals and the group(s) they belong to (Halbwachs, 1992: 53). Remembering thus becomes a factor and indicator of social belonging and solidarity and concomitantly of the normative order and moral imperatives that underline such social relations (Irwing-Zarecka, 1994: 9).

Considering this relationship between memory and belonging, Levy and Sznajder discuss the formation of “cosmopolitan memory” as a basis of emerging moral interdependencies and transnational solidarities (Levy and Sznajder, 2002). The authors argue that globally shared memories such as the Holocaust construct a global moral space, where the Other becomes part of a common global past and “new cosmopolitan sensibilities and moral-political obligations” emerge (Levy and Sznajder, 2002: 103). In a similar vein, in their work on the project of *Global Media Generations*, Volkmer and her colleagues studied the ways media-related memories can formulate a common ground for perceiving the world (Volkmer, 2006a). The authors argue that formative news

memories, such as the Vietnam War, the moon landing, or the death of Princess Diana, provide a framework for people's current perception of the world, which is generation-specific (Volkmer, 2006b: 14).

The media, as widely shared and used discursive resources, play a double role in the construction of social memories. First, they provide a reservoir of mediated experiences to become the "raw material" for the construction of a remembered past; second, they are implicated in the "social definition of worthiness vis-à-vis remembrance" (Irwing-Zarecka, 1994: 164). The differential media attention and extent of reporting of different events is a case in point. Therefore, the media not only provide viewers with experiences to be remembered but also with the resources to interpret these experiences and future ones of the same kind. As such, the media, as representations and as institutions, are instrumental in the construction, reservation and reconstruction of public memory (Zelizer, 1992; 1998; Sturken, 1997). With the exception of the *Global Media Generations* project (Volkmer, 2006a), the relevant work on the relationship between media and collective memory has illustrated the role of the media as "technologies of memory" (Sturken, 1997:10), namely as cultural resources instrumental in the construction, reservation and reconstruction of public memory (e.g. Zelizer, 1992; 1998; Sturken, 1997; Neiger et al., 2011). In that context, the focus of research has largely been on the analysis of the media as representations and as institutions.

By focusing on the practice of media remembering, the present thesis explores the appropriations, (re)interpretations and (re)articulations of the media discourses by audiences, illustrating the mutually constitutive relationship

between media texts and their viewers (Livingstone, 1993: 7) beyond the point of media reception, in the context of everyday discourses people employ to talk about and make sense of distant suffering. In this context, exploring media remembering as an audience discursive practice throws light into the viewers' emotional engagement with stories of distant suffering and the role of the media in the (re)articulation of these memories, as well as the viewers' expressions of allegiances and solidarity within social groups.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter has set out the theoretical premises underlying the research focus of the present thesis and has suggested an analytical framework for its study. It has argued that the moral agency of the viewer vis-à-vis distant suffering is constructed through processes of mediation and articulated through the practices of media witnessing and media remembering. The resources for these practices are provided within the media space, which expand the viewers' experience beyond the local and create relations with the distant other through the nourishment of imagination and the formulation of judgment.

However, the mediated space is underlined by unevenness, inequalities and restrictions, which reflect the symbolic status quo established by western media and their representational practices. At the same time, the mediated space is often ethnocentric in character, as it is embedded in national contexts and addressed to national audiences. This unevenness is concomitantly reflected on the mediation processes through which the moral agency of the viewer is articulated. For that reason, I have argued that the formation of the moral self of the viewer takes place along three significant tensions, which I have described

as the tension between the viewer's emotional involvement and rationalised detachment from the scene of suffering, the tension between hospitality and apathy towards the suffering other, and, finally, the tension between audience responsibility and complicity with the media.

I then proceeded to suggest an analytical framework for studying mediation in this context. Following Couldry's conceptualization of mediation as practices (Couldry, 2004; 2006), I suggested that the mediation of viewer's agency with regard to the suffering reported by the media should be studied as media practices, namely as the kind of things people say or do about suffering.

I introduced two media practices that are central in the articulation of the moral agency of the viewer. First, *media witnessing* describes the way viewers position themselves as spectators of the suffering of others. Second, *media remembering* refers to the discursive reconstruction of the audience memories of the events witnessed through the media. I argued that in describing how they see and how they remember stories of distant suffering, viewers simultaneously articulate their sense of agency.

This analytical focus based on the practices of media witnessing and media remembering aims, in the first place, at addressing the absence of audience studies of distant suffering, as described in the introductory chapter. The analytical focus on the discursive construction of viewer's agency, as explained throughout this chapter, also aims at illustrating the complexities involved in the mediation of distant suffering, obscured when moral agency is merely considered in terms of audience response to humanitarian appeals and public action or the affective impact of specific media images or reports of suffering.

Looking into how people talk about and remember distant suffering allows for the exploration of the specificities of how the suffering of faraway others gets embedded into the audience lifeworlds and the implications of this for the viewers' sense of moral agency.

Chapter 3 Researching Audience Discourses: Design and Methods

The previous chapters have established the central research interest of the thesis as the construction of the moral agency of the viewer vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others. Chapter 2 has argued that there are two audience practices that are instrumental in the construction of the moral agency of the spectator of suffering, namely media witnessing and media remembering. It has also problematised the issue of action at a distance and has argued that the viewers' inclination to act upon the suffering reported is mediated through the practices of witnessing and remembering. This conceptual framework has constituted the basis for the secondary research questions of the thesis, namely: *How do viewers position themselves as witnesses of the suffering of others made visible through the media? How do audiences remember distant suffering? How do viewers describe themselves as public actors with regard to the suffering of people they witness through the media?*

These three research concerns, media witnessing, media remembering and action at a distance have guided the design, conduct and analysis of the empirical research. As explained in the introductory chapter, Greece constituted the research context of this empirical investigation, its focus being on Greek audience discourses of distant suffering. This chapter will address the methodological and analytical choices made with regard to the selection and analysis of the research material.

The chapter begins with the justification of the choice of focus group discussions as the preferred methodology for accessing audience discourses also contextualising the use of focus groups in the field of media and communications research. The conceptualisation of the construction of the moral agency of the viewer as discursively articulated through the practices of media witnessing and media remembering led to the employment of focus groups as a research method that employs the interaction of participants in discussion to gather empirical material.

The chapter then discusses the practicalities of conducting the discussions, also briefly situating the research within the context of the Greek news media landscape. It outlines the framework for the analysis of the research material, based on the principles of discourse analysis. The final section of the chapter will engage with issues pertaining to the evaluation of the design and conduct of the research in a way of a reflexive commentary.

3.1 Researching Audience Discourses

The empirical research of the thesis is based on twelve focus group discussions that were conducted during the period between July and September 2006¹⁰. As outlined in the introduction, discussions mainly focused on the three disasters of the East Asian Tsunami in 2004, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir Earthquake of 2005. Their duration was 50 – 80 minutes and they were tape-

¹⁰ The total number of focus group discussions conducted for the purposes of the research was eighteen. After an initial careful consideration of the material and the decision to explore the discussions into further depth, the actual number of the groups analysed in greater depth was limited to twelve. The final choice of the discussions used for the analysis was based on the richness of the relevant material provided by the groups (for example, some groups were eliminated on the basis that their participants would rarely watch television) as well as the need to keep groups representative of different segments of the audience.

recorded and subsequently transcribed. Notes were taken immediately after each discussion, regarding the peculiarities and interesting points of each group, which were later significant in the analysis of the discussions.

Krueger defines a focus group as “a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Krueger, 1994: 6). Its particular character as a research method consists in its ingredients, namely “(1) people, (2) assembled in a series of groups, [who] (3) possess certain characteristics, and (4) provide data (5) of qualitative nature (6) in a focused discussion” (Krueger, 1994: 16). As such, focus groups seem to share the same aim and character with individual in-depth interviews in gathering accounts and interpretations of reality, with the only difference lying in the number of participants. However, such a definition seems to obscure the main characteristic of focus groups as a qualitative methodology: its reliance on the group interaction as a resource of research material (Morgan, 1988: 12; Kitzinger, 1994: 103). Emphasising exactly this dimension, Morgan defines focus groups as a “research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher” (Morgan, 1996: 130). As such, the method of focus groups is not merely interested in eliciting participants’ attitudes on the research issues; rather it explores the ways meaning and knowledge are discursively constructed through group interaction.

Based on these characteristics of the methodology and under the light of the interests of the thesis, focus groups were employed here on two grounds. First, because of their emphasis on the discourse as constructive of meanings and

identities, they allow for the exploration of the viewer's discursive construction of moral self with regard to distant others. Second, their illustration of the social and active construction of meanings among discussants places the focus on viewers as participants in the process of mediation. The next two sections will further explore these issues, first by contextualising the use of focus groups as a methodology in media studies and then by addressing the discursive construction of meanings within focus group discussions.

3.1.1 Focus Groups in Media Studies

It is the interest in and the potential to explore the active construction of meaning that rendered focus groups a popular methodology in media studies over the last decades. Lunt and Livingstone attribute the increasing employment of focus groups by media scholars in the beginning of the 1980s to the broader turn from the "effects" tradition to an emphasis on the social aspects of the research context and the emancipation of the research subject (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 83). Although Merton (Merton, 1987; Merton et al., 1956), the "father of focus groups", first employed the method along with Lazarsfeld (Puchta and Potter, 2004: 4), the methodology became almost exclusively an instrument of market research, only to resurge in media studies as a valid research tool on its own within the context of the broader turn in audience studies, which placed the focus on the active construction of meanings by the audiences, considered not anymore as aggregates of individual opinions but as active interpreters of media messages through the use of their own socio-cultural resources (Hall, 1973/1980; Livingstone, 1998). It signifies a break

with the tradition of “effects” studies and a turn towards the process of media consumption as a contextual activity.

In his seminal work on the *Nationwide* audience, David Morley used twenty-seven homogeneous groups of various socio-economic backgrounds to compare their different readings of the current affairs programme (Morley, 1980; 1981). Morley’s work was the first significant approach to explore the way media programmes are incorporated into the particular framework of viewers’ everyday lives through audience talk. His choice of homogeneous groups reflected the effort to allow for differences of socio-economic position to be more easily expressed. As such, focus groups were regarded as settings for the expression of participants’ identity (Morley, 1980).

Focus groups were famously adopted by Liebes and Katz within the context of their study on Dallas and its consumption by different cultures around the world (Liebes and Katz, 1990). The authors used as participants members of pre-existing groups, such as family members or friends. They approach their focus groups as a naturalistic setting that can be used as the assimilation of the everyday domestic viewing of the soap opera and, therefore, “a key to understanding the mediating process via which a program such as this enters into culture” (Liebes and Katz, 1990: 28).

Livingstone and Lunt have used focus groups to study the dialectic processes through which public opinion is being formulated (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). The focus is placed on the “the openness and interactive potential” of the method, which is seen “as a device which allows people to discuss issues abstracted from their social identities, as informed by

Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere" (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 88).

In another famous study, Philo asked from the focus groups included in his research on news bias to get involved into creative activities, producing news reports based on still images of the 1984/5 miners' strike (Philo, 1990; 1993a). Once more, based on the assumption that "culture and beliefs are, after all, the product of collective thought and action" (Philo, 1990: 22), the author places the focus on the way members of the groups collaboratively respond to the activity challenge, taking into account their different socio-economic backgrounds as the basis for the variation in their responses.

Overall, focus groups have been largely used in media research as a methodological tool that provides insights into audience processes of meaning-making and consumption of media products, based on the belief that the method replicates some of the everyday interactions through which people appropriate media, although "the setting within which they are conducted and, crucially, the ways in which they are conducted, are much less naturalistic" (Burgess et al., 1991: 502). The use of focus groups allows for significant insights into the social processes through which meaning is produced by audiences. According to Lunt and Livingstone: "The focus group emphasizes the social nature of communication and does not reduce social scientific research to the study of the individual, an important consideration in the context of media research where mechanical conceptions of media effects are giving way to more social, semiotic, and diffusion-based conceptions of media processes" (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 90).

More recently, and in attempt to capture the complexity of contemporary audience activity, as described by the concept of the diffused audience (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), focus groups have been employed in innovative ways or in combination with other methods in line with the broader ethnographic turn in media studies and news consumption (see discussion in section 2.2.3. in the previous Chapter). Madianou, in her study of news audiences in Greece, combines focus groups with individual interviews and participant observation in order to capture the place of news in the viewers' everyday life (Madianou, 2005a; 2008; 2010). Other researchers have tried to create quasi-naturalistic situations, where focus group discussions mimic everyday conversations and can be, therefore, treated as a route into exploring how people talk about news in the context of their everyday lives (Bird, 2003; Martin, 2008; McCallum, 2009).

However, a "sociological investigation of the contemporary diffused audience", which requires "to get as close to the everyday life of participants in the diffused audience as possible" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 166) is rarely practical for scholars with limited time, as this way of studying the audience might involve hours of observation before any significant data emerges (Bird, 2011: 495). In this context, Bird uses the concept of "news talk" as "the informal and often very active way that news stories are communicated among people and meanings are made that may have more or less to do with the original intent of the journalist who created the text" (Bird, 2010: 494). What the concept underlines is the fact that news stories are the product of interpersonal communication as much as the output of specific media texts (ibid.). Studying

news talk in everyday contexts is one way of exploring the activities of the diffused audience, which stems from the assumption that audiences are not only to be studied as addressed by specific media texts, but that the experience of audiencing leaks out into the conduct of the everyday (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 75).

Although artificial in their design and conduct, focus groups were chosen here as a methodology for exploring the audience practice of news talk about distant suffering. The artificiality of the design was minimised by the use of peer groups, which are assumed to be the social networks within which news and, therefore, stories of suffering are being discussed. Furthermore, the focus of the study being on viewers' engagement with stories of distant suffering rather than their habits of news consumption, it was judged that focus groups were an adequate method in gaining insight into the ways these stories are incorporated into the audiences' everyday life. As news of suffering are a frequent but not daily occurrence, it would have been challenging, if not impossible, to design a naturalistic study of how people engage with images of human pain in real time. Ethnographic methods might have provided richer material but that would have been hard and time-consuming to acquire and it would not necessarily address the research focus which is on how viewers *discursively* position themselves in relation to suffering rather than how they routinely consume the news. This focus on the discursive also entails an interest into how common sense assumptions and knowledge are (re)produced through social interaction, for which focus groups can provide invaluable insights. It is this character of focus

groups as a form of discursive interaction which provides insights into the constructed nature of social meanings that the next section will address.

3.1.2 Focus Groups and the Social Production of Discourse

The focus of this study is on the discourses employed by media audiences when talking about distant disasters. The aim is to explore through these discourses how viewers position themselves as moral agents with regard to the suffering of distant others. Although individual interviews could also have offered “access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words” (Reinharz & Chase, 2002: 222), it is through the interaction of discussion that commonsense discourses are more vividly articulated, negotiated and illustrated. Michael Billig justifies such an approach to focus group discussion: “In the cut-and-thrust of discussion, one can hear the processes of thinking directly, witnessing the actual business of people formulating and using thoughts. When people argue, they justify and criticize, frequently appealing to common-sense or to the values of accepted common-places” (Billig, 1992: 16-17).

A crucial point of this discursive interaction consists in its form, which is close to everyday talk, allowing the researcher to explore uses of language, which in itself can prove more illustrating of people’s beliefs and attitudes than their actual responses. As Kitzinger notes, “people’s knowledge and attitudes are not entirely encapsulated in reasoned responses to direct questions” (Kitzinger, 1995: 300). Less structured forms of talk, such as jokes, teasing and arguing can prove equally, if not more, informative. In the more controlled environment of an individual interview, such forms of everyday communication are difficult to occur. The one-to-one discussion retains the power asymmetries between

researcher and participants (Briggs, 1986; 2002) and, thus, the formal character of the interaction in a greater degree than focus group discussions. The presence of more participants who listen to, agree with and challenge one another makes these everyday forms of communication more salient in focus groups (Kitzinger, 1994: 108). In this way, focus groups “reach the parts that other methods cannot reach” (Kitzinger, 1995: 301).

Despite the close similarity among focus group and everyday talk, however, Myers underlines the risk of uncritically regarding focus group discussion as everyday conversation (Myers, 1998). The great resemblance aside, he argues, focus groups are peculiar forms of interaction, which takes place under special circumstances and with specific purposes. For this reason, it is essential not to take isolated utterances at face value, but rather analyse the discussion as a specific speech event and report more on the ways focus groups work (Myers, 1998).

Group interaction of such kind provides insight not only in the knowledge and understandings that people hold but also in the way that this knowledge has been formed. It highlights the operation of social processes in the articulation of knowledge represented at the micro-level of the group processes (Kitzinger, 1995). Krueger argues that the focus group interview works because “it taps into human tendencies” (Krueger, 1994: 10). Attitudes, perceptions and meanings are never formed in a social vacuum but always through interaction with others. Evidence from focus group discussions can provide insights of how these interactions influence individual utterances and the process of meaning construction. Especially in relation to media messages and use, “the way

individuals use and make sense of media material is determined by the identities and communicative repertoires they are socialized into as a result of their membership of these groups in the course of their life history” (Schrøder et al., 2003: 5). A focus group discussion brings these identities and communicative repertoires into the front light. It also provides an insight into the role of the media in the construction of knowledge and understandings about the world. It is, therefore, the “key to understanding the mediating process via which a [media] program...enters into the culture” (Liebes and Katz, 1990: 28). Focus group discussions throw light into the ways audiences themselves make sense of these media messages drawing upon their socially situated identities and communicative repertoires. In numerous occasions during the discussions participants would justify their expressed attitudes and opinions as due to their status as “women”, as “young people” or as “Greeks”, illustrating how different reference points were implicated in the production of meanings.

What can also be discerned behind group interactions is the normative framework underlying them (Kitzinger, 1995; Bloor et al., 2001). Focus groups provide insights into the dominant cultural values that influence assessments and beliefs and how these may vary across different segments of the population. For the purposes of this thesis, the discussions throw light to dominant narratives about the media, distant suffering or humanitarianism and charity. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, participants often felt the need to justify themselves for not responding to humanitarian appeals, as inaction is equated to a moral failure within the context of a normative humanitarian

discourse. Although these normative narratives can also be reflected in individual interviews, their status as taken for granted stock of knowledge is more likely to be negotiated and challenged through group interaction. As Bloor and his colleagues acutely put it, “the group is a socially legitimated occasion for participants to engage in ‘retrospective introspection’, to attempt collectively to tease out previously taken for granted assumptions” (Bloor et al., 2001: 5-6).

A further methodological advantage of focus group discussions is the fact that they allow for a greater degree of unexpected responses (Kitzinger, 1995). Individual interviews, based on a question-answer structure, often seem to bear a stimulus and response character. Discussion is mainly restricted to the topics initially identified by the researcher and the emergence of new ideas is dependent on the participants’ communicative skills and enthusiasm about the topic as well as the interviewer’s capacities to follow cues and identify interesting ideas, something that requires experience and can be proven difficult in the flow of the interview. On the contrary, the smaller degree of control that the researcher has over the group discussion might prove beneficial in encouraging participants to share experiences and opinions that might break away from the initial assumptions of the researcher about them. Whereas in individual interviews it is more likely for researchers not necessarily to “hear” what their informants tell them, but “only what their own intellectual and ethical development has prepared them to hear” (Johnson, 2002: 106), this possibility is minimized in the group discussion, where there are more than one participant voices and the control of the researcher over them is less.

This is also reflected in the negotiation of differences among the participants. Kitzinger makes an interesting point in arguing that the focus group discussions allows for participants to theorise about the diversity of opinions among themselves (Kitzinger, 1994). Different perspectives have to be supported by elaborate arguments or description of experiences in order to be persuasive or justified by the other participants. Thus, whereas the researcher analyzing individual interviews “might have been faced with ‘armchair’ theorizing” about the causes of such differences, in focus groups these can be explained “ ‘in situ’ with the help of the research participants” (Kitzinger, 1994: 113).

Finally, there are a number of practical advantages that characterise focus groups as a research material-gathering methodology in comparison to individual interviews. The presence of other participants enhances a permissive environment and minimizes the structural distance between researcher and participants, therefore rendering participation in the group discussion a more appealing experience to the respondents. It is easier, then, to secure participation by people who would be unwilling to be interviewed individually, either because of the perceived formality of the situation or because they feel that they have nothing interesting to contribute (Kitzinger, 1995). Especially in the case of pre-existing peer groups, there is the extra advantage of a sense of a shared obligation to attend, which can spare the researcher from the difficult situation of non-attendance (Bloor et al., 2001: 23).

3.1.3 Problems with Focus Groups

The important advantages of the focus groups aside, researchers have often pointed out the need for caution against some potentially problematic aspects of

group discussions. Most of these have to do with the group dynamics and their potential harmful side-effects. There is a strong likelihood that the voices that tend to deviate from the norm may be silenced in fear of repercussions by the group (Kitzinger, 1995), either in the painless form of teasing or in more serious forms such as open disapproval and confrontation. In the context of the present study, it was considered likely that participants might be unwilling to express views that might contradict dominant norms, such as lack of interest for distant suffering or refusal to contribute with any form of aid. Such problems were, however, minimized through the planning of the focus groups and selection of participants. As proved during the discussions, participants did not hesitate to challenge or disagree with each other.

The majority of the focus groups in this thesis were formed on the basis of pre-existing social groups. Gamson names these naturally occurring groups, the members of which are already familiar to each other outside the research setting, "peer-group discussions" (Gamson: 1992). Most of the respondents belonged to the same network of friends, some were colleagues and in a couple of cases members of the same family. This allowed for a permissive atmosphere during the discussions, leaving space for disagreements and opposing arguments to be expressed. Group dynamics in peer group discussions are likely to be similar in real life, too (Katz and Liebes, 1990: 29). Indeed, Sasson argues that peer group discussions are more suitable than conventional focus groups for the exploration of popular discourses, since due to the fact that they "have a social existence independent of the sociologist's contrivance, their discourse can be regarded with greater confidence as reflective of the particular subcultures

from which they are drawn” (Sasson, 1995: 20). Pre-existing social groups, who are in close contact, are also more likely to discuss about media stories (Liebes and Katz, 1990: 23) and it is this kind of popular discourse that the present study is interested in.

The content and flow of the discussion is also vulnerable to the group dynamics, which unavoidably affect the material drawn by group discussions. A number of issues can prove to be problematic, such as the domination of the discussion by the louder participants, the existence of quiet or shy participants that are difficult to include, or a general unwillingness of the group to respond to the moderator’s questions, often expressed through hush (Morgan, 1988). Although minimized, these problems cannot be securely avoided through the use of peer groups. Such issues did occur during the conduct of the focus groups in this research. And while it was not extremely hard to keep the balance between louder and shy participants by interfering in the discussion or encouraging alternative views, the general silence or reluctance of some groups was regarded as informative in itself of the indifference of the respondents about the issues under discussion.

3.2 Conducting the research

3.2.1 Planning the focus groups

The study is focusing on Greek audiences and their discourses on mediated distant disasters. As such, the population was restricted to audience members of Greek national identity. Although the inclusion of members of ethnic minorities would have provided an interesting point of comparison, especially in terms of

how different national and cultural discourses interfere with the viewers' engagement with distant suffering, such a choice would have added further dimensions to the study that would complicate its analysis and affect its depth and quality given its necessary limits. It was among these members of the audience with Greek national origin that an effort was made to secure the biggest possible variability of respondents through the sampling process.

Since the purpose of the study, as in all qualitative research, is not the generalisability of the results on a broader population but rather the in-depth exploration of different views and practices on the issue under study (Gaskell, 2000), purposeful sampling was employed for the choice of the participants in the focus groups so that they better fitted the goals of the research (Morgan, 1998: 56). This theoretical approach to sampling ensures the most productive and insightful results, as opposed to random sampling, which aims at collecting statistically reliable and valid data.

The segmentation of the focus group participants was based on pre-existing theoretical propositions and the relevant literature and with the greatest variability of perspectives in mind (Morgan, 1996: 143; 1998: 64-65). Based on these, there were factors that were regarded as the most significant in respondents' variability, namely their age, gender and education.

Age

Participants in the focus groups covered two main age cohorts, the younger consisting of people in their twenties and the older of people in their forties and fifties. There are a number of reasons for such a distinction. Younger

generations usually display a greater degree of media literacy and use and this might affect the way they use media to connect to world. Furthermore, being the target group of transnational media corporations and in particular the music industry they are more inclined to be members of a “cosmopolitan cultural citizenship” (Chaney, 2002) and an “entertainment cosmopolitanism” (Malcomson, 1998; Urry, 2000). Although mundane and often unintended, such a cosmopolitan experience could possibly be associated with more reflexive and “genuine cosmopolitan outlooks” (Skribs et al., 2004: 130), expressing a concern with and commitment to the distant other.

Age was also considered to be an important segmentation factor with regard to the practice of media remembering. Influenced by Mannheim’s argument that the experience of historical, and in particular traumatic, events is the connecting link among members of the same generation (Mannheim, 1952), Edmunds and Turner have suggested the concept of “global generations”, united through the electronically mediated experience of global traumatic events (Edmunds and Turner, 2005). Volkmer and her colleagues make a similar argument in their study of global media generations, discussed in the previous chapter, as they explore how news memories are formative of different generations’ framework for making sense of the world (Volkmer, 2006c). Different memories of global events, such as World War II, the Vietnam War or Princess Diana’s death, as well as the engagement with different media proved to be crucial for each generation’s background or commonsense knowledge about the world. Supportive of these findings about the variety in the ways different generations engage with the world were also the findings of the research conducted by Urry

and Szerszynski on the emergence of a cosmopolitan culture among audiences (Szerszynski and Urry, 2002), which seemed to differ in meaning between older and younger generations¹¹.

In short, age seems to be an important factor that accounts “for differences in cultural value orientation within cultures” (Fern, 2001: 32) and for this reason it was regarded a significant factor guaranteeing variation in audience responses with reference to their engagement with distant suffering, both in terms of witnessing and remembering them.

Gender

“Gender”, Denzin argues, “filters knowledge” (Denzin, 1989: 116). In the case of the mediation of distant suffering, it also seems to filter responses towards the suffering victims. Gilligan has claimed that there is a difference in “moral voices” between men and women (Gilligan, 1993). Accounting for the moral development of children, the author has argued that boys and men interpret morality in terms of abstract ideas and rules, such as fairness and justice, while girls and women understand it in terms of an ethic of care and responsibility. In a similar argument, Höijer in her study of “global compassion” in relation to television images of violence and war concluded that there are gendered

¹¹ According to the authors, the results of their project indicated that ideas of global connectedness and responsibility were interpreted by the younger respondents as an “openness to the new and culturally different”, whereas for the older ones they were associated to “received notions of British character and the fulfillment of duty, familiar from the days of Empire and the World Wars” (Szerszynski and Urry, 2002: 476). Different cosmopolitan interests and practices seemed to be prominent in different stages of the lifecycle, with the younger being interested in traveling and working abroad and duty and responsibilities being regarded as more associated to older citizens (ibid.). Finally, different generations gave different reasons for not feeling responsible global citizens; the young people because they were more concerned with enjoying themselves, the older because of more urgent and immediate responsibilities and the retired because they thought it was time to think of themselves (ibid.).

differences in the way viewers react to images of violence and conflict. She argues that compassion appears to be “gendered” (Höijer, 2004: 525), since her female interviewees often identified with the victims, whereas men were occasionally cynical, something which, according to the author, can be attributed to the fact that when men “hear and see documentary depictions of the victims of violence, they meet a story about themselves through the hidden myth of violence and manliness” (Höijer, 2004: 526).

A second reason that gender seems to be an important factor of the segmentation of participants is the actual habitual gendered segmentation of a number of public spaces as well as social roles, something that is particularly relevant to the older generations. There are still male dominated spaces, such as pubs or sport clubs, as well as activities that women usually do together at shopping malls or private houses. This is reflected on the existence of gendered social networks and spaces, where people of the same sex are likely to discuss private as well as public issues (Massey, 1994). News stories and, for the purposes of this study, news of distant disasters are also cases that can be discussed in similar terms, namely by people of the same sex within informal networks. In other words, respondents of the same gender are likely to draw upon similar interpretative repertoires in engaging with distant suffering. Indeed, when respondents were asked whether they would discuss about the news of the disasters with other people, female respondents claimed to do that over coffee with their female friends or while watching the news at each other’s homes; men, on the other hand, would often say that such discussions would

arise at the coffee places they frequented when the television news was on, or with colleagues at work.

Education

Respondents were also considered and segregated according to the level of their education. It was decided that an effective choice would be the segregation of respondents depending on whether or not they have completed a University Degree. There are two main reasons for this choice. In the first place, it expresses an attempt to test the hypothesis that education might enhance cosmopolitanism as “a willingness to engage with the Other” (Hannerz, 1990: 239). Although there is not an explicit association in the relevant literature, there seems to be an implicit assumption that might permit a connection of education to cosmopolitanism. Hannerz describes the latter as “an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences” and highlights the fact that it can be a matter of competence, of “a personal ability to make one’s way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting” (Hannerz, 1990: 239). Szerszynski and Urry relate cosmopolitanism with the “*semiotic* skill to be able to interpret images of various others, to see what they are meant to represent, and to know when they are iconic” (Serszynski and Urry, 2002: 470; emphasis in the original). Along similar lines, Hall argues that cosmopolitanism requires the ability to draw upon discourses from a variety of cultural repertoires (Hall, 2002: 26).

Furthermore, education was used in the context of this study as an indication of socio-economic status. Respondents were chosen in such a way that their educational background was reflected in their occupational status,

distinguishing between professionals and upper white-collar professions on the one hand, and lower white-collar, blue-collar and unskilled workers on the other. In the rest of the thesis I will refer – rather allusively – to the former as “middle-class” and the latter as “working-class”.

Locale

The focus groups were shared between two different locations within Greece. Virtually half of the focus group discussions were conducted in the capital city of Athens and the rest in the town of Komotini. This was mostly dictated by the time constraints of the fieldwork, which, taking place during the summer, demanded for immediacy and time-effectiveness in the organizing and conduct of the group discussions. Having already contacts in both places, it was easier to effectively plan the groups. This segmentation of respondents, however, can also be explained on theoretical grounds.

The two places are separated by more than 800 kilometres of distance as well as by significant differences in the lifestyle of their inhabitants. Athens, counting five million people, is a cultural and economic centre, a modern European capital, accommodating transnational communities and migrants and attracting great numbers of tourists. As such it constitutes an example of a “global city”, a space where the macrosocial trends of globalisation materialize (Sassen, 2007: 101; see also Sassen, 1994). Komotini, on the other hand, a town of fifty thousand, represents the typical semi-rural Greek life. On the northern border of the country it lacks in cultural activities and centres and can hardly constitute a tourist attraction. If mobility seems to be main characteristic of the capital, then stability and permanence seem to be typical in a semi-rural town. To

appropriate Hannerz's distinction of people (Hannerz 1990), the two places could be described as representing the cosmopolitan and the local respectively.

There is, however, a significant factor that complicated this distinction. Komotini is home to a large Turkish-speaking minority, mostly of Turkish origin, which amounts to almost half the town's population. In this sense, the town could be characterized as a "cosmopolitan place" in its lack of national homogeneity. It, therefore, theoretically encapsulated the both/and principle of cosmopolitanism (Beck, 2006: 57) as the internalization of difference within society (Beck, 2004: 438). Whether this can be translated into a cosmopolitan outlook from the perspective of its inhabitants is a challenge open to empirical investigation. Although currently peaceful – albeit not very close – the relationship between the national majority and the minority has been characterized by turbulences in the past. It is also underlined by the historic hostility between Greece and Turkey.

The segmentation of focus group participants according to these different criteria reflects an attempt to explore a diversity of discourses and ways of articulating moral agency rather than the objective of putting the differences between the audience groupings into a strict test. The peer groups are adopted here as social occasions that are indicative of the real-life peer discussions, where moral discourses on distant suffering are being articulated rather than as reflective of the participants' common "involvement in various forms of cultural frameworks and identifications" (Morley, 1980: 26) based on their social class, age or gender. In this context, the diverse discourses are approached as *collective*, namely "mutually constructed by the social interactions among

members of particular subgroups” rather than as *taxonomic*, “distributed across the individuals within particular sociodemographic subgroups” (Livingstone, 1998: 113). As such, the dimensions of participant segmentation do not form major dimensions in the analysis. The focus here is on social interaction among the group participants rather than the implication of their sociodemographic characteristics in the construction of their moral agency.

Focus Group Composition

The focus groups were homogeneous in their composition. This was decided on the basis of the argument that respondents tend to feel safer and more relaxed among people of common social characteristics, which facilitates discussion and disclosure (Finch and Lewis, 2003: 190), whereas participants in heterogeneous groups tend to stick to superficial statements (Myers, 1998). Besides, the homogeneity of the groups was in most cases a consequence of the choice to use peer groups of pre-existing social networks.

3.2.2 Sampling the disasters to trigger the discussions

As already stated in the Introduction, the focus group discussions were instigated by three major disasters: the South Asian Tsunami in December 2004, Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 and the Kashmir Earthquake in October 2005.

The South Asian Tsunami – which will be hereafter also referred to as “Tsunami”, as also named by the participants – was caused by an undersea earthquake with a magnitude of 9 in the Richter scale, which occurred in the Indian Ocean on December 26th 2004. The destructive force of the Tsunami hit fifteen surrounding countries and claimed about 230,000 lives, resulting in one

of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history. A significant number of the victims were tourists from around the world that were travelling in the area at the time, an aspect that affected global media coverage (CARMA, 2006; Kivikuru and Nord, 2009).

Hurricane Katrina hit the Southern regions of the United States at the end of August, leading to flooding and destruction and resulting in almost 2,000 deaths and the displacement of about 100,000 people. The economic damage caused by the disaster rendered it one of the costliest in U.S. history. The media coverage of the disaster, however, often moved beyond the discussion of the damages and became a “site for discursive contention and even political dissent” (Cottle, 2009: 61), focusing, on the one hand, on the “civil unrest” and looting that followed the disaster in New Orleans (Tierney et al., 2006), and, on the other hand, on the political failures of the US government (Cottle, 2009: 64).

The Kashmir earthquake shortly followed Hurricane Katrina, occurring on the 8th of October 2005, in Kashmir, Pakistan, rendering 2005 “the year of natural disasters” (Braine, 2006: 4). The earthquake, with a magnitude of 7.6, killed 73,000 people and left millions homeless. Although not as extensively covered as the other two disasters by Western media, the devastating aftermath of the earthquake triggered considerable humanitarian response from around the world (CARMA, 2006: 16).

The three disasters were chosen as triggers of the focus group discussions on the basis of a number of factors, as explained in the introductory chapter. First, they were all relatively recent to the inception of the research and almost concurrent to each other, taking place over a time period of less than twelve

months. Disasters of great destructive force, they were all extensively covered by the media, often through the interruption of the scheduled programmes, in the form of breaking news or occupying great parts of the regular news bulletins. There were, to be sure, differences in the extent of this reporting across the three disasters, as well as in their framing by the different media (CARMA, 2006). This rendered the three disasters interesting cases of comparison. As Chapter 2 has explained, the interest of the thesis does not lay with audience responses to particular disasters but rather the way the viewer formulates her moral agency within the media space, where the visibility of the other in her human vulnerability is a common occurrence. The three destructive events were judged to be good examples of this mediated moral space and its inherent unevenness in terms of symbolic power. They were, therefore, judged to be useful examples to instigate discussions that would address the questions of interest in the thesis.

Chapter 1 has also explained the choice to employ only natural disasters as triggers of the discussions. As viewers' responses to political suffering were thought to be more explicitly embedded in political and nationalistic discourses that might interfere with their engagement with victims of natural disasters, it was considered to be appropriate not to initiate the discussions with the example of a political disaster or conflict that might have framed or limited the debate to political events and ideological conflicts. Of course, this distinction is formulated as an ad hoc analytical choice, as it is widely accepted that there is hardly anything natural about apparently natural disasters (Wisner et al., 1976; Sen, 1983), as the intensity of the consequences of natural phenomena is always

conditional on political, economic and social structures. In this context, the Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake, were selected as disasters inscribed through the media with emotion and appeals to a common humanity based on the human vulnerability in the face of natural catastrophe (Cottle, 2006: 421; 2009: 51). As such, they were judged to be better triggers for the instigation of broader discussions on stories of distant suffering.

3.3 Greek audiences in context

Thinking about the mediation of viewers' moral agency vis-à-vis news of distant suffering requires a contextualisation of the research question in the context of Greek civic and media culture. Before moving on to the specifics of conducting and analysing the focus group discussions, this section will briefly illustrate the television news space in Greece, as the landscape within which the participants of the study situate themselves as audiences, the characteristics of this audience, as those emerge from the limited empirical studies, and, finally, the broader Greek civic context within which the study is embedded.

As suggested in the introductory chapter, the national and cultural characteristics of this context constitute a peculiar landscape that does not comfortably fit with the assumptions held about Western societies in relation to suffering. On the one hand, Greece as a European country belongs to the "safety zone" of the West, as institutionally defined and symbolically reproduced by the media. At the same time, Greece historically and culturally is situated between the West and the Eastern world. Having experienced a series of conflicts, crises, population displacements and other forms of political and social suffering in its long history, the country differs from the context traditionally assumed for the

Western spectator of distant suffering. As such, the focus on Greece as a case study by the present thesis can offer useful insights not only in relation to how audiences engage with distant suffering but also with regard to diversifying the positions attributed to the spectator of suffering, which has so far been conceptualised in terms of a homogeneous Western perspective.

3.3.1. The television news media landscape in Greece

Television news in Greece constitutes a typical example of the transgression of the traditional generic form of the genre and its transformation to a mixture of information and entertainment broadly described as infotainment (Pleios, 2006). News programmes, as formed especially during the last couple of decades and after the deregulation of the broadcasting sector in the end of the 1980s (Papathanassopoulos, 1997), are characterised by a fusion of different media genres, such as talks shows, entertainment and of factual news stories. The most significant of the peculiarities of the Greek news environment can be summarised in the long duration of the programmes, reaching and often surpassing one hour, sensationalism in the coverage of news, reports of celebrity gossip, personification of political debates, live interviews or talks and high degree of intertextuality between the news and other programmes or media, mainly programmes of the same channel or media belonging to the same organisation (Papathansassopoulos, 1999; 2000; 2001; Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Chondroleou, 2004). This shift away from “hard” news also entails a decrease in the coverage of foreign news (Papathanassopoulos, 2001: 510). Live coverage of celebrity weddings or reports on celebrity feuds are frequent features in the news programmes.

Although state channels differ from private channels in that they have not fully embraced this news culture of infotainment, the Greek public service broadcaster lags in audience preferences (Leandros, 2010).

The rise of infotainment in the Greek news programmes cannot be viewed independently from the wider political culture of the country, which is broadly characterised by a profound mistrust in the state (and, concomitantly, state broadcasting), a weak civil society, a strong clientelist system, partisan political character of the press and an intersection of interests between media owners and the political status quo (Papathanassopoulos, 2001; Chondroleou, 2004; Leandros, 2010). All these form a peculiar mediated political environment, where politicians and media owners find themselves in a constant interplay over the control of public agenda and the audience is left with poor information and, most importantly, with a general mood of mistrust over the news they are provided with (Papathanassopoulos, 1999; Madianou, 2005a).

Elements of this civic culture and the general mood of mistrust and suspicion were evident in the discussions, as the empirical chapters will suggest. What is to be noted at this point is that these elements and character of the news programmes in Greece constitute the media landscape within which the research project situates itself and the specificities of the construction of the moral agency of Greek viewers are explored.

3.3.2. Greek audiences

Partly related to the characteristics of commercialisation and competition within the media landscape, as described above, audience research has been

traditionally linked in Greece with quantitative research. The use of market research to provide media owners and advertising agencies with audience ratings seems to have also affected the methodological choices of academic inquiry. Audience research, often limited in surveys and quantitative studies, has generally indicated public dissatisfaction with the media and public disengagement (Papathanassopoulos, 1997; Leandros, 2010). These studies, however, have ultimately failed to illustrate the dynamics of mediation of public life in Greece.

In an attempt to explore the use of information and communication technologies within the Greek social and cultural context, Tsatsou combined quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus groups) methodologies to indicate how the slow adoption of the Internet in Greece is linked to a “dismissive culture” of the public, who found the Internet unnecessary in the context of their everyday lives (Tsatsou, 2011: 119), as well as a widespread technophobic attitude (Tsatsou, 2011: 120). In its turn, this technophobic attitude can be linked to the problematic notion of citizenship as developed in the Greek context that goes hand-in-hand with a failure to recognise the Internet as part of the Greek information society (ibid). The study, therefore, highlights how the use of media and communications is embedded in broader socio-cultural frameworks and people’s perceptions about and attitudes towards politics.

A significant exception within the lack of audience studies, and most importantly news audience studies, in Greece is Madianou’s study on the relationship between media and identities in Greece (Madianou, 2005a). Following an ethnographic approach, the author explores how different ethnic

and cultural groups within the country, namely Greeks, Cypriots and members of the Turkish-speaking minority articulate their identities in relation to media consumption and television news. She illustrates how, despite the ethnocentric character of news programmes, audience members often challenge this dominant national discourse. The way they do that does not necessarily reflect their ethnic identities, but often their personal experience with the media, which provides them with knowledge that contradicts the information given in the news (Madianou, 2008: 328). Furthermore, when a news story was interpreted as an internal affair, viewers were more likely to be critical of the dominant discourse, whereas they embraced the nationalistic discourse, when they regarded a story as foreign news, and therefore something foreign to their identity (ibid.). In this context, although the media do not determine identities, they do contribute to the creation of communicative spaces of inclusion and exclusion, whereby identities are negotiated (Madianou, 2005a: 56).

Madianou's study is important in highlighting the dialectical relationship between news consumption and everyday life. The former is described as a dynamic process that involves a number of material, social and individual parameters (Madianou, 2005a: 5). It also interestingly reveals viewing paradoxes in the consumption of news. There seems to be a discrepancy between what people say about their relationship with the news in the context of the interview and what they actually do with it, as revealed through participant observation. While audiences were critical and cynical about the news when being interviewed, it was proved that they watched the news as a daily ritual, when observed in their everyday context. Similarly, although they

claimed that the only news worth watching were the ones provided by the public broadcaster, this was not the news they watched during participant observation, when they preferred the commercial channels (Madianou, 2005a: 60).

3.3.3. The Greek context

As the two aforementioned studies have indicated, exploring audience engagement with the media as technologies and as content requires an examination of the social and cultural context within the audience is embedded. As argued in Chapter 2, the theoretical framework of mediation approaches both media and their audiences as socially and institutionally embedded. At the same time, the nation still functions as a primary basis for the development of social solidarity and moral sentiments, and, therefore, nationally embedded discourses mediate the relationship of the viewer to the spectacle of distant suffering.

Modern Greek culture has been described as a blending of tradition and innovation between what is old (elements of ancient Greece) and what is new (elements of modern Greece), on the one hand, and what is native and what is foreign, on the other hand (Babiniotis, 1995: 230). If this holds truth for most modern societies, what is particularly important for Greece is the opposition between West, as Europeanism, and East, as Byzantine culture, which are actually the two sides combined in the Greek national identity, giving it an inherently double nature (Babiniotis, 1995: 231; Lipovats, 1994: 124). This national cultural identity emanates from the country's history, with its classical world having supported Western ideas and its Byzantine past having dominated

the East for centuries, on the one hand, and four centuries of slavery and foreign intervention and national tragedies thereafter (Babinotis, 1995: 240).

The complexity of the broader national culture is also reflected in the political culture, underlined of similar contradictions and tensions. Diamandouros distinguishes Greek political culture in two distinct co-existing discursive frameworks: what he calls “the underdog culture”, which is the inward-looking, parochial outlook and insistence on tradition with a hostile attitude towards ideas of Western Enlightenment and modernity, on the one hand, and a Western-oriented modernising and universalising culture that favours rationalisation and liberal ideas, on the other hand (Diamandouros, 1993). While the latter resides in the margins of intelligentsia and diasporic bourgeoisie, the former is an integral part of the way the majority of Greek people make sense not only of politics but also the world overall and their place in it. Main characteristics of this underdog culture are, apart from an inherent introvertedness and parochialism, a xenophobic attitude often expressed through “a conspirational interpretation of events and...a pronounced sense of cultural inferiority towards the Western World, coupled with a hyperbolic and misguided sense of the importance of Greece in international affairs and, more generally, in the history of Western civilisation” (Diamandouros, 1993: 18). At the same time, the underdog culture is expressed through the victimisation of Greece in the “hands of mightier entities” and the Greek tendency to express allegiances to “collectivities which share a perceived ‘common heritage of exploitation’” by the world powers (Stefanidis, 2007: 8).

Part of this underdog culture is also a strong anti-Americanism, widespread and deeply rooted in Greek social discourses (Calotychos, 2004; Katzenstein and Keohane, 2007). Politically, Greek anti-Americanism can be traced back in the American involvement in Greek politics in 1947, in the early days of the Cold War, which has since produced a number of other political interferences, conspiracies as well as conspiracy theories. At the same time, Calotychos recognises in Greek anti-American feelings the “Greek penchant for conspiracy theory and political immaturity that strives to place responsibility elsewhere” (Calotychos, 2004: 182; see also Mouzelis, 1993). The latter is part of a broader cultural framework through which people understand power relations as well as history and their place in the world (Calotychos, 2004; Sutton, 2003).

There is an ongoing debate about both the origins and the consequences of these characteristics of Greek political culture and its inclination to conspiracy theories (see Demertzis, 1994; Sutton, 2003). Whether these political discourses should be approached as a social pathology that undermines participation in the public sphere (Mouzelis, 1993) or are expressive of Greek people’s everyday understandings of global politics and the shaping of local experiences by distant forces (Sutton, 2003) is beyond the interests of the discussion here. The political discourses of conspiracy theories, the tendency to place responsibility on invisible forces and the “underdog culture” are approached here as constitutive of a cultural vocabulary Greeks make use of in talking about the social world and their place in it.

These understandings of power and peoples’ relation with it also apply to the national political arena. They are expressed through feelings of detachment and

alienation from political institutions and especially politicians, as well as widespread mistrust (Kafetzis, 1994). Expressions of such mistrust, Demertzis argues, are part of a broader culture of political cynicism in Greece, itself discursively constructed through the articulation of a varied vocabulary of affective expressions, such as despair, detachment, sarcasm, indignation, pessimism, fatalism and irony (Demertzis, 2008). This political cynicism and disengagement has been particularly prominent since the 1990s, when the exuberance of the post-dictatorship period started to wear off and party politics disillusioned the public (Mouzelis and Pagoulatos, 2005).

These political discourses are not restricted to the field of politics but also underline perceptions and discussions about the social. The pervasiveness of the political culture in all aspects of social life has been attributed to the organisation of the Greek political system since the formative decades of the Greek state in the mid-19th century (Mouzelis, 1995). Characterised by clientelism and populism, politics has coloured the way people approach and understand public life overall (Mouzelis, 1995; Sotiropoulos, 2004). Despite the centralisation of politics and party organisation and the expansion of political participation after the 1967-1974 military dictatorship, the clientelistic modes of incorporation have resisted in a political system that is characterised by a “vertical, authoritarian integration of the people into the national political arena” (Mouzelis, 1995: 19). In this context, the expansion of party politics and its involvement in mass movements since 1974 has been translated into the “partyness of society” (Papadopoulos, 1989: 66; see also Mouzelis and Pagoulatos, 2005). Party competition has been extended in all Greek mass

movements and cultural and social organisations, suffocating social life (Papadopoulos, 1989: 66). The pervasiveness of political discourse in all social interactions and cultural exchanges can be, therefore, attributed on the one hand to the extent of state expansion and penetration and, on the other hand, on the fact that knowledge of the political system by lay citizens is a “necessity in a social environment in which any economic or social project, however trivial, requires for its fruition clientelistically achieved state support (Mouzelis, 1995: 22).

The pervasiveness of the political system is reflected in the atrophic nature of civil society in Greece. Recent in its emergence, with most NGOs and civil society associations coming of age only in the last couple of decades, civil society in Greece has faced the consequences of the organisation of public life in the country, where clientelism and populism have been the main characteristics of the pervasive political system, leaving little space for alternative political participation (Panayiotopoulou, 2003; Sotiropoulos, 2004). As the organisation of the political system follows a top-down approach of control and mobilisation, there are few alternatives for the formation of horizontal ties among citizens and interest groups (Sotiropoulos, 2004: 17). In this vertical system of patron-client relationships (Mouzelis, 1987), even labour organisations and professional associations are controlled by political parties (Sotiropoulos, 2004: 18). The weak civil society is, therefore, the characteristic of a country where politics, or rather party politics, has prevailed over “any other logic that might emanate from different institutional spheres” (Mouzelis, 1995: 20).

At the same time, it can be viewed along the lines of the general culture of mistrust in institutions, which has inhibited the crystallization of a civic spirit. In a country where party interests predominate public life and there have been deficiencies of defining common good and collective goals, not only is the State seen as “an entity to be suffered, played with...[and] never taken seriously” but also citizenship and civic participation or responsibility are generally seen “as smoke screens for the system of domination” (Tsoukalas, 1995: 198). This attitude is not restricted to state institutions but expands to civic associations and projects. According to Tsoukalas, “Greeks are still born and socialised to the tunes of an anarchic individualism, which considers liberty as coterminous with total irresponsibility towards the collectivity, the law, and the others” (Tsoukalas, 1995: 199).

Symptomatic of this weak civil society culture is the limited volunteerism as systematic collective action (Sotiropoulos, 2004; Demertzis et al., 2008: 64-67). Despite the increase of voluntary associations during the 1990s, participation in these is still weak. Although social care and philanthropic associations are the biggest in numbers and the most diverse volunteer organisations in Greece, they also have more limited memberships in comparison to sports clubs and cultural associations (Sotiropoulos, 2004: 24). This is reflected in the World Giving Index, published in 2010 by the Charities Aid Foundation, which reports Greece as scoring very low among 153 nations. On the basis of a worldwide survey that explores the percentage of population giving money to charity, volunteering and helping strangers, Greece is ranked at the 147th place and is reported as the

country with the least charitable population in Europe (World Giving Index, 2010).

The underdevelopment of civil society organisations in Greece can be also related to the relevant lack of development or independence from the State of institutions that have been central in the construction of the public sphere and civil engagement in other Western countries. Mass media, as seen on the previous sections, have not only failed to provide the premises for civil engagement in public life but, on the contrary, exhibit characteristics of the broader political system, further enhancing public cynicism and mistrust. At the same time, the limited use of new technologies (Tsatsou, 2011) has indicated limitations in the emergence and sustainment of an informal Greek civic culture (Tsaliki, 2010).

At the same time, underdevelopment of the Greek civic sphere has also been attributed to the dominant and restrictive role of the Greek Orthodox Church, which lacks autonomy as a collective actor (Sotiropoulos, 2004: 17; Danopoulos, 2004). Embraced by the State for nation-building purposes after the country's independence in the 1820s and 1830s, the Church has been attributed and still retains a "national-salvationist" self-image (Danopoulos, 2004: 48). This has given the Church a pervasive interfering role both in politics and in social affairs overall, as well as rendered Orthodoxy synonymous to Greekness (Danopoulos, 2004: 49). This strong nationalistic character of the Orthodox Church goes hand-in-hand with its parochial "centrality and unchanging nature" that ultimately promote "anti-intellectualism and racist and xenophobic attitudes" (Danopoulos, 2004: 51). In this context, despite its charitable work within the

country, the Church's narrowly perceived communitarian values contradict openness to and understanding of the distant Other. It is rather a factor for xenophobic and anti-Western tendencies characterising Greek cultural identity (Demertzis, 1994: 67), as these were described above.

In this context, the dogmatic nature of Orthodox Church stands next to the conservatism of Greek nationalism in sustaining and reproducing practices of xenophobia and cultural and social discrimination against ethnic minorities, especially the small number of Slavo-Macedonians in northern Greece and, most importantly, the large Muslim minority in Thrace, the majority of whom are culturally Turks but are not allowed to be identified as such (Mouzelis and Pagoulatos, 2005: 90). Although discriminating practices have weakened in the last couple of decades, partly due to governmental affirmative action policies, xenophobia and racism are on the rise, especially against immigrants from Eastern Europe and northern Balkans (notable example of whom are the Albanians) (Mouzelis and Pagoulatos, 2005: 95; see, for example, Hatziprokopiou, 2003).

These characteristics, although not exhaustive, broadly describe the social, cultural and political landscape in Greece as the context for the present study. There are a few points to be highlighted from this discussion as the most relevant for the audience engagement with distant suffering. First, the pervasive politicisation of public life and public discourses frames and underlines the ways people make sense of social life and their place in it. Closely related to that, this politicisation is implicated in the broad lack of a strong civil society as a way of orienting the people to common public cause outside the political, or rather

party politics. Finally, there are a number of characteristics in Greek culture that are related to inward looking and xenophobic attitudes, mostly encouraged by the dominant role played by the Church or the “underdog culture” that underlines the way Greeks understand world politics and public life. As will become evident in the empirical chapters of the thesis, these characteristics are significantly implicated in the way people position themselves in relation to the distant sufferers on the media screens.

3.4. Conducting the Focus Groups

Conducting the focus group discussions was proved to be a much less straightforward process than initially expected. The hardest part of the process was convincing people to participate and making sure that they did show up on the planned day; its most rewarding aspect was the richness of the material obtained by most of the discussions.

Respondents were accessed in three ways. Most of the focus groups were assembled through networks of friends and acquaintances. The idea was that one person would be the key contact, who would arrange a meeting with their own friends or colleagues and further contacts would be made from then on through the snowballing method (Gaskell, 2000). In other instances, people were contacted through groups or organisations they belong to, as was the case with the Red Cross in Komotini (Focus Group 5) or a football fan club in Athens (Focus Group 10). In these cases, there was no prior key contact with the participants but respondents were accessed through visits to the meeting points of these groups. Finally, some participants were accessed by the simple way of me talking about my research at different social settings (for example Group 7

was assembled from young women that were introduced to the research at a beauty salon). In all cases, it was ensured that the people selected to participate in the research were conforming to the criteria of segmentation as outlined above.

Ensuring participation to the focus group discussions was proved to be a hard process. A lot of viewers, unfamiliar with the concept of focus groups or academic research for that matter, were initially reluctant to participate, worrying that the discussions would test their knowledge and skills. Most of them were even surprised that their opinions would be of any academic interest and would express their feelings of inadequacy in the beginning of the discussions. Some even asked whether they should prepare by reading something in advance. The group of housewives I talked to in Komotini were rather harshly teasing one of the members of the group by telling me she did not manage to get any sleep the previous night due to her stress about the discussion and that she had spent the last few days "*reading encyclopaedias*" (Group 2). Constant efforts of reassurance had to be made before the conduct of the discussions that what was of interest was what people thought rather than what they knew.

Once respondents accepted to participate, arrangements were made so that the place and time of the discussion were of convenience to all. Despite these efforts, however, there were cases when respondents cancelled at the last minute. This resulted in some of the groups having considerably less members than initially planned and in comparison to what the general rule of thumb of six-eight people recommends (Morgan, 1998: 71). The groups were generally

consisted by a mean of around four people, varying from two to seven participants. In the end, this turned out to be rather effective, since participants in smaller groups had more time to debate and express their views. Indeed, in the focus groups that consisted of seven members (Focus Group 6), it proved hard work to ensure that everybody's views would be heard, since more silent participants found it easier to avoid involvement, as well as to keep the discussion in order and the respondents focused, as they would have the tendency to get divided into smaller groups.

The discussions were conducted in locations suggested by the respondents themselves, mainly their homes but also places they would use to gather together, such as coffee places. This choice, apart from the practicalities of being the most convenient to the respondents, was also made on the basis of securing the most naturalistic setting possible, thus enhancing a relaxed and permissive atmosphere for the participants. Of course, this is not to deny the artificiality of focus groups as a set-up of a social situation (Kitzinger, 1994: 106). Rather, it reflects an attempt to encourage respondents to engage with one another in a setting they felt comfortable with.

The discussions started with the presentation of three sets of photographs from the three respective disasters, without an explanation of what the disasters were. Launching the focus group discussions by presenting media material is a practice quite usual for media research (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996: 83). In this context, the photographs were used as a means to trigger the discussions rather than as their main focus. The sampling of the photographs was more random than purposeful, as it included the most clear and considered to be

characteristic of the disaster photographs displayed on the front pages of major newspapers during the respective periods. Participants were asked to attribute each of the set of photos to an important global disaster they could recall and then to retell the events about each of the disasters as they could remember them. This opening, although mainly aiming to probing the broader discussion, provided interesting information in terms of audience memory and attributed importance to the disasters. The discussions would later proceed in a relaxed and informal style, with the least intervention possible, so that apart from their views on the predetermined questions, respondents would also be able to indicate what other issues they regarded as important in relation to the main topic.

Discussions varied in duration from fifty to eighty minutes and were generally successful in providing rich information on the issues discussed. Most of them flowed easily and were generally enjoyed by the participants themselves, a lot of whom expressed afterwards that they had found the experience more pleasant than initially expected. There were, however, rare occasions when it proved extremely difficult to keep the participants' interest and engagement active (for example, Group 12). Nevertheless, even this kind of indifference can be interpreted as significant information in itself about the perceived relevance, or rather lack of it, of the issues addressed in people's lives.

3.5. Analysing the Focus Group Discussions Material

The audiotapes of the focus group discussions were later transcribed amounting to a large amount of material for analysis. Aid for the analysis was provided by notes taken during and shortly after the discussion, which pointed towards the

most remarkable elements with regard to the interests of the study and summarized the main arguments displayed and the particularities of each group.

The material was read repetitively before the detailed analysis took place. The analysis, underlined by the secondary research questions outlined in the beginning of the chapter, focused on the practices of media witnessing, media remembering and the issue of action at a distance. It was conducted on the basis of the principles of discourse analysis, informed by a combination of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; 1995; 2003) and discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). The method focuses on the use of language not only in terms of content (what is being said) but also in terms of its functions (what is being done and how) (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 28). As such, discourse analysis allows the researcher to go beyond the denotative meaning of participants' responses and explore the ways these responses are constructed through the choice of specific discursive choices excluding alternatives. In other words, it provides insights not only in what people think but how they have come to think this way.

This emphasis of discourse analysis on "understanding and interpreting socially produced meanings rather than searching for objective causal explanations" (Howarth, 2000: 128) is in accordance with the interest of focus groups as a methodology on the social character of the construction and articulation of knowledge and opinions, as addressed above. As the interest of the thesis is on the ways viewers discursively construct their agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others, the constructionist assumptions of both focus groups

methodology and discourse analysis seem to be suitable methodological choices in the context of the empirical research.

Given the plurality of discourse analytic perspectives and the lack of specific procedural description of applying the method (Gill, 2000: 177), the analysis draws upon a variety of relevant work (e.g. Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wodak et al., 1999; Billig, 1987; 1988; 1991; 1992; Fairclough, 1992; 1995; 2003). The first strand of discourse analysis informing this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough (Fairclough, 1992; 1995; 2003) and Chouliaraki (Chouliaraki, 2007; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999).

Critical discourse analysis takes as a point of departure the conceptualisation of discourse as a social practice, which, in dialectic relation with other non-discursive practices (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999) contributes to the “constitution of the social world, including social identities and social relations” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 61). In terms of analytical focus, the methodology takes “the larger discursive unit of text to be the basic unit of communication” (Wodak, 2001: 2). The framework of analysis expands from the close textual analysis - the “internal” relations of text (Fairclough, 2003: 36) to the relationship of the texts to other elements of social events, practices and structures – the “external” relations of text (Fairclough, 2003: 36). Drawing upon the principles of critical discourse analysis, two main analytical categories were identified here in relation to the research questions: the viewers’ discursive strategies of representing agency (Van Leeuwen, 1996; Fairclough, 2003: 145-6) and the discursive strategies of perspectivation and involvement (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 82; Kryžanowski and Wodak, 2007: 105).

In relation to the construction of agency, the analysis draws upon Van Leeuwen's framework on the representation of social actors in discourse (Van Leeuwen, 1996). For the purposes of the research the following discursive practices have been especially relevant in the context of the analysis: nomination and categorization; functionalisation, namely the description of actors on the basis of what they do (for example, victims or sufferers) and identification, which defines actors in terms of what they are (for example Greeks or Americans); personalization and impersonalisation; individualization and assimilation (Van Leeuwen, 1996). The use of personal pronouns is particularly instructive in terms of categorization (for example, "we", "our", "they") (Billig, 1992), as devices for the construction of unity, sameness or difference and distinction (Wodak et al., 1999: 35). As it will be made explicit in the empirical chapters of the thesis, these distinctions in talking about agency play an important role in the evaluation of social actors and the attribution of agency, either in terms of the viewers' self-representation or the victims' and other actors' representation. With regard to attribution of agency, the discursive strategy of role allocation was also explored in distinguishing between actors represented as "agents" or "patients" with respect to given action (Van Leeuwen, 1996: 43). Finally, equally important for the analysis were practices of exclusion, namely the omission of specific actors or categories of actors from the discussion. What is absent in discourse is just as important as what is present.

The discursive strategies of involvement, on the other hand, "aim both at expressing the speakers' inner states, attitudes and feelings or degrees of emotional interest and engagement and at emotionally and cognitively engaging

the hearers in the discourse" (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 82). Strategies of involvement or, adversely, detachment, are realized in discourse through the use of spatial (for example "here", "there", "our country") and temporal deixis ("at that moment", "then"), direct or indirect speech, active or passive voice, as well as the use or not of linguistic markers of emphasis and intensification, such as intensity markers (for example, "really", "very") or verbs and phrases that encode the speakers emotions (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 82). As it will be further discussed in the empirical chapters, these linguistic choices articulate the viewers' engagement with distant suffering, as well as their sense of proximity and distance from the events and the suffering victims.

Finally, the analysis also draws upon the tradition of discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Billig, 1987; 1988; 1991; 1992), which emphasises the active use of discourses as resources in talk-in-interaction and the context-bound nature of utterances and attitude expressions (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 110). Whereas critical discourse analysis focuses on unravelling and denaturalizing the way ideological power structures are constructed in and through discourse, discursive psychology is looking into interaction in discourse and the details of talk among discussants (Simpson and Mayr, 2010: 61). Underlying assumption of discursive psychology and, in particular, the rhetorical approach is that argumentative strategies are dependent upon the context of argumentation (Billig, 1987). In other word, understanding the meaning of a statement requires its consideration in relation to what the counter-statements, which it opposes, are (Billig, 1987: 245). This accounts for the inconsistencies and variations of arguments a discussant might draw upon.

Discursive psychology has used these principles of conversation analysis to think about and explore practices of remembering based on the assumption that what is remembered and forgotten is both flexible and occasioned on the “interactive business of communicative action” (Middleton, 1997: 73). Remembering in this context is explored as offering versions of events, which are examined “in terms of the specific contexts of situated action for which they are constructed” (Edwards and Potter, 1992: 27). It is this approach to remembering as well as its focus on the negotiation of meaning within discursive interaction that render this approach especially relevant for the purposes of the present study.

Drawing upon this tradition of discourse analysis, the final analytical category to the focus group material consists of a focus on the argumentation strategies employed by the participants. The analysis of the discussions explores in particular the “topoi” or “loci” used in the discussions. These can be described as the commonsense principles that function as “content related warrants of ‘conclusion rules’ that connect the argument or arguments with the conclusion, the claim” and as such “they justify the transition from the argument to the conclusion” (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001: 74-75). The interplay between different topoi within the discussion depending upon the discursive context and the different positions people find themselves arguing against (Billig, 1987: 247) is of great interest here. Participants in the discussions would often move between different discursive positions and draw upon a variety of topoi, such as humanitarianism, national community or political mistrust, in different occasions during the discussions.

3.5. Issues of evaluation and reflexivity

Social science research has been traditionally evaluated against the criteria of validity and reliability. The latter refers to the internal consistency of the research, which is required to produce the same results on repetition. Validity, on the other hand, concerns the extent to which the methodological and analytical choices capture what they were chosen to explore (Gaskell and Bauer, 2000: 340). There are two ways the validity of a research can be thought of: first, as the accuracy of the interpretation of the results through the adoption of a specific procedure; second, in terms of generalisability of the results in a way that can reflect reality, which has been often referred to as “external validity” (Brewer, 2000: 10).

However, both concepts have been challenged in the field of qualitative research, as presumably based on positivist assumptions about social reality and its empirical investigation (Seal, 1999). Reliability as repetition is hard to assess in qualitative research, where the analysis deals with complex concepts rather than numbers. It is even impossible in relation to focus groups methodology, where even the same group of people might generate different results, if asked the same questions again. This has been particularly the case in the field of discourse studies. Validity proves an equally challenging concept, since it is tested against truth claims, which are fundamentally against a discursive approach to the constructed nature of reality. In the same way, triangulation, widely used by social researchers, to warrantee soundness of results is considered “inconsistent with the principles of discourse analysis in that it assumes that different versions...can be taken as a route to something

behind them, and further, that there is one correct version” (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 176). Thus, alternative criteria have been suggested for the evaluation of empirical analysis, to match the tradition’s metatheoretical and epistemological perspectives.

Following Wood and Kroger, the notion of validity here is concerned with the trustworthiness and soundness of the research and its claims (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 169). Crucial in that respect is the documentation of the research process in a way that gives a clear description of all facets of the research not in order to be able to test its replicability but to understand the claims made (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 169). In terms of soundness, the analysis is judged mostly in terms of the demonstration of its grounding on the empirical material and the plausibility of its claims (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 171; 174). Equally important here is the inclusion of participants’ own orientation during the discussion in the analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 170). This ensures that the analysis is not merely based on pre-established categories, blind to new directions, but also takes into account what respondents themselves see as important.

Especially in terms of external validity, it has already been noted above that the purpose of the research is not the generalisability of its results but the exploration of everyday discourses on distant suffering. As Gaskell argues, qualitative research does not aim at “counting opinions or people but rather exploring the range of opinions, the different representations of the issue” (Gaskell, 2000: 41). It has already been thoroughly explained how the methodological and sampling choices made served this purpose.

The above issues were the guiding lines throughout the conduct of the research and the analysis of the empirical material. However, there are number of factors inherent in the research process that have to be taken into account. The first has to do with the use of focus groups and the constructed nature of their context. Although adopted as a method closest to processes of everyday talk, focus groups are still of a constructed character, which generally implements a normative context on the discussions. Far from being a naturally occurring situation, a focus group discussion constitutes a “deliberately constructed exchange between the moderator and the members of the group interview” (Morrison, 1998: 166). Participants in the discussion are aware that their input will be used by the moderator for her own purposes. There are two implications of this “moderator demand” (Morrison, 1998: 184): on the one hand, the presence of the moderator in itself can push respondents towards specific answers that they think mostly relate to the researcher’s interests; in a closely related way, participants often self-censor themselves, avoiding expressing opinions that can be interpreted as extremist or prejudiced. In order to minimize the effect of these issues, the topic of the research was never explicitly and thoroughly explained to the participants, unless requested after the discussions were finished; usually the research interest was generally defined as “people’s opinions about major disasters that occurred rather recently”. The use of naturally occurring groups is also a way of minimizing the effect of the normative assumptions (Kitzinger, 1995: 302). Participants did not feel obliged to create a positive image in front of people they already knew quite well and, in case they did, they would often be challenged by the other people in the group.

These techniques seem to have been effective in the context of the present research.

Another important aspect that has to be taken into account was my own role in the research process. Two are the issues of greater significance. The first has to do with the fact that, being Greek myself, I am sharing the same cultural characteristics as my research subjects. Studying one's own culture has been a major issue in social research, especially in relation to ethnographic studies. It has been common knowledge within the field of anthropology, where these debates were initially addressed, that only through the immersion of the researcher in the culture of the studied population could the former actually comprehend the "structures of signification" (Geertz, 2000: 9) of the latter. By getting familiarized with the culture, customs and behaviours of their respondents, researchers are able to discern the hidden, connotative meaning of their actions and responses and clarify ambivalences and paradoxes that seem incomprehensible to the outsider. These abilities are more of a given when somebody is studying their own culture. Such a first-hand familiarization, however, could prove to be a trap in its blinding the researcher towards the taken-for-granted commonsense assumptions of the studied culture, which she also shares (Chock, 1986: 87). Participants themselves, also taking for granted the researcher's sharing of their cultural views, might often find it unnecessary to elaborate on statements that are commonplaces in their culture. Being reflexive on one's own position in the dominant culture and critically addressing commonsense assumptions during the analysis are ways such obstacles can be addressed.

The second aspect of the researchers' identity possibly affecting the research field consists in their status as seen by the respondents' perspective. My status as a researcher was intimidating at times, creating a distance with the focus group participants. The initial reluctance of some people to participate into something they were mistakenly regarding as a knowledge test has already been addressed. The fact that the research was conducted within the institutional framework of a British university was a factor that would contribute to this. Funnily enough, at points I was addressed as a mediator with the British public, urged by some respondents to "*say that to the British*" or "*to Blair*" (Focus Group 2) or not to include something that might have been insulting to them. However, being young and female was a counter factor to this constructed distance with the respondents. I would often be addressed by the members of the older groups as "*the girl*" or the "*kid*" and they would often express their willingness to do "everything they could to help me"¹². My gender was proved to be an issue only in the case of one group of young working-class men (Focus Group 9), who would use humour and irony at an excessive degree apparently challenging my control over the situation (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002). In this case, I had to try and establish myself as one of the group by laughing at the participants' jokes and avoided direct questions, mostly by asking them their opinions as outsiders on the events and other people's reactions (Adler and Adler, 2002: 529).

¹² This of course had a two-sided effect, since there was the fear that respondents would try to satisfy me by trying to say things that I needed to hear. It was in these cases that it was most important to avoid leading questions.

Summary and conclusions

The present chapter has set out the methodological and analytical framework of the research process. It justified the choice of focus group discussions as the methodology selected for the gathering of the empirical material with regard to the research questions of the thesis, which focus on the audience of suffering and the discursive articulation of their agency. Given the theoretical assumption that the viewer's moral agency is discursively constructed and articulated through social interaction, focus groups were deemed to be the appropriate methodology for the research concerns of the thesis.

The chapter also described the research process in terms of planning, organizing and conducting the focus group discussions with members of different segments of the Greek audience and contextualized the Greek viewers with regard to their information environment as constructed through the commercialization of television news in Greece.

The chapter has described the analytical principles of the exploration of the empirical material based on the premises of discourse analysis. Two strands of discourse analysis were in particular employed, namely Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992; 1995; 2003; Wodak et al., 1999) and discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1993; Billig, 1987; 1988). The analysis aims at exploring the way viewers position themselves as witnesses of the suffering of others, the kinds of responsibility they attribute to themselves with regard to this suffering, and the different ways they reconstruct their memories of stories of such suffering, as witnessed through the media.

The research design both in terms of methodology of gathering the material and its analysis is based on the assumption that through discursive interaction, participants actively construct identities for themselves and each other and represent the world not “abstractly but in the course of and for the purposes of their social relations with others and their construction of social identities” (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999: 41). In this context, the way viewers talk about media stories of distant suffering with each other illustrate how they construct their interpretations of these events as well as their position towards them and their perceptions of the distant sufferers. This audience talk was analytically distinguished – and with regard to the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 2 and the secondary research questions presented in the beginning of this chapter – into three discursive categories: media witnessing (namely the discursive construction of the viewer as a witness), media remembering (the discursive reconstruction of the viewers’ memories of the events) and action at a distance (the discursive construction of the viewer as an actor vis-à-vis the suffering witnessed). These three analytic categories will be addressed in the following empirical chapters.

Chapter 4 Media witnessing

I now return to the empirical analysis of the focus group discussions in order to address the ways in which participants positioned themselves as witnesses of mediated disasters. The focus of this chapter is on the participants' emotional engagement with media stories of distant suffering. In the analysis, I take as a point of departure the assumption that the audiences' experiences of witnessing can be analyzed in terms of the three tensions of mediation identified in Chapter 2: the tension between emotional involvement and rationalised detachment, the one between hospitality and indifference and, finally, the tension between viewers' complicity and responsibility in relation to the media representations. What this analysis enables me to do is to produce a 'typology of witnessing', which identifies in some detail the specific conditions upon which the experience of media witnessing may allow for certain forms of moral engagement and not others. I argue, in particular, that the emotional agency of the viewer is contingent upon the events witnessed, their textual representation by the media, as well as broader cultural and social discourses.

This typology consists of four articulations of the witnessing position. The first articulation is that of *affective witnessing*, characterised by expressions of empathetic connections between the viewer and the distant sufferers. *Ecstatic witnessing*, as described here, is an exceptional case of affective witnessing, where the high levels of emotionality are closely connected to the audiovisual qualities of the media text and their impact on momentarily annihilating the spatial and temporal limits between viewers and event. *Politicised witnessing*, on the other hand, is highly embedded in cultural, local and national frameworks,

distinguishing between victims worthy and unworthy of empathy. Finally, there is the *detached witness* for whom the perceived banality of suffering and safety of the local restricts the possibility for an emotional connection between viewer and sufferer. In the rest of the chapter, I will illustrate these four types of witnessing, drawing upon the focus group discussions and the participants' discourses. Each type of witnessing is presented below with reference to its characteristics in relation to the three tensions.

4.1 Affective witnessing

The use of affective language was particularly common in the participants' accounts of their experience of witnessing distant disasters. Words like "*shock*", "*was touched*" or "*was moved*" were often used to describe both their emotional reactions to the events on the screen and their feelings towards the suffering of the victims.

It is this type of witnessing, describing participants' affective reactions and emotional expressions, that I call 'affective' witnessing. The concept of "affective" is employed here to describe the dependence of viewers' responses and engagement on the visual stimuli of the television image of the sufferer, with an emphasis on her body and emotion. Affect in this context is understood as the impact of the sufferer's body on the viewer's (Zembylas, 2006: 309). Affect has been theorised as a non-conscious and unstructured physiological experience as a response to stimuli (Tomkins, 1962; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Massumi, 1996). In this context, affect differs from emotion as the latter is the transformation of affect after conscious attention and reflection (Massumi, 2002). In other words, it can be argued that affect pertains to the body and

emotion to the mind (Zembylas, 2006: 310; see also Shouse, 2005). However, they are also intrinsically interlinked concepts, as the emotion is the product of affect. As participants in the focus groups described the affective impact of the image as they experienced it, their affected response was translated into emotional terms and expressions such as the above. However, and despite the transformation of affect into emotion in discourse, the concept of “affective” is chosen here instead of that of “emotional” in order to account for the initial affective response of the viewer.

This category of witnessing, which focuses on the description of inner feelings as motivations for reactions, constructs the viewer as an emotional agent, who relates to the distant sufferer primarily through a process of empathetic identification with her or his suffering. Affective witnessing applies to a variety of events that were mentioned during the focus group discussions and can be defined in terms of specific characteristics that consistently emerge across audience discourses:

- The employment of strategies of involvement realised through the use of verbs and phrases that expressed the viewers’ emotional response to the suffering they witnessed on the screen (*“I was shocked”, “I get upset”*).
- The centrality of personalised stories of suffering, where the victims of the disasters were represented through discursive specification and particularisation (*“the image of a girl”, “the child”, “the mother”*).
- The construction of commonalities with the victims, through the use of empathetic connections with the suffering people on the screen.

Linguistically, this was achieved through the use of pronouns (“we”) or choice of verbs (“we empathise with”).

These three characteristics constructed the practice of witnessing as a highly emotional experience, whereby the viewer becomes a moral agent primarily through the expression of affective responses, mostly characterised by empathy and compassion towards the victim. The way this construction of moral agency takes place will be further explored in the discussion below, where affective witnessing is discussed in relation to the three moral tensions of mediation.

4.1.1 Emotional involvement as empathetic identification

The construction of the affective witness was centred on two basic discursive elements: the description of an image singularising particular sufferers on the screen and the articulation of the affective impact of the image on the viewer. This dual argumentative structure is illustrated in the following quote of a viewer talking about his experience of the Tsunami disaster:

Dimitris: The image of a girl, on its own, that was running, I mean, that was from the Tsunami...of a girl that was crying non-stop, she had just found out that her parents were found drowned on a beach and stuff, and she runs and calls her little brother. Among the wreckages, in a deserted place. Well, that was it! I was shocked at that point, I started crying on the spot!...When you see people on the screen...When you see their emotions...How can you do otherwise? You cry!

(Male, 27, middle-class, FG8)

In articulating his position as a witness, this viewer combines two forms of reporting: the description of the victim’s suffering, what Boltanski calls, the

“external report” (“*the image of a girl...*”) with the depiction of the viewer’s emotional response to that description (“*I was shocked...*”), or, in Boltanski’s words, the “internal report”, which expresses “the states through which the heart passes” (1999: 86).

The viewer’s emotional response here confirms the power of visuals in capturing audience’s emotional imagination (Cohen, 2001: 173; Höijer, 2004: 520; Sontag, 2003: 85) and, in particular, the significance of the singularisation and personalisation of suffering in the process of visualisation (Boltanski, 1999: 11; Chouliaraki, 2006: 123). Personal stories of suffering, in their detail, seem to arouse audience’s imagination and emotional engagement. Victims singled out from the masses of sufferers become real people to whom audiences are able to relate to. These specific figures of sufferers seem to combine in their specificity the possibility of the spectator to both *think of* the suffering – that is, of thinking people suffering from the consequences of disasters but without necessarily considering that this takes place – and *think that* extreme suffering is actually being experienced by others, there and then, connecting the idea of suffering to the particular situations on the screen. As discussed in Chapter 2, this double articulation of the process of thinking, thinking *of* and thinking *that*, is central for the spectator’s imagination and necessary for the expression of commitment and emotional involvement with the scene of suffering (Boltanski, 1999: 51).

In expressing his own emotions towards the suffering, the participant above also introduces an implicit evaluative dimension of the appropriate response to suffering and, at the same time, attempts to engage the rest of the group in this kind of involvement. The rhetoric question “*How can you do otherwise?*” is

indicative of this attempt. Empathy is not presented merely as a personal reaction but as an indisputable moral response to suffering. In affective witnessing, the viewers' emotional engagement is articulated as the spontaneous or natural feeling of empathy and compassion that emanates from the image of the individual sufferer.

On the other end of this highly emotional involvement of the viewer with the scene of suffering, was the frustration about being unable to act upon the suffering. The following quote, from a discussion of the 2006 Lebanon war, which was taking place contemporarily with the research, is indicative of this position:

Olga: There was somebody [on TV] holding a dead kid in their arms and was saying...and crying...

Ira: Then I just lose my joy for life!

Olga: What else is there to see! I don't want to! I don't want to analyse it, I don't want anything! I mean, it's shameful! You feel bad that there's a man there holding a child in his arms saying "here's my child!". There's no image worse than this one!...No matter how just the war is!

Chrysa: But that's how we are, us human beings, we need to be shocked in order to get involved!

Olga: I see the child and I get goosebumps and I cry and then what, it doesn't stop, does it?

Penelope: We don't do anything! No, we do nothing!

Ira: We can't do anything!

Olga: It's an embarrassment being a human being! And you tell yourself "shame on me, I'd rather not switch the television on! So that I don't get shamed over and over again"!

(Female, in their 40s and 50s, middle-class, FG4)

The intense emotional involvement of the viewers with the scene of suffering also marks the limits of their engagement with it. The focus on the viewers' accounts is on their own affective response rather than on the reality of the suffering. To go back to Boltanski's distinction between internal and external report, the former overtakes the latter, in an *indulgence* to the sentiment of the viewer, which overshadows the description of the victim's reality (Boltanski, 1999: 98). As seen in the extract above, the focus of the discussion is on how this image makes the viewers feel, the internal account of their affective response described through the employment of a variable vocabulary of sentiment, "*shame*", "*shock*", "*goosebumps*". The mismatch, however, between these intense emotions and the perceived impossibility to act upon the suffering renders the former obsolete.

As a consequence of this impossibility to act, what is illustrated in this extract is the need of the viewer to "work through" the emotional experience of witnessing (Ellis, 2001). The urgency of the situation, recognised as "an aching sense that something has to be done" (Ellis, 2001: 11) cannot be translated as an invitation for action by the viewer, it is, therefore, only experienced as emotionally disturbing and, as such, something to be avoided:

Gerasimos: When I watch a disaster, I watch what happened and I don't want to know anything else. Because I get upset, I start thinking this and that, and every time this happens, I don't want to learn any

details. I don't know if this is bad, I don't think I would get any better by sitting and watching how the children get killed, the mothers, these stories that are tragic and they shake you emotionally. When I see the mother crying...I saw the other day that there was an earthquake somewhere in Peru, where was it? When did it happen lately? And a woman says "I've lost my family!". Where was that? Was it in Peru? It's a week now that it took place. I was so sorry for her! She says "I've lost my entire family!". What about that?! What more should I see! That's what I'm telling you, I don't..."

(male, 56, middle-class, FG11)

Expressing an initially strong emotional engagement with the scene of suffering, this viewer's reflection on the experience of witnessing eventually leads him to disengage from the event¹³. Conscious as he is of the normative framework against which his judgment is made (*"I don't know if this is bad"*), he rationalises his choice precisely on the basis of the extreme emotional intensity of mediated witnessing. It is because of the tension between distance and the moral compulsion to act, inherent in the mediation of suffering, that the viewer prefers to consciously disengage from the suffering and stop watching it.

4.1.2 Empathetic identification and hospitality

Hospitality, defined in Chapter 2 as the willingness of the viewer to engage with and understand the other, is based on the empathetic identification of the spectator with the sufferer. As in Boltanski's topic of sentiment, the relationship established between spectator and unfortunate is a relationship of "heart to

¹³ The quote here also offers interesting insights into the implication of the image's affective impact on the viewer's remembering of the events. He recalls the face and words of the woman on the screen but not the disaster that led to her suffering (*"there was an earthquake somewhere in Peru, where was it? When did it happen lately?"*), a theme that will be further explored in the next chapter.

heart, going from interiority to interiority” (Boltanski, 1999: 81). It is a relationship established on the basis of the spectator’s emotional response to the sufferer’s emotional pain, as perceived and imagined by the viewer. In affective witnessing, the image of the other makes the viewers feel and think of the victim’s suffering in relation to their own lifeworlds and frames of reference:

Gerasimos: Whenever I see a human face I feel sorry as if it were my mother. There have been times when I said “she could be my mother”, let’s say. You understand...

(male, 56, middle-class, FG11)

The sufferer, as a face that renders the pain imaginable, becomes an object of concern, reflection and emotional engagement. In this context, two seem to be the preconditions of the viewer’s hospitality towards the sufferer: first, the image of the human face, which renders the suffering visible (“*Whenever I see a human face*”) and, second, the assumption of the commonality of human pain, which renders the suffering of the other imaginable and relatable to the viewer (“*she could be my mother*”). There is a certain degree of narcissism, however, in such expressions of empathy. The participants’ emotional connections to the sufferers are expressed on the assumption that the latter are people similar to the participants and thus experiencing and feeling things in similar ways.

This illustrates an apparent collapse of distance between the spectators and the distant others on the basis of the perceived sameness in the face of human pain. This is not to say that the physical distance has been ignored and eclipsed; rather, as Silverstone puts it, identification with the other entails “the elision of the different to the same” and “the refusal to recognise the irreducibility in

otherness" (Silverstone, 2007: 47). The specificity of the suffering and the particularities of the context it emerges in are neglected. In the quote in the previous section, Gerasimos empathises with the woman that *"lost [her] family"* but does not comment on the context of her suffering. In a similar vein, a group of women claimed to be moved by suffering, as their families, parents and grandparents, had *"went through the same things"*, as they had experienced war and displacement.

Litsa: And I called my mother the other day and she was crying! Here, I told you, Penny, didn't I? Not today, you know about this! And I tell her, "mum, why? Your blood pressure will go up". And she was crying cos she was watching images from Lebanon, and she was saying that she had experienced the same things in the war with the Germans...

(female, 45, working-class, FG2)

In this context, hospitality is conditional on the assumption of sameness. The viewer is moved by the image of the other on the screen and is affected by the morally compelling nature of her suffering, in so far as this suffering is understood in familiar terms, such as the loss of loved ones. In affective witnessing the particularities of the suffering that escape the screen, also escape the attention of the viewer. Empathy does not necessarily encompass understanding and judgement, essential for a duty of care, as described by Silverstone (Silverstone, 2007: 47).

The conditionality of empathy on the visibility of specific faces and human stories underlines the circumstantial character of the viewers' emotions and illustrates the problematic of particularisation, which lies at the heart of affective witnessing and, indeed, of the representation of suffering. In order for

private emotions towards the sufferer to be translated into an engagement with the suffering as a public cause, suffering needs to be concrete in its representation, allowing for the viewer's imagination to bridge the distance with the victim, while at the same time retaining its generalisability (Boltanski, 1999: 100). However, what the case of affective witnessing illustrates, is that the relationship with the other, emotional and engaging as it is, is based on the visual and its morally compelling nature. As such, it is bound up with a particular situation. It therefore does not easily and necessarily translate into a generalised politics of pity and moral duty of care (Boltanski, 1999: 100). Empathy is expressed towards *"the image of a girl"*, *"the mother crying"*, *"the children"*, vulnerable figures that have been described in the literature as "ideal victims" (Moeller, 1999). Affective witnessing, as illustrated here, is biased towards the particular in a way that the relationship with the distant other is consumed through compassion towards specific faces and figures.

Characteristic of this difficulty in generalising viewers' emotional responses from the particularity of the pained face to the masses of the victims was the substitution of the empathetic references to specific sufferers by detached generalisations when referring to the entirety of sufferers, described through discursive practices of impersonalisation and objectification. In this way, the victims were described in the discussion as *"the wretched"* (Focus group 2 and 8), *"the hungry"* (FG1, 2 and 9), people who *"would even eat the expired products"* (FG1) sent to them by charity organizations, the *"dead bodies"* or the *"damned"* (FG8). Whereas the compelling image of individual sufferers instigated empathetic connections between the viewer and the distant other, general talk

about the sufferers as a whole would construct them as aggregates of victims displacing their agency and emphasizing the irreducibility of difference between the viewer and the suffering distant other. Hospitality is thus delimited and fragmented.

Affective witnessing, in this context, describes the moral positioning of the viewer in a way that recognises the other on the screen as a singular face, the situation of whom is imaginable on the basis of the perceived commonality of human pain. Hospitality for the other is, therefore, conditioned by the imaginability of the suffering, itself contingent upon the visibility of particular cases and victims.

4.1.3 Sensationalism and complicity

The last dimension of affective witnessing addressed here concerns the relationship between the spectator of suffering and the media. It has been argued so far that the visualisation of the pain of distant others, as expressed by particular people on the screen, was at the heart of the experience of affective witnessing. At the same time, however, this visualisation was also at the centre of the viewer's critical engagement with the media representational practices. Journalistic sensationalism, described as the morbid fascination of the media to focus on the most hurt and devastated, while reporting the events, was the main point of this criticism:

Maria: Why should we see everything?! And they have this melodramatic music and they show the faces and then they go above the crying mother and they ask: "How do you feel?" How should she be feeling?!

(female, 45, middle-class, FG5)

These criticisms are moralizing, in that they question the ethics of graphic representations of suffering and the limits between witnessing and voyeurism. This critical engagement with the media is dependent on the viewers' ability to decipher and recognise regularities in the journalistic conventions of covering suffering (Boltanski, 1999: 84). Through a long familiarity with these practices of reporting suffering and crises, the viewer recognises the reporter's attempt to move them on the basis of a constructed sentimentality.

However, there is a paradox here. Despite extended criticism of media reporting for its emphasis on emotionally charged scenes and the sensational depiction of human pain, it was mostly these images that also proved to be the participants' anchoring point for emotional identification with the sufferer. When asked about their experience of the events, participants would often draw upon this repertoire of people crying over lost family members or similar images. Some would even admit that this is what mostly attracted them in the daily news bulletins, namely stories of human pain. This paradox is best exemplified in the case of the following respondent, a housewife in her forties, who was vocal in her criticism of the media and journalists throughout the discussion accusing them of

Litsa: ...searching to find wherever there was a dead body, a dead child, a wrecked person to show them and try to attract bigger audience numbers! That's what I have experienced! Of the media!

However, when she was asked along with the other respondents about her daily news consumption and the kind of news she was mostly interested in, she admitted the following after briefly hesitating

If I have to be honest, it's always news of human pain that attract us...It sells, that's it! I think it's awful, I say this, and yet I watch it!

(Female, 45, working-class, FG2)

This seems to be a constitutive paradox in the mediated experience of witnessing: on the one hand, human pain, in order to be communicated and morally engaging, needs to focus on the human body in order to nourish the viewers' imagination (Peters, 2005: 118; 262); on the other hand, this focus on sensation and the bodily pain renders suffering into a spectacle and viewers into voyeurs, lending itself into the critique of sensationalism (Seaton, 2005: 127; Cohen, 2001: 204-205). The emotionally compelling nature of sensational images cannot be neglected. Even if the modality of reporting is being under attack, the existence of the suffering and its appeal to the emotionality of the viewers is beyond doubt. In affective witnessing, the viewers are affected by media representations in exactly the way they accuse the media of trying to affect them. In this way, the viewers fail to substantially challenge template journalistic reporting. On the contrary, and despite their critical approach to it, they are influenced by it and appropriate it in their discussions of the events.

Furthermore, and despite their criticisms, viewers appear to be in a relation of collusion with the media representations of the suffering in accepting the media as a sufficient way to fully engage with it. One of the implications of the disengagement from the scene of suffering on the basis of the intensity of

emotions, as described above in section 4.1.1., is accepting the emotional engagement with the sufferer on the screen as an adequate form of involvement. This is also evident in the quote below, where one respondent is describing how witnessing events of human suffering “makes him feel a better person”:

Dimitris: [I mean] that at that time, I realize...I mean, while sitting in front of the television, I realize my sentiment, I mean, whereas I don't in my routine...Simply, when you witness things like these, I feel that I become a better person – in what sense? – in that I have a nice feeling about everybody, I mean...I feel happy about the people and say “well-done” to the people that help. How many times do you say “well-done” to people around you here, in the city where you live? Well-done her for doing this?...I will say “well-done” to the people that go and send humanitarian aid, well-done to the correspondents that are there and they are trying to speak, to find, they run in their jeeps, they live in wretchedness, even if it's for five-six days, if they do their job...You feel sorry for the people for what happened to them. I've seen...I have cried, let's say...And you know, I realise, you tell yourself, “it can't be, since there is a tear on my face, it can't be, I'm a human being, I feel something!” I mean, you are touched.

(male, 27, middle-class, FG8)

The quote is descriptive of the emotion of “tender-heartedness”, as approached by Boltanski (Boltanski, 1999). This emotion is addressed towards the benefactor, the victims, even the journalists who connect the viewer to the scene of suffering. He thus positions himself as an emotional agent vis-à-vis human pain, exemplifying the case of emotional engagement with the scene of suffering in affective witnessing as described above. However, what is also evident is the viewer's indulgence in his own feelings (Boltanski, 1999: 99). It is him who “becomes a better person”, his humanity that is highlighted. The moral

actors, however, in the respondent's account are the benefactors and the reporters; his own role as a public actor is not being reflected upon and questioned. What can be concluded from this is that the mere appearance of the sufferer on the screen is sufficient for the participant here to believe that he is adequately engaged with the suffering, in a relationship of collusion with the media representational practices. This indulgence in sentimentality, also addressed in section 4.1.1., constructs the viewer as a narcissistic spectator, emphasizing private emotionality and self-inspection (Lash, 1980; Illouz, 2007). Affective witnessing thus described overall favours sentimentality over judgment. It describes a type of witnessing, where the viewer emotionally engages with particular sufferers on the screen through the faculty of imagination. At the same time, however, this engagement is expressed through a narcissistic indulgence to emotion at the expense of judgment.

4.2 Ecstatic witnessing

There were two particular events that were distinguished as exceptional within the narratives of the respondents in terms of their emotional impact: the South Asian tsunami disaster, which was among the disasters initially addressed by the discussion topic guide, and September 11, which, although not included in the events participants were asked about, was extensively discussed by all groups as an exemplary case of a global disaster. The two events are, of course, hard to include within the same category, due to the great differences in their nature, occurrence and causes, 9/11 being the result of a terrorist attack on the United States, whereas the Tsunami a natural disaster, devastating mostly poor

areas¹⁴ but also claiming the lives of thousands of tourists from around the world, and especially Western Europe. In this sense both September 11 and the Tsunami involved the imaginary community of the West as an integral part of the experience of the suffering (Chouliaraki, 2008). Most importantly, a number of commonalities emerged through the ways the two disasters were discussed about by the focus group participants when describing their experiences as vicarious witnesses of the two events. These commonly perceived characteristics can be summarised in the following points:

- The viewers' emotional involvement with the suffering through emotionally charged verbs and expressions, in a way similar to affective witnessing but often at an intensified degree (*"Oh, God!", "so shocked"*).
- The sense that the viewers were immediate witnesses to the events at the time of their occurrence expressed through the extensive use of temporal and spatial deixis to indicate this sense of liveness and closeness to the scene of suffering (*"at that moment", "in front of our eyes"*). This sense of "ecstatic" experience of the two disasters also had implications for their construction as "iconic events" through the practice of remembering, an issue that will be further discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁴ These are of course only a few of the differences between the two events. Equally important is the fact that the two disasters did not make the same moralising claims to the viewer: the Tsunami destruction left huge numbers of victims in need of aid, whereas the attack of the Twin Towers did not call for similar public action from the part of its spectators. However, what is important at this point and of interest in the present section is the way the two events were constructed in similar terms in audience discourses.

Overall, these two dimensions were implicated in the way viewers experienced their moral agency and constructed their status as witnesses of the two events. Drawing on Chouliaraki's description of the coverage of September 11, this witnessing will be named here ecstatic witnessing¹⁵ (Chouliaraki, 2006). Characteristic of this kind of witnessing is that within the three tensions involved in the construction of the moral agency of the audience, viewers tend to move towards extreme positions of full immersion in the scene of suffering as presented on the screen: intense emotional involvement with the events witnessed with little reflection; unconditional hospitality towards the people suffering "in front of their eyes"; and unquestioning acceptance of the media coverage. Marked by a strong affective element ecstatic witnessing can be regarded as a version of affective witnessing, as that was described in the previous section. The extraordinary character of the emotional involvement of the spectator, however, and the sense of unmediated witnessing renders this type of moral positioning of the viewer an extreme case of affective witnessing.

4.2.1 Ecstatic emotion

Characteristic of the respondents' narratives when describing their experience of the events, as broadcast during the Tsunami disaster and 9/11, was a sense of instantaneous proximity to the scene of suffering, a feeling that the viewer was witnessing the events as they were unfolding. This is indicated in the following

¹⁵ Chouliaraki uses the term "ecstatic news" to describe the coverage of September 11, as an event that was broadcast both as "a local tragedy" and as "global political fact", in terms of its spatiality; and both as "contingent", "lived experience", and as historical in terms of its temporality. "Ecstatic time", as she defines it, "breaks with the ordinary conception of time as a succession of "now" moments and presents us with *truly historic* time" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 158; emphasis in the original).

quote, where a participant is describing her experience of watching the collapse of the Twin Towers.

Nana: I was realising...I mean, I would catch myself thinking – the plane having crashed on the, let's say 50th floor-, wondering "what are the people up there doing? Is this the end? Is this it? I mean, is their life over?...Oh, God!

(Female, 26, middle-class, FG3)

The spectator's emotional involvement is once more expressed in relation to specific people, in a way similar to the type of affective witnessing. This time, however, it is not the specificity of suffering faces that the viewers find emotionally compelling. Rather, it is in the urgency of the situation, itself created through the use of live footage, that the emotional force of the suffering lies.

Tina: For example, with the Twin Towers, let's say, the fact that people were jumping from the balconies and we could see it happening, we could see that at that moment this person had reached their limits, I mean, they had lost their mind at that point, I mean, what was going on in their mind that they thought that they could save themselves by falling from the window, which was on – I don't know what floor, and they were doomed because of that, it was suicide what they were doing, but still...I was so shocked by that...so much...

(Female, 26, middle-class, FG1).

Watching the Tsunami disaster was also often described in similar terms of a feeling of urgency and immediacy of the suffering witnessed.

Tina: The moment that you would see the wave to emerge and you would see the people that were on the street being taken by the wave

and then you wouldn't see them anymore and that was going on, this is what affected me the most. Because you would actually see the event. I mean, in this case, we had visual contact with the event, we saw it taking place, I mean at that...there was a video and we saw it.

(female, 26, middle-class, FG1)

The mechanism of the spectators' emotional immersion in the scene of suffering, their movement from thinking of suffering as a generalised reality to thinking that people suffer contemporaneously takes place in a similar way as described in the case of affective witnessing, instigated by visuals that render the suffering imaginable and emotionally compelling.

There are, however, two characteristics that render this emotional involvement "ecstatic" and extreme in its expression. First, the viewers position themselves as immediate, simultaneous witnesses, almost present in the scene of suffering. The emotional vocabulary employed in affective witnessing is also present here (*"I was shocked!", "Oh, God!"*). These expressions, however, are not only responses to the particular face of the sufferer but also to the fact that the suffering is being unfold in front of the viewers' eyes, that they *"could actually see the event"*. This sense of immediacy is constructed through the frequent use of temporal deixis, such as *"at that moment", "at that point", "anymore"*, which immerses the viewer in the scene of suffering.

The second characteristic of ecstatic witnessing is that what the viewers are faced with and experience is not only the pain of a particular sufferer but the sublime spectacle of death and the fear it instigates. They become witnesses of the death of people, which renders the experience even more emotionally

compelling and unsettling than the general spectacle of suffering. If for affective witnessing the link between spectator and sufferer was based on the assumption of the commonality of the human pain, in the case of the ecstatic witnessing it is based on the attempt of the viewer to comprehend the fear of the sufferer in the face of death. This incomprehensibility of the victims' experience is evident in the participants' rhetorical questions included in the quotes above: *"what are the people up there doing? Is this the end?"*, *"what was going on in their mind that they thought that they could save themselves by falling"*.

These two characteristics, the perceived immediacy of witnessing and the spectacle of death, constitute a position of witnessing which is overwhelmed by emotion. This intense emotional engagement overwhelms the viewer to the expense of reflexive contemplation. The emotional power of the image seems to be such as to absorb the spectator into a fully sentimental experience. The specificities of the suffering, the causes of the disaster and its broader impact seem irrelevant in the light of the emotionally compelling images. This is not to say that both the Tsunami and the 9/11 attack as moments of crisis were exclusively discussed in relation to the moments that the disasters took place, as these were covered and broadcast by television. Both events were further contextualised and discussed in relation to the conditions under which they took place and to their respective consequences. This was particularly the case for the World Trade Centre attack, a disaster of a political nature, which was extensively discussed in relation to its political implications, as will be further illustrated later in this chapter. However, what the concept of ecstatic

witnessing highlights is the construction of the viewer as a fully immersed witness in the scene of suffering on the basis of footage of images of death.

4.2.2 Ecstatic empathy

It is this intensity of the experience of death as seen on the screen that forms the basis for the imaginative link between sufferer and spectator. The fear in the face of death brings to the fore the theme of a common humanity shared by viewers and victims. The expression of the respondents' emotional involvement is indiscriminately addressed to the dying victims. The agency of the latter is constructed through their description as specific people with thoughts and emotions (*"this person had reached their limits", "what was going on in their minds"*). The victims are not recognised through their relational identification, as they mostly did in the type of affective witnessing, as mothers, children or parents having lost loved ones. Their differential status, national origin or cultural identity was also irrelevant in the topic of the ecstatic witnessing, which is especially remarkable for the case of 9/11, as will be later discussed in the type of politicised witnessing in section 4.3.

Hospitality in this sense and in the context of the focus group discussions seems unconditional. The imaginative link between the viewer and the victim is built on the perceived commonality of feelings of fear and horror in the face of death. In this context, the presence of the other is not only welcome; it is unquestioned and morally compelling. If in affective witnessing the victims were mostly recognised because of their status as "ideal victims" (Moeller, 1999: 107), namely children and parents, which made their suffering imaginable, in ecstatic

witnessing the sufferer appears to be in a way identified as a universal human being symbolising the human fear in the face of death.

There is a note to be made here with regard to the implications of the two events, September 11 and the Indian Ocean Tsunami, in challenging the clearly distinctive roles between Western spectator and non-Western sufferer, constructing the hitherto “safety zone” of the West as part of the disaster (Chouliaraki, 2008). Indeed, the Tsunami has been described as a “national disaster” in some European contexts (Kivikuru, 2006), whereas September 11 has been theorised as a unifying global event around which “a feeling of solidarity within humanity” imploded (Haes, 2002: 279-80), due to its positioning of the West both as a sufferer and a spectator.

The discussions of the focus groups in this thesis, however, do not seem to confirm such theoretical arguments from the perspective of the Greek audiences. With regard to September 11, as discussed above, it was the sublime spectacle of death that formed the basis for engagement and empathy with the other. Furthermore, and beyond the immediate experience of watching the victims on the screen, the strong Anti-Americanism of Greek culture, which will be addressed in the next section of this chapter, challenges this homogenous concept of the “West” experiencing the suffering of 9/11 in a unifying way. As far as the Tsunami is concerned, despite the existence of Greek tourists in the area at the time of the disaster, there were very few references to them by the focus group participants, perhaps due to the fact that there were ultimately no Greek victims of the disaster. The few relevant references made interestingly claimed no interest in the Greek tourists, as it was humorously argued that “it

served them right for going over there to sunbathe" (FG 4; 12) *"instead of staying in Greece of the holy days of Christmas"* (FG 5). Repeated references would be made, however, to a Greek showbiz couple that was travelling in the area at the time and attracted great media coverage, something all respondents were cynical about but that is also typical of the widespread celebrity culture in Greece.

The care and engagement with the victims of 9/11 and the Tsunami, therefore, do not necessarily reflect in the case of the Greek audience the Western bias in reporting the events, since the West was part of the disasters (Chouliaraki, 2008: 343). What is argued here, instead, is that the viewer's engagement with the distant other is based on the sublime experience of death, virtually witnessed through the media. When viewers witness the death of people on the screen, distinctions between "us" and "others" seem to be rendered irrelevant.

4.2.3 The immediacy of ecstatic witnessing

Characteristic in the descriptions above of the 9/11 attack and the Tsunami disaster is the construction of the temporality of viewing as synchronous to the one of suffering (*"Is this the end?"*, *"The moment that you would see the wave..."*). Viewers go further than empathetic identification with the sufferer; they are drawn into the scene of suffering as if they are watching it taking place in front of their eyes. They become witnesses *par excellence*, as indicated in this discussion about the collapse of the World Trade Centre:

Irini: ...you actually went through this experience! You went through it, I mean, it was a tragic scene, which will stick in people's memory for ever, because you are actually waiting to see whether that person will

manage to jump from the window or not, whether she will be saved from the fire...

Nana: Exactly! You could see the person...

Irini: It was tragic to know that at any moment they could do it, let's say. To find your own death...

Nana: Oh, God...

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

Central in the symbolic construction of synchronicity is the usage of live footage, amateur in its majority, which create the sense of a realistic depiction of the events as they unfold and, therefore, construct a direct link to the scene of suffering¹⁶. The focus here is on mediation as immediacy, namely as the construction of suffering as it were happening in front of its spectators' eyes (Chouliaraki, 2006: 39). The hypermediatic qualities of the medium, namely the semiotic and technological modes through which the suffering is staged, such as the camera shots and the narrative (ibid.), are ignored and almost forgotten by the viewers. Witnessing feels almost "unmediated", as if the distance between the viewer and the scene of suffering is thus annihilated that the viewer can witness "live" the death of others. This sense of the annihilation of temporal distance is expressed through a number of temporal deixis and verbs ("*waiting to see*", "*at any moment*") and also the use of present and future tense ("*will manage*", "*she will be saved*"), which place the speaker in a coterminous relationship with the events witnessed.

¹⁶ According to Gillmor, the Tsunami catastrophe marked a turning point in the status of user generated videos, many of which became an indispensable part of the mainstream media reporting of the disaster (Gillmor, 2005: xiv).

In this annihilation of the technological and symbolic qualities of mediation, the space for judgement of the media representational practices is also annihilated. Complicity with the media is almost complete. The veracity gap between the suffering and its representation (Peters, 2001) is invisible. What matters is the suffering itself and the way it makes the viewer feel rather than its staging by the media. Characteristically, there is a transit in the description of witnessing from *“they would show”* (where *“they”* refers to the media and the journalists) to *“you would see”* and *“I was realising”*. Apart from the construction of the viewer as an active participant in the suffering, at least in a strongly affective dimension, these linguistic choices also express the idea of an unstaged reality, where the suffering witnessed is unmediated.

4.3 Politicised witnessing

The third type of witnessing described here is named politicised witnessing, due to the implication of political discourses in the audience discussions of their experience of the disasters and the suffering of others. “Politicised” is used here to describe discussions addressing relations of political, social and military power and inequality both at the global as well as the local level. These issues would form the point of reference and framing for people’s experience and perception of the disasters and the suffering on their screens. Overall, the characteristics of politicised witnessing can be summarised as following:

- The movement away from the individual suffering subjects to the judgement of the events as a whole.

- The movement away from the relationship between witness and the individual unfortunate to the construction of collective identities, both for the viewers as witnesses as well as the sufferers, through the use of deictic words of difference and community (*"the Americans"*, *"we"*, *"the rest of the world"*, *"they"*). The latter were indicative of an interpretative frame of conflict, which informed the respondents' articulation of the events discussed.
- The reference to causes and justifications perceived to have led to the suffering and the linguistic choice of verbal markers for the attribution of blame (*"due to"*, *"are to blame"*, *"involved"*).

Politicised witnessing should not be equated to the witnessing of political events, conflicts and crises, such as the war in Lebanon, which, as already noted before, was taking place simultaneously with the conduct of the focus group discussions and was therefore often mentioned by the respondents. It was of course more explicitly expressed in relation to such political crises. However, politicised witnessing was also implicated in the construction of the viewer as a moral agent in relation to natural disasters, such as the Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake by framing audience understanding and positioning of the events.

This description of the viewers' experience of the events was especially prominent in the focus groups with male participants, who expressed an overall interest into politics, when talking about the news in general. It was, however, also present in almost all discussions, when participants focused on U.S.-related disasters and American victims. This was also the case with the 9/11 terrorist

attack; when discussions would move beyond the scenes covered by the media to address the broader issues surrounding the event, such as terrorism or the role of the USA in the world stage, viewers, in contrast to ecstatic witnessing discussed above, would position themselves by making political arguments rather than emotional ones.

4.3.1 Indignation and powerlessness

If in affective and ecstatic witnessing, the viewer's emotional engagement was centred on specific images of suffering, in politicised witnessing there is a move from the specificity of the scene of suffering to the search for causes and the attribution of blame and political responsibility for the events witnessed. This was the case in relation to suffering attributed to political reasons (for example, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were described as a compensation of the suffering Americans had inflicted elsewhere) in the same way as in natural disasters (earthquakes, it was discussed, only result in so many victims due to the lack of appropriate infrastructures, and hurricanes, when predicted, are not defended against with the appropriate measures). In the following extract, a group of housewives are even attributing the Tsunami catastrophe to manmade causes:

Litsa: But who do you think caused the Tsunami? It is not only natural, a natural disaster...! The bombs the Americans throw...in the sea can also cause these things at some point.

(Female, 45, working-class, FG2)

In this context, the viewers' emotional involvement with the scene of suffering can be best summarised in feelings of indignation, addressed either to the perceived reasons that brought about the suffering, or, most often, to its

perceived perpetrators. An exclamatory tone, irony and accusatory words were indicative of such expressions of indignation, as is evident in the quote below about the lack of infrastructure in Pakistan, which according to the respondents was the main cause for the high number of victims.

Pavlos: They keep telling us about slum areas and stuff – but you are the one who wants the slum area to exist in the first place! There has to be a slum area, that's it! OK, if the state didn't want it to exist, they would have kicked them out of there! It's very simple! The state itself damns them to go through all these!

(male, 40, middle-class, FG6)

What is also evident in the above is that these expressions of indignation take place along an interpretative frame of conflict between “us” and “them”, the latter being the ones to blame for the emergence of crises and the misfortune of the sufferers. This deictic “they” would either stand for the “state” or “states” or “the Americans”, as seen above or other referents that would alternate depending on the argumentative context.

If indignation would describe the affective state of politicised witnessing, in a way similar to Boltanski's topic of denunciation (Boltanski, 1999: 57), this emotional response would exhaust the engagement of the witness with the scene of suffering to the level of passing judgement about the causes, often perceived to be hidden and obscured, of the suffering. This in its turn would be extended to a fatalistic perception of the world affairs, where

Simos: everything is initiated up there, everything. Everything depends on the people who have the power, either they are the state, or

Kokkalis, or Microsoft or the people who have the money...They don't care about the rest who are below them.

(male, 25, middle-class, FG1)

In this categorical argument, presented not as a personal opinion but as an indisputable fact, responsibility about “*everything*” is placed with the “*people who have the power*” and there is no space for individual agency. The same is evident in the accusatory tone of the previous quote: “*you are the one who wants the slum to exist in the first place!*”. Apart from the judgement of unfairness in both quotes, the witness does not enter the discussion as an agent in any case. Through this absence, discussants constructed themselves as powerless pawns in the global stage, mere spectators of the suffering of others. Their witnessing of this suffering is exhausted in making evaluative claims about its injustice. Their powerlessness in relation to the situation was used as the basis for the rational detachment from the scene of the suffering.

In the context of politicised witnessing, therefore, the emotional involvement of the viewer as a witness is limited to the passing of judgement and the expression of feelings of indignation towards the causes that led to the suffering of the victims. The perceived mightiness of the powerful, however, towards which their indignation targets, is at the same time the reason for their detachment of the scene of suffering: there is nothing that can be done, since this is how power works. The implications of this form of rationalised detachment for public action at a distance will be further explored in Chapter 6.

4.3.2 Deserving victims and the limits of hospitality

Characteristic of the type of politicised witnessing was the discussion and interpretation of the events within the framework of an “us vs. them” dichotomy. This was expressed along the lines of the attribution of blame and responsibility of the events witnessed, as expressed above. At the same time, however, this interpretative framework was also applied to the relationship between the viewers and the sufferers. The latter were in some way distinguished between deserving and undeserving victims. Exemplary cases were the US-related disasters discussed by the focus group participants, namely Hurricane Katrina and 9/11. The latter, as discussed above, was experienced as an instance of ecstatic witnessing, where the viewers were drawn into the scene of the disaster as the events were unfolding. However, when discussions would turn from human stories to the generality of the events, American victims would hardly be considered to be worthy of pity and sympathy. This tension is evident in the following extract from one of the discussions:

Hara: I mean, there were other things behind the events that were so shocking that I admit that during the specific disaster I wasn't that moved from the...in the sense of human pain...Yes! I mean, in the sense "Oh, God, so many people have died!"...I mean, of course I was really upset. But there was all this background behind it...how terrorism started being represented, how this was a reaction...I mean, really, during the Twin Towers disaster, I was fully desensitised! Maybe because they were Americans, I don't know, maybe I also have some anti-American...

Tina: I do understand what you are talking about but I'm telling you what mostly touched me. I was touched in that moment that I would

see the people jumping or later, let's say, that they would broadcast the phone calls they had made, when they were still inside and they would make the last phone call and they would say a few words to their loved ones and you could hear their voices and then, after a while, this person was dead, this person had died and these were her last words! That thing! That was the most tragic of the whole thing. I collapsed at that moment; these things touched me the most from anything else that I saw!

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG1)

The extract illustrates the juxtaposition between two types of witnessing, as described in this chapter: the second participant is situated as an ecstatic witness in relation to the scene of suffering. She highlights the collapse of time and space boundaries from the scene of suffering due to the qualities of the coverage, which bring her in an immediate relationship with the victim and emotionally draw her in the scene witnessed (*"that moment"*, *"I would see"*, *"when they were still inside"*, *"last phone call"*, *"after a while"*). Hara, on the other hand, adopts the position of a politicised witness, passing judgement about the events that brought about the suffering and considering the latter justified and, therefore, unworthy of compassion (*"behind the events"*, *"background"*, *"reaction"*, *"Americans"*). Suffering individuals are equated to American politics, and, therefore, are denied empathetic emotions.

Characteristic of this kind of talk was the fact that, whereas the sufferers would be described as the *"victims"* in all other disasters, they would be identified as *"the Americans"*, when discussions would be about U.S. casualties. The identification of the victims in terms of their national identity was used to demarcate boundaries between them and the viewers, both spatial and

emotional. It implies that American victims are mostly recognised on the basis of their status as Americans rather on recognition of their suffering. In this context, hospitality is reserved for the victims of unjust suffering; victims regarded as deserving cannot make emotional and moral claims to the viewer's sensibilities.

The same kind of anti-American discourses were dominant in discussions of hurricane Katrina. Expressions of empathy were significantly less than comments about the inefficiency of the American government to take care of "its people", a failure which was hardly ever mentioned about governments of other disaster stricken areas.

Pavlos: You remember about this (Hurricane Katrina). They had warned them and they knew about it. They knew but they didn't...most of them didn't leave because of their own decision...

Ilias: But why did they say then that they hadn't been warned?

Pavlos: They had been warned!

Ilias: Nevertheless, they did not pay that much attention, they didn't...people didn't understand, they were not given the chance to understand that it was that...

Pavlos: And indeed, what impressed me was that the political authorities were really late and they only went afterwards to play smart.

Ilias: Yes. It was said that they were late. That in the areas that should have been evacuated the state was also responsible for it. In...

Pavlos: Responsibility, yes!

(male, in their 40s and 50s, middle-class, FG6)

It is evident in the above how discussants attribute responsibility in their reconstruction of the events. The description of the events begins not with images, as in the previous types of witnessing, but with an indication of the reasons that brought about the suffering. At the same time, the agency of the victims is highlighted: *“they knew about it”, “they did not pay that much attention”*. Being also uncomfortable in rendering the victims responsible for their misfortune, it is on the U.S. government that they ultimately attribute the blame in agreement. The events witnessed are no more a natural disaster and its consequent destruction but a state failure to take care of its people.

The suffering of Americans is thus constructed as somehow justified based on cultural or national and nationalistic discourses. These discourses come to the fore in this type of witnessing. It is in politicised witnessing that feelings of national identity and belonging are either implicitly or explicitly expressed by respondents, when situating themselves in relation to the events witnessed. The deeply-rooted character of anti-Americanism in Greece has already been discussed in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.3).

Interestingly, anti-American discourses were often accompanied by expressions of the “underdog culture”, also discussed earlier in the thesis. The image of the “martyr nation, victim of unjust treatment by the ‘powerful of the earth’” (Stefanidis, 2007: 5), characteristic of the national popular discourse in Greece, was translated in the focus group discussions as the projection of feelings of indignation or empathy to the level of the nation, Greece, in a way of personification. In the following extract, the respondents are trying to explain

their statement that they are more interested in news of wars than of natural disasters:

Why are you more interested in a war?

Simos: I don't know...

Hara: Maybe because it provokes more indignation. At least for me, I mean, this is it. I mean, a natural disaster...

Simos: Yes, maybe in that case you say that there is nothing you can do. In the war, especially when it is done the way it is nowadays done, where only the US goes on war, and there are the rest after that, who are against it, then it is very frustrating, but this has to do with the fact that there are a lot of anti-Americans, let's say, as a people, or at least as...anti-Americans. But yes...This is well-known. And also because we are a country that has gone through a lot of wars, it has it in its DNA, and at any moment there have been a lot, I mean this [a war] also affects us, in the sense that we know that we also have around us enemies, we have no friends. That is why...

(male-female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG1)

Asked to express his interest in war stories, the participant immediately projects his feelings of anti-Americanism to the country as a whole, as a people, as well as Greece as an entity (*"it has it in its DNA"*). Witnessing is expressed here as taking place through the national. Politicised witnessing is expressive of political discourses, which in their turn are entrenched in national and nationalistic culture.

Within the position of politicised witnessing, in experiencing, framing and making sense of the events witnessed, viewers construct themselves as members of the imagined community of the nation. As such, politicised

witnessing adheres to the principles of a communitarian public, which shares pre-existing assumptions as to whose suffering matter and who are the unfortunates worthy of engagement and commitment (Chouliaraki, 2006: 188-189).

4.3.3 The media as part of the power structures

Viewers' relationship and evaluation of the media coverage within the context of politicised witnessing are also informed by the same lay understandings of politics which frame their understanding of global affairs and disasters, as well as their relationship with the suffering others. In a perceived universe of underlying political power inequalities and struggles, the media are constructed as an ideological mechanism that serves the dominant hegemony. Expressive of this discourse were criticisms of Greek media for focusing on disasters taking place in the U.S., namely the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and Hurricane Katrina. In both cases the media were accused for differential attention. In the case of Hurricane Katrina they were blamed for obscuring the failures of the American government:

Thanos: The American channels show what they want to be shown! I mean, there's no one else there, no European...or somebody from other channels. The Americans do not show what is not to their interest. We see this in a lot of things, not only in this case. Also in the war and stuff, they always show what they think [is good]. This is what they did with Iraq, this is what they did with Iran, this is what they are doing now with Lebanon. Everything, everything from the perspective they see.

(male, 58, middle-class, FG6)

Anti-Americanism comes to the fore, even when discussion is about the media coverage of events. The latter is described as a vehicle for American politics, therefore following preferential perspectives. Common knowledge and experience of the media coverage of other political events, such as the war in Iraq, are used as the basis for explaining the media coverage of the Hurricane.

At the same time, the extensive coverage of the terrorist attack of 9/11 was also criticised for being exaggerated in terms of time and focus.

Tina: When the planes crashed on the Twin Towers in the States, the whole world stopped moving, because, as if...A lot more people are being killed because of the wars Americans do. But then it was the States and all of us had to do something.

(female, 26, middle-class, FG1)

Again, anti-American feelings are expressed as a distinction between “*the States*” and “*the whole world*” or “*all of us*”. What is also implicit in this quote is a criticism of the hierarchies of life that underline dominant media representational choices, as described in the introductory chapter. The media are criticised for not focusing as much on the people killed by “*the wars Americans do*”, when they did cover extensively the disaster of the Twin Towers. This critique of the hierarchies in the attributed newsworthiness by the media was made often by the discussants:

Ilias: There are so many things happening around us, either about Iraq either Afghanistan, either about that one [the earthquake in Pakistan] that first of all nobody pays any attention and the mass media of communication neither, and also because they happen in downgraded areas we think of them as second class people.

Pavlos: Let's assume that you are at home and the television or radio is playing in the next room and you hear, let's say, that there has been an earthquake in Pakistan, or an earthquake, let's say, in Paris, I think you will focus and instinctively react in a completely different way. And since we take it for granted that the image and the sound should be only what sells best, I mean, then I will only show what is for my best interest, I will show what gets more audience...Now about Pakistan...

...

Ilias: But they showed so many things from Afghanistan!

Thanos: Of course they did...

Agis: But that was a war, they had to...

Thanos: But the channels themselves don't give any importance [to the earthquake in Kashmir]! What about CNN, I remember during the Gulf War, they would show everything!

Ilias: Yes, but that was an earthquake! If it had been a war...

Thanos: Exactly!

(male, in their 40s and 50s, middle-class, FG6)

What is interesting in the above is the movement between complicity with the media's hierarchies of life in the coverage of suffering to the exclusive attribution of blame to the media for ignoring some events and focusing on others, in other words between taking responsibility as a viewer and placing responsibility to the media. The extract starts with an admission that the viewers themselves show preferential attention to victims coming from some places in the world, considering others "second class people". The media in this argument follow the viewers' preferences, adopting similar hierarchies, in their

effort to attract audiences. Responsibility lies, therefore, with the viewer. As the discussion progresses, however, this responsibility is again placed on the media, which ignore events such as the Kashmir earthquake. The argument shifts from the media following viewers' preferences to the issue of what the media decide to show and why. Once more, political reasons are seen as informing this decision; the preferential coverage of the media is seen as serving ideological purposes as was the case, according to the viewers, in the war in Afghanistan.

There is, therefore, once more and similarly to the case of affective witnessing a paradox in the way viewers place themselves in relationship to the media coverage of suffering in the case of political witnessing. On the one hand, discussants seem to have their own lay theories of the ideological work of the media in their coverage of distant events and attributed newsworthiness. Their criticism focuses on the preference of the media to focus on Western, and most significantly American, traumas, as this is perceived by the audiences. In this, they try to morally distance themselves from such a practice. At the same time, however, they implicitly acknowledge that they themselves adopt such hierarchies of the newsworthiness of suffering. Although sceptical of the role of news, the audience seems unable to challenge their status as their main resource of imagining and understanding the distant other, thus confirming the symbolic power of the broadcasting of suffering "to reproduce the moral deficiencies of global inequality" (Chouliaraki, 2008: 329). Once, more, then, the audience critical engagement with the media can be interpreted as part of a broader culture of suspicion towards institutions rather than as a moral stance as a witness to the suffering of others, the misfortune of whom is absent or

misrepresented in the mainstream media. Viewers criticise dominant media on moral grounds; however, what evades them is the articulation of the moral stance they themselves take in relation to the issues criticised.

4.4 Detached Witnessing

The three previous types of witnessing, as distinguished here, described the construction of the viewers as moral agents either in emotional or political terms. The final type of witnessing analysed in this section illustrates the positioning of the viewer as a disengaged spectator of the suffering of the distant other. Detached witnessing describes the experience of the suffering of others as something remote or ultimately irrelevant to the viewer's everyday life. The expression of affect, either as emotional identification or indignation, is overall absent from this kind of witnessing. It was mostly the younger respondents that would more often construct themselves as detached from suffering and describe themselves as *"mere spectators"* to the events taking place on the television screen. The distinctive characteristics of this kind of discourse can be summarised in the following:

- The absence of expressions indicating the viewer's emotional state in conveying the media stories (*"a lot of people died"*, *"parents crying, - 'we lost our children'- , that kind of thing"*).
- The narration of the experience of witnessing as a sequence of events (*"there was an earthquake, and then the tsunami was created"*).

- The emphatic construction of distance between the viewer and her lifeworld and the scene of suffering through the use of spatial deixis (*“outside of the situation”, “somewhere far”*).

In this context, detached witnessing describes the experience of spectatorship of distant suffering in a way that the latter fails to engage the emotional and political imagination of the viewer. The suffering of the other seems irrelevant to its viewers’ everyday life and concerns and therefore fails to enter their moral space of concern and reflection.

4.4.1 Rationalisation of detachment

As mentioned above, the emotional involvement of the viewer as a witness which characterises all three previous dimensions of witnessing is lacking in the type of detached witnessing. For one, this is marked by the absence of the emotionally charged verbs and expressions used in the previous types of witnessing (*“shocked”, “touched” or “outraged”*). Indicative of this way of experiencing distant suffering is the following description of the Tsunami disaster:

Menelaos: There was an earthquake and then the tsunami was created and the rest, the sea was drawn in, the seashells came in the front...

Stathis: The seashells?

Menelaos: The sea was drawn in and the bottom of the sea came in the front. On the bottom there were starfish, different shells and stuff and they say, “oh, cool, let’s go to collect them” – no, seriously, that’s how it happened! They started, instead of going away, they stayed in the sea,

they went further in, and then the tsunami came, the first and the second and the third, anyway, and it took them.

Haris: Some people that were in a village knew – a young girl knew about the tsunami and she gathered everyone and took them to the top of the hill.

Kimon: Also the sea went in penetrated the land for about 7,5 kilometres.

(male, in their 20s, middle-class, FG12)

Hurricane Katrina was described in similar terms:

Menelaos: Katrina took place in New Orleans. I think in Northwest, towards central, though. New Orleans, anyway. It was a devastating hit to New Orleans, Katrina passed very destructively, areas were flooded, eh...What else? Electricity was down, a lot of people died, many refused to leave their homes, they went afterwards to the – what was the name of the basketball thingy? It was the dome, a big stadium, it was there that a lot of people went.

(male, 26, middle-class, FG12)

What mostly characterises this narrative of the experience of witnessing the Tsunami disaster on the screen is the focus on the external report (Boltanski, 1999: 84) of the events as presented on the news. What is missing is the expression of the respondents' emotional response to these events. Indeed, the viewer is completely absent as an agent in the narratives above, which consist of sequences of facts and images. Also absent is the suffering itself, which is briefly and abstractly referred to: "*and it (i.e. the tsunami) took them*", "*a lot of people*

died". When the victims are present in the narratives, this is also in an abstract way, as in the talk about the Tsunami disaster below:

Vicky: I just remember watching little children running...

Mary: The images afterwards.

Vicky: ...I mean, the things that the news were showing, the parents crying, "we've lost our children", that kind of thing.

Giota: A sense of panic everywhere.

Vicky: Yes.

(female, in their 20s, working-class, FG7)

The focus is again on the identification of the "ideal victims" of the disaster, the children and their parents ("*little children running*", "*the parents crying*"), however, the narrative is not centred on specific stories and faces as was the case in affective and ecstatic witnessing; on the contrary, suffering is constructed as a generalised sequence of images where each face seems to dissolve into the other: it is "*little children running*" rather than "*a girl, on its own, that was running*" (see section 4.1.1. on affective witnessing, Dimitris, male, 27, middle-class, FG8). Using the plural number, respondents identified a generalised category of sufferers rather than a specific instance of suffering. In sharp contrast with affective and ecstatic witnessing, there is no reference to any kind of emotional reaction towards the suffering of the faces on the screen. The only emotionally charged word in the quote, "*panic*", is used to generally describe the scenes of suffering rather than the affective response of the viewers.

Narrating distant suffering in indefinite terms as a state of a generalised category of unfortunates, devoid of its specificity, seems to result in a failure to imagine the pain of the other. This lack of involvement with the scene of suffering is justified by the distance separating the viewers from the unfortunates:

Irini: Since we are outside of the situation, we only see it...we watch it just as...spectators.

Kiki: True, you can't really do anything else.

Irini: Just a...we can't really do anything, just a slight emotion...

...

Irini: And then it somewhere far...which does not touch us...

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

Respondents justify their lack of emotional engagement (“*just a slight emotion*”) by emphasising the distance with the scene of suffering, both emotional (“*outside the situation*”) and geographical (“*somewhere far*”). It is this stark contradiction between the reality of the suffering on the screen and the viewers’ every day life that fails to render the pain of the other imaginable and ultimately engaging for the viewer.

Irini: I don't know, I think it's an issue of indifference...I do...admit it!

Nana: You think that it will never happen to you and you don't sit down to think about it and you say, OK, I mean I do get upset, but...

Kiki: Let's say that for the five minutes you sit down and watch it you say, “what a pity”...

Irini: "What a pity, what has happened to them?!"

Kiki: ...but then, I don't know, somebody gives you a ring, or you go for coffee, or...you have something else in your mind and you don't...

Irini: You go on with...Life goes on.

Nana: Yes! That's it!

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

Irini's categorical statement that "*indifference*" is the reason for their lack of engagement with the victims of the disasters encompasses a moral evaluation of disapproval for the discussants' stance. This indifference, however, is attributed not to the viewers' emotional numbing but rather to the concerns ("*you have something else in your mind*") and practicalities ("*somebody gives you a ring*") of daily life that inhibit these viewers from emotionally engaging with the situation. Emotions like empathy or compassion seem to occupy some fleeting moments spent in front of the screen ("*the five minutes*"). Empathy described as such appears to be banal, an unreflective and fleeting emotional reaction that fails to connect the spectator with the sufferer. The rationalisation for this ultimately lies in the distance separating the two; the circumstances of the latter do not and cannot affect the lifeworld of the former; for the viewers "*life goes on*", a cliché that rationalises their detachment from the suffering witnessed on the screen.

4.4.2 Hospitality conditional on immediacy

If participants' emotional engagement with the suffering was articulated as fleeting and banal in the context of everyday life, hospitality towards the victims

on the screen was conditioned in similar terms. Victims were described as fleeting images on the screen. As seen in the quotes in the previous section, they are either altogether absent from the respondents' narratives, or recognised as aggregates of sufferers ("*little children*", "*parents*") rather than individuals. They become part of a narrative of an event rather than presences, which albeit virtual, claim the viewers' engagement and hospitality. This is not to say that the presence of the other on the screen is disputed, neglected or unwelcome. It rather means that hospitality is limited to the moment of watching; the other does not constitute a cause of further engagement. What is disputed is not the right of the other to a mediated presence but the urgency and relevance that this presence deserves in the viewer's lifeworld.

There is a distinction here between emotionally engaging suffering and suffering seen as media spectacle. This distinction does not take place on the basis of worthiness of suffering, as is the case of politicised witnessing. There is no distinction between deserving and undeserving victims. There is, however, a distinction between relevant and irrelevant suffering. And the measure of relevance seems to be proximity, based on conceptions of both geographical distance and community. In the following extract, the participants are discussing about their interest in the news of the Tsunami disaster:

*Nikos: I felt more interested in the Greeks. By all means, of course.
Because they are our people...*

Sotiris: No, for everyone!

Nikos: For everyone, but first of all for the Greeks!

Gregoris: But this is bullshit, what you are just saying.

Nikos: OK, you have to think of the Greek citizen, because...

Gregoris: What kind of bullshit is that, to think of the Greek and not of the kid that you see being drowned...

Nikos: You put yourself in the situation of the Greek, don't you get it? You don't put yourself into the situation of an African. You say, for example, I could have been there...You won't care about the Greek victim?! We have to care!

(male, in their 20s, working-class, FG10)

In arguing for the greater relevance of the suffering of the Greek victims, Nikos here is making use of two interlinked topoi: the first is the sense of belonging to a national community (*"the Greeks...they are our people"*) and the normative assumptions of care that it seems to entail (*"we have to care!"*); the second is the assumption that the suffering of fellow nationals is more easily imaginable, in an *"as if"* sense, since the viewer can assume that it could happen to him (*"I could have been there"*).

In one of the focus groups of young women distance also seemed to be defined in similar terms. According to one of the participants, her lack of engagement with the Tsunami victims was justified because *"It's not next to us! If it happened next to us, I could totally see us all regretting it!"*. Later on in the discussion, she explains what she means by *"next to us"*.

Nana: If it doesn't affect me, my family environment, my circle of friends, that's it! My social environment...I mean, if it were something I was experiencing here, as when...What could I say now? Then, the example with the...the guy that was paralysed, what was his name?

*Taxildaris!*¹⁷ *That they were saying then, yes, he is somebody that I believe that when the accident happened, I think that I would help and I would experience it, I would hear about it...do something about...discuss about it...*

(female, 26, middle-class, FG3)

The moral space of care and emotional engagement is constructed through the use of spatial deictic terms, such as “*next to us*” or “*here*”. The narrow limits of this space include the unmediated experience of the everyday life, which entails the family, friends and the locally situated social environment. In the way of detached witnessing, the distant other fails to enter the moral space of the viewer.

There is again a gravitation of the detached spectator towards the local and national community as a moral space, in a more obvious and affirming way than in politicised witnessing. The emotionally engaging victims are the ones closer at hand, either in terms of the local community (“*here*”) or the nation (the “*Greeks...our people*”), because it is their stories that affect the viewers’ everyday experience (“*hear about it...discuss about it*”), and it is their suffering that the viewers imagine that can happen to them (“*you put yourself in the situation of the Greek*”, “*I could have been there*”). Ultimately, the object of concern is not the suffering itself but its implications for the viewer. If the analytical concept of hospitality, as described in the theoretical chapter, is the measure of evaluating mediated relationships between the viewer and the sufferer, detached witnessing describes the viewers’ expressed limitations in establishing such

¹⁷ Alex Taxildaris is a local athlete, who became a swimmer and Paralympic medal winner, after an accident that left him suffering from paraplegia in 2000.

virtual commitments. In the moral space of the detached viewer the distant other is not unwelcome but also not morally and emotionally engaging; she is mostly indifferent and irrelevant.

4.4.3 Complicity with the media

Emotionally disengaged from the spectacle of suffering and its victims, detached witnessing was characterised by a similarly disinterested evaluation of the role of media in informing about the events discussed and bringing the world closer to home. Discussing about the differential attention attributed by the media to the different disasters discussed, respondents' acknowledgement of it seemed to be devoid of any further kind of moral evaluation:

Giota: (The Kashmir earthquake) wasn't extensive, didn't...ok, it didn't get extensive coverage from the media, I think.

Vicky: When did it take place, though? Perhaps it has to do with the period it took place?

Giota: But it didn't...The Tsunami...It didn't get as much as the Tsunami neither as the earthquake in Turkey.

Mary: Basically, I think it wasn't shown as much.

Giota: That's it! It wasn't covered extensively by the media.

Mary: We are talking about more coverage, this is it. The way that the others will show it to you plays an important role!

E: The way they will show it, exactly!

G: And how much they show it, doesn't it?

E: And the way they show it!

C: But you know why it was the Tsunami? Because it is considered to be something totally strange according to everything given.

(female, in their 20s, working-class, FG7)

Participants acknowledge the greater coverage the Tsunami disaster, as well as the Turkish earthquake, attracted in comparison to the Kashmir earthquake. This choice does not seem to be critically questioned in the extract. On the contrary, respondents are attempting to explain this difference by resorting to justifications for the media practices: perhaps the Kashmir earthquake was not covered as much due to the period it took place; in addition to this, the Tsunami *“is considered to be something totally strange”*.

Furthermore, the discussants use this differential attendance of the media to the various events to justify their own difference of engagement – as well as easiness in recalling the events, as will be further explored in the next chapter – with these events. They place themselves at the receiving end of the media output, on which they have no responsibility themselves. By stating that *“the way that the others will show it to you plays an important role”* in their engagement with the events, they place responsibility on the media institutions and journalistic practices (*“the others”*), assuming a position of a consumer of media images with no responsibility or power of choice on them, complicit with the media representations.

Another interesting element of this relation of complicity of the viewer with the media practices in the case of detached witnessing was the reproduction of discourses of celebrity implicated in the coverage of the Tsunami disaster. The focus of some Greek media on the local celebrities that were travelling in the

area at the time of the disaster was, on the one hand, satirised by the viewers but also, on the other hand, reproduced in their own discussions. Specifically, the story of a celebrity couple that was holidaying in Thailand when the tsunami hit the area was widely reproduced by some of the younger participants. The attention the couple attracted by Greek media was mentioned by most focus groups but often in a way of ridicule and irony as part of their broader criticism of the media:

Tina: That thing with Gogo and Somer¹⁸! How many times did they show it?! You can't imagine! They were gathering fish afterwards...Gogo, in her little hat, and they were actually showing her on the news!

(female, 26, middle-class, FG1)

In the discussions, however, that viewers mostly positioned themselves as detached witnesses of the events, this story was discussed as an integral part of the disaster. One of the participants starts describing the Tsunami disaster by referring to the story of the celebrity couple:

Nana: I remember reading the interview by Somer...

Kiki: Ah, she reads OK magazine!

(laughter)

Nana: ...while I was waiting at the doctor's – that he couldn't see from far what it was, basically it was not at the...at the area where he stayed, at the hotel it was, he says, up to the knee...

Irini: The water.

¹⁸ Gogo Mastrokosta and Kostas Somer are both actors and television personalities and at the time a celebrity couple favoured by the Greek tabloid press.

Nana: He didn't...the water. So it hadn't destroyed a lot, but just, he says, the hotel owner told them to evacuate the place for security reasons. They didn't have any particular problems. Then, when they went to the beach, he says, he understood...

Kiki: They were tide waves, which they say that rose...

Nana: He says that things were not as tragic as they presented them, at least where he was, where he stayed.

Irini: Alright, but weren't there a lot of victims?

Nana: And then they had problems in leaving, in going away.

Irini: Exactly!

Kiki: They couldn't leave after that point.

Nana: What else were they saying? That they gave their tickets, he said, to some people who needed them more. And they went by route, he says, up to a point...and then, he says, they went straight to Athens! Ha!

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

Despite the reference to OK magazine, the following laughter and the apparently ironic “ha!” in the end of the extract, the validity of narrating the disaster through the footing of the celebrity tourist is not disputed in the extract. Two points are especially relevant in this narrative. First, the absence of actual victims and sufferers, characteristic of detached witnessing, as discussed above. Although one of the respondents is attempting to introduce this aspect in the discussion (“but weren’t there a lot of victims?”), the focus of the latter continues to be on the celebrity couple. Second, not only are celebrities accepted as the appropriate witnesses for exposing the extent of the disaster, but they are also

constructed as the benefactors of other victims, giving away their tickets “*to some people who needed them more*”.

The celebritisation of the public sphere is a major aspect of the mediation of social life in Greece (Tsaliki, 2010: 153) and mostly evident in the tabloidization of television news, following a characteristic model of infotainment, as discussed in the previous chapter (Papathanassopoulos, 1997; 2001; Plios, 2006). The apparent uncritical acceptance of this role of the media by the discussants here is another evidence of their complicit relationship with the media mainstream representational practices and journalistic choices.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter, I have focused on the experience of witnessing distant suffering as a mediated audience practice implicated in the construction of the viewer as a moral agent. I have argued that the experience of media witnessing is articulated in a variety of modalities, which depend on the ways in which participants negotiate the tensions around involvement, hospitality and trust that traverse practices of mediation, as described in Chapter 2. Specifically, I suggested a typology of media witnessing, which consists of four different types of witnessing, as these emerge from the different positionings of the viewers in relation to the three analytical concepts above: affective, ecstatic, politicised and detached witnessing.

Affective witnessing was described as the articulation of a position of intense emotionality vis-à-vis mediated suffering. This was mostly expressed through the description of the viewers’ affective responses to human pain, triggered by

stories and images of individual sufferers. In this context, hospitality towards the sufferer was conditioned by the identification of the human face and the assumed commonality of human vulnerability. The relationship of the viewer with the representations of this pain was characterised by a paradox, since the media focus on the coverage of pained individuals was criticised for its sentimentality and sensationalism, on the one hand, but seemed to attract the viewers' attention and engagement, on the other hand.

Ecstatic witnessing was described as an extreme type of affective witnessing, associated with the Tsunami disaster and 9/11, which due to their mode of coverage, gave viewers the sense that they were positioned as "live" witnesses of the events on the screen. The extensive use of temporal deixis, which indicates this sense of liveness, is distinctive of ecstatic witnessing. The use of affective liveness to describe the experience of witnessing, the unconditional hospitality towards the victims in the name of a common humanity faced with the liminality of death, and the suspension of judgement towards the media and its representational interventions were the other main characteristics of ecstatic witnessing.

Politicised witnessing was described as the position of the spectator who passes political judgements in relation to mediated suffering. It was argued that this positioning is not only relevant to political events but was also applied in cases of suffering induced by natural disasters. Expressions of indignation against the assumed persecutors of the suffering were at the centre of the viewers' emotional engagement with the events, usually expressed through blame. These persecutors were generally identified as the global political state powers. The

media were constructed as part of the power status quo and were criticised for adopting relevant hierarchies of life in their preferential attention to different disasters and the representation of their victims. In the context of politicised witnessing, victims are distinguished between innocent and deserving ones and hospitality is limited to the former, usually constructed as culturally or politically proximate to the viewers' culture and national community.

"Detached witnessing" was used to describe the position of the viewer as an indifferent bystander to the suffering of others. More common among younger participants, detached witnessing describes the lack of emotional engagement of the viewers with the disaster and its victims. In this context, a variety of spatial references are used to construct distance from the scene of suffering and describe the pain of faraway others as irrelevant to the viewer's lifeworld. In this way the distant other remains outside the viewer's moral space of concern. Although the reality of suffering is not disputed, it is the relevance to the spectator's life that is doubted. In accordance with the general indifference of the viewer to the suffering, her engagement with its representation is also characterised by the lack of reflective address. Far from critically reflecting on the role of the media as the connector between spectator and the suffering of distant others, participants, seeing the latter as irrelevant, are in a relation of complicity with the media, accepting them as adequate mediators.

These four positions of media witnessing also construct the moral space of the viewer in distinctive ways. On the one hand, affective and ecstatic witnessing, as discussed here, describe the empathetic connection of the spectator with the sufferer, in a way of cosmopolitan empathy, as the willingness to take the

perspective of the distant other (Beck, 2006: 6). However, and although the moral imagination of the spectator as illustrated within these two types of witnessing moves beyond the limits of existing communities, this imagination is also delimited, first, by its being bound to particular images of suffering, and thus failing to generalise private emotions of empathy to a politics of pity, and, second, due to its over-indulgence in the sentimentality of the viewer in a narcissistic way. On the other hand, politicised and detached witnessing have described the viewer as positioned within the moral space of the nation and the local, either by employing nationally relevant frameworks in discussing about suffering or by demarcating the local and national as the space of moral concern. The imagination of politicised and detached witnessing is, therefore, that of a communitarian public (Chouliaraki, 2008). In all four dimensions of witnessing, therefore, and despite the differences in the viewers' engagement with the distant other, the cosmopolitan imagination is constructed as limited and fragmented, if not utterly incapacitated, as in the case of detached witnessing.

My analysis, therefore, shows that the way viewers position themselves along the three tensions of mediation is contingent upon the nature of the disaster itself, its depiction in the media, as well as broader social discourses available to focus group participants, such as anti-Americanism or public mistrust. In this context, no event was approached in a uniform way and respondents in general did not assume the same witnessing position for every event discussed. Instead, a complex matrix of different discursive positions is constructed for the viewer

to adopt. My typology of witnessing aims at illustrating this complexity rather than attempting to construct clear-cut types of media witnessing.

Even though the practice of media witnessing is a multifaceted and complex process that cannot be pre-determined by either the nature of the suffering or its representation by the media, nonetheless, there are three specific properties of the mediated representation of events that emerge as significant. The first is the visual power of the face of the individual sufferer to nourish the viewer's emotional imagination. This power was even more accentuated in the cases of the Southeast Asian tsunami, as well as in 9/11, which due to their way of coverage, gave viewers the sense of immediate witnessing of the disasters. The second is that, by virtue of the traditional iconography of the news, the participants' hospitality towards the victims of disasters was constructed on the basis of an assumed commonality with the victims or of a sense of cultural and political proximity. Third, there was a fundamental paradox in the relationship between viewers and their media; although the media were often criticized for their ideological work and their sensationalism in reporting suffering, their symbolic power always seemed to co-opt viewers in a relationship of ultimate complicity with their messages, as the latter neither used nor looked for alternative mediators. Finally, and despite the pitfalls of attempting to match a particular type of witnessing to a specific segment of the respondents, it is remarkable that younger respondents most often constructed themselves as mere bystanders to the suffering of distant others and ultimately as detached witnesses.

Chapter 5 Media Remembering

Media remembering has been defined in Chapter 2 as the audience practice of the discursive reconstruction of events witnessed through the media. Thus defined the practice of media remembering is integral in the mediated constitution of the viewer as a moral agent in that it throws light into the mutually constitutive relationship between media texts and their viewers beyond the point of media reception and into the ways media stories of suffering are integrated within the everyday discourses of their viewers. Media remembering is, therefore, the second analytical focus for the exploration of the focus group discussions and will be the subject of the current empirical chapter. As it has already been argued in Chapter 2, what is of interest here is not merely the way memories of media stories of suffering are stored and retrieved by the participants but rather the broader discursive frameworks these memories are embedded in and reconstructed through and the ways these discourses are combined in viewers' narratives about the events.

With regard to the three disasters that were initially included in the topic guide of the focus groups, namely the South Asian Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake, the most notable point emanating from the discussions was the great discrepancies in the respondents' recollection of the events. The Tsunami disaster initiated long and lively discussions among the participants, who would readily recall its occurrence and the events following it, as well as narrate particular scenes from it, as already addressed in the previous chapter. However, this was not the case with Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake, despite the relatively more recent occurrence of the two events. In

most discussions, participants needed probing in their remembering of Hurricane Katrina, which was mainly constructed as a failure of the U.S. state to support its citizens rather than in terms of the suffering it caused, as already seen in section 4.3. Finally, the Kashmir earthquake was only recalled as a distinctive event by very few respondents. In most discussions it collapsed into a general category of “earthquakes”, an often occurring and not unexpected type of disaster, and was discussed along these lines.

These differences in recalling the three disasters followed broader patterns of participants’ remembering and “forgetting” events in the discussions. These patterns, as they emerge in the discussions, and as it has already been argued in Chapter 2, reflect the social frameworks of memory viewers employ and as such they are illustrative of the social groups they situate themselves within (Halbwachs, 1992: 22). In this context, the analytical emphasis here is on the discussants’ perspectivation strategies (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; Kryžanowski and Wodak, 2007), as discussed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.4.), namely the discursive strategies through which viewers construct their involvement with the events remembered.

In what follows, the focus will be on the different ways events are constructed in the discursive process of media remembering. I will argue that in narrating stories of suffering, viewers simultaneously constructed a *moral hierarchy of remembering*, reflecting the significance they attributed to the stories remembered, as well as their moral engagement with the suffering victims. The bottom of this hierarchy, explored in section 5.1. on forgetting suffering, includes events that had faded in discussants’ memory, described as frequent,

unoriginal and ultimately banal. The second section of this chapter will focus on the construction of a small category of events as iconic in collective memory due to their acute affective impact on the audience. The top of this moral hierarchy of remembering is addressed in section 5.3., which discusses viewers' memories of the earthquake in Izmit, Turkey, in 1999. It is only in this last case that media remembering expresses a cosmopolitan moral engagement with the distant sufferer, recognising the other both in their difference and on the basis of a common humanity (Silverstone, 2007: 36).

The final section of the chapter will explore the way the category of "global disasters" is constructed in media remembering. It draws upon the concepts of media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992) and media disasters (Cottle, 2006) to explore the ways global events are remembered as such by the viewers and the implications of this for the participants' sense of belonging and expressions of solidarity towards a global community.

5.1 "Forgetting" suffering

As discussed in Chapter 3, focus group discussions were triggered by photographs from three relatively recent to the focus groups disasters, namely the Indian Ocean Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake, before discussions continued and expanded to broader issues and events pertaining to the overarching theme of distant suffering. Although events surrounding the Tsunami disaster were easily recalled and vividly discussed by respondents, Hurricane Katrina and especially the earthquake in Kashmir seemed to have faded in public memory. These "absences" in participants' memory were treated as equally important as their memories of other events

mentioned in the discussions. “The absence of memory”, Irwing-Zarecka argues, “is just as socially constructed as memory itself, and with an equally strong intervention of morally as well as ideologically grounded claims to truth” (Irwing-Zarecka, 1994: 116). Exploring then the practice of media remembering inherently presupposes the simultaneous study of practices of “forgetting”. “Forgetting” here is not to be addressed as blanks in the memory of audiences; rather, what is of great significance is *how* these events that participants claim not to be able to recall are discussed about within the focus groups.

The present section will focus on how meaning about these “forgotten” events was constructed through the interaction among focus group members. By constructing meaning in discussion, viewers would draw upon a number of other disasters and similar events either as points of reference or by way of confusion between different disasters. The ways viewers make these associations during the practice of remembering are telling of the different ways they position themselves in relation to these specific events and the suffering of distant others overall.

5.1.1 Hurricane Katrina and Anti-Americanism

Hurricane Katrina, as one of the disasters focus group participants were asked about, came up early on in the discussions. As already explained in Chapter 3, it was chosen both as a disaster contemporary to the Southeast Asian Tsunami, as it followed it about eight months later, as well as an interesting point of comparison with it (Section 3.2.2.). The section of politicised witnessing in Chapter 4 has addressed how participants in the focus groups positioned themselves through a framework of political and cultural stereotypes in relation

to disasters occurring within the U.S.A., including Hurricane Katrina (Section 4.3.). Here the focus will be on participants' memories of the event.

Characteristic of most discussions was that these memories were not readily triggered among the participants. When shown photos of the events, it was common for group members to initially identify the disaster as a *"flood"* or even a *"hurricane"* but only about half of the participants could name the disaster and the place of its occurrence. The mention of the name "Katrina" sounded familiar to most respondents but even then only a few of them could recall the particulars of the disaster. *"Now that you mention the name, I remember something"* (Litsa, FG2; Kiki, FG3) and *"I only remember the name"* (Mary, FG7) were common responses to the name "Hurricane Katrina".

Characteristic of participants' narratives of Hurricane Katrina and the events surrounding it was, first, the construction of the events as a political failure of the U.S. government, and, closely related to this, the framing of the Hurricane as a national disaster. Both of these aspects are in accordance with some of the characteristics of the type of politicised witnessing as described in Chapter 4 (Section 4.3.), namely the focus on causes and attribution of blame for the suffering witnessed and the employment of anti-American stereotypes to make sense of the events. If participants positioned themselves as politicised witnesses in relation to U.S.-related disasters, they also constructed their memories of Hurricane Katrina in a similar way. The focus on the unresponsiveness of the American government due to its alleged racism and the construction of the victims as *"poor black Americans"* (Gregoris, FG10) were the

main characteristics of such anti-American discourses in audience memories of Hurricane Katrina, as evident in the following extracts.

Do you remember anything about Hurricane Katrina?

Mina: I remember that...When it happened more or less – last winter or autumn – but I can't remember...I mean, I had heard about it but I can't remember what happened after that.

Simos: They knew that it was coming!

Yes...

Simos: And they were evacuating the cities.

Tina: They weren't evacuating it! Or rather...

Simos: They had said that...

Tina: ...they warned them at the last moment and it was only white rich people that managed to leave and the black ones who were extremely poor could not go anywhere, this is why most of the people who drowned were...

Simos: I remember, yes, that they had warned...

Tina: were blacks!

Simos:...and that there were very long queues on the streets from people fleeing New Orleans. Yes, I remember that.

(mixed, in their 20s, middle-class, FG1)

The narrative is a combination of images and political analysis of the event, as recalled by the participants. Interestingly, Simos begins his narrative by immediately constructing the victims as agents through the nomination strategy of the deictic “*they*” and the use of the verb “*know*”, in a way implying that they

were partly responsible for their misfortune, as already seen in section 4.3.2. Tina later places agency and, in a way, blame on the authorities (*“they warned them at the last minute”*), also entailing an account of racism in her narrative, since it was only the *“rich white people”* that escaped the disaster. Similar issues were echoed in many of the other group discussions:

Sofia: I remember the flooding; I remember the water, the flooded houses, people complaining because aid did not reach them on time...These.

Gerasimos: Perhaps they were indifferent in this case...I...Yes, about the inhabitants complaining, it wasn't just that they complained at that point – I think that this was in National Geographic, that I don't really read, Sofia reads these things, I just browse it –perhaps there was not enough attention paid by the state, the Federal Government or whatever they call it, to those people, because they are black in their majority.

(mixed, middle-class, FG11)

By identifying as actors the *“Federal Government”* and the *“black inhabitants”* the disaster is implicitly framed and remembered as an internal national affair of the U.S., drawing a distinctive spatial demarcation between the disaster and the viewers' lifeworlds. By focusing on the victims' indignation (*“people complaining”*) towards their government, the event is also constructed as a political rather than natural disaster and most importantly as a political failure of the U.S. government. This framework of understanding and remembering the disaster seems to encompass an underlying anti-Americanism, as the section of politicised witnessing has already discussed.

Interestingly, such an anti-American discourse seemed to inform the narratives of participants that initially admitted not to recall a lot about Hurricane Katrina. In the following extract, a group of young women who claimed not to remember the hurricane as a specific disaster still find an opportunity to pass judgment about the USA overall.

Giota: But even there, you know what? I have noticed that their houses in the US are like fake ones! They should learn how to build a house!

(laughs)

Giota: Guys, you know what? When...I can't remember, that, and in the films I watch, I mean, their houses are like that! You know, as the pre-constructed houses look like!

Vicky: Prokat?

Giota: Prokat! Yes, I mean there are no bricks, no cement, no anything! What else could the hurricane do to them then?! Now, that it serves them right, this is not something you say but...

(female, in their 20s, working-class, FG7)

Not recalling specific images or facts from the disaster, the viewer draws upon other media images to reconstruct the disaster, namely general images of housing buildings in the USA, in this case from films. Most importantly, there is a latent anti-Americanism in her statements, placing responsibility to the victims as Americans, who “*should learn how to build a house!*” and virtually constructing them as deserving victims, despite the disclaimer of her prejudice (“*not that it serves them right but...*”). In a way similar to politicized witnessing, we see here how broader cultural and political discourses with a national focus enter the discussion about distant suffering. What is of interest here is the way

these discourses are employed to “fill in” the memory gaps during the practice of media remembering.

Apart from resorting to cultural stereotypes in order to make sense of the disaster, discussants also used another important strategy to fill in their memory gaps about the event of the hurricane, namely the use of relevant media images of “flooding” and “water”, as the ones described in the quotes above. The interplay between actual images of the specific disaster as remembered by the focus group participants and of relevant events is evident in the quote below:

Can you remember something specific about Hurricane Katrina? Has something made an impression on you?

Chrysa: I can't remember anything...

Daphne: Me neither...not very much!

Olga: The floods were very...these, flooded, the roads were covered in mud and this thing here [shows photograph of people sitting on the roof of the houses]...it was shown many times! They would show it all the time!

Daphne: Yes, I...

Olga: The mud!

Daphne: And the boat, people travelling on the boat tying to escape...OK, well, over there...

Chrysa: But that wasn't from this specific one – specific but...

Daphne: Yes, from the specific one!

Olga: We're talking about the specific one!

Chrysa: But usually, when we see disasters like that, because of hurricanes and stuff, this is how it is. Boats, people trying to escape, someone having climbed on the roof...But I can't remember about this specific one...

(female, in their 40s and 50s, middle-class, FG4)

Olga narrates her memories of Hurricane Katrina in terms of images of flooded roads and mud. These images seem to trigger similar memories to Daphne, who initially claims not to be able to recall a lot from the specific disaster. She then, however, goes on to describe similar images of water and even of victims indeterminately described as “*people travelling on the boat*”. The indeterminate character of the description is picked up by Chrysa, who attributes these images to the broader category of hurricane as a disaster and gives a repertoire of similar images that are associated with such events. What is at stake here is the specificity of the event under discussion, namely Hurricane Katrina, which seems to have faded from viewers’ memory and been assimilated to a number of similar events as broadcast by the media. A similar point is made by the participant below when asked what he can remember from the specific disaster:

Alex: Which one exactly was Katrina? What was it, a hurricane?

Yes.

Alex: In the U.S., New Orleans...I can't remember it. First of all, I can't remember it because there have been many tornados, a lot of disasters because of tornados in the States and I don't remember. I confuse them with all of them, because there have been so many! When I watch the news, I hear about a tornado, a disaster, a hurricane but I don't retain the name.

(male, 25, working-class, FG9)

The participant here feels the need to justify his inability to remember the specific hurricane by referring to the great frequency of similar events that take place in the U.S. and are broadcast by the media. The specificity of each disaster is lost in interchangeable images of tornados, disasters and hurricanes.

The concept of the uniqueness and perceived originality of a disaster, or lack of, for that matter, is a theme that underlined all discursive reconstructions of the events addressed by the focus groups and will guide the discussion in the following sections. What is to be highlighted again in the case of Hurricane Katrina is, first, the construction of the event as an internal affair of the U.S. and, second, the resort to stereotypes about the specific country and similar images as broadcast by the media to reconstruct the events in the practice of remembering the Hurricane.

5.1.2 Kashmir and the ordinariness of earthquakes

If Hurricane Katrina seemed to have somehow faded from participants' memories in most focus groups, this was even more the case with the earthquake in Kashmir, which followed Katrina only by a couple of months with a destructive force far greater in terms of its death toll. Only in a couple of the focus group discussions the earthquake could be remembered as a specific disaster. The group with the members of the Red Cross could remember it because of the aid the organisation sent to the affected area (Focus Group 5); in another group (Focus Group 12), one of the participants remembered it because it took place while he was doing his Masters' degree in Manchester and his Pakistani classmates discussed about it extensively. In both cases, therefore, the

recollection of the disaster was linked to autobiographical rather than mediated memories.

What is of greater interest, however, is the attempt of some participants to reconstruct the events that surrounded the earthquake. In both cases below, participants had initially claimed to “*kind of remember*” (Litsa, Focus Group 2; Giota, Focus Group 7) the Kashmir earthquake, after the location of the event was mentioned to them. Later on in the discussions, when asked again, they try to remember the event as described below:

Can you remember anything about the earthquake in Kashmir?

Dina: A lot of people died then...

Litsa: I think it must...it must have been the case that in ten...

Dina: Was it about 7-8 Richter, what was it then?

Peni: And did it happen around the same time that an earthquake happened in Egypt?

Litsa: But didn't this happen a year ago?

Yes.

Litsa: Yes, I remember. And, actually, it must have been the case that after ten days, thirteen days, they found a little child and they kept showing it, I remember, for a long time...

Peni: But didn't this happen in the earthquake in Turkey?

Dina: But I can't remember anything...

(female, in their 40s and 50s, working-class, FG2)

Giota: I remember people wandering around the ruins, looking for members of their families, mothers crying for their children...

(Female, 23, working-class, FG8)

It is evident that viewers in both extracts do not merely refer to the specific earthquake but rather draw upon a reservoir of media images and representational templates employed in the coverage of similar disasters. In the first extract, Dina uses a general reference to describe the aftermath of the earthquake and, although actively trying to participate in the reconstruction of the events, she finally concedes that *"she can't remember anything"*. Litsa, on the other hand, refers to a story of a rescued child that she is not convinced that it took place (*"it must have been"*) and that, as Peni remarks, seems to be associated with earthquakes in general rather than be particular of the specific one. In the same vein, Giota makes use of generic images to describe their memories of the events. Children and mothers are subjects of these images, constituting the "ideal victims" (Moeller, 1999: 107) of media's formulaic sensationalist reporting of similar disasters as has already been discussed in Chapter 4. These images seem to be subsequently recycled over time in public discourse in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish among different events. In the same way that hurricanes were reconstructed through a reservoir of relevant media images, earthquakes are also associated to a media repertoire of images. This is evident in the extract below, where participants discuss the interchangeability of media images of earthquakes.

What about the Kashmir earthquake?

Sofia: I can't remember then, cos I have them confused with the one in Istanbul...in Iran...in East Turkey, yes, that's where it must have happened...

Gerasimos: Yes, every time it happens...

Sofia: And then...I can't remember which one was that one...

Gerasimos: There are so many that they don't register anymore.

Sofia: But the scenes are always the same. The houses falling down, because construction is not good and...

...

Gerasimos: Here, this child must have been rescued [shows photograph]. It should be the case that, there were two children that...now it slowly comes to mind...but OK, as Sofia said, there are so many and repetitive the images we see from earthquakes that you cannot distinguish them.

(mixed, in their 50s, middle-class, FG11)

Gerasimos here tries to recall a story of children rescued under the ruins after the Kashmir earthquake, which “*slowly comes to mind*” after looking at the photographs of the disaster. After some hesitation, however, he realises that this story might not have taken place during this specific earthquake, as it is not unique but rather part of many similar repetitive images. Indeed similar stories of survivors were discussed by other focus groups, as well. In the following extract, the discussion about the Kashmir earthquake initiated a lively exchange of stories of human suffering caused by earthquakes in other occasions:

Giota: Guys, do you remember that there was an earthquake – I don't remember in which country – and they found a woman who was...

Mary: Wasn't it in Greece?

Vicky: The factory?

Mary: Yes, the factory of Ricomex!

Vicky: In Athens¹⁹!

Giota: And she was there for days...

Vicky: Yes, they had rescued a woman, yes, yes, yes...

Giota: Do you remember? How did she even survive?!

Participants kept discussing the collapse of the factory Ricomex for a while only to come back to similar stories that they could recall:

Giota: And then there was another one, with a little boy, Andreas²⁰, I don't know where...And it took them days to take him out of the ruins but they rescued him in the end.

Vicky: I remember something else in Armenia²¹...A mother who had a...who was trapped with her child and in order to save it she had cut her fingers...

Giota: Yes, and she would feed the child!

Mary: Oooooohh!!! A mother's sacrifice! But it's so touching! To hear stories like that!

Giota: Guys, if you want to survive...First of all, if you are a mother, you want your child to survive!

¹⁹ Participants here refer to the collapse of the factory Ricomex during the Athens earthquake of 7th September 1999. The collapse left 39 dead and a number of injured victims.

²⁰ Andreas Bogdanos was an 8-year-old boy that was extricated from the ruins of his home after a strong earthquake in the city of Aigio, Greece, in 1995. The rescue operation lasted for more than 20 hours and was covered live by the national media virtually for its entire duration.

²¹ The participant seems to refer to the 1988 earthquake in the area of Spitak, Armenia.

Mary: And then another story, that somebody would drink their own urine in order to survive. But it's so horrific! To be under the ruins and nobody finding you!

(female, in their 20s, working-class, FG7)

Similar stories of survivors were also mentioned in other focus group discussions, such as of a woman who *"was trapped, and they found her a month later...and there was a pack of pasta and she survived on dry pasta"* (Georgia, Focus Group 5). Human stories of individual suffering have a lasting impact on viewers' memory due to their emotionally compelling nature as *"moving"* or *"horrific"*, as it has already been discussed in the chapter of the experience of witnessing. There is also, however, an over-indulgence in self-oriented emotions in these narratives, as already addressed in relation to affective witnessing (Section 4.1.).

Nevertheless, and despite the affective impact the human pain of these stories evokes, what is being lost in the discussions is the specificity of the context in which these stories occur. The conversation becomes an interchange of stories of particular instances of horrific suffering, where the categories of time and space completely collapse and the historicity of the event is obscured. Susan Sontag makes a similar point with regard to photographic images of suffering. "The problem", she argues, "is not that people remember through photos, but that they remember only the photos", which "eclipses other forms of understanding and remembering (Sontag, 2003: 89). This does not mean that harrowing images lose their power to shock but "they are not much help if the task is to understand" (ibid.). In the same way and in congruence to the problematic of particularisation discussed earlier (Section 4.1.2.), harrowing

stories of specific sufferers are reconstructed by participants in the practice of media remembering but they are devoid of their socio-historical circumstances that would allow for better understanding of the predicament of the sufferers.

The local (earthquake in Athens) is intertwined with the distant (earthquake in Armenia) and the discussion about the recent (Kashmir) brings to the fore images of the past. These associations point to the construction of the theme of human suffering caused by earthquakes as an interpretative category for a number of different events. At the same time, however, this process of categorisation obscures the specificities of particular events, which in its turn bears implications for the positioning of the viewer towards these events. These implications will be explored in the next section.

5.1.3 Hurricanes, earthquakes and the banality of suffering

In the process of the discursive retelling of the Kashmir earthquake as well as Hurricane Katrina, participants in the focus groups drew upon media images of trauma that seem to have accumulated over time into broader interpretative frameworks to which people resort to make sense of similar events. These discursive frameworks are acquired over a long period of exposure to similar media images and representations and shape understandings of subsequent mediated disasters of a similar nature (Kitzinger, 2000). Events, in this context, become “de-evented” (Silverstone, 2007: 62), they somehow lose their uniqueness and become part of a broader discursive framework, falling into “frames that they provide for each other as well as those that, in the media’s own imaginary, lie close at hand in the present and popular reservoir of dramatic images” (Silverstone, 2007: 63). They are de-contextualised from their

specificities and become part, through a process of osmosis, of similar mediated narratives (Kitzinger, 2000: 76).

This “recycling” of images in audience discourses in a way that the uniqueness of the disaster is concealed bears significant latent moral implications for viewers’ engagement with the suffering of distant others. Disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes are constructed through the practice of media remembering as expected, unremarkable and ordinary. In the following extract participants account for the fact that they cannot remember Hurricane Katrina by comparing the hurricane to the Tsunami disaster:

Mary: They did not show this (Hurricane Katrina) as much as the Tsunami!

Giota: I’m telling you, the Tsunami happened years ago and it feels as if it just took place. Whereas hurricanes and earthquakes are...a typical phenomenon by now, they are ordinary. This is why.

(female, in their 20s, working-class, FG7)

The argument about the lack of uniqueness or originality of disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes met earlier is made yet again. It is employed here as an argumentative strategy to justify the fact that viewers do not remember Hurricane Katrina as easily and vividly as the Tsunami. This apparent need for justification implies a normative discourse according to which forgetting is perceived as failing (Connerton, 2008: 59), in this case as a moral failure of the spectator and as indifference to human pain.

By describing hurricanes and earthquakes as “typical” and “ordinary” viewers also construct the suffering that these disasters entail as ordinary, expected and,

ultimately, banal. Cohen describes the “normalisation” and “routinisation” of suffering as the loss of the potential impact of suffering due to the viewers’ familiarity with it (Cohen, 2001: 189). Audience engagement meets its limit “after activating the memory trace that ‘this is just the sort of thing that’s always happening in places like that’” (ibid.). This should not necessarily be translated as the viewers’ loss of the sense of conventional definitions of normal and their emotional numbness towards the suffering of others, as the compassion fatigue thesis implies (Moeller, 1999). What is rather at stake here is that particular areas are constructed as more exposed to disasters and the people living there as more vulnerable to trauma, as is the case in the extracts below in which participants reflect on the Kashmir earthquake:

Vivi: Something that I always think about, when something like this happens, is why it is always that the poor people are hit! And in Pakistan the earthquake was huge! In Turkey, where it had taken place...the poorest people, the poorest places....

(female, 40 years old, working-class, FG5)

Fanis: Wherever there is a poor person...that’s where it hits!

Stelios: Wherever there are poor people, their bad destiny follows them, yes! That’s where it hits, yes!

(male, in their 20s, working-class, FG9)

The participants here make a moral judgment, expressing frustration with the apparent unfairness of disasters always hitting the most unfortunate (“why”). At the same time, however, through the use of the commonplace in Greek language (*Wherever there are poor people, their bad destiny follows them*), discussants naturalise the occurrence of disasters in specific places and for specific people.

This is not to say that viewers cannot construct empathetic connections with the suffering victims in this context. As the empirical findings on media witnessing have already suggested, participants' emotional involvement with the victims of "ordinary" disasters such as earthquakes was expressed in strong affective terms (Section 4.1.). However, within the practice of remembering this affective engagement is characterised by a self-orientation towards the private emotions of the spectator rather than a reflective engagement with the suffering of the other. Disasters of a similar nature covered by the media in similar ways are constructed through the practice of media remembering as interchangeable, unsurprising and banal. In a similar way the pain of the suffering victims is something to be expected.

There is a further moral implication of the constructed banality of suffering in audience remembering, namely the complicity of the viewers with the media representational practices (Silverstone, 2007: 3). Although the repetitiveness and similarity of media images of the coverage of disasters were often pointed out by participants in the process of remembering the events, these were only used as a justification strategy to defend the difficulty of viewers to distinguish between different disasters. They did not form the basis for a critical engagement with the media and their template reporting as inadequate for revealing the multiple aspects of an event. On the contrary, the events become blurred with the media images, namely the means through which they were supposed to be remembered (Zelizer, 1998: 202).

These template images provide a contextual framework for viewers to make sense of the events they witness. At the same time, however, they undermine

the events they contextualise by conflating the complexity of each individual event into a set of similar images (Zelizer, 1998: 226). What is at stake here is audience understanding of the particularities of a given disaster, which in its turn can allow for a full moral engagement with the situation witnessed. As suffering becomes de-evented, it is evacuated by the dimension of historicity, necessary for understanding the distant other and for the cosmopolitan imagination (Chouliaraki, 2006: 43). Chouliaraki approaches historicity as instrumental for the moralisation of the spectator of suffering, both as “social explanation”, contextualising a media story of suffering within a broader pattern of social and political relationships (Chouliaraki, 2006: 63) and as “the specific horizon of space and time that contextualises the singular event” (Chouliaraki, 2006: 64). As such, historicity is an important dimension for the viewers’ understanding of the distant other and their engagement with her suffering.

Overall, the moral implications of “forgetting” disasters, as illustrated in this section, do not lie so much with the lack of memories but rather with the apparently inadequate understanding of the events discussed. Media remembering in the case of Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake is underlined by two characteristics: the use of cultural stereotypes and frameworks to make sense of the events, such as anti-Americanism or the platitude that disasters always hitting the poor; and the use of a reservoir of media images from the coverage of similar disasters as accumulated over time. Attending to the ways people attempt to reconstruct the events in the group discussions offers insights into the politics of memory construction, namely how ideological positions influence memory (Kumar et al., 2006: 222), as well as the

instrumental role of media representations as technologies of memory that embody and generate memories (Sturken, 1997: 10). At the same time, it illustrates viewers' engagement with the suffering through the practice of media remembering as gravitating towards the self and private emotions of compassion with specific images of others rather than a reflective engagement with the suffering of the victims. This, it has been argued, is mainly due to the de-contextualisation of the events in the practice of remembering, depriving them from their historical dimensions which are necessary for judgment and understanding.

5.2 Iconic media disasters and the spectacularity of suffering

If hurricanes and earthquakes were constructed as banal through the practice of audience remembering, there was another limited category of disasters that were referred to in the discussions as exemplary memories of global disasters. This category consisted mostly of the South Asia Tsunami, which participants were specifically asked about, and the attack on the World Trade Centre of September 11, which, although of a very different nature, both in terms of its occurrence as a terrorist act and with regard to its death toll with a smaller number of victims, was discussed without probing by all groups in similar ways. The two events, as was argued in Chapter 4, were experienced by viewers in the form of ecstatic witnessing (Section 4.2.). This ecstatic character attributed to the mediated experience of the events, also has implications for viewers' practice of remembering, as the two disasters were vividly recalled and most importantly referred to as points of reference and comparison with other distant disasters.

It is argued here that these events have become to acquire a mythic significance (Leavy, 2007: 4) because of their extraordinary character, which captivated audience attention at the point of their occurrence, but also because of the broader meanings that have been attributed to them as “icons” of global disasters and distant suffering. The extraordinariness of these events relate to their “*originality*”, as referred to by the participants in the discussions and mentioned above in relation to the “*ordinariness*” of earthquakes and hurricanes. The particular character of these events has also formed the basis for their appropriation into broader discourses and has ultimately constructed them as “iconic events” in public memory. “Iconic” is used here to denote the events that come to mean something further than their individual components and acquire a mythic meaning, representing universal concepts, emotions and meanings (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001: 36).

The Tsunami and September 11 were especially remembered and narrated in relation to pictorial images as these were broadcast by the media. Most of these images were of the amateur footage covering the disasters as they unfolded. The affective impact of these images has been discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the type of ecstatic witnessing (Section 4.2.). Apart from their intense emotional element, however, there were also other characteristics of these images that rendered them impressionable and dominant in audience discourses: their *spectacular* character and, related to this, their *originality*. In the following extract the disaster caused by the Indian Ocean Tsunami is remembered not only in terms of its major destructive outcome but also as an

unimaginable spectacle. The extract follows a comparison between suffering caused by war and by natural disasters:

Tina: Let's say the Tsunami did not seem like a movie to me, because I have never seen something similar, I had never before in my life seen something like this...

Hara: I cannot comprehend it, nevertheless...

Mina: Hmmm...

Tina: Me too, in the beginning, although we could see it, we see it as an image, what you're saying, I could not comprehend it, I didn't...didn't, I mean, I could not...I could not really comprehend it. Did you also feel this thing?

Simos: I did like this [moves as if to protect himself] to avoid the wave!

(laughter)

Simos: It was a show! It was an impressive wave that took everybody away!

(mixed, in their 20s, middle-class, FG1)

Characteristic of ecstatic witnessing, the sense of immediacy with the scene of suffering is expressed through Simos's alleged move to avoid the wave. The emotional compelling nature of the images of the Tsunami disaster, already discussed as an integral part of the experience of ecstatic witnessing, is conveyed through the use of the verbs "*comprehend*" and "*feel*". This intense emotional engagement is linked not only to the sensed immediacy of the experience but also to the extraordinary nature of the event, as it was something the viewers had "*never before*" seen in their lives. The comparison implied constructs the tsunami disaster as "original" in comparison to other

“ordinary” disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, as discussed above. Closely related to this, the event is remembered as “*a show*”, its memory based on “*impressive*” pictorial images.

The 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre was also remembered in terms of its pictorial representation by the media. As already discussed in relation to ecstatic witness, the event was mostly discussed in terms of the “*images of people burning and falling of the Towers*” (Focus Group 8), of the planes hitting the Towers (Focus Group 1;3;4) or the broadcasting of the phone conversations that were broadcast after the event (Focus Group 1;3). These images overshadowed the character of the disaster as a terrorist attack and, therefore, a political event. In the following extract, the group is asked to explain why 9/11 was the event that first comes to mind when they think of the concept of “global disasters”:

Nikos: It was the most horrifying!

Sotiris: Yes, it was something that had never happened before!

Nikos: Along with the Tsunami, I think. No, it was the whole story even...First of all, it is not a natural disaster!

Sotiris: It was like a film!

Nikos: Exactly! It was not a natural disaster!

Sotiris: You see it and you can't believe it! As if it is fake!

(male, in their 20s, working-class, FG10)

In terms similar to the Tsunami, 9/11 is described as extraordinary, “*something that had never happened before*”. Although its extraordinariness is attributed to

its political character as a terrorist attack, it is again mostly on the visuals that the participants' remembering focuses on. The attack is again constructed as a "terror spectacle" (Kellner, 2003b), a "film".

The vivid recalling of the two disasters, 9/11 and the Tsunami, through pictorial images was often attributed in the discussions to the extraordinarily extensive media coverage the two events attracted. In the following extract, the participants make fun of a peer's detailed memory of the breaking news of the Tsunami disaster:

Simos: You have the memory of an elephant!

Mina: Have you been haunted by it?

Tina: Guys, it was constantly on the news! Constantly! It was the only thing they would show! The whole duration of the news would be this. And they would show it until the evening, all the time, constantly! On that day and the next one and the next one...

(mixed, in their 20s, middle-class, FG1)

The media coverage of 9/11 was also put at the centre of public memory of the attack:

Irini: And this event [i.e. 9/11] overshadowed everything else. It had the greatest media coverage...

Nana: Even the other day, I saw photographs in a magazine, of people just standing and looking. The planes having fallen but the Towers not having collapsed yet and these people standing there and not having understood what happened....

Irini: This event will stick with us! For many years! And they will always mention it! Whereas I think that the earthquake, either in

Pakistan or Turkey, has faded. And I believe that the Tsunami might also fade out. But this will always be mentioned. And the images will always be shown.

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

There is an implied criticism and frustration about the media's extensive focus on the two disasters in comparison to other events in the first extract, as indicated in the repetitive use of "*constantly*". This focus is considered by participants to be instrumental in their recollection of the events. Recycled in the media for weeks after their occurrence, the events were also recycled in public memory (Teer-Tomasseli, 2006: 231).

However, drawing a direct causal line between extensive media coverage and the vividness of viewers' memory seems to be an oversimplification. A main characteristic of the articulation of remembering of iconic disasters is the presence of the viewer in the narrative of the events in a way of emotional immersion. The use of affective vocabulary such as "*I cannot comprehend it [the Tsunami]*", "*did you also feel this?*", "*horrifying*", and "*can't believe it*" in the above extracts is indicative of this emotional positioning of the viewers within the practice of media remembering. There is an important link to be made here between the experience of ecstatic witnessing and the practice of media remembering. Both events, the Tsunami and the attack of September 11, have been discussed in the previous empirical chapter as two events that were experienced by the viewers through the position of ecstatic witnessing. It was argued at the point that the two disasters, due to their mode of representation through unedited and amateur footage, gave the viewers the sense that they were immediate witnesses of the events, an experience of intense emotional

nature (Section 4.2. above). Remembering the disasters becomes an emotional enterprise, which focuses on instances of affective intensity rather than a narrative of facts and sequences of events. It is this affective impact that seems to be the triggering point for viewers' recollections of the two events. It is also an element that links the two events in viewers' collective remembering. They thus escape their individual meaning and become reference points in framing each other and in constituting points of comparison to other instances of suffering. In the following extract, the participant is describing her experience of the Tsunami disaster:

Nana: For me, when I saw it, it reminded me of the same feelings I had felt when I saw that of September 11 – I don't know if that has any immediate relationship to this.

Yes, sure...

Nana: But the same kind of emotions that I felt for this one[i.e. the Tsunami], because it was one of the biggest disasters, as that one, it automatically brought into my mind what I had felt on September 11, that it is something you cannot fight, let's say.

(female, 26, middle-class, FG3)

A particular characteristic of this emotional kind of remembering the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Tsunami was the construction of the events as "flashbulb memories" (Brown and Kulik, 1977, in Pennebaker and Banasik, 1997: 5). The concept of "flashbulb memory" is used to describe the "mixture of personal circumstances and historical events in memory" (Pennebaker and Banasik, 1997: 5). In other words, it describes the situation where viewers not only remember the event itself but can also recall their personal situation when

they first heard about it. This is best illustrated in the following extract, where the group, when asked about their memories of other global disasters, start talking about September 11:

Mary: Can I talk about it? I was sitting exams at the point!

Vicky: But this is not a natural disaster!

Mary: I was sitting exams for college and I was studying with the TV switched on!

Giota: When did this happen?

Vicky: In 2001!

Mary: And while I was reading, I had the TV on, on mute. And I lift my eyes, I see an aeroplane on the TV, I say "what's going on, are you kidding us?!", I say "OK", I'm about to start again, I look again, a second one! I drop the books! (laughs) I was shocked! I was shocked, of course, afterwards with these, with the last phone calls that were aired afterwards...

Vicky: Exactly!!!

Mary: that they would say "I love you all and I know that I will probably die and..."

(female, in their 20s, working-class, FG7)

Similar accounts were mentioned in other discussions too, with many participants recalling watching television in the afternoon of September 11 2001 and suddenly being confronted with the incomprehensible sight of the Twin Towers collapsing. Although not as frequently, the Southeast Asian Tsunami was also remembered by some participants in terms of flashbulb memories, as the quote below describes:

If somebody would ask you “what happened during the Tsunami disaster?” what would you say?

Dimitris: Well, I get into the house – listen to this – I get back home and suddenly I turn around, I hadn’t realised a thing, my sister was also there, and I turn and see the television, there was a huge wave on the screen at that moment, you know, there were people that had recorded the event with a camera, and they were showing this on the news, a huge wave, and I say “What is this?”, let’s say, I didn’t know...First of all, I didn’t even know what “tsunami” meant...

(male, 27, middle-class, FG8)

The viewers position themselves here as ecstatic witnesses of the events, in a virtually un-mediated relationship with the scene of the suffering, as has already been discussed in Chapter 4 in the context of ecstatic witnessing. Through the use of temporal references (“*while I was reading*”, “*suddenly I turn around*”), the participants describe the spectacle of suffering as “an immediate reality” (Chouliaraki, 2006: 40), as if the events were unfolding in front of their eyes, in a dimension of “instantaneous proximity” (Chouliaraki 2006: 164).

At the same time, viewers not only vividly recollect the images of the disaster but also their exact situation at the time they heard about the event, in a mixture of mediated and autobiographical memory. According to Pennebaker and Banasik, people have such vivid recollections in relation to flashbulb memories, exactly because they can include themselves in the event as immediate witnesses and thus place themselves in a historical context (Pennebaker and Banasik, 1997: 5). Viewers’ narratives here are not of the events but of themselves watching the events. Confronted with the sublime spectacle of terror, of a disaster that they cannot “*comprehend*” and “*have never experienced*

before”, viewers try to make sense of their experiences through “reflexive contemplation”, by placing themselves within the spectacle of the disaster, by “watching” themselves watching the disaster (Chouliaraki, 2006: 175).

It is exactly this positioning of the viewer as an immediate witness to the event and, thus, part of a historical context that renders the Tsunami and 9/11 iconic in collective remembering. In describing the events as spectacular and original and, at the same time, expressing their emotional involvement with the media images, participants place themselves as witnesses of historical moments, which are then recycled in public memory as iconic disasters. Unlike earthquakes and hurricanes that are incorporated into already existing accumulative frameworks of meaning, the two disasters, the Tsunami and 9/11, are constructed as landmark events through the practice of media remembering. They are events through which viewers engage with and reflect on the global; however, they do this by placing themselves as participants in the events unfolded. This gravitation towards the self and the emphasis on the spectacular construct the events as iconic in memory but obscure the moral relationship between the spectator and the sufferer. If through the normalization of earthquakes and hurricanes as banal in media remembering understanding is suspended because of the decontextualisation of the suffering from its historicity, in iconic disasters understanding is overwhelmed by intense emotionality and the spectacularity of the events.

5.3 The Turkish earthquake and the universality of human pain

There was a third event, apart from the Southeast Asian Tsunami and September 11, that was recalled by all focus groups when discussing about

disasters and distant suffering, namely the Turkish earthquake of 1999. The earthquake occurred in Izmit, north-western Turkey, and its death toll rose above 17,000 victims. The geographical proximity to Greece rendered it a newsworthy event and its extensive media coverage was accompanied by great amounts of aid pledges. The Turkish earthquake was followed in less than a month by a strong earthquake in Athens, which although of a much smaller scale and destructive force, was one of the strongest Greece has experienced in recent history. The subsequent exchange of support between the two countries came to be described by news media as the “Greek-Turkish earthquake diplomacy” (Ker-Lindsay, 2000), symbolic of an apparent overcoming of the mutual hostility between the two neighbouring countries.

The disaster seems to be unique in its complicated status as an event both proximate and distant. It is more proximate than any of the other disasters discussed, as it concerns a neighbouring country. It is also associated with an event of a national significance, the Greek earthquake. At the same time, however, it remains distant, as it occurred within another nation; this distance is even more accentuated by the hostile historic relations between Greece and Turkey.

Although not part of the topic guide of the focus group discussions and participants were at no point prompted to talk about it, the Izmit earthquake was discussed by all focus groups. These discussions were more prominent and focused in the groups that were conducted in the town of Komotini, which, as discussed in Chapter 3, is home to a big minority of Turkish origin. However, the earthquake was also mentioned by the participants of the Athens groups.

Interestingly, and despite its much earlier occurrence – as well as the fact that participants were told that the photos were from recent disasters – the Turkish earthquake was the event most groups associated with the photographs of the Kashmir earthquake. It was also remarkably common for participants to turn the discussion to the Izmit earthquake, when asked about their memories from the Pakistan one. The extracts below are indicative of this tendency:

Do you remember anything about the Pakistan earthquake?

Mary: No! Nothing!

Vicky: Only about the Turkey earthquake!

How come?

Vicky: I don't know...

Giota: It sticks more with you because it is a neighbouring country, is this why?

Vicky: Maybe.

Mary: About the Greeks that went there and helped and there was talk about Greek-Turkish friendship and stuff...Pakistan...Had we sent aid back then? No...

Giota: We always send, guys.

(female, in their 20s, working-class, FG7)

Hmmm...Do you remember anything about the Pakistan earthquake?

Nana: I only remember the Turkey one, guys, really vividly.

Kiki: When was that?

Irini: Eeeehhh...it was summer...

Nana: Has it been five years?

Kiki: It was a summer again; I think we were sitting exams for the second time.

Nana: Wasn't it after the Athens earthquake?

(female, in their 20s, working-class, FG3)

The Izmit earthquake appears to be used by participants to “fill in” their memory gaps concerning the Kashmir earthquake. In a way similar to the use of template media images to remember earthquakes, as described in section 5.1.2. above, the Turkish earthquake is used here to frame the memory of the Kashmir disaster. In a line of “ordinary” earthquakes, the Izmit one is constructed as a landmark event and a frame of reference for others.

There are two interrelated reasons that can be seen as the basis for this predominance of the Turkish earthquake of 1999 over other similar disasters. First, due to its geographical proximity it is described as more relevant and, therefore, more impressionable in viewers’ memories. Second, the disaster is attributed a further symbolic significance, due to its follow up by the Athens earthquake and the consecutive media and political discourse on “disaster diplomacy” (Kelman, 2011) between the two countries. Audiences seem to reproduce this discourse in their remembering of the events. As one participant put it:

Dimitra: What has stuck with me from that event, besides the Richters and stuff, is that we were constantly talking about the relationship between Greece and Turkey, that Greece had helped a lot.

(female, 54, middle-class, FG5)

Unlike the disasters previously discussed, the Turkish earthquake is hardly remembered in terms of visual images of suffering, either in their template format, as discussed in section 5.1. or in specific visuals and reports, as is the case with the iconic disasters of the Tsunami and 9/11. Rather, it seems that the Izmit earthquake of 1999 has become embedded in broader national and political discourses. It is not constructed merely as a disaster but rather as an event of political significance for the national community. The national framework viewers draw upon is indicated through the use of deictic pronouns (“*we sent help*”) and spatial references (“*neighbouring country*”). At the same time, the earthquake was often referred to as an exemplary case of the compelling nature of mediated suffering and its alleged potential to connect people across geographical and cultural borders under the idea of a common humanity. In the following extract, participants are responding to the question of how interested they are in news from geographically distant places:

Litsa: I just wanna say...But it's irrelevant. I mean, I sent help to Turkey, after the earthquake in Turkey.

Dina: Of course, it's a neighbouring country!

Litsa: And I'm saying that, because I think it's interesting...I highlight the fact that it was in Turkey, because we are Christians, I don't know whether you can write this, they are...

Popi: Muslims!

Peni: Turks!

Litsa: They were Turks! I mean, another religion and enemies, so to speak. But I didn't care about that, it didn't affect me...I sent a lot of things...

Dina: We did too! It's a neighbouring country, of course!

Litsa:...to Turkey through a friend here who is Muslim. When I say a lot, I mean a lot of stuff! It didn't care at all! The human being felt for the human being without caring about what and who they [the victims] are...

(female, in their 40s and 50s, working-class FG2)

The Turkish earthquake is constructed as a “landmark” event (Halbwachs, 1992: 61) in viewers’ collective memory, in the sense that it symbolises the overcoming of national hostilities and individual prejudices in the face of human pain (“*the human being felt for the human being*”). At the same time, however, respondents distinctively position themselves as members of the national community, when remembering the disaster. As such they identify themselves in opposition to the Turkish victims, who are still defined as the “*other*”, as “*another religion*”, as the “*enemy*”, even in order to negate the significance of such categorisations when judged against the urgency of human pain. The recognition of boundaries of otherness goes hand-in-hand with the articulation of the discourse of a common humanity, by way of illustration of the “both/and” principle of cosmopolitan experience (Beck, 2006: 57), within which “there arises a space of overlapping but incompatible frames of reference and meanings” (Beck, 2002: 33).

Such discussions were common among all focus groups. At the end of one of the discussions when participants were asked whether they had anything to add, one of them felt the need to emphasise the significance of the earthquake in Turkey:

Olga: I just wanna say about the issue of the Turks, when that disaster took place, how we were emotionally charged and we felt for the human being. And how, despite the whole hostility, we felt their pain.

(female, 47, middle-class, FG4)

The use of the deictic “we” – denoting the national community – and “their” – referring to Turkish people – is indicative of the adoption of a national framework, when viewers talk about the earthquake. The national context is used here as the “social framework of memory” (Halbwachs, 1992: 38), within which participants place themselves. The Izmit earthquake is attributed a meaning beyond its nature as a case of distant suffering; it is constructed through remembering as an incident of national significance and, therefore, of more immediate significance for viewers’ local lifeworlds. It becomes a “critical incident” in collective memory, as it constitutes a moment “by means of which people air, challenge and negotiate their own standards of action” (Zelizer, 1992: 4). The Turkish earthquake of 1999 is such a moment, during which audience members negotiate their moral agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others, in this case as members of a national community who are asked to overcome traditional hostilities in order to feel for the “enemy”.

In this context, it appears that cosmopolitan connectivity as the reflective engagement with the distant other is only achieved in media remembering through the national framework. In the hierarchy of remembering that has been so far discussed in this chapter, the Turkish earthquake is the only event constructed as a landmark of moral connectivity among spectators and sufferers. If in remembering other earthquakes or hurricanes the face of the other is taken out of context and becomes the basis for an indulgence in private

emotion, as also discussed in relation to particularisation in mediated suffering in the previous chapter, and in narrating iconic events the sufferer is obscured by the sublime experienced of the viewer herself, it is only in the case of the Turkish earthquake, that the viewers engage with the unfortunate both as an other and as a fellow human being. The recognition of common humanity, in this case, is conditional on national recognition.

5.4 Media disasters and the global audience

The three disasters discussed above, the Southeast Asian Tsunami of 2004, the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001 and the Izmit earthquake of 1999, were the events most often mentioned and discussed among the participants in the focus groups. Apart from being landmark events of distant suffering in audience collective memory, these disasters were also constitutive of the discursive category of “global disasters”. As such, apart from instances making moral claims to the viewers in relation to the suffering of others, they were also occasions for the creation of a “global audience”, establishing relationships among viewers around the world. This possibility of mediation to establish a sense of community among audiences around the world through the sharing of common mediated experiences (Tomlinson, 1999; Cottle, 2006) has been discussed as part of the optimistic narrative of the creation of a cosmopolitan public on the basis of mediated experience (Chouliaraki, 2006) in the introductory chapter of this thesis. Here, this possibility will be explored in relation to the audience practice of remembering these vicarious experiences, through which viewers also construct their sense of space and belonging.

Arguments about the media's capacity "to bring a global population, albeit momentarily, into the compass of a global community" (Silverstone, 2006: 83) echo Dayan and Katz's theoretical construct of "media events" (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Media events are defined as the television genre of the broadcast of ceremonial events, which interrupt the routines of daily media flow and attract large numbers of audiences brought together by the simultaneous viewing activity (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Although traumatic events such as disasters are not included in the initial definition of the genre, later critiques of its narrowness expanded it to include unplanned and sudden occurrences such as disasters and disruptive events (Liebes, 1998; Cottle, 2006; Katz and Liebes, 2007; Kyriakidou, 2008). In such an attempt, Cottle describes the category of "media disasters" in terms similar to the one of media events, namely as "disasters that are publicly signalled by different media as major, often traumatic and, on occasion, historically momentous happenings, [which] also frequently exhibit high media performativity, circulate potent symbols, and invoke and/or mobilize solidarities" (Cottle, 2006: 421).

What is of interest here is how viewers through the practice of remembering distant disasters construct them as global media events and themselves as participants in a global or cosmopolitan public. This focus will throw light into discussion about the cosmopolitanisation of memory (Levy and Sznajder, 2002) briefly discussed in Chapter 2, which has been theorised as instrumental in formulating a common global ground for perceiving the world (Volkmer, 2006). To that end, the rest of the chapter will first examine the kind of events viewers themselves construct as "global disasters". It will then explore the ways these

disasters are also “localised” in collective memory by being associated with events and meanings of local and national significance. Audience collective memory in this context, I will argue, is a double process of simultaneously “globalising” and “localising” media disasters.

5.4.1 Global media disasters

September 11 and the Izmit earthquake were brought in the focus group discussions by participants themselves without any probing from the moderator, as mentioned earlier. In introducing these two events and discussing them alongside the three disasters initially chosen as the focus of the group questions, participants expanded the category of “global disasters” to their own understanding to include events different in nature (9/11 was a terrorist attack rather than a natural disaster) that they nevertheless interpreted in similar lines. In addition to these two events that were discussed by virtually every focus group, participants were asked later in the discussion to mention other “global disasters” they could recall, collectively expanding this discursive category.

This question led to the collective construction of a list of events participants considered fitting under the category of “global disasters”. Events as diverse as the Chernobyl accident in 1986 (groups 1; 7; 10; 11; 12) and the Gulf War of 1990 (groups 2; 6) fell under this label in audience discussions. The events ranged from man-made, such as the terrorist attack of the Madrid train bombings in 2004 (Groups 10 and 12) to natural disasters, such as a volcano eruption in the Philippines (Group 11) and from old disasters, such as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 (Groups 7, 10, 11), to

contemporary events, such as the war in Lebanon (Groups 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Interestingly, in a great number of groups there was a discussion of climate change and its concomitant environmental risks as a kind of “manmade” global disaster (Groups 1, 2, 4, 6, 12), confirming the emergence of an environmental discourse as integral in the experience and construction of the global (Beck and Sznaider, 2006).

Typically, discussants would collectively construct the category of “global disasters” through interruptions and interventions and often without drawing connections between the different events, as is evident here:

What other global disasters come into your mind?

Sofia: Hiroshima and Nagasaki!

Gerasimos: But Hiroshima was not due to a natural disaster!

Sofia: Yes, it came to my mind as a big disaster!

Gerasimos: It was the nuclear bomb!

Sofia: OK, and all the war, of course...

Gerasimos: Chernobyl...

Sofia: Huh...the wildfires in...that were huge – of course, ours were not smaller either but...

Gerasimos: In the US?

Sofia: In Los Angeles, around there. Wildfires burning millions of acres...I remember this vividly.

(mixed, in their 50s, middle-class, FG11)

The conversation seems to jump from one event to the other, from the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the nuclear accident of Chernobyl of 1986 to the wildfires in California in 2005. The environment seems to be the link for the association of these three disasters with each other, although all three of them are remembered on different grounds: the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are landmark historical events not experienced by participants but part of global history, the ecological disaster of Chernobyl is an event that affected Greece among others, and the California wildfires are remembered in terms of their media images. Interestingly, there is the national framework again at play, indicated by the deictic “*ours*”, meaning the wildfires that occur in Greece every summer.

There are different meanings attributed to these events that construct them as global. Some of the participants constructed the category of “global” as affecting populations around the world. This was the case, for example, with environmental disasters such as the ones mentioned above. For others, it was their worldwide broadcasting that rendered some events global. This interplay of attributes is evident in the extract below, which indicates how participants are again collectively constructing their memories of global disasters:

What other global disasters come into mind?

Ilias: The earthquake in Turkey?

Thanos: The bombing of Serbia, Yugoslavia. The war. Those bombings.

Dimos: The war in Iraq, in Kuwait.

Pavlos: Look, the word “disaster” now, for example, for me, in the broader sense of disaster, I do think that it was a disaster when an

entire submarine was lost then in Russia, with all the people inside, and the way it happened²². Or when, let's say, the spacecraft perished in the air²³. I mean, a disaster that OK, maybe it is not that...But it's considered to be...When, let's say, you have for entire days a submarine with people inside slowly dying, let's say, and you feel like you cannot help, you can't do anything, and then it finally ends...

Ilias: Yes, true...

Pavlos: Also the environment! The environment. It's a disaster that has a much bigger scale, let's say...It depends on how each one sees it. What you consider, let's say, to be a disaster.

(male, in their 40s and 50s, middle-class, FG6)

Wars was a category of events conspicuous in the list of global disasters as constructed by the participants and it comes up in the discussion here both in terms of a geographically proximate (Serbia) and a distant (Iraq) war. What is mostly interesting, however, is the distinction between disasters in the “*broader sense*” such as the loss of Kursk submarine and the Challenger or Columbia space shuttle explosions and disasters such as environmental ones. The latter are described as global, since they are of a “*much bigger scale*”. What renders the loss of the Russian submarine a global disaster, however, as described here by the speaker, is the fact that through its global broadcasting it places viewers around the world into the position of witnesses. Indeed, there are a number of

²² The participant refers here to the loss of the Russian submarine Kursk, which sank together with its 118 crew members after an explosion on the 12th of August 2000. Rescue efforts were delayed and for a week it was uncertain where the submarine was located and whether there were any survivors.

²³ It is unclear whether the reference here concerns the 1986 Challenger space shuttle, which exploded seconds after its launch – which was covered live by the media – resulting in the death of its seven members of crew or the Columbia space shuttle, which disintegrated during its re-entry into the atmosphere on February 1st 2003.

elements in this extract that point towards the category of ecstatic witnessing, as discussed in section 4.2. in chapter 4. The sense of immediate witnessing expressed through temporal and spatial deixis (*"you have for entire days a submarine with people inside slowly dying", "...and then it finally ends."*), as well as the sense of helplessness created by the spectacle of death (*"you feel like you cannot help, you can't do anything"*) position the viewer as an ecstatic witness vis-à-vis the media report of the lost submarine. What constructs this event as a global disaster is *"the way it happened"*, namely that it took place in front of the viewers' eyes, witnessed by global audiences.

This global reach of the events through their media broadcasting was an aspect of the global disasters that was extensively discussed by the focus groups. In some ways, what is really global in these events is their reaching of audiences around the world through their broadcasting and media reporting. In this way, global disasters were constructed as moments of "mechanical solidarity" among viewers around the globe, as described by Dayan and Katz (1992: 196), based on the fact that "all those within reach of a television set are simultaneously and equally exposed, and they share the knowledge that everybody else is too" (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 197). In the extract below, one of the participants describes how he believes that during disasters such as the Tsunami people around the world might feel for their fellow human beings:

Dimitris: And I am not saying this just for myself! I believe that then, during such disasters, let's say like the Tsunami, that it is as if all the nations of the world were united.

Tasos: Exactly!

Dimitris: I mean that everyone united felt for the victims...

Tasos: You realise your emotions as a human being!

Dimitris: Not just myself! That...I mean, even the murderer that might have committed a murder the previous night will...will sit down and watch this thing for a couple of hours! Not just me! Everyone!

(male, in their 20s, middle-class, FG8)

There is a sense that the “whole world is watching” (Gitlin, 1980) such globally mediated events, both in terms of nations (“*all the nations of the world were united*”) as well as individual spectators (“*everyone!*”). The viewer here positions himself not only in relation to the suffering witnessed but also to the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1989) of fellow viewers around the world. This imagined community is even elaborately described as the “*global village*” in another discussion:

Menelaos: When disasters like these take place, the scale of which is much bigger and they surpass the borders of a country, for example the Tsunami of Hurricane Katrina, with such a scale, they cannot only preoccupy the country itself. At this moment, that big, that global village that we refer to as the mass media and communications is being activated!

(Male, 26, middle-class, FG12)

In narrating their experiences of global disasters, viewers simultaneously position themselves in relation to a community of viewers around the world, connected to each other through the practice of simultaneously viewing the same events, witnessing the same instances of distant suffering. They thus take part in the construction of a global collective memory based not on the sense of

belonging in “some continuing community of fate, but as the product of a reflexive choice to incorporate the suffering of the ‘Other’” in a kind of cosmopolitan memory in-the-making (Levy and Sznajder, 2002: 103). This does not necessarily assume a functionalist attribution to the role of media memory in creating and sustaining a “global community” (Couldry et al., 2010: 5). As it will become clear later in this chapter, there is nothing purely global in the sense of ecumenical in the way Greek viewers remember the disasters discussed. Rather, what is emphasised here is that in remembering events of global scale viewers position themselves not only in terms of their already constituted national community but also as members of a global audience.

In constructing events as global disasters through the practice of media remembering, viewers position themselves as members of a global audience and participate in the construction of a global or cosmopolitan collective memory. While being categorised as global, however, the same events were simultaneously contextualised by participants within local frameworks of reference. This process of particularising and localising media disasters will be explored in the following section.

5.4.2 Localising the global

The category of global disasters as constructed by participants included both events remote in time and space and events that took place in close proximity to the discussants’ locale. The 1999 earthquake in Turkey was the most prominent of these proximate events; as discussed above, the event was remembered for its significance within the national context, as a disaster on the basis of which the two countries, Greece and Turkey, overcame their differences. Other

examples of such proximate disasters included the Serbian bombings of 1999, which were described as taking place in the participants “neighbourhood” (Groups 1 and 9), and, most notably, the Chernobyl nuclear accident of 1986, which albeit distant affected participants in their everyday lives. Chernobyl was especially mentioned by the group of the younger age cohort. Given that the participants in these groups were about five or six years old when the disaster took place, it was an event implicated with childhood memories, as is evident in the extract below:

Menelaos: Chernobyl comes to mind.

Stathis: Oh, that’s a good one!

Menelaos: Nuclear disasters, if not Chernobyl, the trials at the...that France had conducted in Mururoa, what was their name. And...the environment, in general, whatever can affect a lot of people. There are many events like that.

You mean these events affect you as well?

Kostas: Not me, not all.

No? Not Chernobyl?

(laughs)

Stathis: I was running in the rain, when I was little. And my parents were shouting “come, get the umbrella!”.

Kostas: Yes, more those with nuclear stuff and the ones that are in our neighbourhood, like this, they affect us as a country.

(male, in their 20s, middle-class, FG12)

The Chernobyl disaster is initially constructed as part of a broader category of environmental disasters affecting the globe. As such, the speaker positions himself as one of the “*lot[s] of people*” that can be affected by such events. Later on in the discussion, however, Chernobyl becomes a disaster implicated in autobiographical memory, as well as national and local life. By localising this way the memory of Chernobyl, participants embed global disasters into national and local frameworks. Through the use of spatial deixis (“*in our neighbourhood*”) and the use of metonymy (“*us as a country*”) to describe themselves as members of their national community, discussants highlight the fact that events become significant as long as they are implicated in their everyday lifeworld. In accordance with detached witnessing (section 4.4.), the adoption of local and national frameworks in memory places the viewer in a limited world of everyday affairs.

Notably, local frameworks were also employed in discussions of events that have not had an effect on the local or national community. This interplay between the global and the local or national is best exemplified in the quote below, where the two are intertwined. The discussion is initially focused on the Tsunami, described as “*the greatest ever global disaster*”, only to turn to the issue of national disasters.

Giota: I’m telling you, it [i.e. the Tsunami] hit there and it immediately found itself elsewhere, so many kilometres afar, in the other end of the world. This. And usually these things take place in the Pacific! That’s it! In the Pacific Ocean. So don’t think that they will ever happen to us. Don’t expect this!

Mary: If it ever happened, that would be it for Greece!

Giota: It's only earthquakes that happen here! Earthquakes and wildfires! And floods!

Vicky: Oooh, I can't stand it with the fires now!

Giota: Look, it was on the news again yesterday that the ice is melting and Africa is beginning to slowly connect with Cyprus and Crete. It's starting to raise slowly-slowly, the plaques.

Vicky: We're gonna sink all of us.

Giota: Yes, in some years! I hope it doesn't catch up with our children!

Vicky: It won't...I do believe this. That it will happen.

Giota: Yes! It was on the news yesterday!

Vicky: I was so sad now with [the wildfires in]Halkidiki now!

Giota: Oh, yes! They completely burnt! And it was so nice there!

(female, in their 20s, working-class, FG7)

In the course of the discussion the focus turns from the global (the tsunami “in the Pacific ocean” or the “ice...melting”) to the local and the national (the fires in Halkidiki or Africa slowly connecting with Cyprus and Crete), while the participants retain their national collective frameworks positioning themselves as Greeks throughout the discussion (“don’t think that they will ever happen to us”, “we’re gonna sink, all of us!”).

Based on a study of public memories of global events around the world, Teer-Tomaselli argues that the most important influence on what was remembered by the audiences in different countries was cultural proximity (Teer-Tomaselli, 2006: 235). Distant events were more easily recalled when they exhibited a

sense of local relevance but, even when not related with the immediate national area, they were often recalled in terms of factors associated with the national arena. This way of “localising” or “particularising” the memories of global events was prominent in the focus group discussions here. It was also expressive of the significance of national collective memory for the practice of media remembering. As members of a national community, viewers reconstruct their media memories within the social frameworks of the national collective memory (Halbwachs, 1991: 38). In this context, media remembering becomes the practice of articulating together mediated and personal, national and global, local and cosmopolitan memories.

5.4.3 Media remembering: between the global and the local

The practice of media remembering has been described in this section as a double process of “globalisation” and “localisation” of memory. On the one hand, a number of events are constructed and remembered by audience members as “global”. Through this process, viewers simultaneously situate themselves as part of a global audience and participate in the construction of a global collective memory. On the other hand, they seem to simultaneously “localise” their memories of the events they have witnessed through the media by remembering them alongside autobiographical memories or narratives of national or local significance. In this way, they re-contextualised their memories of global disasters to meaningfully fit into their own lifeworlds.

This illustrates the practice of media remembering as a multidimensional process at the intersection of local, national and global discursive frameworks. It also describes the positioning of viewers as members of both pre-existing

communities of belonging, such as the nation or the local community and in the global community of spectators, a community in-the-making through the process of mediation. As discussed in chapter 2, looking into the discursive frameworks people employ in reconstructing the past is telling of their placing in social groups (Halbwachs, 1992). We have seen here that viewers, when remembering, employ both local or national and global collective frameworks. In its turn, this is indicative of their sense of belonging not only in the national community but also a more abstract global community, albeit fleeting and media-oriented.

This dimension of constructing distant disasters as global media events misses the explicit moral gravity of the mediated connection between spectator and sufferer (Chouliaraki, 2006: 27). The bonds formed in this case seem to be merely among the spectators. As the previous sections have argued, the practice of remembering most often lacks a reflective engagement with the suffering witnessed, as the misfortune of the distant other is either forgotten, considered expected or remembered in terms of particular stories deprived of their historicity. Therefore, even when remembering “global” suffering, viewers still gravitate towards the imagination of pre-existing memberships (Halbwachs, 1992: 52): this is mostly the imagination of the national community, which seems to filter and re-contextualise global events in the social world of the everyday; but it is also the imagination of the communitarian public of the West, constituted by the spectators addressed by global media and based on the sense of connectivity to fellow spectators (Chouliaraki, 2006: 27).

Summary and conclusions

The chapter has illustrated the practice of media remembering as being constructed at the intersection of different discourses. Two main tensions underlined the practice of remembering in audience discussions: on the one hand, there is the tension between the intertwined but antithetical processes of remembering and forgetting events witnessed through the media; on the other hand, there is the tension between employing national and global frameworks of memory.

The exploration of the tension between forgetting and remembering has illustrated a moral hierarchy of media remembering. At the bottom end of this hierarchy, disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes have faded in collective memory; they are constructed as ordinary and the suffering they cause as banal and expected. This is justified by viewers on the basis of the relatively often occurrence of such disasters and lack of spectacularity or originality both of the events and the way they are reported by the media. The engagement with the distant other is expressed in these narratives as compassionate feelings towards particular stories of human pain, which are, however, decontextualised from their specificities and stripped of their historicity.

The middle ground of the moral hierarchy of remembering is occupied by a small number of disasters that are constructed as iconic in collective remembering. The chapter has identified two such events in audience discussions, namely the Southeast Asian Tsunami and the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre. It has been argued that these events have acquired a mythic meaning in collective memory and would resurface in the focus group

discussions as points of comparison and reference to the other disasters discussed. Due to the position of the viewer as an ecstatic witness to these events and the sense of immediacy constructed by the audiovisual reports, narratives of these disasters are characterised by the emotional immersion of the viewer in the scene of suffering. However, the spectator's feelings of connectivity in the narratives are mostly directed towards the spectators' self-involvement and extreme emotionality as well as the spectacle of the disaster rather than the distant sufferer.

Finally, it was the earthquake that took place in Turkey in 1999, a disaster that was discussed by all focus groups, that was at the top of the moral hierarchy of remembering. The event was not remembered in pictorial images or faces of human pain but for its significance as a disaster that brought together the two neighbouring but historically hostile countries of Greece and Turkey. It was, therefore, embedded in nationalistic and political discourses. Despite – or perhaps because of – these frameworks, however, the viewers reflectively engaged with the sufferers as both the national other and fellow human beings. The viewers' cosmopolitan outlook, as both a universal concern and responsibility for the distant other and an acknowledgment of her difference (Appiah, 2007: xv), is rendered possible on the basis of national recognition.

The chapter moved on to discuss how the construction of such events of distant suffering as global disasters also position the viewers as members of a broader and abstract global community of viewers brought together through the simultaneous witnessing of suffering and disasters. In this way, viewers seem to participate in the construction of global memories, which in their turn can be

constructed as social frameworks of viewers' knowledge and understanding of the world and similar events (Volkmer, 2006a: 6). Such memories, however, seem to lack the moral engagement with the distant other; they instead connect the viewer with the community of Western spectators.

At the same time, viewers recontextualised global events through national social frameworks, either attributing to them national significance or considering them in relation to national and local frameworks. In this context, the practice of media remembering confirms the centrality of the national community and its social context in framing and constructing collective memory. Media remembering as a practice constitutive of the viewer's moral agency is, therefore, underlined by a number of tensions, which although momentarily positions spectators in a global space ultimately confirms their positioning as members of the national community.

Chapter 6 Audience Agency and Action at a Distance

The previous two chapters demonstrated the ways viewers' agency is articulated through the practices of media witnessing (Chapter 4) and media remembering (Chapter 5). The present chapter will address the kinds of agency viewers attribute to themselves with regard to the suffering of distant others. It will thus engage with the ways spectators of suffering construct themselves as public actors in relation to the events witnessed and will explore the question of action at a distance, namely what viewers feel that they should do and what they actually do as a response to their experience of witnessing the pain of others. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is this question that ultimately underlines academic and public debates over the mediation of distant suffering and its potential as a moral force in the globalised public space.

The research findings from the focus group discussions indicated that viewers' action at a distance was rather limited both in terms of its extent and the variety of forms it would take among the participants in the research. The first section of this chapter illustrates the kinds of actions that participants in the focus groups undertook as a response to the relief efforts targeting the victims of the disasters. These are not limited here to the three disasters discussed on the basis of the topic guide but include other instances when viewers claimed to have responded to charity and humanitarian appeals. Remarkably, these were rather limited despite the participants' acknowledgement of the urgency of the events discussed and their occasionally intense emotional involvement with the suffering witnessed, as discussed in Chapter 4. This inconsistency between the

viewers' acknowledging the need for action and not acting themselves will be the focus of the second part of the section (6.1.2.).

The rest of the chapter will illustrate the range of justifications participants (re)produced in the discussions in order to ground their inaction in the face of human suffering witnessed on the screen and irrespective of the appeals to alleviate this suffering. These justifications generally followed two main argumentative strategies: on the one hand, viewers justified their inaction on the basis of their mistrust in the mediators of the relief efforts or in humanitarianism in general; on the other hand, they constructed themselves as powerless in the face of the disasters and the suffering caused and, therefore, as unable to take responsibility for the relief of the sufferers. These two accounts, the generalised culture of suspicion and the viewers' sense of powerlessness, will be addressed in the last two sections of the chapter respectively.

6.1 Action at a distance

The question of action vis-à-vis distant suffering was explicitly discussed in focus group discussions as it constituted one of the main themes of the discussions' topic guide. The question of action was posed to participants both in terms of actual practices ("had the participants contributed in any way to the appeals for aid relief?") as well as potential practices as a response to media reports of suffering ("given a choice, what kind of sufferers would they favour with charity donations?"). The aim of the inclusion of these questions here was both to identify what kind of actions viewers considered available to them and which ones they undertook as well as to recognise what the conditions for public action vis-à-vis distant suffering are, as illustrated through the

participants' discourses. Viewers' actions, it is argued here, were limited and mostly restricted to media orchestrated efforts, in specific telethons. The next two sections will explore the conditions of this kind of action at a distance, as well as illustrate its limited character.

6.1.1 Telethons and the media staging of action at a distance

When discussions focused on the question of relief efforts and humanitarian appeals, only a minority of the participants in the focus group discussions replied that they had occasionally contributed to some of them. These contributions took mostly the form of monetary contributions, either in the form of donations through deposits to bank accounts, or, more often, through the practice of text messaging, where the costs of the texts were designated for the relief of the affected populations.

With regard to the three disasters that were included in the discussion guide, it was virtually exclusively in the aftermath of the Tsunami that participants were motivated to take part in the relief efforts and respond to humanitarian appeals. Indeed, the Tsunami was often remembered along with the extraordinary wave of donations and organisation of charity events and telethons in Greece²⁴. These were discussed by participants as part of the media "spectacle" of the Tsunami and the fixation of the media with the specific disaster, as already discussed in the previous chapter in relation to media remembering and the construction of the disaster as iconic in viewers' memory. A predominant theme in the

²⁴ Two of the groups also mentioned that they had collectively taken part in locally organised collections for the victims of the Kashmir earthquake: group 5 through the local Red Cross and group 4 contributed to the organisation of a collection at their workplace.

discussions about audience action was the primacy of telethons as the media genre that would instigate viewers' responses in the form of monetary contributions to the relief efforts, as indicated here:

Peni: For the Tsunami there was a whole thing in Greece...They organised... – what's it called? – a "Marathon of Love"!

Popi: Yes, yes, yes...

Dina: A telethon!

Peni: And a lot of money was gathered!

Popi: We made phone calls.

Toula: And went to the banks!

Litsa: My daughter went to the church and gave a blanket and a...of course!

(female, in their 40s and 50s, working-class, FG2)

Through the use of impersonalisation ("*there was a whole thing*", "*money was gathered*"), participants minimize individual agency and emphasise the telethon as a media-orchestrated ("*they organised*"), national ("*in Greece*") effort. They thus mediate their own agency through the media's organised actions and the national community. Positioning their contributions in relation to the mediated appeals for donations rather than to the victims that constituted their beneficiaries, participants here seem to view their actions as part of a national effort to contribute to the alleviation of the suffering and destruction the Tsunami caused to the affected areas and populations. They are responsive to the media campaign rather than the morally compelling nature of the suffering itself, as will be further illustrated later. The trigger for public action seems to

be the media and their forms of addressing the viewer rather than a moral sense of responsibility towards the suffering others.

Overall, telethons seemed to be the trigger of most participants' charity donations not only with respect to the Tsunami but other appeals and disasters as well. Interestingly, participants would often find it hard to specify the appeals they responded to or the context of the events that the telethons were organised to contribute to; they would only remember that they did send financial help or made a phone call or sent a text message as a response to "some" telethon. The specificity of events and of the different appeals would fade from memory; disasters and other charity appeals would all conflate to the single category of "telethons", as seems to be the case in the extract below:

Dimitris: I have sent, for example, to various telethons that take place in Greece in order to help people in Ethiopia, let's say, that Mega Channel organised, I mean, telethons and stuff, or in order to build an oncologic hospital and stuff, yes, I have sent for stuff like that. Apart from the Tsunami, not that I haven't been touched by anything else, but I can't explain the reason why I didn't donate.

What is it that makes you want to donate?

Dimitris: It has to do with the media...the mass media, how much they engaged, the things that were said, how they were said, how much attention was given to this thing, it motivates your sentiment. A bit more than in any other disaster.

(male, 27, middle-class, FG8)

The agency of the media is once more highlighted by the viewer's focus on their role in "*motivating sentiments*" about the Tsunami through the way the event was covered as well as the extended attention attributed to it by the media over a lengthy period of time. These factors have also been described as instrumental for the construction of viewers' memories of the event in the previous chapter. Furthermore, humanitarian appeals are constructed through generalisations ("*various telethons*", "*stuff like that*") in a common category of telethons, stripped off the specificity of the cause of the appeal. Cases of emergent distant suffering, such as the Tsunami disaster, and charity appeals, such as the campaign for the construction of an oncologic hospital, are associated in audience talk on the basis of them being the theme of the same media genre of telethons.

The telethon has been described by Tester as a "lengthy television broadcast", which "asks the audience to support a specific charitable cause or to address a particular range of suffering and deprivation by pledging donations by telephone or participation in specially organised events" (Tester, 2001: 116). As a very peculiar television genre, telethons mark "the entry of television into a fund-raising role", while suspending the routine television programming (Devereux, 1996: 48). Telethons attract viewers in three ways: by giving them the sense that "something can be done" to alleviate the suffering and misery of other people and that viewers as individuals can have an impact in this effort; by including celebrities, who in this context represent the possibility that serious causes do not necessarily entail "introspection" and "inwardness"; and by connecting viewers with a community of similar individuals, such as the

national community, as evident in the quote above (Tester, 2001: 118-120). What was evident, however, in the focus group discussions was that, the effectiveness of telethons to motivate the viewers aside, it was the telethon as a media event organised by and with celebrities that made a bigger impression on the viewers rather than the causes for which they felt the need to donate. This can be seen in the quote below, where the telethon is identified through its organisers rather than its cause:

Irini: I made a phone call to a telethon this year.

Which one?

Nana: Ah, yes!

Irini: This last one, for some kids, who was it for?

Nana: Do you mean the one that Menegaki presented?

Kiki: I think it was on Alpha Channel...Menegaki...

Irini: Yes, on Alpha.

Nana: By Hope Foundation.

Irini: Yes.

Nana: For something anticancer...

Irini: You just make a phone call and the charging amount, let's say, goes to these little kids. Just this...

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

Once more, the action taken by the viewer is not described as a response to a specific instance of suffering or need but as the response to a telethon. The

latter is more easily associated with its celebrity organiser (“Menegaki”²⁵), rather than the cause that was at the centre of its organisation. The appeal is described in vague terms as “for some kids” and “something anticancer”. Telethons become so integrated in the appeal to act in relation to a disaster or a charitable cause in general that they ultimately overshadow the significance of the cause. This can be seen as extreme consequence of the assimilation of modern humanitarianism to the media logic (Cottle and Nolan, 2007), which ultimately distracts attention from the suffering itself projecting it on the media spectacle instead. Viewers attribute significance to their actions as a contribution to a media appeal and, in a way, a form of participation in a media event rather than as a form of action aimed at specific suffering others.

Characteristic of the lack of reflection over the viewers’ role as public actors with regard to distant suffering is the small effort involved and the easiness of the option of action available to the viewer as created by the telethon. The action required is “just” a phone call, a small investment in terms of time and money from the viewer. Stathis, a young participant who had a characteristically detached positioning towards disasters taking place in distant locales (Section 4.4.), claimed to have contributed with text messaging in different telethons:

Stathis: I always give to telethons and we should all give to telethons.

Even to...I give to all telethons.

Even for the Tsunami?

²⁵ Eleni Menegaki is a popular television personality and presenter of a daily morning show in Greece.

Stathis: To all of them, yes. OK, it's just a text, it doesn't really cost anything! The thing is that I wasn't affected but when they tell you "send a text to save a human being", OK, I do send. Always.

Despite a previous claim that the suffering of faraway others does not touch him, Stathis even becomes vocal in his reaction against the other members of the group when they admitted to being unresponsive to televised appeals:

Menelaos: It's not about what kind of happening will take place when it comes to giving money. It's worth giving in any disaster, I mean, something you perceive in such a way. It's just that it's mostly about how you will be at that moment – not about how much it will touch you or not – that giving help depends on.

Stathis: But of course you can send an SMS at that point. Or make a phone call.

Menelaos: What about if you don't watch television?

Stathis: OK, if you don't watch. But it's a telethon, 24 hours, it can't be that you haven't watched television at all. It really bothers me that thing with the text message, it annoys me that you don't send texts!

(male, in their 20s, middle-class, FG12)

Menelaos attempts to justify inaction by separating emotional involvement with the scene of suffering (“*how much it will touch you or not*”) from action taken for the alleviation of this suffering. As a justification strategy, this distinction safeguards the ability of the viewer to feel for the suffering human beings as a moral agent irrespective of his inaction. Stathis, on the other hand, does not contradict this claim but argues that action should be taken in any case, when there is a call for it from the media. What is at stake here, however, is the kind of action discussed, a kind that seems to be separated both from emotional

engagement and the nature of the suffering it aims at alleviating. It is action that is easy and convenient for the viewer to undertake (*"of course you can send an SMS"*). It is action of "low investment" (Tester, 2001: 110) and unreflective.

There are a number of issues, therefore, pertaining to the issue of action at a distance and viewers' agency, also seen in other focus group discussions, that underline this dialogue. First, the action viewers take is described as independent of their feelings of empathy and compassion with the suffering victims. Emanating from this, action is constructed as circumstantial, namely not dependent on the nature of the suffering and its urgency but rather on the personal circumstances of the viewer herself. It is thus illustrated as fragmentary and random, as it is not based on a consistent relationship between the severity of the suffering and the viewer's motivation.

The prominence of telethons in instigating audience contributions also illustrates public action at a distance as highly contingent upon the media and their orchestrated efforts to motivate audiences towards taking action, in this case the telethons. Significant in this media orchestration is the presence of celebrities in attracting viewers to the telethon (Tester, 2001: 120). The involvement of celebrities with charity and humanitarianism has been especially widespread over the last couple of decades as part of the expansion of practices of marketing of the charity and humanitarian sector (Littler, 2008: 240; Cottle and Nolan, 2007: 864) and the simultaneous increase in strategies of branding celebrities (Littler, 2008: 241). This synergy has been advocated, on the one hand, as necessary in order to raise the profile of humanitarian campaigns and expand their reach to the mainstream public (Littler, 2008: 241).

On the other hand, the use of celebrities by charities and NGOs has been heavily criticized for attracting attention to some problems and away from others, glossing over structural inequalities and emphasizing the role of the privileged as benign figures and ultimately ideologically obscuring the implications of capitalism in the reproduction of the world poor and global crises (Devereux, 1996; Littler, 2008). The analysis of the focus group discussions was revealing in terms of the problematic relation between celebrity endorsement and charity appeals. On the one hand, the participation of popular celebrities in the telethons seems to attract audience interest and motivate viewers to contribute to the relief efforts. On the other hand, celebrity-led telethons are described by the viewers as media spectacles, where the spectacular deflects attention from the cause of the appeal and the sufferers.

Media spectacles are understood here as “those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatise its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution” (Kellner, 2003a: 2). Telethons as spectacles initiate audiences in television’s fundraising role through the dramatization of human suffering and the assimilation to “a culture of celebrity which provides dominant role models and icons of fashion, look, and personality” (Kellner, 2003a: 5). The focus group discussions illustrated two main problematic consequences of the association of public action with the media spectacle of the telethon, namely the commodification of distant suffering – and ultimately of the viewers’ sense of moral self – and its fictionalization.

Embedded in the economy of the cultural industry, the telethon commodifies human pain in order to attract audience attention and contributions (Smit, 2003). As a television genre, the telethon capitalizes on the viewer's experience of media witnessing and transforms it into that of the consumer and celebrity fan. The kind of public action suggested to the viewer is action that is easy and unreflective. What is ultimately commodified, Baudrillard argues, is the moral conscience of the viewer (Baudrillard, 1994: 68), who, urged by the telethon appeal to "*send a text to save a human being*" (Stathis, FG12), works through the uneasiness and moral guilt inherent in the experience of witnessing human pain. At the same time, the construction of the telethon as a show business genre renders this public action part of the spectacle of the telethon, staged for the purposes of representation. This merging of reality and representation results in the disappearance of the criterion of action with the concomitant loss of the distinguishing lines between reality and fiction (Boltanski, 1999: 154). This is evident in the loss of the relationship between the event of the telethon and its cause, as illustrated in the audience discussions above. The telethon as an expression of charity is disassociated with the reality of the suffering. Ultimately, the kind of public action initiated and supported by the telethon does not seem to unite the viewers as donors and the suffering victims; rather it unites the viewers with the media and with each other through participation in a media event and a national effort to raise aid pledges.

6.1.2 Justifying inaction

Apart from these limited number of responses to telethons, most participants claimed to remain unresponsive to the charity appeals organized in response to

distant disasters. Aware that this inaction was measured against the normative discourse of humanitarianism, discussants' claims to inaction would be formulated as admissions to something morally unacceptable, often accompanied with hinted expressions of guilt. This guilt was at a constant interplay with different argumentative strategies participants used to justify their inaction. Interestingly, it was mostly among the younger respondents that such admissions to inaction would be more often expressed. This can be considered under the light of their young age and relevant lack of or just accomplished economic independency, as most of the respondents were young graduates who had just found employment or were still looking for one. At the same time, however, and seen along their generally detached positioning as witnesses, which was discussed in Chapter 4, inaction among younger respondents can be seen as part of the broader tendency of civic disengagement among young generations in Greece (Demertzis et al., 2008). Detached from public affairs overall and the civic life within the local and national community, the young seem to display similar disengagement as public actors with regard to distant suffering.

In the following extract, a group of young participants is asked whether they had ever contributed to humanitarian appeals:

Kiki: I haven't, my mother has.

Nana: I don't think so.

Irini: Me neither, I think.

Kiki: My mother and I, yes. I, for example, would tell my mother...In general, she always gives. When she sees something, an appeal for help, something, she sends, you know, she puts money in the bank, anything.

But you don't really give...

Kiki: No, not me as an individual, I didn't give anything...

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

The participant avoids giving a clear answer about her possible actions as a response to charity appeals. What she does instead is displacing her sense of agency and expressing it through her mother's contribution, a piece of information that is not relevant to the question asked. It is only after she is asked for a second time, that the participant admits to not doing something "*as an individual*". Such expressions were common among other young participants, as well (Group 1; 9). Admitting inaction is incongruent with the discussants' previously expressed emotional engagement as well as with normative humanitarian discourses. For that reason and in an attempt to defend themselves in the face of possible moral accusations, young participants displace their agency to their family or parents: their unresponsiveness is not a moral failure, if they have contributed as part of a family.

As the discussion continues, another member of the group even admits that she changes the channel when she sees appeals on television:

Nana: When I see the number of the bank account sometimes I change channels.

Kiki: But even this little help I don't think it is that great. You are still like a spectator. I mean, two, five, ten, even, I don't know, fifty Euros that you will give...

Nana: Yes, but you still get yourself into the process of doing it.

Irini: If we don't experience it, I don't think we can understand the degree of misery. If we don't go through it.

Nana: I don't think so, because when you see the bank accounts, I say this for myself, I change channels. I mean I say, just a minute... (laughs). Yes! I see it and I say "perhaps you should give something?" and then I don't even think about it and I just switch channels.

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

Nana's admission to inaction and indifference to the aid appeals is underlined by a sense of guilt and shame expressed through the question she poses to herself ("*perhaps you should give something?*"). Kiki, on the other hand, moves from the use of the displacement of agency as a justifying device and now attempts to invalidate the effectiveness of action at-a-distance ("*even this little help I don't think it is that great*"): action can only take the form of a small financial donation; and since this donation is too small to make a difference, what is the point of offering it? Cohen and Seu describe such argumentative strategies as the "vocabulary of denial" (Cohen and Seu, 2002: 189), namely of the audience avoidance of moral responsibility for the suffering witnessed. As discussed in Chapter 2, the concept of denial as the psychological, cultural and sociological mechanism of consciously and subconsciously blocking unwanted knowledge has been employed in order to explain audience unresponsiveness to distant suffering and human rights appeals (Cohen, 2001: 4-5). For the

vocabulary of denial to best work as a strategy of the rationalization of inaction it has to draw on believable stories, which are often commonplace and clichés, namely “cultural texts that are common but difficult to decipher” (Cohen and Seu, 2002: 189).

The use of such argumentative strategies was a commonplace among participants, who felt the need to justify their lack of action, morally interpreted as indifference for the suffering of other human beings. These argumentative strategies will be further explored and categorised in the rest of the chapter. What is to be highlighted here is the felt need of the viewers to justify themselves for their inaction vis-à-vis the suffering of faraway others. This is also evident in the extract below:

Did you sent something then (after the Tsunami disaster)?

No! (the whole group).

Have you ever contributed to a relief effort?

Mina: Never! The truth is that...

Hara: My parents have...

Simos: Because the post office is not close enough?

(laughs)

Mina: No, it's just that...Although I hear about it, I mean, I have never considered doing it!

How come?

Mina: I don't know! Because of boredom maybe? Probably? Perhaps it's something like that. It's not that I don't want to or that I don't have anything to give. In no way! It's just that I don't do it.

(mixed, in their 20s, middle-class, FG1)

Once more, Hara is using the strategy of displacing her perceived responsibility to act to her parents. Mina, on the other hand, in a self-reflexive attempt contemplates the reasons for her inaction. She initially offers a morally condemnable explanation, “*boredom*”. She then rushes to distinguish between this explanation, however, and her actual intentions (“*it's not that I don't want to*”). She tries to separate emotional engagement, expressed as the intention to act, from the undertaking of action, in a way similarly addressed in the previous section, where the motivation to act was described by participants as independent of their feelings about the suffering witnessed. Lack of emotional engagement would imply indifference, which is condemnable; inaction, on the other hand, although also condemnable within the frame of a humanitarian discourse, seems to be the norm among audience responses. Indifference constructs the viewer as inhuman; inaction, however, constructs them as rather unremarkable. The way inaction is normalised through the viewers' argumentative strategies will be explored in the rest of the chapter.

What is evident in the above is the ambivalence in the construction of the viewers' moral agency. It is constructed through the normative perceived responsibility to act for the alleviation of suffering, implicit in the act of witnessing the suffering of distant others, on the one hand, and the actual inaction vis-à-vis this suffering, on the other hand. The concomitant uneasiness produced by this incongruence is dealt with by discussants through the use of

argumentative strategies of justification, which displace or ultimately dissolve viewers' responsibility to act. This section has highlighted the expression of this need within the focus group discussions. The remaining of the chapter will closer examine the argumentative strategies adopted to justify inaction. These argumentative strategies, as it will be further illustrated below, are in a constant interplay and often employed together by discussants. However, for the sake of their better illustration and clarification, they are analytically distinguished here in two broader discourses arguments are constructed within: a general culture of mistrust, which undermines the value of action at-a-distance, and the viewers' sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis the suffering witnessed, which renders effective action unimaginable. Both of these discursive strategies, as will be further discussed below, are embedded in broader cultural and political discourses, they are cultural clichés (Cohen and Seu, 2002: 89) that frame public life in Greece, itself underlined by civic disengagement and political cynicism (Demertzis, 1994; Kafetzis, 1994).

6.2 Mediation and the culture of mistrust

Questions about *what* kinds of action participants in the focus groups took in relation to disasters witnessed through the media would often transform into debates about *why* viewers did not take action, as explained in the previous section. A great part of the reasons participants employed would refer to the viewers' mistrust in the mechanisms of transforming their action and donations into valuable support for the victims in order to alleviate their suffering. Elements of a broader culture of mistrust and suspicion have been hinted at in Chapter 4 in relation to politicised witnessing. Here this prominent theme in the

audience discussions will be discussed as an argumentative strategy for justifying inaction towards the suffering witnessed in the media. As such, mistrust was a central concept in viewers' construction of moral agency vis-à-vis distant suffering. Participants in the focus groups would express their mistrust both in terms of the motives of the people contributing to the alleviation efforts and, most often, in terms of the institutions mediating between the actions of the public and the delivering of aid to the affected victims. Both these dimensions of mistrust were used to explain viewers' reluctance to take action.

As already discussed in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.3) expressions of mistrust are part of a broader culture of political cynicism in Greece, usually expressed by a varied vocabulary of affective expressions, such as despair, detachment, sarcasm, indignation, pessimism, fatalism and irony (Demertzis, 2008). As such, mistrust is embedded in a broader cultural vocabulary, thus enabling the rationalization of public inaction and more specifically audience inaction and unresponsiveness towards the suffering of faraway others (Cohen and Seu, 2002).

6.2.1 Mistrusting humanitarianism

The previous sections have discussed how participants in the focus groups would distinguish between emotional engagement with the scene of suffering and their motivation to act for the alleviation of this suffering. Whereas the viewers' emotional engagement was treated in most cases as indisputable – with the exception of the type of detached witnessing as discussed in section 4.4 in Chapter 4 – action was often debatable. In some discussions this debate

would engage with the meaning of humanitarianism as a whole and the motivations of the donors, the members of the public that actually do take action and respond to media appeals.

At the heart of the relevant criticisms was the nature of viewers' action as selective and media-dependent. In the extract below, a young participant is expressing this position against media-instigated public action, by juxtaposing the outpour of donations towards the relief of the Tsunami victims to the general indifference towards other cases of suffering around the world:

Simos: Good, why haven't they sent help for so many years now to Somalia, let's say, to Ethiopia, I don't know where! Other people are being killed on a daily basis!

Hara: It was like...I mean, we all know that a lot of people face hunger....

Simos: They are hungry, meaning...

Hara: But when they bombard you with...with a specific stimuli, they instigate...

Simos: So, you are like a little robot!

Hara: No, I wouldn't call it like that! They just touch sides of your sensitivity, I don't know, I don't know what, which you might have but not having them touched on a daily basis.

Simos: You know what? I can't accept sensitivity expressed from the sofa!

(mixed, in their 20s, middle-class, FG1)

The above argument is underlined by two critiques of mediated humanitarianism. The first is illustrated here through the questioning of the selection of the sufferers who matter: victims of poverty and famine in Somalia and Ethiopia are juxtaposed to the victims of natural disasters that gain media attention. The second criticism concerns the suspicion over the motivation behind action, which underlines the expression “*sensitivity expressed from a sofa*”. It is the ingenuity of the viewers’ emotion that is ultimately debated on in the argument. There is a double critique constructed in such discussions: what is challenged is both the altruistic nature of charity as a concept and practice and the potential of the media to foster such a practice.

According to Boltanski, these two criticisms have intruded public discourse to the point they have become platitudes bolstering the reinforcement of anti-humanitarian discourse (Boltanski, 1999: 159). He describes them as “uncertainties” underlying media-staged emotion and therefore media-staged public action (Boltanski, 1999: 154), namely the doubt about the choice and identification of the victims (Boltanski, 1999: 155) and the uncertainty about the motives behind the intention to act (Boltanski, 1999: 172)²⁶. Taken together, these two arguments undermine the value of humanitarianism and are used here as strategies of denial (Cohen and Seu, 2002). In the discussion extract above, we see how these uncertainties are employed as argumentative strategies to undermine public action and justify inaction. In mistrusting the donors’ motivations and humanitarianism as a whole, viewers at the same time

²⁶ According to Boltanski, the other two “uncertainties” consist in the attribution of the role of victims, persecutors and benefactors and the suspicion of the desire to look at suffering (Boltanski, 1999: 159). These have already been discussed in relation to the tension between the viewer’s responsibility and complicity with the media in Chapter 2, section 2.1.3.

position themselves as bystanders, refusing to take action upon the suffering witnessed.

Simos: I just cannot understand the concept of charity. I mean, it sounds a bit...What I have already said, that we do it in order to get a key into heaven, let's say, to get rid of the guilt. That's it, this is why I am a bit negative and much more because we live in a society, which is the way it is. Which lives through television. In which everything is business, let's say. It is not something which happens because of altruism, in no way.

(male, 26, middle-class, FG1)

Section 6.1. discussed how telethon-staged appeals constitute the horizon of mediated action at-a-distance for the vast majority of the focus groups. It is this mediated character of charity and humanitarianism that is criticised in the extract above. The first part of the argument defies the altruism of humanitarianism (*"a key into heaven"*); the second part constructs media as a pro-profit institution and instrumental in the conduct of social life (*"everything is business"*). In this context, it is impossible for the media to stage altruistic action, first because altruism as a concept is highly debatable and, second, because what the media as private institutions are ultimately interested in is financial profit. Aware of the embedding of media-staged humanitarianism in the economics of the culture industry, viewers apply their own critical readings of telethons as expressions of modern charity and express their suspicions of humanitarianism as a whole.

In the extract below, the criticism is centred on telethons as a media spectacle from which both television channels and the participating celebrities profit from.

Gerasimos: I don't give to the telethons, because I am against the telethons, they are just a scam. They are only organised for the spectators, I am sure of this, there is no other way. And let me tell you, Stai²⁷ was on [television] the other day, who earns 600,000 per year, and she was talking with Lazopoulos²⁸, and she said "we should do something! What should we do? Let's do a telethon!". Why doesn't she just say: [I give]100,000 Euros! Since she earns 600, she can't live without 100?...I am fanatically against telethons! Because it is only to show off! And then it shows: Mrs Katina: 50 Euros, Mrs Stavroula: 2 Euros and stuff...But how do I know? Will she give it tomorrow? Because she does call, but will she go to the bank the next day? And in the end they say: "we have gathered so many millions!". These millions...Have they really been gathered? Who gathers it? Where does it go? And who spends it? Why do they spend it?

(male, 56, middle-class, FG11)

The participant's scepticism is targeted towards the character of the telethon as a spectacle – as addressed earlier in this chapter – which is "*only organised for the spectators*" and as a means for celebrities "*to show off*". This mistrust in the spectacularity of the telethon as a television genre expands to the substance of the aid pledges announced and the suspicion of whether the money is gathered in the first place. A series of questions express the viewer's mistrust, best

²⁷ Elli Stai is a Greek journalist and television news presenter.

²⁸ Lakis Lazopoulos is a popular comedian and writer of political satire.

summarised in the one he poses first: “*how do I know?*”. It is this lack of knowledge, that mistrust is based on.

Similar arguments are also echoed in the following extract. It is part of the discussion of the housewives, who, as discussed in section 6.1.1., were among the few participants in the research that had taken part in a number of relief efforts by donating money, responding to telethons and sending food to the affected victims. However, there is a strong sense of cynicism in their talk about media-staged charity. Their contributions are juxtaposed to those of celebrities, who are accused of using the suffering of others to their benefit:

Litsa: The famous, you can write down, so that the famous English also listen to it, they did go, they sung over there and they danced and pretended that they did that as a love charity and the channels were showing them again and again.

(laughs)

Litsa: Yes, and they were gathering from us, the poor, the phone calls.

(laughs)

Litsa: You write that down, too! This is what the famous people and the journalists did! The poor were the ones offering again! And there was Ploutarxos²⁹ and there was that one now, don't you remember – oh, Jesus! – and there was Roula Koromila³⁰ presenting and all of them [did] nothing! They made money and I, the stupid, I was paying for phone calls! Write it exactly like that!

(Litsa, 45, working-class, FG2)

²⁹ Popular Greek singer.

³⁰ Television show presenter that has often hosted telethons.

There is an implicit criticism of the transformation of mediated aid appeals to a media spectacle. What is more evident here, however, is how the viewer's agency is negotiated in relation to this process. While the participant here describes "*famous people and the journalists*" as making money, at the same time she victimises herself as she is "*the stupid*" and "*poor*" one that makes contributions. What is missing in this argument is the actual cause of the appeal. The participant does not situate herself in relation to the suffering victims and does not discuss her perceived agency and responsibility in relation to their misfortune; she positions herself in relation to the mediators of her contributions, the organisers and celebrities of the telethon in relation to whom her agency is passive. By constructing mediated charity and humanitarian appeals as media spectacles that address them as consumers and by critically resenting this position, viewers move away from their relationship with the people in need and focus on their relationship with the media. Mistrust in humanitarianism and its mediation, therefore, becomes a strategy of denial, distancing the viewer from the scene of suffering.

6.2.2 Mistrusting the mediators of aid

If skepticism towards humanitarianism and especially its transformation into a spectacle was one way viewers expressed their mistrust as a discursive strategy to justify their inaction, lack of trust in the way their contributions would be handled was another way. This mistrust was similar in its consequence of drawing attention away from the relationship between viewers and sufferers and victimising the audience as donors. In this case, however, mistrust was not expressed towards the idea of humanitarianism sustained by the media but

towards the way audience donations are (mis)handled in their way to the victims. Suspicion, therefore, is targeted more specifically towards the mediators of humanitarian help, namely NGOs, governments, the organizers of the appeals, as well as local organisations such as the church. Two main arguments were supporting this suspicion: first, rumours and reports of mishandling of the funds, and, second, the apparent lack of any evident results emanating from aid pledges.

Such are the arguments underlining the following discussion:

Have you sent any help?

Ilias: Personally, I didn't. I talk as an individual. But collectively or whatever, we did help. But personally, I mean, I find it a bit...to have your name written there with a...I find it...I don't like it.

Thanos: You know you can send anonymously, no? (laughs)

Ilias: Even anonymously...It's the same thing.

Pavlos: I agree with what Ilias said. I mean, I believe that during the last years the humanitarian movement offers help doing assumingly a great job, more systematic, at least we used to have UNICEF at the centre then on a daily basis...

Giannis: The "Doctors without Borders" nowadays.

Pavlos: Yes, there is some work being done. But the issue is, however, that there have been doubts, I think, about this whole effort because, if, let's say, you make simple maths, given that a lot of times the amounts of money gathered, I mean, are announced...well, you don't see the result!

(male, in their 40s and 50s, middle-class, FG6)

A number of argumentative strategies are employed by the participants in the discussion in the extract above. First, we see the way Ilias displaces his personal agency to the community, whether local or national, in a way similar to the young respondents displacing their agency to their parents, as discussed in section 6.1.2.. He furthermore expresses his suspicion of the motivations of other donors, in similar lines to the preceding extracts, by embedding action as donation to the spectacle of the telethon. Constructing this action as morally condemnable, his own inaction is justifiable. Finally, the third argument employed in support of inaction are the “*doubts*” about the humanitarian effort overall, which Pavlos introduces. Interestingly, Pavlos claims to agree with Ilias’s argument, although what he goes on to talk about seems quite different from what his interlocutor is saying. The common theme among the two arguments is mistrust, which expands from the media-staging of charity to the actual “*job*” done by the “*humanitarian movement*” and the mediators of humanitarian aid, who do not manage to produce a result out of the amounts of money gathered through donations. Through the mitigation strategies of using abstractive voice (“*there are doubts*”) and the personal pronoun “*you*” rather than “*I*”, the speaker attempts to distance himself from the argument being made. It is not him debating the value of humanitarianism; it is a general social discourse. It is also a doubt based on undeniable evidence (“*simple maths*”).

Such criticisms of the mishandling of the amounts of money and aid contributions gathered were frequent in discussions:

Gregoris: No way! I never give help!

In general?

Gregoris: This thing, with Roula³¹ and celebrities, it's just a scam! I think that these things with SMS, this bullshit, it's just a scam. And they never reach the victims. I would rather, for example, although I've never done it, to go there...

Nikos: Would you ever help people affected by disasters in any kind of way? Apart from mobile phones?

Gregoris: Only face-to-face.

(male, in their 20s, working-class, FG10)

Gregoris begins his argument by expressing his refusal to contribute to relief efforts in an intense manner (“no way!”). At the same time, however, he justifies his position by arguing that it is not charity itself that he opposes but media staged appeals and telethons about which he expresses his indignation, as well as the mishandling of donations that “*never reach the victims*”. In Nikos’s question that seems to challenge his intention to act, he replies by favouring “*face-to-face*” action. The premises and possibilities of such action are not discussed. The argument, however, does construct the speaker as somebody who wishes to take action for supporting the victims but cannot because of the ineffectiveness of mediated action at-a-distance.

Claiming that the money viewers send is mishandled and does not reach its destination invalidates the effectiveness of action at a distance further constructing it as unnecessary. In the following extract, the participant explains his refusal to donate to charity for the Tsunami disaster victims:

³¹ Roula Koromila, the television show presented and occasional host of telethons already mentioned earlier (section 6.1.2.).

Simos: Because the money didn't go anywhere, in the end. They wasted it all. And they didn't...They would say afterwards...And actually, there was this big – I remember this – there was this very big concert that they organised in the Olympic Stadium with a variety of artists, where they supposedly gathered money to send and then all this...all these things and the mayhem that happened with the food and stuff...

Tina: And they did, I think it was ERT that did...

Simos: ERT as well...They all had done..

Tina: They all did something for the Tsunami.

Hara: And auctions...

Simos: As if! They conducted a research now, which said that in the end the amount of money that reaches the victims is...

Mina: A lot smaller than the one gathered?

Simos: A lot smaller than the one you give and the procedures take so much time and are so expensive that in the end it makes no difference.

(mixed, in their 20s, middle-class, FG1)

The argument here encompasses a critique of the mediators of humanitarian relief efforts as a whole, described through the deictic “they”, who “wasted the money”. By identifying the group of mediators between individual benefactors and the victims the money is aimed at reaching, the participant implicitly victimises the donors as well, arguing that their money do not reach its target. He then justifies his inaction as a refusal to be victimised in such a way and to participate in an effort that “makes no difference”. The victimisation of the viewers is used here as an argumentative device to justify non-action: since their donations will be consumed by the mediators, it is only fair that viewers

will try to protect themselves by not contributing to the relief efforts. It is the effectiveness of action at a distance that is ultimately undermined here.

In reproducing this kind of justifications, already circulated in the public domain mostly through the media (*“they conducted a research...”*), viewers individually but also collectively construct inaction as justifiable and ultimately commonsensical and unquestionable (Seu, 2003). In the extract below, the participants are collectively constructing an agreement on the ineffectiveness of the mechanisms that administer the aid pledges.

Penelope: Even if we did sent before, I have stopped now having heard that a lot of food rots, a lot of medicines expire because they throw them aside, I mean, there is not a right way to transfer them, this is why, I mean...

Chrysa: A kind of co-ordination so that they arrive there!

Penelope: Now that I walked into the supermarket, there was a basket saying “Help for Lebanon”. I didn’t reach my hand to give something...

Chrysa: No, me neither!

Penelope: because I thought, where will all these go? Will they reach their destination?

Chrysa: Because we see on television that they say that they cannot reach...

(female, in their 40s and 50s, middle-class, FG4)

The authority of the media is again called upon to validate viewers’ suspicions towards the mediators of the aid gathered for the victims of disasters. This illustrates the ambivalence of the role of the media in engaging the spectators:

on the one hand, they stage appeals to attract viewers' contributions for the relief of distant sufferers; on the other hand, they become the sources of information undermining the value of these contributions by revealing scandals about their mishandling, thus providing the cultural vocabulary for justifications of inaction. Stories of food and medication going bad or donations never reaching their destination were common among all focus groups. In some discussions they were embedded in broader discourses of mistrust in institutions such as the church mishandling charity donations (focus group 2; 5) or politicians being dishonest and mispending public money (focus group 6). Discussions would alternate between such stories and their suspicion about action at-a-distance. As Cohen and Seu argue, for rationalisation to work as a technique to justify detachment, it should draw on believable stories, the best of which are often clichés and common cultural texts (Cohen and Seu, 2002: 189).

This generalised culture of mistrust in political and social institutions is embedded in the broader political culture in Greece and forms a framework for understanding politics and public life (Stefanides, 2007; Sutton, 2003). Framed in broader cultural discourses of mistrust, scepticism towards the organisations that staged and managed humanitarian appeals was translated into rationalised detachment from distant suffering. This rationalisation took place in two steps: first, the placement of responsibility to the organisations and institutions managing action at a distance; and, second, the undermining of the effectiveness of these organisations. Implicit in this line of argumentation was the lack of control of the viewers over their contributions. The broader arguments about

the viewers' powerlessness underlining these discussions will be addressed in the next section.

6.3 Mediated agency and power

The generalised culture of mistrust, as discussed in the previous section, displaced the focus of the discussion from the relationship between spectator and sufferers to that among the viewers, the media, and humanitarian agents that handle audience contributions, also constructing viewers as helpless in relation to controlling their contributions in the relief efforts. This expression of helplessness was embedded in broader discourses of power and viewers' perceived powerlessness in relation to the events witnessed. These cultural frameworks of thinking about power have already been introduced in Chapter 4, with regard to the Greek "underdog culture" (Diamandouros, 1993) and inclination towards conspiracy theories (Sutton, 2003). They are, therefore, part of a broader vocabulary of civic detachment and cynicism, characteristic of the Greek public space (Demertzis, 2008). Such discourses minimised viewers' agency in relation to the suffering of distant others. Nothing that the viewers did would ever change the situation, was the gist of the argument.

The relevant discussions will be presented here as two streams of a similar argument: first, viewers felt powerless due to the distance separating them from the scene of suffering; second, they minimised their sense of agency as that of "*powerless paws*" (Focus group 2) in the public space. In this context, discussions of audience responsibility were substituted by arguments about audience powerlessness and their action at a distance was undermined as infeasible and ineffective, and ultimately unnecessary. In this line of

argumentation, “personal helplessness mingles with political scepticism and indifference” to justify audience inaction (Cohen and Seu, 2002: 196). Its underlying principle is that the viewers’ contribution cannot make a difference to the sufferer’s situation as it would be pitiful due to the spectators’ helplessness.

6.3.1 Mediation and the impossibility of overcoming distance

A common theme within the discussions about the possibility of the audience to intervene for the alleviation of the suffering witnessed through the media and to the assistance of the distant victims was that of the powerlessness of the viewers to have any effect on the situation due to the distance separating them from the scene of suffering. Indicative of this would be the response that participants are “*mere spectators*” of the events unfolding. This response has been touched upon in section 4.4.1. on detached witnessing as a basis for the viewers’ rationalisation of disengagement from the scene of suffering. Here, it is also highlighted as a rhetoric device for constructing the viewer’s agency vis-à-vis the suffering witnessed:

Panagiotis: Since we are outside of the situation, we only see it...we watch it just as...spectators.

Alex: True, you can’t really do anything else.

Thodoris: What can you do, go there and help?

Panagiotis: And it’s far...it doesn’t really affect us...

(male, in their 20s, working class, FG9)

This response was common among other groups as well:

Kiki: You see the human pain and you think “what could I do”? And you just watch it...

Nana: We watch it and we might get touched but the bottom line is we can't go over there and help, can we?

(female, in their 20s, middle-class, FG3)

There are significant implications of this argument in relation to viewers' sense of agency. Firstly, it indicates viewers' reluctance to take up responsibility in relation to the events witnessed. In identifying themselves as “*mere spectators*”, viewers limit their sense of agency to the practice of media witnessing with the different responses to suffering this might entail, as discussed in chapter 4. They sharply distinguish between spectatorship of suffering and undertaking action for its alleviation. In this sense, viewers position themselves in a relationship of collusion with the media, accepting that the mere exposure to the image of the other on the screen is a sufficient form of engagement (Silverstone, 2007: 131).

At the same time, viewers draw a strong distinction between the scene of suffering and their own everyday conduct and experience. In the extracts above, participants highlight the distance separating them from the sufferers, both geographical (“*it's far*”, “*over there*”) and emotional (“*it doesn't really affect us*”), to justify their inaction. By constructing themselves as powerless and negating that there is any kind of effective action available to them, they simultaneously fail to acknowledge the suffering of the other as a cause for public action.

Seu recognises the discursive articulation of the spectators' powerlessness as a defence mechanism that lies in the root of their desensitisation with regard to distant suffering and violations of human rights (Seu, 2003). However, the

employment of such argumentative strategies does not necessarily assume “desensitisation” or “apathy” (Seu, 2003) of the viewers. As seen in Chapter 4, in section 4.1.1. on affective witnessing, the feeling of powerlessness was occasionally expressed alongside an overwhelming of emotion. It was argued that in that case intense emotional involvement can militate against viewers’ reflective engagement with distant suffering, and consequently against action for its alleviation.

Considering viewers construction of themselves as powerless in relation to suffering can be theorised as part of a broader sociology of denial, as it draws upon cultural commonplaces and clichés (Cohen and Seu, 2002). It is important to consider viewers’ perceived lack of agency vis-à-vis distant suffering alongside the context of the broader civic culture within which they are embedded. The sense of viewers’ powerlessness in acting at a distance is implicated with the participants’ cynicism and mistrust in the institutions that render this action possible. A generalised culture of mistrust in institutions, as illustrated above, is part of the broader public culture in Greece (Kafetzis, 1994). Distance is acknowledged as prohibitive of any kind of agency here not only in terms of the actual geographical separation from the scene of suffering but also because viewers’ do not trust in the mediators of the aid pledges and humanitarian appeals. Furthermore, their arguments about their sense of powerlessness can be seen as part of their broader perceived lack of agency as public actors. This will be the subject of the following section.

6.3.2 Powerlessness in the global public space

Arguments about viewers' powerlessness vis-à-vis distant suffering and its alleviation were not limited to the impossibility of overcoming the geographical distance separating them from the scene of suffering. They were further expanded in the broader sense of a perceived powerlessness of the participants as public actors. This argument can be seen alongside the discourses about power and politics underlying politicised witnessing, as explored in section 4.3. of Chapter 4. Similar conceptualisations of power expressive of the "underdog culture" characteristic of the popular understanding of public life in Greece (Diamandouros, 1993) were also implicated in participants' sense of their agency within the public space. Positioning themselves as part of the underdog class, or "the small people" (Demertzis, 1994: 24) viewers minimized their sense of agency as public actors. Such arguments were constructed within the focus group discussions in a variety of ways.

First, it was commonplace among viewers to juxtapose their agency to that of media celebrities and the affluent within discussions about contributions and donations to humanitarian appeals. This can be seen in the earlier quote in section 6.2.1., where the participants, identified as "*the poor*" are juxtaposed to "*the famous*", who not only did not contribute to the appeals as much as they should have but apparently benefited from the telethons and the media coverage they attracted through it. The distinction is expressive of the ambivalence of the use of celebrities in order to publicise appeals. As already discussed, celebrity endorsement attracts and engages audiences with telethons. There is the implicit expectation that celebrities as good-doers will

function as role models for the viewers and their presence in the telethons as an invitation for action (Tester, 2001: 120). The risk, however, revealed by the focus group discussions here is that the social gap separating the viewer from the celebrity benefactor is prohibitive of an actual identification of the audience with the charitable celebrities. The latter are treated with irony and sarcasm, as their wealth ostensibly contradicts not only the suffering that celebrity charity aims at alleviating (Littler, 2008: 143) but also the viewers' own social status and minimal agency.

In the following extract, a group of young participants are making a similar point of distinguishing between the viewers as the "*common people*" and the powerful and wealthy:

Giota: I did sent help, yes. You say, OK, I do help somehow. But there are other people that give millions, thousands of Euros, why would you go and give twenty or thirty Euros that you actually need? Therefore, you say, OK, I will give one Euro, or 1.20, which is how much a text costs and you will contribute with this action.

Mary: The fact, of course, that the mighty ones, who have all the money, do not give and it's the common people that give is even more annoying. Because, OK, it's about ten people in Greece that own billions! And they don't give!

(female, in their 20s, working class, FG7)

The women here minimise their own sense of agency and the effect of their contributions by emphasising how limited these can be ("*somehow*", "*one Euro*"). At the same time, they juxtapose this minimal agency to that of the "*mighty ones*" who "*don't give*". It is the actions of those "*who have all the money*" that

could actually make an impact; however, these people remain, according to the discussants here, unresponsive to the media appeals. Therefore, viewers' themselves are to be commended despite their small contributions or even justified for remaining inactive. By victimising themselves in relation to the "mighty", participants, first, shift emphasis of the discussion from their own actions vis-à-vis distant suffering towards social relations within their own community, and, then, use these relations to justify their own lack of or minimal action.

It is not only the powerful few that viewers juxtaposed their sense of agency as public actors but also "the system" of social and political structures, which further diminish their willingness to offer to people in need. In the following extract, the group of housewives moved from a discussion about action towards distant suffering to the obstacles they meet to their wish to contribute in their own community by reading to blind children. As the care house is outside the town and they cannot drive themselves, they argue that there should be public transport to enable them to get there.

Dina: You want to offer and you can't!

Litsa: I mean, the system does not help us at all! This is my conclusion! ...If you try through the church, the church will try to take advantage of you instead of sending you to the people in need. I don't want to go through the church! Do you know where the person is? Send me, and I will go every day for an hour, to feed them, to help them...Like that!

Popi: Offer to society!

Litsa: There are five people that do these things to show off and they use us a bit like their instruments, they use me, they step on me, and

*these are the people that television shows and this annoys me so much!
Incredibly!*

(female, in their 40s and 50s, working class, FG2)

Action at a distance and action within the local community are treated in the same context under the common theme of the viewers' powerlessness when encountered with the "system". It is this powerlessness and mistrust in the institutions (Demertzis, 2008) that is used once more as an argumentative strategy to justify viewers' inaction vis-à-vis the suffering of others. The "system" appears to entail the "church", celebrities (the "five people that do these things to show off"), as well as the media ("television") that focus their attention on them. Viewers are constructed as victims of this system and ultimately as unable to "offer to society", even if they want to.

Ultimately, this sense of lack of agency of the viewers that participated in the discussions can be summarised in the quote below:

Litsa: We identify more with the poor, with the wretched because unfortunately this is who we are as well.

(female, 45, working class, FG2)

In affective terms, what is expressed here is empathetic identification with the suffering victims. In terms of constructing her own agency, however, the viewer positions herself as powerless and victimizes herself in a way similar to the distant sufferers and thus distances herself from taking up responsibility for the events she witnesses. At the same time, identification with the other here entails "the elision of the different to the same" and "the refusal to recognise the irreducibility in otherness" (Silverstone, 2007: 47). The specificity of the

suffering and of the status of the sufferers is denied. Empathy in this case does not necessarily encompass understanding and judgement, essential for a duty of care, as described by Silverstone (2007: 47). It also minimises the viewer's agency as a public actor vis-à-vis the suffering of the unfortunates.

The distinction between the "*powerful*" and the "*common people*" is an underlying framework for the participants' understandings of social and political life (Diamandouros, 1993, Stefanides, 2007). It concomitantly affects their understanding of public action and their own agency as well. Identifying themselves as the "*common people*", viewers minimise their role as public actors. Inaction or unresponsiveness to humanitarian appeals, therefore, is not to be understood as merely an indifference or failure to engage with the unfortunates or as a moral failure of the process of mediation as a whole. Rather, it should be considered in relation to broader cultural frames about power and public action, which are into play in the context of the spectators' everyday life. Expressions of powerlessness are part of a broader repertoire of emotion underlying conceptions of public life. As such, they are entrenched within a broader emotional discourse bound up with the social and cultural context (Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1993).

Towards the end of the focus group discussions, participants were asked whether they felt themselves to be "cosmopolitans". The question was open-ended in that it let group members to freely attribute meanings to the concept of the cosmopolitan without guidance. Its ultimate aim was to illustrate the different ways people might construct their own agency as public actors in the global public space. The question instigated interesting discussions and

responses ranging from conceptualisations of cosmopolitanism as part of the new world order, which serves the interests of the few mighty nations manipulating the rest of the world population (Focus Group 10) to a construction of cosmopolitanism as global citizenship with the rights and obligations this might entail for individuals (Focus Group 6).

In their overwhelming majority these responses employed similar conceptualisations about power based on the distinction between the mighty few and the common people, highlighting the viewers' lack of agency when it comes to public affairs.

Chrysa: If we think about it, generally, I say that we cannot really feel a lot of things as cosmopolitans – there should be something that I could have an effect on as a citizen of the world, to be able to do some things for the good, some wars, some stuff to go through me, anyways, in order to change. We cannot do anything as citizens of the world. This is what I see and I feel that I am not a cosmopolitan.

Penelope: But what do we do as citizens of own country? Isn't it the same thing?

Chrysa: As citizens of our own country, I can say that I can vote for something, I have the power of the vote to choose something specific. But from then on...

Penelope: Only this!

Chrysa: Only this!

Penelope: From then on, I have no power!

Ira: I don't even have any power in order for the town to be cleaned, or for this or that to be done, not to have a four-storey building built in front of me...

Chrysa: Therefore, as cosmopolitans, we are completely powerless! What kind of cosmopolitans are we, when we can do nothing about this world!

(female, in their 40s and 50s, middle-class, FG4)

The participants position themselves as completely devoid of any kind of agency vis-à-vis the global public stage due to their lack of influence on the global affairs. This lack of agency is further expanded to the level of the national where, voting aside, discussants still feel powerless, and even to the level of the local community, where viewers cannot even get their town to be cleaned. Viewers' articulation of their agency vis-à-vis the distant, therefore, is infiltrated with discourses about their agency within the national and local community.

It is important to note here that the word "cosmopolitan" is literally translated in Greek as "citizen of the world". For that reason, most of the participants framed their answers through the concept of citizenship. Since the latter is mostly associated with civic life within the nation state, most answers seemed to be filtered through the viewers' sense of citizenship within the national community. This is also the case in the following extract by a young respondent:

Giota: I have to feel as a citizen of my own country first in order to feel a citizen of the world...If your own country does not take you into account, no matter how cynical this sounds, how will the foreigner ever take you into account? This is what I mean...If I can't be an active member in my own country, how can I feel a citizen of the world?

(female, 23, working class, FG7)

The viewer is once more constructed as passive in relation to an impersonal system, in this case her “*own country*”. It is this system that “*does not take her into account*” and does not let her “*be an active member*”. Interestingly, the global is identified here with the “*foreigner*”, in sharp contrast with the speaker’s “*own country*”, which makes her powerlessness towards it even greater. Evident in both the above quotes are the characteristics of the Greek civic culture as already described above, embedded with discourses of cynicism, powerlessness and ultimately disengagement (Demertzis, 1994; 2008; Stefanides, 2007).

Similar arguments are made in the following discussion, where there is an interesting distinction made between global citizenship in terms of being informed about global affairs and participating in them.

If somebody would ask you whether you feel like citizens of the world [i.e. cosmopolitans], what would you say?

Ilias: Perhaps citizens of our neighbourhood...

(laughs)

Agis: No way!

Pavlos: Citizens of the world in what sense?

Giannis: With regard to participation or information? There is a difference here.

To both. The way you see it.

Pavlos: Both in relation to participation and information!

Giannis: [with regard to] information they give you whatever they want – don't they give you whatever they want? Why, do we know a lot of things? Whatever they show you, whatever they send, whatever they want...What's the other thing we said?

Participation.

Pavlos: It doesn't exist! [There is] detachment from everything! I think so! Everyone is secluded in what is of personal interest and from then on I think there is no...and I think...we experience this at every moment of our everyday lives. There are associations with no members, organisations that do not function...There is no offer...

(male, in their 40s and 50s, middle class, FG6)

The viewers' sense of agency is expressed as minimal with regard to both meanings they attribute to the concept of global citizenship. In relation to information circulated in the global public space, they are constructed as passive receivers of what the media ("*they*") give them. And, in expression of their mistrust and critical engagement with the media, they accuse them of showing "*what they want*" rather than what they ought to. With regard to participation in global affairs and public life, through the use of nominalisation ("*detachment*", "*offer*"), the agency of the viewers is again reduced and the emphasis is placed on the effect rather than their own (in)action and lack of participation. Interestingly, once more, a question about cosmopolitanism and global citizenship is re-contextualised and answered through the context of the participants' lifeworlds and "*everyday lives*".

This discussion on cosmopolitanism offers useful insights in relation to the concept of "global citizenship". It illustrates it as a question understood by

audiences through national citizenship and as an expansion of it. Such a discussion, fruitful in its own terms, is beyond the scopes and interests of this chapter. What is to be highlighted here is that the viewers' articulation of agency vis-à-vis the global and the distant is filtered through their construction of agency as members of a community, national and local. And as this membership is surrounded by discourses of powerlessness, the same discourses are implicated in viewers' construction of agency as public actors in relation to distant suffering. Constructing themselves as powerless and as "*common people*" in juxtaposition with the powerful and mighty, viewers discredit the effectiveness of their action and justify their passivity in general and their unresponsiveness to the relief efforts in specific.

Summary and conclusions

The present chapter has explored the question of public action as a response to reports of distant suffering, which ultimately underlines viewers' agency as public actors. As discussed in Chapter 2 of the thesis, it is usually this gap between knowledge of the suffering of distant others and audience unresponsiveness or minimal responsiveness that is at the heart of the debate about the potential of mediation to construct spectators as moral agents in relation to distant suffering. This chapter has illustrated the modalities and preconditions of audience action at a distance, by focusing, first, on the kinds of action viewers consider available to them, and, second, the array of justification strategies participants in the focus groups employed in order to explain their inaction vis-à-vis the pain of others.

Audience public action as a response to distant suffering, as illustrated in the current chapter, is rather fragmentary and elusive. It is heavily dependent on the orchestration of humanitarian appeals by the media and most often takes the form of donations through mobile phone texting within the context of telethons. According to the audience discussions, motivation to act towards distant suffering is therefore hardly a direct outcome of the urgency of the situation and the humanitarian crisis or the viewers' emotional and reflective involvement with it; it is rather circumstantial and media-induced. In this context, viewers' action or inaction as a response to distant suffering appears to be independent of the practice of media witnessing. As discussed here, emotional involvement was not always followed up by action to help the distant sufferers; on the other hand, viewers who positioned themselves as detached from the suffering of others claimed to have contributed to media appeals. What triggers public action, it was argued, is ultimately not the moral compulsion to act in the face of suffering but the attraction to participate to the media event of the telethon.

This has further illustrated the problematic relationship between the reality of the suffering at the heart of the media appeals and their staging as a spectacle through the telethon. Although telethons manage to instigate public action and motivate audiences to contribute to relief efforts, their spectacular character ends up disassociating itself from the actual cause of the suffering, deflecting viewers' attention from the people in need to the event of the telethon and the celebrities participating in it. The latter, it was argued, although useful in attracting audience attention, were also treated by viewers with irony in their

role as good-doers, which undermined their employment as public role-models of charity and humanitarianism.

Despite viewers' criticisms of telethons and their use of celebrities, however, participants in the focus groups still did not move beyond the kinds of action at a distance suggested by the telethons, namely contributions mostly through text messaging. Understanding themselves as public actors only in the limited sense suggested to them by the telethons and media appeals, viewers find themselves in a relationship of complicity with the media (Silverstone, 2007: 130) with regard to action at a distance. For most of the participants in the focus groups, however, their admission to inaction illustrated a collusive relationship with media reports of suffering, where the exposure to images of the pain of others was believed to be sufficient for the viewer's engagement with them (Silverstone, 2007: 131), ultimately ignoring the morally compelling nature of the suffering.

Aware of the criticisms of moral failure admission to inaction in the face of human suffering might raise, discussants would employ different discursive strategies to justify their unresponsiveness. These strategies were analytically distinguished here into two main discursive frameworks: first, a discourse of generalised mistrust of humanitarian action at-a-distance, and, second, a discourse of powerlessness that rendered viewers' action ineffective. With regard to the first argumentative strategy, participants criticized the mediation of humanitarianism as a media spectacle, discrediting the motives both of the organizers and the donors, or expressed serious suspicions about the way public donations are handled by the mediators of humanitarian pledges, be it

NGOs, governments or other institutions. With regard to their positioning as public actors, viewers would construct themselves as powerless, both in relation to the events witnessed due to their geographical remoteness as well as in the broader context of public and political life. Minimizing their sense of agency as actors in the public stage, participants simultaneously discredited the effectiveness of their actions vis-à-vis distant suffering.

The two argumentative strategies, of powerlessness and mistrust, are of course intrinsically intertwined. Viewers do not trust the mediators of public action, since they feel they have no power of control or accountability over them. At the same time, by mistrusting institutions who have power over the situation witnessed viewers simultaneously victimise themselves in relation to these institutions and stress out their own powerlessness. The two discourses are, however, analytically separated here in order to be explored in their particularities and also illustrate the complexity of the discussions surrounding public action. The argument to be made here is that viewers' sense of agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others as expressed and enacted (or not) through action at-a-distance should be considered not merely in relation to or as a direct response to the media coverage of human suffering but also in relation to these broader discourses that surround the viewers' understanding of public action and their position as public actors in the social world. In this context, it is a limited approach to theorise viewers' unresponsiveness to humanitarian appeals and inaction vis-à-vis distant suffering as moral apathy (Seu, 2010: 440), compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999) or as merely a moral failure of the media to convey the urgency of the situation. It has to be

understood alongside viewers' sense of their own agency as public actors and relevant moral discourses that render this inaction expected, justifiable and commonsensical.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

This thesis has explored the ways viewers position themselves as moral agents in relation to geographically remote disasters and the suffering of distant others. The research began from the observation that everyday life has been to a large extent infiltrated by discourses about the global and the distant, as the media expand the sphere of visibility beyond the confines of the local and the immediate. Placing viewers within the context of a globalised media space, which functions as a discursive resource of meaning for the understanding of the distant other, the research set out to explore the significance of the experience of distant suffering for the viewers' sense of moral self.

An understanding of the concept of mediation as *audience practices* guided the exploration of audience discourses on distant suffering. Focus group discussions were employed as the methodological tool to explore the ways viewers discursively articulate their sense of moral agency in relation to television news of suffering of faraway others. The analytical focus has been on two interrelated audience practices, those of *media witnessing* and *media remembering*, namely the positioning of the viewers as virtual witnesses to distant suffering and their discursive reconstruction of the events witnessed. It has been suggested that the moral agency of the viewer in relation to these practices is articulated through three main tensions: the tension between emotional engagement and rationalised detachment, hospitality and apathy towards the distant other and, finally, the viewer's complicity and responsibility towards media representations. The empirical chapters have illustrated that audiences engage with distant misfortune in diverse ways, often reproducing the symbolic

hierarchies of suffering adopted by the media, or constructing ones drawing upon national and cultural discourses.

In this concluding chapter, I bring together some of the themes and findings of this study as a means to point out the academic contribution of the thesis, as well as to suggest avenues for future scholarship. The chapter begins with a review of the key empirical findings of the research, discussed in relation to the three empirical chapters. The contribution of these findings to the general field of media and communications studies as well as the more specific academic work on the mediation of distant suffering is also explored in the next section. Finally, a reflection on the research choices and the possible limitations of the thesis is followed by a consideration of the areas that the research presented here suggests for further study.

7.1. Theoretical and empirical contributions

The concept of mediation was the theoretical starting point of this thesis. Chapter 2 employed mediation to focus on the production of meanings within the broader context of the viewers' lifeworlds, shifting away from a focus on media texts and media production. The concept was therefore used to conceptualise viewers *as agents in a relation of appropriation to the media as discursive resources* for the nourishment of imagination and understanding of the distant other, who is only visible through the media. Following Couldry's conceptualisation of mediation as practices (Couldry, 2004; 2006), I employed the concept of media practices to study this relationship between audiences and media. Couldry suggests a new paradigm for media research which, theorising media as practices, focuses on the question of what people do and say in

relation to the media (Couldry, 2006: 39), in order to analyse the influence of media on everyday life in a media saturated culture (Couldry, 2004: 115). Based on the underlying assumption of the discursive construction of the self (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Edwards, 1997), the thesis operationalises Couldry's suggestion and explores *what people say* about media stories of distant suffering in order to illustrate the construction of their moral agency vis-à-vis the remote sufferer.

A key theoretical development of the present study was, therefore, the construction of a conceptual framework for the study of the mediated agency of the viewer of suffering. This framework placed two media practices at the centre of the constitution of the viewer as a moral agent: the practice of *media witnessing* and that of *media remembering*. Media witnessing was suggested as the concept that better describes the viewing experience of suffering, as this modality of audiencing varies dramatically from any other audience experience in terms of its moral implications, and cannot be addressed by hitherto used concepts such as "reception" (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009b: 1). I operationalised media witnessing, a hitherto largely theoretical concept (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009a) to construct an analytical framework of three dimensions, which focuses on the relationship of the viewer with (a) the scene of suffering, (b) the distant other, and (c) the media report. Studying media witnessing along these aspects allows for the comprehension of the specificities of watching suffering, as well as the variability in the viewer's engagement with different stories of suffering. It provides an analytical space for the exploration of the variety of moral and emotional implications of being exposed to distant suffering for the viewer that

go beyond the dichotomy of compassion and empathy, on the one hand, and compassion fatigue and moral apathy, on the other.

Media remembering was conceptualised as an analytical category drawing upon Halbwachs's concept of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) and discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992). As a media practice of the discursive reconstruction of viewers' memories of mediated stories of suffering, media remembering throws into relief the role of media in generating and reproducing memories of global disasters and human suffering, as well as the ways this suffering is employed by viewers in the context of their lifeworlds and gets embedded into broader frameworks of meaning.

This is a study of *audience talk* and the production of *discourses about* media stories; as Chapter 2 has highlighted it is not a reception study and is not interested in audience responses to specific media texts. However, as evident in the exploration of the empirical material, the media text was far from absent from the audience discussions; its presence was dominant in the media practices of witnessing and remembering. It was specific media reports, either of individual sufferers or of the sublime spectacle of death that enabled the viewers' intense emotional engagement with the scene of suffering and the victims, as discussed in relation to affective and ecstatic witnessing (Chapter 4). It was through "media templates" (Kitzinger, 2000) that viewers remembered distant suffering and respectively constructed their moral hierarchy of remembering, as explained in Chapter 5. It was also the media and their orchestrated appeals, mostly in the form of telethons, that motivated viewers to take action vis-à-vis distant suffering, as Chapter 6 has argued.

Some of these issues, already elaborated in the empirical chapters, will be further addressed below. What is to be highlighted here, in relation to the theoretical contributions of the thesis, is the use of media practices as *audience discourses* for the study of the symbolic power of the media. For what the empirical chapters have often confirmed – without of course neglecting the influence of the discourses, cultural, social and political, of the context of the viewer's everyday life – is the power of media representations to define or delimit viewer's engagement with the suffering witnessed.

Finally, the focus on Greece as the context for the exploration of audience discourses of suffering has provided useful insights within the broader literature on the relationship between the Western spectator and distant suffering. Chapter 3 has addressed some of the peculiarities of the Greek cultural and political landscape, which illustrate Greece as a particular case of a Western context. These peculiarities became also evident in the empirical chapters, as they underline the way audiences engage with the suffering they witness through the media. The cultural and political discourses employed by Greek audiences in making sense of distant suffering challenge the homogeneous perspective of the Western spectator of suffering, which has so far been assumed by the relevant literature. The strong discourse of anti-Americanism has challenged assumptions about a unified empathetic Western reaction to the events of September 11 (Haes, 2002; Chouliaraki, 2008). The study has illustrated how cultural conceptualisations of power, historical in their origin and thus deeply rooted in national culture, might be stronger influences in framing audience responses to suffering in comparison to cultural

proximity, as has often been assumed in the literature. It is these conceptualisations rather than the distinction between the West and the rest that underline expressions of empathy and allegiances. By focusing on Greece as its research context, therefore, the present study has challenged assumptions about the Western spectator as a homogeneous category.

The following sections will discuss some of the empirical findings of the thesis, contextualising them within the relevant academic debates.

7.1.1 Key empirical findings

The thesis has illustrated the construction of the moral agency of the viewer with regard to the suffering of distant others as constituted not only in the ways viewers describe themselves as actors vis-à-vis media reports of human pain (Chapter 6) but also through the practices of media witnessing (Chapter 4) and media remembering (Chapter 5). In this section, I will summarise the key findings of the thesis across these three research sub-questions.

Media Witnessing

Media witnessing was employed here as the discursive articulation of the spectator's experience of the pain of faraway others through the media. The exploration of the focus group discussions illustrated a variety of ways viewers experience mediated suffering along the three tensions in the mediation of moral agency. I analytically organised these in a *typology of media witnessing*, consisting of four different types or modalities of experiencing mediated suffering.

Affective witnessing was mostly characterised by the empathetic identification of the spectator with particular images of sufferers and an indulgence in sentimentalism and personal emotion. *Ecstatic witnessing* was described as an extreme case of affective witnessing, distinguished by the sense of immersion of the viewer in the scene of suffering, enabled by the mode of coverage of the media reports and the use of unedited footage. This type of witnessing was associated in audience narratives with the media coverage of the Indian Ocean Tsunami and September 11. *Politicised witnessing* was associated with the expression of political judgments about the suffering and feelings of indignation, as well as the tendency to attribute blame and distinguish the sufferers between innocent and deserving. Finally, the concept of *detached witnessing* was employed to portray the position of the viewer as an apathetic bystander to the suffering of distant others, described as irrelevant to the viewer's moral space of everyday life.

This typology dissects audience engagement with distant suffering, which has hitherto been rather uniformly described as “compassion” (Höijer, 2004), “compassion fatigue” (Moeller, 1999), “desensitisation” (Seu, 2003) or “moral apathy” (Seu, 2010). It describes mediated experience of human pain as a complex process, which cannot be assumed or predetermined by the nature of the suffering or its mediated representation. Media witnessing, as illustrated in this thesis, was found to be *contingent both on the nature and the mode of reporting of particular disasters* (as is mostly the case with affective and ecstatic witnessing) and *broader social and political discourses* viewers employ in

making sense of the events (as in the case of politicised and detached witnessing).

Media Remembering

Media remembering, as the discursive reconstruction of viewers' memories of the suffering witnessed through the media, was illustrated as a complex process at the intersection of, on the one hand, remembering and forgetting, and, on the other hand, employing national and global frameworks of memory.

Chapter 5 has illustrated the existence of a *moral hierarchy in the practice of media remembering of distant disasters*. It argued that, on the bottom end of this hierarchy, a large number of events reported as disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes, are *de-evented* in audience memory and are remembered in terms of media templates that characterise the reporting of similar disasters. In this case, the suffering of others is described as inevitable, expected, and, ultimately, banal. A smaller number of events, the ones experienced within the frame of ecstatic witnessing, namely the South Asian Tsunami of 2004 and the September 11 terrorist attacks, are constructed as *iconic* in the practice of remembering. Despite the viewers' intense emotional immersion in the scene of the disaster, however, or rather because of it, audience engagement in remembering these disasters shifts emphasis away from the suffering and towards the viewer's own emotions. Finally, the case of the earthquake in Izmit, Turkey in 1999 tops the moral hierarchy of remembering distant suffering. It was constructed in viewers' memory as a moment of actual cosmopolitan engagement with the sufferers, whose otherness is recognised and

acknowledged but overcome in the construction of the victims as a subject of concern and expression of solidarity.

The exploration of the focus group discussions has also indicated how in remembering global events, viewers position themselves in a world community of spectators, brought together through the simultaneous mediated witnessing of distant suffering. At the same time, however, viewers localised the significance of the events remembered by re-contextualising them in memory within national and local frameworks. Under this light, media remembering was illustrated as a practice which, albeit momentarily placing the viewers in a global space, is *ultimately underlined by the frames of the local and national community*.

Action at a distance

The issue of action at a distance was explored in the focus groups in relation to how participants talked about themselves as actors vis-à-vis distant disasters and their suffering victims. The discussions illustrated *action as limited, mostly circumstantial and motivated by the media rather than the moral impulse to help the sufferer*. Instrumental in the media staging of action at a distance was the telethon, as a televised appeal which breaks the routine television programme and employs celebrities in order to publicise humanitarian appeals. It was found that it is mostly through the telethons that viewers are motivated to act for the alleviation of suffering. However, the disassociation of telethons from their causes in audience narratives indicates that it is the *participation in a media event that is the motivation for action* rather than the actual humanitarian cause.

The focus group discussions also indicated a number of argumentative strategies participants employed to justify their inaction, which were analytically distinguished here in two main streams. First, viewers drew upon a *generalised culture of mistrust* to discredit either humanitarianism as a whole or the management of the resources gathered through humanitarian appeals. Second, they juxtaposed their *sense of powerlessness* to the needs of the distant unfortunates, either on the basis of the geographical distance separating them from the scene of suffering or, mostly, on their limited agency as actors in broader public and political life. These discursive frameworks of powerlessness and mistrust are entrenched in the broader civic culture in Greece and framed viewers' understanding of public action overall. In this context, it was argued that inaction is not a necessary consequence of moral apathy or compassion fatigue but has to be understood within the *broader political and cultural context* of the viewers' lifeworlds, which renders inaction expected, justifiable and commonsensical.

Overall, the empirical discussion has illustrated the mediation of the viewer's agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others as a complex process underlined by tensions and contingent upon the nature of the disasters reported, the media practices of reporting them and broader cultural and political discourses that underline viewers' understanding of public life. The next section will open up the theoretical discussion by expanding on some key themes in the relevant academic work that the empirical findings of the thesis provide further insights to.

7.1.2. Discourse diversity among respondents

As argued earlier in the thesis (Chapter 3, section 3.2.1.), the demographic criteria according to which participants were selected did not constitute major dimensions in the empirical analysis. The reason for this is twofold: first, an underlying assumption of the research and focus of the analysis was that discourses are mutually constructed through group interaction and are not the property of specific social groups; second, the small number of focus groups used for the analysis does not allow for safe conclusions to be drawn about the differences among the various groups. Nevertheless, a few points can be made in relation to the issue of the variability of discourses among the groups.

A clear distinction among participants' engagement with stories of distant suffering emerged on the basis of their age: as discussed in Chapter 4 and mostly on Chapter 6, younger respondents appeared to be more disengaged in relation to the participants of the older cohorts. They were described as detached witnesses and also as the least likely to act upon the spectacle of suffering. This finding, defying assumptions that younger generations, as consumers of global cultural products, might display cosmopolitan attitudes, was explained on the basis of civic disengagement among the youth, which is characteristic of Greek civic life (Demertzis et al., 2008).

With reference to gender segmentation, there were no significant differences among the groups. Höijer refers to a gendered display of compassion in her research of audience responses to news of violence and war, as her female respondents were more inclined to express feelings of compassion and pity, whereas men tended to be more cynical (Höijer, 2004). This does not agree with

the findings of the present study. As seen in Chapter 4, section 4.1 on affective witnessing, male participants also made extensive use of emotional language to describe the way images of distant suffering affected them. At the same time, female participants often employed politicised discourses when discussing distant disasters (section 4.3). The difference on the use of political discourses was rather one of degree; although male participants expressed compassion and empathy for the victims, they were also more likely to discuss about structural problems underlying human crises (this was especially the case with groups 6 and 11). However, as discourse analysis does not allow for quantification of the responses, reporting on the extent of this difference is not possible (see also section 7.3. on the reflections on the research design below).

No significant differences in relation to the research questions were observed between participants from the two different locales in which the research was conducted. Interestingly, participants in both the Komotini and Athens focus groups extensively discussed about the Turkish earthquake of 1999. As the earthquake was remembered along the one that took place in Athens just one month later, namely a national disaster, the event seemed to be equally meaningful and memorable for both communities. One interesting observation concerning two groups in Komotini (groups 3 and 7) was that they rather extensively discussed the possibility of a war between Greece and Turkey towards the end or even after the end of the focus group discussions. These discussions, reflective of the long-rooted tensions between the Greek and Turkish-descended population in the area, can be seen as indicative of how discussions about the distant other are localised and transformed into

discussions about the “national” or “local” other. They are also illustrative of the fragility of cosmopolitan sentiments of humanitarianism in relation to national and nationalistic discourses. The significance of these discussions, however, merits in-depth exploration, which is beyond the scope of the thesis and the question of distant suffering.

Finally, there were no major differences between the groups of the different socioeconomic backgrounds. The discourses employed for the viewers’ identification with the victims were both sociological (participants’ identifying with the “*poor*” and the “*wretched*”, because they felt they shared the same fate) but also psychological, expressed through empathy with the suffering mother or child on the screen. At the same time, the inclination to act (or not) seemed similar among all respondents, irrespective of their status. In his study of audiences of suffering in the Philippines Jonathan Ong has concluded that there are “classed moralities” in the ways people justify and act in relation to the suffering of the poor represented in the media (Ong, 2011). Drawing comparisons between this thesis and Ong’s study would be hard, given both the different aims of the projects (Ong’s research focuses on the suffering of Filipino poor as represented on television) and the different characters of the two national contexts. However, the differences between the two studies might raise interesting questions about the differences between watching distant and proximate suffering. If proximate suffering raises questions about local social structures and inequalities, and thus can be perceived as threatening to the elites, distant suffering always retains a degree of safety for the viewer, as it does not make claims to or challenge her own livelihood and lifestyle.

The lack of significant differences among the different focus groups should not be seen as an assumption of homogeneity among Greek audiences. This would be a naïve and false claim, which has in any case been challenged elsewhere (Madianou, 2005a). Rather, this lack of great variation should be seen along the lines of the research design and aims, and especially the analytical focus that dictated the small number of groups and participants.

7.2. Discussion

7.2.1. The mediation of suffering and the problem of particularisation

The emotional involvement of the viewers with the scene of suffering and their hospitality as the ability to engage with and understand the other, as illustrated throughout the empirical chapters, is conditional upon images of specific sufferers whose pain is graphically reported on the television screen. This finding supports the theoretical and empirical arguments made in previous work about the morally and emotionally compelling power of visuals in conveying distant suffering (Cohen, 2001, Höijer, 2004; Sontag, 2003), as well as the instrumentality of the singularisation and personalisation of suffering for the latter to be rendered imaginable by the audience members (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006).

However, there is a problem of balance between emotionally engaging singular suffering, as it appears on the screen, and its generalisation to include the rest of the sufferers affected by the crisis. This problem of particularisation of suffering as associated with specific visible figures in pain has been described by Arendt as the inability to translate compassion inspired by and directed towards

particular individuals to a generalised politics of pity (Arendt, [1963]1990: 85-90). The latter takes into account the dimension of distance and generalises “to reach out the multitude of suffering” (Arendt, [1963]1990: 89), expressing a commitment – rather than a sentiment – to the suffering as a public cause. This disconnection between compassion towards specific victims and the generalisation of their suffering to the masses of unfortunates affected by the disasters was evident in the practice of media witnessing. As discussed in section 4.1.2., viewers otherwise filled with empathetic emotions towards specific victims, would detachedly describe the aggregates of sufferers as “*the damned*” and “*the wretched*”. The same problem became apparent in the practice of media remembering, as viewers would emotionally reconstruct memories of stories of human suffering of particular individuals but their narratives were devoid of context and the dimension of historicity (section 5.1.). In this context, the engagement of the viewer with the suffering is an emotional one, lacking the necessary reflexivity necessary for deliberation and rational judgment (Chouliaraki, 2006: 179), as discussed in relation to the tension between emotional engagement and rationalised detachment (section 2.1.3.)

The problem of particularisation seems to be unresolved with regard to the mediation of distant suffering both in terms of representation (how can somebody represent the suffering of thousands, if not by the use of a few specific faces?) and audience engagement (how can the viewer imagine what it feels like to suffer if not by identifying with a specific face?). If there is anything to be taken as instructive from the focus group discussions, this is the viewers’ engagement with the victims of the Izmit earthquake of 1999. As explained in

Chapter 6, participants' recollections were not focused on the stories of particular victims; rather, they acknowledged the victims' otherness on the basis of national identity, while at the same time considering their suffering a cause for commitment and public action.

This, to be sure, had to do with the contextualisation of the disaster within national political and cultural discourses due to the construction of Turkey as the national enemy. It might also be related to the strong earthquake that hit Athens only a few weeks later. This kind of engagement beyond the particular sufferer, therefore, might be very particular to the specific case. It is, however, the *contextualisation* of the disaster, not only in terms of its own specificities but also in relation to the viewers' lifeworlds within the national community, that renders the suffering of specific victims from particular images to exemplary of a situation (Boltanski, 1999: 11). As the mediation of suffering requires the transformation of personal emotions of compassion and empathy to a generalised pity for suffering to become a cause for public action, it requires the contextualisation of "the intensely personal in the realm of the public and the political" (Chouliaraki, 2006: 215). In the context of the empirical findings of this thesis, this contextualisation takes place on the basis of national recognition.

7.2.2. The problem of action at a distance

The problem of the particularisation in the mediation of suffering has been theorised as an impediment to public action vis-à-vis distant suffering, as it fails to translate audience emotional engagement to a commitment to a public cause. The empirical discussion in Chapter 6 has illustrated further issues pertaining

to action at a distance. It argued that viewers' inaction is associated to their perceived lack of agency, which is not particular to the moral demands of distant suffering but embedded within broader discourses of power and mistrust in institutions, some of these particular to the Greek civic culture. In this context, viewers would often victimise themselves in relation to the organisations that mishandled audience donations (section 6.2.) or the "powerful" and the "system" (including individuals, institutions and states alike) (section 6.3.). As such, the lack of action vis-à-vis distant suffering can be seen as a problem of civic culture as much as it is a problem of mediation.

At the same time, the limited action viewers undertook as a response to images of human suffering was media-instigated, circumstantial and often disassociated with the specific sufferers, as the discussion on the telethons has illustrated (section 6.1.1). Action in this context is not only of low-investment (Tester, 2001: 130) but also lacks a reflexive connection between the spectator as a donor and the sufferer whose predicament constitutes the cause for the donation. This poses questions not only of *how* the media can instigate public action for the alleviation of suffering but *what* kinds of action they enable and what kinds of moral connections are expressed by these actions. As the audience discussions here have indicated, action has often been expressive of the impulse to take part in a media event rather than of a direct response to the human pain witnessed. Measuring the moral response of the audience in terms of action (Seu, 2003; 2010) misses the more nuanced dimensions of what kind of moral connections action is expressive of.

The disassociation of mediated action at a distance from its cause, as illustrated in Chapter 6, also challenges the idea of compassion fatigue as the main challenge facing the question of social action with regard to distant suffering (Tester, 2001: 46). Albeit criticised by different accounts as conceptually problematic³² (Cohen, 2001: 187-193; Tester, 2001: 15-17; Cottle, 2009: 131-135), compassion fatigue is still widely used both in academic and public discourse with reference to the unresponsiveness of media audiences to humanitarian appeals and reports of human suffering. Underlying assumption is that the emotional engagement of the viewer guarantees his or her motivation to act vis-à-vis the suffering witnessed through the media.

The findings of the present thesis challenge the compassion fatigue argument on two grounds: first, by illustrating that the moral positioning of the viewer with regard to distant suffering varies significantly more than the binary opposition between compassion and compassion fatigue seems to imply; and, second, by describing action at a distance as disassociated from the viewer's emotional engagement with the scene of suffering and the distant other. As argued in Chapter 6, inaction does not necessarily equate lack of compassion: participants who were emotionally affected by suffering claimed to never having contributed to media appeals, whereas people contributed to the telethons more as a participation in a media event than on the basis of their compassion to the suffering victims. At the same time, inaction was part of broader cultural frames of civic participation, powerlessness and mistrust.

³² Indeed, in her book of the same title, Moeller neglects to offer a clear definition of the concept of compassion fatigue. Instead, she descriptively explores study cases of different media reports of trauma, alternating between associating compassion fatigue with the audience response and attributing it to media reporting (Moeller, 1999).

The challenge for humanitarian communication and news reporting alike with regard to social action is, therefore, twofold. As far as the representation of victims is concerned, the question at hand is not only the evocation of the viewer's emotion but also the contextualisation of the suffering in order to both enhance audience understanding and render the suffering relevant in relation to the viewer's lifeworld, translating compassion to a politics of pity, as also discussed in the previous section. With regard to motivating spectators to act upon the suffering witnessed, the challenge, albeit hard and complex, is to undermine dominant discourses about humanitarian failure and mistrust and convince audiences of the relevance and effectiveness of their own actions.

7.2.3. The moral hierarchies of suffering and the symbolic power of the media

The thesis began by contextualising the global media space as a space of unevenness and inequalities, embedded within the unequal distribution of media structures and resources (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen, 1998; Thussu, 2003, Schiller, 2005), reproduced through professional practices of Western journalism (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Adams, 1986, Chang et al., 1987; Singer et al., 1991) and symbolically reflected on the construction of hierarchies of suffering through media reporting (Chouliaraki, 2006; Joye, 2009). These hierarchies differentially construct the distant sufferer as an object of moral engagement and empathetic connection.

Similar hierarchies of pity have underlined the audience discussions in this thesis. These would be either entrenched in national political frameworks and cultural stereotypes, or reproducing the media representational preferences.

The case of politicised witnessing has discussed how viewers would distinguish between worthy and unworthy victims on the basis of cultural allegiances and stereotypes, such as anti-Americanism. The practice of media remembering more elaborately illustrated a moral hierarchy in the way audiences remember suffering. In a way similar to Chouliaraki's regimes of pity, the "banal remembering" of "ordinary" disasters and the "ecstatic remembering" of iconic disasters gravitate towards the personal emotions of the spectator and ultimately towards the imagination of a communitarian public, analogously to "adventure" and "ecstatic" news (Chouliaraki, 2006). It is only in remembering the Turkish earthquake that Greek viewers come closer to a cosmopolitan disposition, where the sufferer is both recognised as other and as a cause for commitment, similarly to the category of "emergency news" in Chouliaraki's typology (Chouliaraki, 2006; 2008).

There is, however, one significant difference between the regimes of pity, as constructed through media reports, and the Greek audiences' hierarchy of remembering. If Chouliaraki's analysis of television texts indicates that the moral positioning of the spectator in the case of the ecstatic news of September 11 and the Tsunami was largely based on the identification of the viewer with the Western victims, this was not the case among participants in the focus groups. The identity of Western victims was not the basis for feelings of empathy and identification – indeed, as the typology of politicised witnessing indicated, in the case of 9/11 the identity of the sufferers as Americans was rather an impediment to empathetic identification. What was the basis for the intense emotional involvement of the viewer and the construction of these

events as iconic was the sense of liveness and the feeling of unmediated witnessing of the death of others. Of course, the present thesis does not include an analysis of the respective media reports of the disasters discussed, which would allow for a more detailed illustration of the extent to which media discourses are reproduced by the audiences. What can be safely argued, however, is that in remembering distant suffering viewers reproduce moral hierarchies of place and life similar to the ones constructed by the media, albeit in a non-straightforward way.

This is also evident in the ambivalent way audiences related to television. As illustrated throughout the empirical analysis here, viewers' relation with the media is underlined by tensions: on the one hand, television is criticised for its sensationalism, commercialism and ideological bias; on the other hand, however, viewers were positioned in a relationship of complicity with the media (Silverstone, 2007). Despite their cynicism about sensationalistic reporting, it was sensational representations of suffering that affected them the most and the ones reproduced in media remembering. Despite their scepticism towards media commercialisation, it was through the telethons and their spectacle that they engaged as public actors with the suffering of others. Despite their criticisms of media hierarchies and differential attention in reporting different parts of the world, it was this differential attention to different events that was ultimately reproduced in audience memory.

The symbolic power of the media as emerging in the empirical discussion of the thesis is, therefore, not incompatible with viewers' criticisms of the media (Couldry, 2000: 45); it is reproduced in audience discourses, which reflect the

unevenness of the mediapolis as a space of imagination and engagement with the distant other. If the viewer as a moral agent is in a relationship of appropriation with the media as resources for imagining and understanding the distant other, as Chapter 2 has argued, what the discussion here and the empirical analysis throughout the thesis has illustrated are the constraints and limitations of the viewers' agency, as it is highly conditional on the media and their representational choices.

7.2.4. Distant suffering and mediated cosmopolitanism

The question of the construction of the moral agency of the viewer in relation to distant suffering has been contextualised in the first two chapters of this thesis in relation to the issue of cosmopolitanism, both as a "concern" and "willingness to engage with the Other" (Hannerz, 1990: 239) and a global imagined community based on shared mediated experiences (Urry, 2000).

As a concern and moral engagement with the distant other, cosmopolitanism was illustrated in the audience discussions as instigated by particular images of sufferers, based on an assumption of sameness, differentially attached to different victims and ultimately fleeting and elusive (Chapters 4 and 5). With regard to mediated cosmopolitanism as a global imagined community, Chapter 5 has illustrated how in remembering global disasters viewers position themselves, albeit momentarily, in a relation of community with fellow spectators around the world. However, this kind of cosmopolitan imagination, it was argued, misses the moral dimension of the connection of the viewer with the distant other. Finally, cosmopolitanism as a sense of global citizenship (Stevenson, 2002), as briefly addressed in Chapter 6, was in most cases

categorically defined by focus group participants on the basis of their limited sense of agency in the global public stage.

It is useful to draw here upon Beck's distinction between cosmopolitanism as a process and its actual acknowledgement and reflexive awareness. Beck calls the former "cosmopolitanisation" and the latter "the cosmopolitan outlook" (Beck, 2006: 21). Cosmopolitanisation is the "latent..., *unconscious...*, *passive* cosmopolitanism" (Beck, 2006: 19, emphasis in the original) and it is largely an unintended effect of market decisions at the global level or of the acknowledgement of global risks, such as climate change or terrorism (Beck, 2005: 249). The cosmopolitan outlook, on the other hand, refers to "the awareness" of this latent cosmopolitanism, "its self-conscious political affirmation, its reflection and recognition" (Beck, 2006: 21). The fact that we live in largely cosmopolitanised societies, Beck argues, does not necessarily mean that we automatically become cosmopolitans. Indeed, he warns against this "cosmopolitan fallacy" (Beck, 2006: 89), which equates cosmopolitanisation to cosmopolitan consciousness. What the latter requires is "*dialogical imagination* in everyday practice", namely "situating and relativising one's own form of life within other horizons of possibility" and seeing "oneself from the perspective of cultural others" (Beck, 2006: 89). How this transcendence from cosmopolitanisation to reflexive cosmopolitanism is taking place is, according to Beck, a crucial question open to empirical investigation (Beck, 2006: 89).

Beck's distinction is useful in thinking about the differences between watching suffering and feeling for the human being on the screen, on the one hand, and an actual cosmopolitan outlook, on the other hand. Media witnessing in itself does

not guarantee a reflexive cosmopolitan outlook. The construction of global memories of disasters in the practice of media remembering is also part of a broader cosmopolitanisation process. What comes closer to the transcendence from cosmopolitanisation as a habitual exposure to images of faraway others to reflexive cosmopolitanism, as dialogical imagination, is the example of the viewers' reflexive engagement with the Turkish earthquake of 1999. It is their contemplation on how differences, natural, cultural and religious, are overcome in the face of human pain (section 5.3.) that is expressive of reflexive cosmopolitanism as both a universal concern to fellow human beings and a respect for difference (Appiah, 2007). In the case of the empirical exploration of this thesis, therefore, the viewers' expression of a cosmopolitan outlook presupposed national recognition, both of the spectators as Greeks and the sufferers as Turks.

7.3. Reflections on the research design and context

The design and implementation of the research entailed a number of decisions which inevitably influenced and shaped the findings of the thesis. A major determining factor of the research was the context of its conduct. Chapter 3 briefly introduced the news media environment in Greece illustrating some of the particularities of the media space within which Greek viewers are situated. At the same time, the empirical chapters have argued that audience practices in relation to distant suffering are often embedded in discursive frameworks particular to the Greek political and social culture, such as anti-Americanism (Calotychos, 2004), widespread celebrity culture (Plios, 2006; Tsaliki, 2010) or civic disengagement and a generalised rhetoric of powerlessness and mistrust

(Demertzis, 1994; 2008; Sutton, 2003; Stefanidis, 2007). This suggests that the findings of the present thesis are strongly embedded in the Greek national context within which the research was conducted. It seems safe to assume that similar research within a different national and cultural context might have pointed out different dimensions and particularities of the practices of audience witnessing and remembering. This also points towards the potential value of the introduction of a comparative perspective to the present study. The application of the analytical framework in a different cultural research context is sure to provide different insights and dimensions to the research, therefore rendering its conduct a desirable future direction.

This is also a comment about the broader generalisability of the research. There is a danger in attempting grand claims about any kind of small-scale qualitative research but I am particularly conscious of the cultural relativity of my research as well as the limitations of its scope. However, the thesis has suggested an analytical framework that aims at advancing understanding of the particularities of the mediated experience of suffering and can be used to further the study of how Western spectators place themselves in relation to distant others.

The choice of focus group discussions as the methodological route for gaining empirical insights and especially the use of discourse analysis for their exploration, justified at length in Chapter 3, also bear implications for the research findings. The decision to closely explore the discussions dictated a necessary trade-off between the depth of analysis and the number of focus groups analysed. The choice of another qualitative analytical method, such as

thematic analysis, might have allowed for the inclusion for more discussions in the analysis. However, as the interest of the thesis was on the careful study of language use (in terms of *how* and not only *what* is being said) in the construction of the viewer's agency and given the attempt to secure a representativeness of participants, the choice of discourse analysis appeared to be the most effective.

This close focus to audience discourses also left out of the research design an empirical exploration of the media content, in this case the television news coverage of the relevant disasters discussed by the focus groups. Although of course valuable in its own terms, such an investigation was not included in the present research study. This decision was taken on the basis of the interests of the research, which, as highlighted in Chapter 2, do not lie with the audience reception of specific media texts but in the ways viewers construct themselves as agents in the mediated public space. As already suggested, though, the media were not absent from the research. As symbolic forms and images (of catastrophe and suffering), as well as institutions (orchestrating and mediating humanitarian appeals) and parts of a broader cultural context (for example, through the promotion of celebrity culture), the media anchored the way people talked about and positioned themselves in relation to distant suffering. It was this appropriation of media discourses in people's everyday talk beyond the moment of reception that was the interest of the research.

Finally, the analytical separation between witnessing, remembering and action in the discussions and the decision to present the empirical material in three chapters exploring each of these dimensions respectively meant that these

analytical categories were further reified by the structure and presentation of the research. This choice, however, has been theoretically justified and defended in Chapter 2. These media practices were considered to be central in the mediated construction of the viewer as a moral agent. They were, therefore, chosen as the analytical foci of the exploration of the empirical material in order to best address the research questions of the thesis. This indisputably led the discussion towards certain paths and issues, while excluding others; nevertheless, it was judged that these were paths of the utmost significance for the interests and research purposes of the study.

7.4. Future directions

The dimensions left unexplored by the specific focus of the research, as presented in the previous section, open up space for further exploration. An obvious direction to move the research forward would be the application of the conceptual framework in another cultural and national context, as suggested above.

Another important aspect of the mediation of distant suffering left out from this thesis is, of course, the study of media texts of distant suffering. Media witnessing, as discussed in Chapter 2, involves a triangle of communication, which includes – apart from the audiences studied here – the sufferers (as first order witnesses) and the journalists (second order witnesses) (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009a). Exploring media reports of distant suffering as witnessing texts opens up the space for a range of critical questions regarding the authorship and composition of the text, such as how stories of suffering are constructed as witnessing texts and what types of audience witnessing are

invited by the choices of representation (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2009). Addressing media reports through the concept of media witnessing also places the focus on the moral implications of journalism in reporting the world. Such empirical questions have been hitherto addressed more or less directly by a small number of studies (Chouliaraki, 2006; 2010b; Cottle and Rai, 2008, Cottle, 2009). The expansion and continuation of such empirical interests are an imperative in order to critically address questions of symbolic power in the media space.

Media witnessing as a modality of audience experience has been explored in this thesis in relation to television. This choice, explained in Chapter 1, had mostly to do with the primacy of television as a news medium in the Greek context. Outside of this specific national context, however, and given a number of technological advances since the conduct of the research, the nature of media witnessing as primarily tied to the audiovisual characteristics of television is challenged. The primacy of user-generated content in the media coverage of September 11 and the Indian Ocean Tsunami and its implications for audience witnessing and remembering have been addressed in Chapters 4 and 5. With the explosion of social media, such as Twitter (Harb, 2011; Ghannam, 2011), and citizen journalism (Gillmor, 2006; Allan and Thorsen, 2009) media witnessing takes place in a “media saturated environment” that provides “an open and instantaneous online structure of information and action, unprecedented in disaster reporting” (Chouliaraki, 2010b: 309).

There are two issues raised in this continuously changing media environment with regard to the concept of media witnessing as approached and analysed in

this thesis. The first issue concerns the potential collapse of the communicative triangle of media witnessing consisting of the audience, the journalists and the sufferers, as audiences can now report the world as they see it through the use of social media, challenging the “authorship” of the mediators of media witnessing, the journalists (Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2009: 145). This in its turn poses further questions of authenticity and trust in user-generated content as a news source of secondary witnessing. The second issue concerns the moral implications for the audience of living in a media saturated, real-time news environment, which places audiences in a position of possible constant vigilance of the outside world, and renders the distant other a virtually constant presence in the media space. Both issues open up significant questions for future empirical research.

An important theme that emerged from the empirical exploration of the focus group discussions and was addressed both in Chapter 6 and earlier in this chapter was the mediated conditions of action at a distant, as described by the participants in the research. Telethons were illustrated as a self-referential media space connecting viewers to each other, as part of the media spectacle. The ideological functions of the telethon have been critically addressed by a number of studies (Devereux, 1996; Tester, 2001; Driessens et al., 2011). In the light of the findings of this study and the ambivalent relationship between audiences and the telethon, which, on the one hand, was portrayed as the main motivation to act upon distant suffering, and, on the other hand, was the object of criticisms and viewers’ mistrust, more critical empirical explorations of the telethon as a media genre are a useful future direction of research. Questions of

both the construction of the spectacle of the telethon and the spaces it opens for viewers' engagement, as well as audience responses to telethons are questions that need to be further explored. Closely related to this, the role of celebrities in humanitarian appeals, an object of theoretical debates with regard to the moral and ideological implications of celebrity endorsement of humanitarian appeals, was briefly addressed in this thesis, opening up more questions for empirical exploration. It was argued in Chapter 6 that although celebrities do indeed attract audience attention to televised appeals, they are also critically approached by audience members on the basis of the differential social status between them and the celebrities. The implications of the use of celebrities by humanitarian appeals, despite the relevant theoretical arguments, is an empirical area of study that remains largely untested.

While this thesis was being written a number of large-scale disasters took place. An earthquake of 7.0 magnitude in Haiti on the 12th of January 2010 claimed the lives of more than 200,000 people and was rendered one of the deadliest ones in history³³. May of 2008 was marked by the great earthquake of Sichuan, China, where almost seventy thousand people died and about five million people were left homeless³⁴. Under the light of the research findings of this thesis a number of questions arise: what spaces of witnessing did these disasters create for the viewer, given the context of their occurrence – Haiti being a country often suffering from political conflicts and natural disasters and China being the most

³³ Source: BBC News| Special Reports| Haiti Earthquake

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/americas/2010/haiti_earthquake/default.stm)

³⁴ Source: BBC News| Special Reports| 2008| China quake

(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/asia_pacific/2008/china_quake/default.stm)

populated state and one of the world's financial powers? These questions become even more relevant in the case of the Haiti earthquake, given that the media coverage of the disaster differed from the mainstream templates for reporting earthquakes focusing on the raw images of trauma and bloody victims (Fernando, 2010). Albeit belonging to the category of "banal" disasters of earthquakes, as constructed by viewers through the practice of media remembering, both events were extensively broadcast by the media, which poses further questions about their place and framing in audience memory.

More recently, the earthquake that struck Japan on the 11th of March 2011 and the tsunami that followed it hitting the area of the pacific coast of Tohoku, killing more than 15,000 people, has given rise to extensive public debates and media coverage that is still ongoing³⁵. The disaster was unique in its nature, since not only did it devastate local populations and areas but, hitting nuclear factories and releasing nuclear power into the atmosphere, it also spread widespread panic about its environmental consequences. It was therefore not just the degree of suffering caused but also the scale of the concomitant risk involved that rendered the Japan tsunami a global disaster. In terms of human suffering, reports on the affected areas became the centre of organised relief efforts around the world. As far as its consequences in terms of the nuclear fears that followed, the disaster exemplifies, if only momentarily, the conditions of living in a "world risk society" (Beck, 1992)³⁶. This renders the disaster an

³⁵ Source: BBC News – Japan Earthquake

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-12711226>)

³⁶ Beck uses the term "risk society" to refer to the whole series of interrelated changes, such as environmental and health risks, social insecurity and erosion of traditional modes of life, which were produced as the collective outcome of choices of modern societies and have altered the

extraordinary event, worthy of academic attention both in its reporting by the media, in terms of its construction as a global event and its characteristics, and its experience by global audiences, as a significant case of distant suffering and with regard to the global risk it entailed. In particular, it poses the question of how the inclusion of proximate risk in the spectacle of distant suffering positions the viewer as a witness, challenging or increasing the number of types of media witnessing illustrated in this thesis. With regard to the practice of media remembering, it furthermore poses the question of how the Japan tsunami will be remembered by audiences. Will the term “the Tsunami” keep describing exclusively the South Asian disaster of 2004 in media remembering? Will the Japan tsunami be rendered as iconic in audience collective memory? Or is the occurrence of a second significant tsunami rendering the disaster as banal as other categories of events, such as earthquakes, and thus not as memorable? These questions, as the present thesis has illustrated, are instrumental in the viewer’s construction of moral agency with regard to the suffering witnessed.

Such questions will keep being raised for media scholars, as the world comes to witness more crises and trauma. These are important questions as our existence is increasingly interlinked with, dependent on and imagined within the global. They are also critical, as they open up the discussion of how the media can better facilitate and support our co-existence with the distant other. The present thesis has contributed in this debate by contextualizing these questions with regard to the moral implications for the viewer’s agency of watching the

nature of everyday experience in a way that links every decision with potential risk. Risks in that context are defined as “a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities” (Beck, 1992: 21).

suffering of distant others, and by providing an analytical framework for the study of this agency. It has argued that, although viewers engage with the distant other in diverse ways and draw upon alternative discursive frameworks, local, political and cultural, in order to make sense of the suffering witnessed, their moral agency is highly conditional on the media and their representational practices. In this context, and as the global mediated space becomes even more complex and ubiquitous, and as the presences of distant others multiply in the mediated space of appearance, questions on the mediation of distant suffering continue to comprise a rich and pertinent field for empirical enquiry.

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Appendix A. Table of focus group composition

Group #	Age	Gender	Locale	Occupational/Educational status	Number of Participants
1	25-26	Mixed	Athens	Professionals with university degree	4
2	45-60	Female	Komotini	Working-class without university degree	5
3	25-26	Female	Komotini	Professionals with university degree	3
4	42-54	Female	Komotini	Professionals with university degree	5
5	40-58	Female	Komotini	Mixed	4
6	40-56	Male	Komotini	Professionals with university degree	7
7	22-27	Female	Komotini	Working-class without university degree	3
8	27-28	Male	Komotini	Professionals with university degree	2
9	24-28	Male	Athens	Working-class without university degree	5
10	25-26	Male	Athens	Working-class without university degree	3
11	47-55	Mixed	Athens	Professionals with university degree	2
12	26-27	Male	Athens	Professionals with university degree	4
Total					47

Appendix B. Profile of participants

Agis (FG6) 41-years-old; teacher at a primary school.

Alex (FG9) 25 years old, mechanic.

Chris (FG6) 40-years-old; gym instructor.

Chrysa (FG4) 42 years old, primary school teacher.

Daphne (FG4) 45 years old, primary school teacher.

Dimitra (FG5) 54-years-old, teacher at a primary school, member of the Red Cross.

Dimitris (FG8) 27 years old, architect.

Dimos (FG6) 56 years old, bookshop owner.

Dina (FG2) 58 years old, housewife.

Fanis (FG9) 24 years old, taxi driver.

Georgia (FG5) 56-years-old, retired kindergarten teacher, member of the Red Cross.

Gerasimos (FG11) 56 years old; agriculturalist.

Giannis (FG6) 44 years old, lawyer.

Giota (FG7) 23 years old, hairdresser.

Gregoris (FG10) 25 years old; works at the service of a petrol station.

Hara (FG1) 24 years old, architect.

Haris (FG12) 26 years old, advertiser.

Ilias (FG6) 46 years old, primary school teacher.

Ira (FG4) 54 years old, primary school teacher.

Irini (FG3) 25 years old, civil servant at the local Municipality.

Kiki (FG3) 25 years old, civil engineer.

Kimon (FG12) 25 years old, PA for an MP.

Litsa (FG2) 45 years old, housewife.

Maria (FG5) 46-years-old, teacher at a primary school; very involved with the local church and member of the Red Cross.

Mary (FG7) 26 years old, secretary at an elevator construction company.

Menelaos (FG12) 26 years old, programmer.

Mina (FG1) 25 years old, architect.

Nana (FG3) 26-years-old; French teacher.

Nikos (FG10) 26-years-old; waiter at a restaurant.

Olga (FG4) 47 years old, yoga instructor.

Panagiotis (FG9) 25 years old, electrician.

Pavlos (FG6) 40 years old, lawyer.

Penelopi (FG4) 45 years old, English teacher.

Peni (FG2) 49 years old, housewife.

Popi (FG2) 49 years old, housewife.

Simos (FG1) 26 years old, radio producer.

Sofia (FG11) 50 years old; accountant.

Sotiris (FG10) 25-years-old; cameraman.

Stathis (FG12) 27 years old, software engineer.

Stelios (FG9) 26 years old, works as a driver for a pharmaceutical company.

Tasos (FG8) 28 years old, English teacher.

Thanos (FG6) 58 years old, GP.

Thodoris (FG9) 25 years old, taxi driver.

Tina (FG1) 26 years old, civil engineer.

Toula (FG2) 60 years old, housewife.

Vivi (FG5) 40 years old, janitor, member of the Red Cross.

Vicky (FG7) 25 years old, receptionist.

Appendix C. Topic guide

A. Memory/knowledge of the disasters:

- Can you remember the disasters presented in the photos (remind when they took place)
- Can you remember what happened – describe the events as remembered:
 - Tsunami
 - Katrina
 - Kashmir
- Is there a story that you remember more intensely?

B. Participation/interest in the events:

- Did you make any donations during the events?
- Have you ever made any donations/when?
- Do you know anything about the situation now in the affected areas?

C. News consumption

- Which other similar events come to mind?
- Where do you usually get your news from? How often?
- What is the news you are mostly interested in?
- Do you usually discuss what you see in the news with other people?

Always for end of discussion: What would you say if somebody asked you if you are “citizens of the world”?

Do you have anything to add?

Appendix D. Monitoring Form for Participants

Focus Group No:

Date:

Place:

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Occupation:
5. I watch television news:
 - a. daily
 - b. 2-3 times per week
 - c. less than 2-3 times per week
6. I read the newspapers:
 - a. daily
 - b. 2-3 times per week
 - c. less than 2-3 times per week
7. I use the Internet:
 - a. daily
 - b. 2-3 times per week
 - c. less than 2-3 times per week
8. Uses of Internet:
 - a. for entertainment
 - b. for information
 - c. for communication