Stijn Joye, Ghent University

Extended outline
-- DRAFT VERSION --
Please do not quote without permission of the author (Stijn.Joye@UGent.be)

INTRODUCTION

Each year, disasters cause severe damage and human suffering around the globe. For most people living in Western countries, disasters are a priori distant suffering (see Boltanski, 1999) as they mainly affect cultural or ethnic others. News media thus play a pivotal role in giving publicity and meaning to these numerous instances of global suffering as it is essentially through media reports that the world perceives international disasters. Next to this informational role, several scholars such as Chouliaraki (2006), Pantti (2009) and Kyriakidou (2011) identified an important emotional role in news media’s covering of international disasters: that is inviting the spectator to care or to feel compassion for people who are not like us. International emergency relief aid increasingly thrives on this sense of global involvement or cosmopolitanism.

In this paper, we address the question of how news media inject a local sense of relevance in an international news event by focusing on the journalistic concept of domestication (Clausen, 2004). Our theoretical framework further dwells on theories and concepts that were developed within the field of disaster studies and the representation of (distant) suffering. In our theoretical and empirical observation of the representation of distant sufferers, we refer to the different regimes of pity as identified by Chouliaraki in her theory on the mediation of suffering (2006; 2008). Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), our cases of study are 92 news items on international disasters that were broadcast by Belgian television channels VRT and VTM in 2009 and 2010.1

Central to this paper are the following research questions: which identities of and relations between ‘Self’/we and ‘Other’/them are articulated in news discourses on disasters? How do these media representations construct (global and local) compassion for a distant other in need? And most importantly, which discursive strategies of domestication are applied by news media?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the academic field of international news studies the concept of domestication is gaining in significance as several scholars have pointed to a paradox characterized by coinciding tendencies of globalization and localization. The former is mainly technology driven as distant events are just a mouse click away. Audiences have the potential to become cosmopolitan audiences. Embodying this is McLuhan’s idea of the global village. Ironically, it is precisely the second part of the concept, village, that is increasingly determining the foreign news coverage. Eurocentrism, proximity, parochialism, … they all point to an inward directed look on foreign news. The underlying premise is generally that (international) “news must essentially be about us”
(Sonwalkar, 2004: 208). Or in the words of Peterson (cited in Ticha, 2006: 19): “the majority of foreign news is domestic news about foreign countries, not international news”. Let us take a closer look at the element of proximity within disaster news coverage as well as the concept of domestication which articulates the above discussed tension between tendencies of localization and international and foreign news reporting.

Proximity and disaster news coverage

The journalistic practice of domestication generally refers to the framing of a foreign news events within the national or local context of the audience (Clausen, 2004). According to Gurevitch, Levy and Roeh (1991), domesticating international events makes them comprehensible, appealing and more relevant to domestic audiences. Therefore, the concept of domestication perfectly links in with the strand of research on disaster reporting. Supporting this claim is the well-researched idea that if global suffering is presented by the news media as close and relevant, we will care for this distant sufferer (Chouliaraki, 2006). Scholars have identified proximity as a key news factor for determining the news value of a disaster as well as for the construction of compassion and pity. Regarding the former, next to the magnitude or intensity of a disaster, it is the element of proximity that determines whether or not a disaster get selected and how much coverage it will receive. We need to look at proximity as a broad concept, incorporating various relations of involvement. In this paper, we define proximity in a very broad sense by including not only the geographic distance, but also other relationships of involvement such as cultural affinity, tourism, historical links and emotional proximity.

Choosing to domesticate a foreign disaster and hence rendering this distant suffering relevant and appealing to domestic audiences has important implications. It determines whether or not a disaster will raise feelings of pity or even compassion which on its turn can result in helping behavior such as donating money, supporting fundraising initiatives or organizing a philanthropic event. In other words, news media in general and journalists in particular play a vital role in orientating (or not) the Western spectator towards the ‘Other’ in need. The latter is mainly located in developing countries as Belloni, Douma, Hilhorst, Holla and Kuiper (2000) argue that more than 90% of all disasters occur in the Third World. When a disaster takes place in remote life areas, the physical but also psychological distance leads to a situation in which the representation and the perception of the event is almost exclusively shaped by media (Servaes & Lie, 1996). Referring to Hanusch (2007), we believe that distance (be it cultural, geographical or psychological) has the potential to block (emotional and practical) engagement, identification and even attention. It is however important to stress that distance does not always lead to indifference, nor does proximity always lead to identification and pity. These feelings are no automatic responses to media exposure to images of suffering. Categories of distance and proximity with the scene of suffering as well as the possibility of emotional involvement and identification are negotiated and established through the media, as institutions and as representations (Kyriakidou, 2008: 160). The mediation of suffering thus involves more complicated space-time articulations (Chouliaraki, 2006: 42-43). In this paper, we acknowledge the potential of proximity as a news value to act as a facilitating factor in such processes of identification and in raising compassion. This premise draws upon insights from psychological studies (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994) which revealed that people display more compassion when they feel close or related to the ‘Other’ in need. Again, media are important in this process. We care most about those whom we can identify or feel connected with (Moeller, 1999). In this respect, media
representations are “conditions of possibility for public action” (Chouliaraki, 2008: 832), such as donating money or any other helping behavior. Let us now turn to a model by Chouliaraki that she has developed to conceptualize and analyze these relations between news discourses on distant suffering and the different regimes of pity and identification.

Regimes of pity and discourses of news: Chouliaraki’s model

Applying discourse analysis, Chouliaraki (2006; 2008) drew up a seminal model of analyzing mediated representations of distant suffering by identifying three regimes of pity and three corresponding discourses of news, involving different degrees of moral and emotional involvement by the spectator: adventure news, emergency news and ecstatic news. Chouliaraki (2006: 98) refers to adventure news as “adventuristic reports on irrelevant misfortune”. The distant other is hereby presented as no cause for concern or action, thus blocking any engagement, identification or feelings of compassion. Emergency news is news that produces pity in its representation of suffering as well as the option for action on distant misfortune. The spectator can now identify with the remote sufferer who is still a (cultural or ethnic) other. In the case of ecstatic news, we feel for and think of the sufferer as our own, as someone who is like us. There is a relationship of reflexive identification as the spectators share with the sufferers the same humanity and threat. Examples of ecstatic news are the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the 2004 tsunami. Chouliaraki (2006: 189) however argues that ecstatic news reproduces a communitarian logic and not a cosmopolitanist as the articulated “global world” or shared humanity is restricted to the already existing micro-sphere of the West.

Linking this three-dimensional model to the central focus of this paper - domestication and proximity - it is possible to argue that identities of the Self generally co-occur with the category of ecstatic news while the identity of the Other could be related to the category of adventure news. Then again, what about the category of emergency news? The framework of a sociocultural binary does not provide an adequate answer to solve this conceptual problem. Therefore, in terms of the representation of identities we would suggest to transcend the existing dual model and to adopt a third category; which we will refer to as the identity of the Domesticated Other.

METHODOLOGY

This paper’s central research question inquires about discourses of proximity in news reporting on global suffering. Our understanding of discourse dwells upon Jørgensen and Phillips (2002: 1) who propose the definition of discourse as “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world”. In other words, discourse in the sense of language use as a social practice. We here refer to social constructionist approaches to discourse, in particular Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that “has become one of the most influential and visible branches of discourse analysis” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000: 447). Power in general and issues of power asymmetries, manipulation and exploitation in particular are the central focus of many investigations within the field. Critical discourse analysts typically stress “patterns of domination whereby one social group is dominated by another” (Phillips, 2006: 288). Focus is put on the way these power relations are enacted, reproduced and challenged by discourse. Characteristic for CDA is also the stress on intertextuality defined as a blended environment in which different kinds of texts condition each other in order to legitimate certain worldviews (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).
Furthermore, all social constructionist approaches argue that language is not neutral. Discourses create representations of the world that reflect as well as actively construct reality by ascribing meanings to our world, identities and social relations. We thus consider language to be both constitutive of the social world as well as constituted by other social practices (Phillips, 2006). This implies that discourse should not be reduced to language alone. Henceforth, critical schools of discourse require that discourse should be empirically analyzed within its social context (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002): text analysis alone is not sufficient. According to Richardson (2007), CDA is mainly used to explore how discourses are realized linguistically in texts to constitute knowledge and social relations, such as a relationship of involvement and identification or compassion with a distant other. For this purpose, we have adapted Fairclough’s (1992) model of CDA for the study of the relations between discourse and social and cultural phenomena. The model consists of three dimensions: text, discursive practice (production, distribution and consumption of texts) and the wider social practice.

Following a case-based methodology, we investigate how two Belgian television stations, the public funded broadcaster VRT and the commercial station VTM, have domesticated international disasters in 2009 and 2010. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; 1995), this paper explores the construction of local relevance and hence compassion in international news reporting on global suffering. In total, both channels broadcasted 92 news items that explicitly linked an distant crisis to Belgium. Concerning the selection of cases, we have deliberately opted to focus on domesticated news items alone. The electronic news archive ENA (www.nieuwsarchief.be) that is based at the University of Antwerp collects all news shows from the public and commercial channel in Flanders, Belgium. They have coded the different items on their geographic width into domestic news, mixed international news and foreign news. It is the category of mixed international news that we are particularly interested in. These items either involve the home-country as an actor in the event or events in which journalists have made Belgium part of the news narrative. All disaster coverage that was coded as mixed news was taken into account, except for the Haiti earthquake as that disaster was out of proportion and would have skewed the findings. It was also the only disaster that involved a telethon and relief campaign that was co-organized by both channels. A lot of the mixed news items were thus dealing with this relief campaign, and not so much with the actual news event of the earthquake.

RESULTS

As indicated above, Fairclough (1992; 1995) identified three dimensions of CDA: text, discursive practices and social practices. In what follows, we will mainly focus on the dimension of text and particularly on the practices of domestication in the news discourses on global suffering. The study analyses how these media representations evoke or block a process of identification between the spectator and the sufferer.

Text

From the perspective of the overall majority of Belgian spectators, the selected news items basically deal with ethnic or cultural Others. For the average Belgian, there was no direct relevance or a priori feelings of proximity or identification with the distant Others. The journalistic practice of domestication helps to minimize this distance between the spectator in the
comfort of his/her living room and the sufferer in need. The element of distance can block dispositions of the spectator as a caring person, as a philanthropic being who feels pity for the suffering other. As the study shows, rendering a foreign event such as a disaster more relevant - or in other words domesticating the event - can be realized in several ways. Let us discuss the five most frequently applied discursive strategies of domestication in the studies news items.

First, the broadcasters managed to raise a sense of social or human domestication as they focused on compatriots who were present in the disaster area. Manifesting itself in a large number of ways, the eyewitness account was the most prominent technique applied. Accounts from Belgian tourists who were affected by the disaster allow the spectator to get an inside look on the event by someone who is like them. In some events, there were compatriots among the lethal casualties as well which is generally considered to be a determining factor for a high level of news value and attention. In these cases, the news reports were built around the Belgian victims and/or their families, henceforth reducing the relevance of the non-Belgian victims, despite the latter’s omnipresence. The Other and his/her life are in other words inferior to the life of compatriots. Furthermore, this particular journalistic focus and more human-interest driven coverage could be interpreted as identifying with the western moral discourse of “civilised” humanity and compassion towards the distant victims (Konstantinidou, 2007). By selecting specific images such as close ups of children or highlighting particular emotional details of a story, Belgian journalists thus constructed a sense of emotional proximity. This more emotion-driven form of domestication opens up spaces for compassion and eventually relief response, but also for a cosmopolitanist identity as the audience is oriented towards the cultural or ethnic Other.

Secondly, another form of domestication concerns the attention that is devoted to the foreign event’s implications for the home country. Belgian experts were interviewed to interpret a distant event and its consequences for Belgium. The main question was whether the distant event could negatively affect Belgium, for instance by triggering a flow of immigrants, nuclear fall-out, environmental damage, … Some news items explicitly looked into the issue if a similar disaster could also happen in Belgium. Other instances of this kind of domestication are more positive and dealt with local aid and relief initiatives (cf. infra). Other discursive practices to domesticate distant events is to visit the Belgian based diasporic community of the affected country or to get the perspective of the Belgian travel sector. The latter is related to our definition of proximity which also takes into account psychological forms of proximity. When a popular travel destination is affected by a disaster, journalists always mention this quite explicitly.

Thirdly, a news crew can follow compatriots who are involved in relief assistance for the affected area. We have found several items on Belgian relief workers, from their departure at Brussels airport to the ground work in the disaster area. Belgian relief workers or NGOs were generally an interesting story to follow up. They allow the news media to continue their reports on the disaster as they introduce a kind of ‘soap’ element or narrative. To a certain extent, some of these workers became familiar faces for the spectators and even celebrity figures. The victims in need were - again - portrayed as less relevant in comparison to these relief workers. One doctor, Luc Beaucourt, was even followed during his entire trip. In the long term, the relief work that is financed by public donations provides the journalist with a relevant angle to cover the annual commemorations of a disaster. The leading question is then often: what has been done with “our money”?
A smaller fourth cluster of discursive strategies that we are able to identify concerns a form of political domestication. Here we list a number of domestication strategies that involve Belgian politicians, political institutions or members of the royal family. They were portrayed as visiting the disaster area or as paying tribute to the casualties. Other practices include travel alerts from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Belgian travel agencies.

Finally, domestication is also achieved by ways of journalistic narrative and journalists or foreign correspondents. Live interventions of Belgian correspondents or explicit voiceover references to Belgium are means of linking the area of danger (them, the Others) with the home country. In this respect, small television channels such as VTM or VRT can make a significant difference with regard to international 24/7 channels like BBC or CNN that generally provide the footage (cf. infra). These local interventions also contribute to a “perceived sense of reality of the event” (Clausen, 2004: 32).

In some of these cases, the element that makes domestication possible was inherent to the news event itself and has henceforth determined the news value of the event (e.g. compatriots killed, the nature of the affected region as a popular tourist destination …). In other cases, it was the journalist who decided to domesticate a ‘truly’ foreign event by introducing local perspectives in his narration such as eyewitness accounts or by interviewing a local expert. It is clear that the societal role and responsibility of news media is mainly reflected in the latter instance of an external element of domestication introduced by the journalist. Here, journalists can opt to make a foreign event more relevant and comprehensible by domesticating it and therefore to render distant suffering less distant. Despite this journalistic practice of domestication, discourses of inequality and hierarchy however remain largely unchallenged. Moreover, a discursive side-effect of the overtly domesticated representation is the articulation of a sharp disparity between us and them in a sense that relief aid was portrayed as ‘premised on an unequal world order, whereby the poor depend on the rich’ (Chouliarakis, 2006: 136). Taken one step further, we could even argue that these news items are not so much about the distant sufferers as it is about us, the western spectators. We are portrayed as a true caring nation, as Good Samaritans and the beneficiary of our pity or compassion is to some extent even subordinate or interchangeable. This mediated disposition of the Self as caring and benevolent persons is linked to the particular articulation of the Domesticated Other but also supports the idea of international relief aid as a project of self-construction (cf. Mason, 2011).

To conclude this section, we consider the identity of the Domesticated Other and its representation in news discourses on distant suffering as a mixture of the identities of the Self and the Other. Although the sufferer remains an ethnic or cultural Other, his or her suffering is not represented as no cause for concern. On the contrary, by domesticating the distant events news media invite their Belgian audience to relate with the Other whose suffering is portrayed as (locally) relevant, hence providing the possibility of cosmopolitanism, identification and action. Although being manufactured and largely determined by journalistic practices, the western spectator relates with someone who is not a member of his/her community but who is a true distant Other with whom a mediated belonging to a same world of fate is shared.
Discursive practices

As discourse is context-dependent (Phillips, 2006), a key characteristic of CDA is to analyze text in its context. This refers to Fairclough’s second dimension of discursive practices in the sense of structural and functional properties of the news gathering, dissemination and reporting processes which limit the choice of journalists. Especially in the case of reporting on disasters, journalists regularly find themselves confronted with a number of constraining contextual factors such as a difficult access to the disaster area, incomplete or unconfirmed initial reports and rumors, government policy, … (Apps, 2009). News is thus the outcome of a broad range of specific professional and institutional practices (Fairclough, 1995).

A first relevant contextual dimension concerns the editorial policy of television stations with regard to for example the balance between domestic and foreign news. Public service broadcaster VRT and commercial channel VTM both maintain a good reputation regarding the quality and amount of their foreign news coverage. Previous research by Joye and Biltereyst (2007) has indicated an average of 47.8 per cent international news for VRT and 42.1 per cent for VTM. However, included in these percentages is also a substantial share of domesticated items in which journalists frame a foreign event within the national context of their public. Too much domestication can however produce ‘a rather Eurocentric if not ethnocentric picture of global affairs’ (Manning, 2001: 62). The study by Joye and Biltereyst (2007) pointed out that Belgian television news adheres to such a Eurocentric or western vision of the world in its selection and coverage of events, as was also the case with the foreign disasters. Events happening in neighboring countries, Western-Europe or the USA, and news events with the occurrence of western victims appear to have a substantially greater chance to be selected and covered in greater detail than others (Joye & Biltereyst, 2007). In other words and slightly exaggerating, news on foreign events must essentially be about us or hold the potential to be domesticated in order to get selected and covered.

A second contextual level is an institutional one. The corporate policy and mission of a television network can be a significant element of editorial context, for example in determining the newsworthiness of events and how they will be covered. Despite a very high level of similarity in the events selected and the footage shown, a subtle discursive difference in news reporting between VRT and VTM is noticeable. For instance, commercial channel VTM tends to round-up the figures in their reports on the number of affected persons. Other subtle differences between the two stations deal with the use of sensational adjectives and sound-bites (‘extremely contagious’, ‘fear psychosis’, ‘a perfect storm’, …), the selection of dramatic and spectacular footage as well as with the domestication of the events. Public broadcaster VRT made less use of these practices. By contrast, the commercial channel VTM has explicitly and repeatedly stated to focus more on the news that matters to the Flemish audience, resulting in a higher proportion of domestic news and mixed or domesticated international and foreign news.

Social practices

News discourse is also permeated by structures, institutions and values from outside the newsroom such as economy, politics and ideology (Richardson, 2007). Referring to these wider social practices, we need to ask whether the news texts will reproduce inequalities and other undesirable social practices or, on the contrary, help to encourage cosmopolitanist identifications.
This dimension of Fairclough’s model essentially refers to ideological effects and hegemonic processes (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). Although van Dijk (2009: 199) admits that it is theoretically and empirically impossible to provide a complete and detailed “account of the ideologies involved and the structures of news that are controlled by them”, he states that a polarisation between the ingroup (the Self, a positive self-image of a social group) and the outgroup (the Other, assessed and represented in a negative way) is characteristic of many such ideological structures. In terms of the presented study and research questions, the practice of domestication itself already refers to such a sociocultural polarisation. News items about the Other, ‘them’ first need to be domesticated in order to gain some relevance or importance. An additional element in the news coverage is the fact that Belgium is mainly represented in a positive way and as a rather dominant force, either stepping in to help the passive ‘Other’ or firmly in control of the situation by demonstrating agency and effective crisis management skills.

The use of pre-established stereotypes about the Other and the tendency towards a ‘journalism by proximity’ resonates with the Orientalist (cf. Saïd, 1987) discourse of civilised West (the ingroup, identified as superior) versus barbarian Other (the non-western outgroup, categorised as inferior). It is also important to acknowledge that these bipolar oppositions “are not defined equally but hierarchically i.e. the second term is usually seen as a corruption of the first” (Creeber, 2006: 46, original stress). This by mediation constituted hierarchy is moreover a reflection of the well-known hierarchies of capitalism in which the rich are valued more than the poor. International news coverage is permeated by such power relations of inequality. Our study demonstrated that news media can promote a cosmopolitanist outlook and invite local audiences to relate with distant Others by common journalistic practices of domestication.

CONCLUSION

This paper acknowledged the power of media to incite local compassion in their representations of global suffering. We further argue to qualify the established socio-cultural binary of the Self and the Other by adopting a third category of the domesticated other. In its mediated representation, the domesticated Other is represented by a mixture of elements that are generally attributed to the identity of the Self as well as to the identity of the Other. Referring to the latter, the domesticated Other is still a cultural or ethnic other who is not like us. Nonetheless, by framing the suffering of the domesticated Other within the horizon of relevance and the life sphere or context of the Western spectator, these particular news discourses on distant suffering create the possibility of compassion, identification, engagement and eventually action such as relief help.

Confronting these results with the underlying assumption of the study that (foreign) news must essentially be about us (Sonwalkar, 2004: 208), our findings support the claim that news on global suffering is mostly and mainly about us and our community. Referring to the key notions of identification and domestication, the key driving question is about who we can relate with or who we can feel compassionate about. Or put differently, it is about whose suffering will be domesticated by news media and whose in the end will be assessed and portrayed as irrelevant and unimportant. However, it also deals with issues on how we represent ourselves as a caring nation or as a (cosmopolitanist) community. In this respect, we underwrite the key role of proximity within international news reporting. As most disasters occur in non-western countries and hence fail to meet the criteria of proximity, news media play a vital role in promoting
cosmopolitanism by domesticating the distant suffering. In conclusion, we argue that global suffering eventually needs local relevance in order to evoke (the possibility of) compassion, identification and cosmopolitanism. This local relevance can be an inherent element of the emergency event itself but, more importantly and more often, it can also be constructed by the news media in their representation of global suffering. This implies an important democratic role of media in the construction of compassion and in opening up spaces for relief help and policy interventions.

NOTES

¹ VRT and VTM are Flemish television channels. Flanders is the Dutch-speaking Northern part of Belgium. Together with the French-speaking Wallonia, bilingual Brussels and the German-speaking region it constitutes the federal state of Belgium.

REFERENCES