The local relevance of global suffering. Articulations of identities and cosmopolitanism in television news discourses on distant suffering

In his seminal work on media and morality, Silverstone (2007) has argued that most people see and experience the world, its people and cultures mostly or only through the media. By consequence, several scholars acknowledge the central role that the media play in raising feelings of cosmopolitanism or a sense of global belonging and world citizenship (Cottle 2009). This is particularly true in the context of suffering and disasters. For most people living in western countries, disasters are a priori cases of distant suffering as they mainly affect cultural or ethnic others. Belloni, Douma, Hilhorst, Holla and Kuiper (2000) argue that more than 90 per cent of all disasters occur in the Third World. News media thus play a pivotal role in giving publicity and meaning to the numerous instances of global suffering as it is essentially through media reports that the (western) world witnesses international disasters. This chapter focuses on the key question of how news media can invite us to empathise or identify with those others who are in need. Underwriting the research question is Hannerz’s sociological understanding of cosmopolitanism as ‘an orientation, a willingness to relate with the Other’ (1996: 103). Central to this definition is the concept of the Other and its logical counterpart, the Self, who are generally positioned as opposites of a sociocultural binary that is particularly of interest to the issue of mediated distant suffering. In the words of Chouliaraki, ‘who watches and who suffers reflects the manner in which differences in economic resources, political stability, governmental regimes and everyday life enter the global landscape of information’ (2006: 4), an argument implying an understanding of the media as not only sources of meaning but also of power.

Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 1995) and drawing on Chouliaraki’s theory (2006, 2008) on the mediation of suffering, this chapter explores the construction of identities and cosmopolitanism in the news reporting on international disasters. Does the mediation of global suffering challenge existing power relations and identities of the Self and the Other or is it rather a consolidation of the established sociocultural binary? And how do these media representations invite (or not) members of the audience to relate with the distant sufferer? Addressing such questions tells us a lot about the power of the news media to create a cosmopolitanist outlook or identity. Following a case-based methodology, I thus investigate how two Belgian television stations have covered seven international natural disasters, including the SARS outbreak in 2003 and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. By analysing media
representations of global suffering, the study seeks to gain insights in the construction of compassion and involvement. In other words, I will explore the identities that were articulated in news discourses on disasters and the ways in which these representations invite spectators to put themselves in the position of distant others in need. The present study further explores the extent to which the element of proximity/distance is crucial in providing a cosmopolitanist outlook.

In this respect, the chapter links up to the other contributions in this edited volume. It employs the methodology of discourse analysis to explore the role of the media in encouraging cosmopolitanist identifications, which is one of the edited collection’s focal points. The study is also complementary to the approach taken by Martin Scott’s chapter here in its choice of the object of study, that is the news media, while laying bare similar tendencies of power struggles and imbalances in contemporary western media products. Both studies also interrogate those who are given news attention and those who are not.

Mediated Suffering and Identities of the Self and the Other

In the western media, Third World people are generally portrayed as the exotic Other, most typically characterized in terms of helplessness, negativity and as inferior to us (Benthall 1993, Chiang and Duann 2007). The Western press has always been charged of constructing such a reductive ideological contrast between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Lee, Chan, Pan and So 2002), thus constructing a sociocultural binary of the Self and the Other. These representations are often rooted in colonial history or are ideologically driven and reinforce the already incomplete, biased and stereotypical portrayal of the Other (see theories on Orientalism; Saïd 1987). According to Chouliaraki (2006: 8), this idea that the western news media reproduce hierarchies of place and human life is not new in social research and it has been a rapid emerging topic of research within the field of media studies. In this respect, she underlines the power of the media to classify the world into categories of ‘us’ and ‘the other’ and orientate (or not) the western spectator towards the other in need. When a disaster takes place in remote areas, the physical but also psychological distance leads to a situation in which the representation and the perception of the event are almost exclusively shaped by the media (Servaes and Lie 1996). One of the main characteristics of such a mediated representation of distant suffering is that it is part of the production and reproduction of global social inequality (Chouliaraki 2006). Nonetheless, Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle (2012: 117) argue that the mediation of disasters is in some cases a vital ‘source of cosmopolitan imagination and
mobilizer of global compassion’, hence extending our emotional imagination, care and moral obligations to include the Other.

The theoretical framework of this chapter further dwells on two related strands of research. On the one hand, I refer to the broad field of international news studies and, on the other, I draw on theories and concepts that were developed within the field of disaster studies. At the cross point of both fields, this article positions the central concept of proximity which I define in a very broad sense by including not only geographical distance, but also other relationships of involvement such as cultural affinity, tourism, historical links and emotional proximity. The concept of proximity further relates to Tomlinson’s (1999) work on cosmopolitanism as an ‘enforced proximity’ in an increasingly globalized world and Silverstone’s (2007) critical notion of ‘proper distance’ which refers to a particular politics of the representation of otherness and our mediated relationship to the other.

Firstly, regarding studies on international news, I can refer to obviously related concepts such as a Eurocentric perspective and domestication as well as to the underlying premise that ‘[international] news must essentially be about us’ (Sonwalkar 2004: 208). Secondly, related to the field of disaster studies, proximity has been identified as a key news factor for determining the news value of a disaster and the construction of compassion (Joye 2010). It is, however, important to stress that distance does not always lead to indifference, nor does proximity always lead to identification. These feelings are not automatic responses to media exposure to images of suffering. Categories of distance from and proximity to the scene of suffering as well as the possibility of emotional involvement and (cosmopolitanist) identification are negotiated and established through the media, as institutions and as representations (Kyriakidou 2008). The mediation of suffering thus involves more complicated space-time articulations (Chouliaraki 2006, Silverstone 2007). In this contribution, I acknowledge the potential of proximity as a news value to act as a facilitating factor in such processes of identification and in triggering an ethics of compassion and cosmopolitanism. This premise draws upon insights from psychological studies (Baumeister, Stillwell and Heatherton 1994) which revealed that people display more compassion when they feel close or related to the other in need. Again, the media are important in this process. We care more about those with whom we can feel connected to (Moeller 1999). If human suffering is then presented by the media as close, relevant and worthy of our response, we will identify with the distant sufferer (Chouliaraki 2006). Rozario (2007) has also argued that
discourses of disaster play an influential role in the construction of identities and in forging (local and global) communities, which refers to the notion of cosmopolitanism.

**News Discourses and Regimes of Pity**

Chouliaraki (2006, 2008) has drawn up a seminal model of analysing 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 identification or feelings of compassion. Emergency news is news that produces pity in its representation 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. Chouliaraki (2006), however, argues that ecstatic news reproduces a communitarian logic rather than 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 chapter, it is possible to argue that identities of the Self generally correspond to 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 I would suggest transcending the existing dual model and adopting a third category which I will refer to as the identity of the ‘Domesticated Other’. At this point, it is necessary to introduce the concept of domestication into our conceptual framework. Domestication hereby refers to the framing of a foreign event 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. This supports the above-stated premise that if global suffering is presented by the news media as close and relevant, we will care for this distant sufferer (Chouliaraki 2006). Rendering a foreign event such as a disaster more relevant, or in other words *domesticating* the event, can be realized in several ways: news media can focus on compatriots living in the disaster area or
on tourists being affected by the disaster; local experts can be interviewed to interpret a distant event and its implications for the home country; or a news crew can follow compatriots involved in relief assistance for the affected area. In some of these cases, the element that makes domestication possible is inherent in the news event itself and is henceforth determining 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 is the journalist who chooses 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 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.

Methodology

This article’s central research question examines discourses of cosmopolitanism in news reporting on global suffering. My 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. This article relies on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that has become ‘one of the most influential and visible branches of discourse analysis’ (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000: 447). Critical discourse analysts typically stress ‘patterns of domination whereby one social group is dominated by another’ (Phillips 2006: 288) such as the above mentioned sociocultural binary and the power asymmetries that are linked to the mediation of global suffering. 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 identification or compassion with a distant Other. For this purpose, I combine the work and methodological approach of two leading scholars within the field of CDA. On the one hand I 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 practices and social practices. On the other hand, the analysis has been largely influenced by and structured according to the three regimes of pity that Chouliaraki has identified in news discourses of suffering.
The cases of this study are sixty-six news items and one infotainment relief show that were broadcast on the Belgian public channel VRT and on the commercial channel VTM over a period ranging from 2003 to 2010. With regard to this article’s main focus of demonstrating how news media can or cannot invite audiences to relate to the Other and which identities are articulated, I have selected cases whose value for research on news discourses of suffering of which I have already demonstrated in other studies (Joye 2009, 2010 and Driessens, Joye and Biltereyst 2012). Only in one of these previous studies was I able to touch upon the key issue of this article very briefly, hence requiring the additional in-depth analysis that is presented here. The selected cases further represent a relevant mix of different types of mediated suffering. The sample (see table 9.1) includes two high-profile disasters (the SARS pandemic of 2003 and the Haiti earthquake of 2010 of which I have analysed the relief show) as well as one regular day of disaster coverage (01/02/2006) that displayed a broad diversity in geographic location of the five covered disasters and in received media attention. It is also important to note that none of these five ‘ordinary’ disasters affected or killed any Belgians, a fact that underlines their nature as cases of distant suffering. In contrast, the local media reported heavily on some false cases of the SARS epidemic in Belgium. Eventually nobody was affected. On the other hand, the earthquake in Haiti did take the life of one Belgian official of the United Nations but it was the magnitude and severity of the disaster that evoked a lot of compassion in Belgium and resulted in a one-hour relief show, Help Haiti, which mainly focused on providing information and was a joint production of the television channels’ newsrooms.

Table 9.1: Overview of selected natural disasters in chronological order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disaster</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SARS pandemic</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Global</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthquake</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Pakistan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood and land slides</td>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest fire</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest fire</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earthquake</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results and Discussion

In what follows, I will mainly focus on the identities that are articulated in the selected news discourses. The study further analyses how these representations evoke or block a process of cosmopolitanisation or identification between the spectator and the sufferer.
According to Richardson (2007), analysing a text is analysing the choices made by the author of that text. I particularly examine the way in which the authors of the text invite their Belgian audience to relate to the Other in need. For each category of articulated identity (the Self, the Other and the Domesticated Other), I discuss the multimodal texts that make use of written language, visual images and sound.

An Identity of the Self

Looking at the Belgian news coverage of the disasters occurring in western countries and at the news items focusing on western people affected by distant misfortune, it is possible to make some general statements about the represented identity of the western Self. Following the literature, this category of news discourses articulates the strongest sense of community and invites the spectator to care.

Regarding the mediation of the ‘western’ disasters in the sample, sufferers and spectators coincide as they belong to the same community. The affected other is one of ‘us’ and his/her misfortune is presented as very close and relevant. In the news item on the American floods, one eyewitness explicitly referred to this feeling of community by stating: ‘We are friends of friends of friends, we already lived through this before.’ Another clear example of such mode of representation is to be found in the news coverage of the SARS pandemic. The VTM anchor-person introduced an item on SARS by stressing ‘how very close by’ the disease now is. Another one by VRT was announced with the headline: ‘Now also present among us?’, hence expressing a community feeling as illustrated by the use of the all-inclusive us. The anchors and journalists furthermore emphasized such discourses of national unity by consistently referring to ‘our country’ and ‘our fellow countrymen’ in their voice-overs and testimonies. This textual strategy of constructing and forging communities is embedded in a broader social practice of dividing the world in terms of us and them, based upon existing power relations. The articulated sense of proximity and identification is further enforced by the live footage and testimonies from journalists present at the scene. This direct link commands an urgent rapport between the sufferer and the spectator, who is positioned as a witness by the televisual mediation. The spectator also obtains access to the scene of suffering via several on-site interviews with government officials, emergency helpers, neighbours and
affected persons who are all given a name, voice and opinion. These textual strategies explicitly invite the audience to relate with sufferers who are part of their national community or who are portrayed as if they are like them.

To sum up for this identity, the news items articulate a positive representation of the Self by stressing the agency and emergency management skills of the community and articulating a very dominant discourse of control which supports feelings of safety. In addition, the suffering is represented as relevant to the western spectator. Combined with the strong sense of communion, these representations result in feelings of identification and compassion with a strong potential to trigger (policy and/or relief) action. The question remains open whether we can speak of cosmopolitanism or rather qualify this and label it as an manifestation of communitarianism. We are indeed invited to relate with the Other according to the above definition of cosmopolitanism, but this Other is not an ethnic or cultural Other as he or she is a member of the same broader community, henceforth reinforcing feelings of communitarianism rather than cosmopolitanism.

An Identity of the Other

The previous studies identified articulations of the identity of the Other in the news reports on the Indonesian flood and in the reports depicting Asian, particularly Chinese, people affected by SARS. Common to these items are indications of what Chouliaraki (2006) defines as the regime of adventure news which consists of only short reports, singular space-times and simple multimodality. In the last days of the SARS pandemic, the primarily descriptive news texts focused on the situation in Asia and mainly dealt with impartial updates on travel advisories and the total number of affected and killed persons. Contrary to the above discussed category of articulated Self, an invitation to relate was replaced by a maximized emotional distance between the spectator and the sufferer as their suffering failed to fulfil the criteria of relevance to the western hemisphere in general and to Belgium in particular. Furthermore, in the coverage of SARS the cause of the infected Chinese people was predominantly represented as a purely local medical issue that is no longer of any interest to the West, henceforth revealing a very detached and Eurocentric perspective in the Belgian news coverage. Bearing in mind the dimension of social practices and referring to Hall’s (2001) notion of the construction of the Self and the Other, downplaying others’ suffering is an important element in establishing and strengthening the identity of the Self.
The few visible victims of flooding and landslides in Indonesia were mainly portrayed as passive and depersonalized, left powerless to the forces of nature. Not much was actually known about these victims and they only appeared in the background as if they were part of the scenery. This process of depersonalization was enforced by the voiceover using passive verbs and talking about an anonymous group of people. It appears that this category of news is not about human lives, but about facts and figures that are illustrated with spectacular footage. The spectator, gazing at this spectacle of misfortune, is not invited to identify with the Others whose suffering is represented as irrelevant and no cause for concern or action. No ethics of cosmopolitanism is triggered as the media fail to engage the spectator and the sufferer in an overlapping community of fate.

An Identity of the Domesticated Other

This category includes the news stories on the earthquakes in Pakistan and Haiti. From the perspective of the overall majority of western spectators, these items basically deal with ethnic or cultural Others. Nonetheless, they diverge from the identity of the Other on some key points while simultaneously reflecting aspects that are generally associated with the identity of the Self.

Analysing the reporting on the Pakistan earthquake, victims are no longer exclusively portrayed as an anonymous group nor as being passive. The Belgian journalists who have selected news agency footage to edit these items have made an important textual choice to show several Pakistanis who are building shelter for their family while also integrating clips of some locals who are being interviewed, thus given a voice, name and opinion. Also different from the Indonesian case, for instance, are the explicit voiceover references to western relief work and aid allocation which link the area of danger (the Others/’them’) with the area of safety (the West/’us’). In other words, the foreign event was undeniably domesticated and hence represented as relevant. This particular journalistic focus could moreover be interpreted as a means of identifying with the western moral discourse of ‘civilised’ humanity and compassion towards the distant victims (Konstantinidou 2007). A second difference is situated at the level of emotional distance constructed by the news narratives. Although they mainly give a very rational and impartial update of the relief work, some emotional potential is identified. By explicitly referring to children, the emotional appeal of foreign suffering is intensified (Moeller 2002). Children who look straight into the camera command an urgent rapport, therefore inviting the spectator to take on the moral
position of ‘the philanthropist who cares for and, potentially, acts to relieve distant misfortune’ (Chouliaraki 2006: 146). By selecting specific images or highlighting particular details of the story, Belgian journalists thus constructed a sense of emotional proximity. This more emotion-driven form of domestication opens up spaces for compassion, but also for a cosmopolitanist identity as the audience is oriented towards the Other. Despite this domestication, discourses of inequality remain largely unchallenged. On different levels the news texts still reinforce a distance between the western spectator’s zone of safety and Pakistan as a zone of danger. For instance, at the end of both reports VTM and VRT stress the hopelessness of the situation as the voiceover states that ‘the cold can last for months while more snow and severe rainfall is expected. It will be harsh months for these deprived people.’ Nevertheless, Others have become Domesticated Others and were accordingly granted world citizenship.

It is, however, the case of the 2010 Haiti earthquake that really demonstrates how wide-reaching and decisive the news media’s defining and portraying of distant suffering can get. Objectively speaking, the disaster drew its newsworthiness entirely from the huge amount of local victims and the damage caused. For the average Belgian, there were no direct feelings of identification with the distant Others in Haiti. Alongside a wave of global solidarity, these feelings were largely constructed by the Belgian media in their representation of the disaster which eventually led to a relief show, Help Haiti. The joint show of the broadcasters mainly featured journalistic items which ‘localized’ the relevance of the otherwise distant earthquake through common practices of domestication. We can refer to, among others, studio interviews with Belgians working for NGOs in Haiti, live interventions of correspondents in the capital Port-au-Prince, several items on Belgian relief workers, a live interview in Haiti’s capital with the then European Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid and former Belgian minister Karel De Gucht, testimonials by local celebrities, and more human-interest driven coverage of concrete cases such as adopted Haitian children living in Belgium and local orphanages. A discursive side-effect of this overtly domesticated representation is the articulation of a sharp disparity between us and them in a way that relief aid was portrayed as ‘premised on an unequal world order, whereby the poor depend on the rich’ (Chouliaraki 2006: 136). Taken one step further, it could even be argued that the relief show is not so much about the Haitian sufferers as it is about us, the western spectators. 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 (see Mason 2011).

The identity of the Domesticated Other and its representation are a mixture of the identities of the Self and the Other. This hybrid nature stems from the fact that the sufferer remains an ethnic or cultural Other while his or her suffering is simultaneously represented as a cause for concern. By domesticating the Other, the Belgian media invite their audience to relate with the Other whose suffering is portrayed as (locally) relevant, hence providing the possibility of cosmopolitanism, identification and action. When successfully achieved, news discourses on the Domesticated Other arguably result in the purest form of cosmopolitanism. Despite 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**

A key characteristic of CDA is its analysis of a text in its context, as news is the outcome of a broad range of specific professional and institutional practices (Fairclough 1995).

A first relevant contextual dimension concerns the economy of news production. Due to high production costs, most media depend on agency materials for visual coverage of foreign events. In this case, Belgian journalists were not covering the foreign events themselves. Henceforth, VRT and VTM needed to rely on footage provided by APTN (USA) and ReutersTV (UK), who dominate the global news market. These two news providers not only decide which news items get distributed but they also set the standard of content and form of the news. For instance, given the easy access and availability of correspondents in the region, APTN and ReutersTV were able to offer their subscribers a lot of footage on the American and Australian calamities, in contrast to the Indonesian case that was less extensively covered due to the overall limited news value of the region. Such access to and control over international news is believed to be an important symbolic resource of power (van Dijk 2001). However, the fact criticized here, that we all are simultaneously witnessing the same media messages, is said to be an essential part of processes of cosmopolitanisation (see Tomlinson 1999).
Secondly, all television stations hold on to a particular editorial policy regarding for example the balance between domestic and foreign news. *VRT* and *VTM* both maintain a good reputation regarding the quality and amount of their foreign news coverage. Joye and Biltereyst (2007) have indicated an average of 47.8 per cent international news for *VRT* and 42.1 per cent for *VTM*. However, these percentages also include a substantial amount of domesticated items. In the previous section we have demonstrated the democratic potential of this journalistic practice in cultivating cosmopolitanism. Too much domestication, however, can produce ‘a rather Eurocentric if not ethnocentric picture of global affairs’ (Manning 2001: 62). Belgian television news adheres to such a Eurocentric or western vision of the world. For instance, disasters happening in neighbouring/western countries or involving western victims appear to have a substantially higher chance to be selected and covered in greater detail (Joye and Biltereyst 2007). In other words, news on foreign events must essentially be about us or hold the potential to be domesticated.

A third 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 among the events selected and the footage shown, a subtle discursive difference in news reporting 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 include 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.

**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 practices, one should ask whether the news texts will reproduce inequalities and other undesirable social practices or, on the contrary, help to encourage cosmopolitanist identifications. This dimension essentially refers to ideological effects and hegemonic processes (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). Van Dijk (2009) states that a polarisation between the in-group (the Self, a positive self-image of a social group) and the out-group (the Other, assessed and represented in a negative way) is characteristic of many such ideological
structures. In terms of the presented study, I have found several indications of such sociocultural polarisation but qualified it by introducing the hybrid category of the Domesticated Other.

Although disasters are very negative by nature, a positive representation of the West (‘people like us’) was firstly achieved by emphasising agency, apparent control over the situation and effective crisis management skills. Chinese, Indonesian (Others) and, to a lesser extent, Haitian and Pakistani people (Domesticated Others) were by contrast negatively depicted as passively undergoing the misfortune and overpowered by forces of nature. Secondly, and closely related to the former, while the voiceover hinted at a certain closure in the cases of American and Australian disasters, the reports on Indonesia and Pakistan finished by stating that misfortune would last for months to come or that worse was about to happen. The consistent voiceover references to the Chinese government’s cover-up as well as to the subsequent inability of taking control over the SARS epidemic also underlined this rather negative representation of the Other. Helplessness and chaos dominated the coverage.

The use of such pre-established images and the slumbering tendency towards a ‘journalism by stereotype’ resonates with the Orientalist discourse of the civilised West (the in-group, identified as superior) versus the barbarian Other (the non-western out-group, categorised as inferior) (see Saïd 1987). 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 hierarchy constituted by mediation 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. This chapter argues that news discourses can on the one hand (re)produce and consolidate unequal power relations between communities. On the other hand, the study also showed that news media can promote a cosmopolitanist outlook and invite local audiences to relate with distant Others by common journalistic practices of domestication.

**Conclusion**

The comparative analysis of news discourses on international disasters reveals differences that reflect global hierarchies. When covering suffering in the West, Belgian television broadcasters portrayed it as comprehensible, relevant and close to their spectators who could identify with the sufferer. Through their representations of global suffering, news media can
thus create, if only temporarily, a strong sense of communion and identification, henceforth promoting a sense of communitarianism rather than cosmopolitanism. Ethnic others are by contrast negatively depicted as passively undergoing the misfortune and subject to the whims of nature. In addition, this Other is represented as no cause for concern, thus blocking any possible engagement or cosmopolitanist identification of the western spectator with the distant sufferer. By introducing the concept of domestication in Chouliaraki’s three-dimensional model of news discourses on distant suffering, we are able to qualify the existing sociocultural binary of the Self and the Other with a third category of the Domesticated Other. In its mediated representation, it is 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 within the horizon of relevance and the life context of the western spectator, these particular news discourses create the possibility of compassion, cosmopolitan identification and eventually action such as relief help. Although largely determined by journalistic practices, the hybrid category of the Domesticated Other is the only one that articulates a form of cosmopolitanism as western spectators relate with someone who is a true distant Other.

Confronting these results with the study’s underlying assumption that (foreign) news must essentially be about us, the findings support the claim that news on global suffering is mostly and mainly determined by the notion of proximity. With regard to the concept of identification, the key 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. As most disasters occur in non-western countries and hence fail to meet the criterion of proximity, news media play a vital role in promoting cosmopolitanism by domesticating the distant suffering. In conclusion, I 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.
References


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1 VRT and VTM are Flemish television channels. Flanders is the Dutch-speaking Northern part of Belgium.