The discourse of global compassion: the audience and media reporting of human suffering

Birgitta Höijer

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF ÖREBRO, SWEDEN

A global discourse of compassion has extended and developed at the point of intersection between politics, humanitarian organizations, the media and the audience/citizens. Today it frames our thinking – our political, journalistic and everyday thinking – about violence and conflicts in the world. In Western politics there is a growing focus on human suffering in relation to distant crises and wars, so too in the media and among citizens in general. Global compassion is considered to be morally correct in the striving for cosmopolitan democracy, and the international community condemns 'crimes against humanity'. The role of humanitarian aid agencies is becoming increasingly important in global crises, and people in the West are getting more involved in NGOs. The media expose pictures of distant victims of civil wars, genocide, massacres and other violence against civil populations, and play a basic role in giving publicity to human suffering. The audience is expected to respond as good citizens with compassion and rational commitment.

As pointed out by Tester (2001: 1) questions about media-reported suffering and misery, such as if and how they move us as audience, have received very little academic attention. There are especially few empirical studies of audiences' reactions to and interpretations of the media exposure of distant suffering. Besides focusing on the general development of global compassion, this article therefore specifically addresses the question: how do people react to the emotional engagement that media offers by focusing on innocent victims of political conflicts, war and other violence?

Global compassion

According to Nussbaum (2001: 301) compassion is 'a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune'. She regards compassion as a complex emotion including such cognitive beliefs as that the suffering of the other is serious, and that the suffering person does not deserve the pain (2001: 306 ff.). This makes the suffering person an innocent victim of some gruesome acts or circumstances. Following Nussbaum we may conclude that compassion is both an affective and a cognitive reaction. Following Tester (2001: 18) the concept of compassion will here be reserved for compassion for the suffering of others in the public sphere. Other concepts, such as empathy, sympathy or even altruism, may also be relevant, but they do not include the same public and political dimensions as the concept of compassion. According to Sznaider (1998) public compassion originates in an abstract, theoretical and rational idea of humanity, not in religious charity. It is closely connected with the ideas of the Enlightenment and the humanitarian movements that arose in the 18th and 19th centuries, such as movements to abolish slavery, child labour and so on. In the following, compassion has to do with perceiving the suffering and needs of distant others through media images and reports. Global compassion is then a moral sensibility or concern for remote strangers from different continents, cultures and societies.

The discourse of global compassion is situated at the intersection between politics, humanitarian organizations, the media and the audience/ citizens. The media may be seen as an intermediate link between the level of social situations, in which audiences' interpretations and responses develop, and humanitarian organizations and politics.

At the macro-political level, there is an increased political willingness to pay attention to internal national conflicts and civil wars with victims among the civilian population – at least some conflicts and civil wars – and view them as threats to global security (Minear et al., 1996).

Through extensive media coverage, images of distant suffering have become part of ordinary citizens' perceptions of conflicts and crises in the world. Further, humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been growing in number and membership, and they have attained more prominent positions in the West (Tvedt, 1993). The latest trend within marketing is humanitarian sponsoring, in which big companies give money and other resources to social and humanitarian aid. Companies want to win goodwill by being seen as benefactors, and human sponsoring is a fast-growing form of marketing today. Of course, it may be discussed whether this is a cynical exploitation of human suffering or an expression of true compassion. Here, however, it is enough to draw attention to the phenom-enon as part of a humanitarian trend in the West, the defence of human

rights, which is to be seen as one aspect of the globalization process (cf. Beck, 2000; Sassen, 1998).

Fostering by television

It is hard to find the chicken and the egg in the development of global compassion because there is a complex interplay of factors behind it rather than a linear causal chain of relationships. Anyway, media coverage seems to be something of a driving force in the development influencing both the public and the politicians. One example of the political effect of televised newscasts is the sanctions that the UN proclaimed against Serbia in 1992 after the shelling of people queuing for bread in Sarajevo. Television all over the world broadcast shocking pictures of the senseless attack.

The relationship between media coverage and political reactions and measures is by no means given, however. As Natsios (1996) shows, many factors, such as domestic politics, geopolitical interests and other co-incidental foreign policy crises, influence the process. And the media reporting often becomes part of propaganda strategies (Höijer et al., 2002). In the recent Afghanistan War, American authorities put pressure on the media to refrain from reporting civilian casualties and suffering so as not to adversely affect public support for the bombings. The chairman of CNN instructed the staff that if such news was going to be broadcast, they should balance the reporting of victims in Afghanistan with reminders to the audience of the victims of the terror attack on World Trade Center and the Pentagon (Ottosen, 2002).

However strong or weak, politically determined or not, the media effect may be in relation to different humanitarian crises, it seems quite obvious that it is primarily through the media that we, citizens and politicians alike, meet depictions of the suffering of distant strangers.

Television especially, with its reach and visual impact, may therefore play a key role in the fostering of a collective global compassion. Photographic pictures are often perceived as truthful depictions of reality. As audience, the experience is that we are seeing the innocent victims of the violence with our own eyes, and the pictures become evidence of the suffering. Through the media, and especially through the moving images of television, people have become aware of the sufferings of remote others and are challenged to include strangers in their moral conscience. Although there are, as we shall see, different ways of responding to distant suffering, no one can deny the existence of large-scale humanitarian disasters.

On the whole, news media focus more on civilian populations as victims of conflicts and wars than before. According to the BBC war reporter Martin Bell (1998: 15–16) the reporting 'has changed fundamentally' from mainly reporting military aspects, such as strategies and weapon systems,

to reporting with a greater focus on people – 'the people who provoke them, the people who fight them and the people who suffer from them'. He believes in what he calls the journalism of attachment: 'a journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor' (1998: 169). And quantitative content analysis studies show an increased exposure of pictures of human suffering among civilian popula-tions in television news, and that the visual presentations have become more lurid (Cronström, 2000; Höijer, 1994, 1996). The camera explores faces twisted in pain, or lingers on wounds and bloody bandages, it zooms in on broken and mutilated limbs, or pools of blood, and the injured are not soldiers but ordinary people.

Photographers and journalists may, like Martin Bell, be seriously committed to humanitarian reporting. Mellum (2000), who interviewed Norwegian journalists reporting from the refugee camps during the Kosovo War, found that half of them were deeply touched and that this had an effect on their reporting. Some got involved and helped the refugees with different things. But media reporting on distant suffering may also be part of more cynical commercial interests, in which the media sell human tragedies in a global market place. In the pursuit of attention, news producers follow the logic of increasingly dramatic coverage, and journal-ists become desensitized and blasé (Moeller, 1999).

The ideal victim

Violence is, as recently pointed out by Delanty (2000: 44), 'not only a normative question which can be answered in political-ethical terms, but it is also a cognitive question relating to the definition of violence'. We conceptualize violence differently depending on social, cultural and histor-ical circumstances. Earlier in our Western culture, and still in some cultures, physically punishing a child or beating one's wife was not considered a violent act. Today it is common even to think of keeping animals in coops as violence, and we talk about structural violence, such as abject poverty and hunger caused by political oppression. Further, cogni-tions of victims may also vary. As a cultural-cognitive construction, the discourse of global compassion designates some victims as 'better' victims than others.

According to the moral ideals of the humanitarian organizations there should be no social boundaries for qualifying as a victim worthy of help. However, in international politics as well as in the media, many victims never qualify as worthy victims. The hundreds of thousands of victims of the civil wars in Liberia and Sudan in the middle of the 1990s are two 'forgotten' examples discussed by Minear et al. (1996). Chomsky (1999)

asks why the Western powers do not pay attention to Kurdish victims, and there are many more examples, such as Sierra Leone, Burundi, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Further, some victims within an area picked out by the West are worthier; that is, they are perceived to deserve our empathy better than others. According to Herman and Chomsky (1988: 38) people abused in what are regarded as enemy states are portrayed 'as worthy victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be unworthy'. Worthy and unworthy relates to the extent and character of political and mass media attention and indignation.

If we leave the macro-political level and turn to a more general socio-cultural level we may also discriminate between ideal and less ideal victims. Children, women and elderly people are often seen as helpless in a violent situation, and therefore they are more suitable as ideal victims than males in their prime (Christie, 1996). 'Mothers and children make ideal victims', writes Moeller (1999: 107) in her critical discussion of the television coverage of famine; she continues:

> . . . men associated with violent political factions can starve by the thousands without creating a flutter of interest in their victim status. The men are culpable, it is assumed, in not only their own deaths, but in the deaths of the truly blameless. Only when victims have been identified as 'bona fide' are they candidates for compassion.

That the ideal victim is a cultural construction becomes apparent if we consider historical and cultural variations in the victim status of women. Women who are assaulted by men are not always seen as victims, in some cultures not at all. Without any feelings of compassion from people an elderly woman could be burned to death in a witch trial some hundred years ago in Scandinavia. And it is only recently that male soldiers' systematic rape of civilian women from the enemy side have been condemned. During the Second World War it was more or less accepted that Russian soldiers, for instance, committed massive rapes of German women immediately after the capture of Berlin.

The media and humanitarian organizations

Television not only pays attention to victims in newscasts but also in entertainment programmes. In broadcast gala shows artists perform for charitable purposes and the audience is urged to donate money to humanitarian organizations. For example, in the year of 2001, nine humanitarian organizations in Sweden stood behind the subscription campaign 'Världens barn' (the children of the world) and Swedish Television broadcast several gala shows. In Great Britain charity pro-grammes – so called telethons, for example, Live Aid, Children in Need

and Comic Relief – are successful and they appeal to both those who can give a lot and those who can give only a little (Tester, 2001).

Campaigns and televised gala shows may be most directly related to activity in the form of economic support for aid, but it is the informative programmes that create the necessary conditions for their success via their depictions of distant suffering. The media often present different views of issues, but when it comes to compassion with the victims, hegemonic unity prevails. Minear et al. (1994: ix) conclude that the news media have 'become a major humanitarian actor in their own right, helping to frame the context within which government policy is formulated and humanitarian action is mounted'.

Interestingly, while citizens' engagement in the traditional political institutions decreases in the West (Karvonen, 1999), studies show that they are getting more involved in non-governmental organizations (Thörn, 1999). In Norway, almost twice as many citizens are members of humanitarian organizations as of political parties (Andresen, 1999), and a Swedish study concludes that humanitarian organizations are one of the types of organizations that are growing most strongly, relatively speaking (Jeppsson Grassman and Svedberg, 1999). The apolitical character of such organizations may be a reason for their attraction. With their philanthropic and altruistic messages and practices, they are apparently above the power games and hypocrisy of ordinary politics. They exist to serve humanity, they always side with the victims and they appeal to our most noble feelings – compassion and altruism.

It is not the purpose of this article to go further into the intricate relationship between humanitarian organizations, the media and international politics. Instead a fourth part, and a part that all three institutions are dependent on in their social practices will be brought up, namely the public.

The humanitarian organizations are dependent on the public as citizens giving money gifts, the media are dependent on the public as audiences paying attention to their texts and programmes, and policy makers are dependent on the public as opinion. Given the mediating role of the media, on the one hand between humanitarian organizations and the public, and on the other hand between politics and public opinion, makes it especially important to focus on the public as the audience for humanitarian reporting in the media. How do people react to the emotional engagement media offers by focusing on innocent victims for political conflicts, war and other violence?

Audience reactions

In the following, the discussion will be based on two sets of empirical studies of audience reactions. One set of studies focused on violent news in general and combined brief telephone interviews carried out with a

representative sample of Swedes (in total 500 interviews) with in-depth personal interviews with a variety of individuals (Höijer, 1994, 1996). The other set of studies consisted of focus group interviews about the Kosovo War with different groups of citizens in Norway and in Sweden (Höijer and Olausson, 2002). Thirteen groups were run in Norway and 11 in Sweden, and the female and male informants were recruited from different occupational sectors and age levels. Kosovo-Albanian and Serb immigrants were also interviewed.

Extent of compassion

Although it is a risky and uncertain task to determine the extent of compassion for victims of distant suffering among the audience in general, I shall here present some figures indicating a division of the audience into those who express some type of compassion and those who are more or less indifferent. Further, there are different reactions among different segments of the audience.

The results in Table 1 are based on telephone interviews in which the public answered open-ended questions about their reactions to pictures of victims for violence (conflicts, war and so on) in news reports. Table 1 shows that half of the respondents (51 percent) said that they often or quite often do react to the pictures of distant suffering.[1] About a quarter of the public (23 percent) said they were totally indifferent and do not react at all, and 14 percent said they react sometimes but very seldom. Some (7 percent) gave unclear answers that could not be categorized. The table also shows gendered differences and differences among age groups. Women react with compassion more often than men, and elderly people much more often than younger people. Feelings of pity, sadness and anger

TABLE 1
Audience's reactions to pictures of suffering on television news (%)

	Gender			Age in years					
	Total	M	W	15–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–64	65–99
React often or quite often	51	41	59	28	37	49	49	54	68
React only sometimes	14	17	12	22	14	16	17	13	9
Do not react at all	23	32	16	41	31	22	19	25	14
Other answers or do not know	7	6	8	4	6	7	12	7	5

Notes:
Number of respondents: 554.
Source: From Höijer (1994).

were reported, and women especially also said that they sometimes cried, had to close their eyes or look away, because the pictures touched them emotionally.

I shall return to gender differences later, and here only comment on the difference between age groups. It is, of course, possible that younger people are more desensitized and blasé because they are more used to seeing fictitious violence and blood, injured victims and dead bodies. But there are other plausible reasons. Young people are often occupied by their own development and identity formation, and in this process it may be hard to engage in the suffering of distant others. Distancing oneself from global suffering may also be a way of warding off an all too pessimistic life view. 'I am not unpleasantly affected', as a young man said, 'reality is terrible and so are human beings.' Elderly people are not symbolically threatened in their own identities by suffering others in the world, and they have a deeper knowledge of the world and greater life experience. Therefore they may be more open to both their own feelings and to global suffering.

Compassion is dependent on visuals

The compassion that the audience expresses is often directly related to the documentary pictures they have seen on television. When asked about their spontaneous impressions of the Kosovo War most of the audience groups interviewed started to talk about the television pictures of streams of refugees or pictures of crying people in refugee camps, especially pictures of children and elderly people:

> 'It was what I saw of live pictures on television that made the strongest impression, all the innocent people, all those who cried.'

> 'I have terrible memories of children stepping on board buses and sitting by the windows crying.'

> 'I remember that I saw crying people on television. They had lost someone in their family and they could not find them again. There were a lot of people and it was very crowded on the gravel roads along which they were walking.'

Pictures, or more precisely our interpretations of pictures, can make indelible impressions on our minds, and as a distant audience we become bearers of inner pictures of human suffering. Especially when emotional pictures are shown repeatedly over time, as for instance the pictures of the refugees from Kosovo, they have a long-term impact on our collective memories. When the audience say 'You never get rid of all the crying children and the elderly' they emphasize the penetrative power of pictures.

The impact of photographic pictures is not least due to the truth-claim connected with them. They are perceived as truthful eye-witness reports of

reality. The audience very rarely questions the reality status of documentary pictures, or sees them as constructions of situations or events (an exception from this is discussed under the heading 'distantiation'). Documentary pictures are instead experienced as if they give direct access to reality and they therefore insist upon being taken seriously. It is hard to deny the burnt corpses from the massacre in Stupni Do, the swollen bodies floating in the rivers of Rwanda and Burundi, the crying children in refugee camps, the endless lines of refugees forced to leave their homes in Kosovo, injured people from the conflict in the Middle East lying on the ground or being carried away on stretchers.

Compassion is dependent on ideal victim images

The audience accept the dominant victim code of the media and regard children, women and the elderly as ideal victims deserving compassion. When describing their emotional reactions the groups interviewed about the Kosovo War unanimously talked about these categories of civilian people:

> 'It makes a really strong impression to see children and elderly people, and women, infirmly wandering about. You start thinking about how it is for them.'

> 'I felt so terribly sorry for them. [. . .] Seeing all the elderly people and the children. They are so tired that they can hardly walk.'

> 'I saw a news item from an empty village and there was an old, old woman left there. She could not go on any longer. I thought it was so terrible for her.'

A condition for being moved is that we as audience can regard the victim as helpless and innocent, and this was sometimes also explicitly pointed out by participants in the study: 'I was most affected by the fact that innocent people were stricken.'

A news item about a crying middle-aged man in a refugee camp in Macedonia who, in front of the television camera, begged to be brought to Norway challenged this cultural conceptualization of a worthy victim. In most of the interviewed groups they considered the man distasteful and selfish and they charged him with bad behaviour. They also thought he was not behaving in a manly way:

> I thought it was a shame to behave as he did when you think about all the pregnant women and sick people. They need to be helped and he should have begged for them. He should have said: 'Please help them!'

A man in his prime is not worthy of our compassion since we do not regard him as helpless and innocent enough. Instead he should be active in fighting the enemy or helping the helpless ones. Elderly men are conceptualized differently since they are considered weak and have a right to

be cared for. In one of the groups this was underlined by an utterance about the middle-aged man who begged to be taken to Norway: 'If he had been an old man over seventy'.

Witnessing remote suffering on television we are thus especially moved by pictures of children, women and elderly as victims. A child is, however, the most ideal victim in the perspective of compassion. When a child shows his/her feelings by crying or looking sad, we may feel pity both through our own memory of being open and vulnerable to the treachery of adulthood, and in terms of our adult identity – our desire to protect the child. When the child stares into the photographer's camera she or he may be perceived as looking directly at you as an audience, reminding you of her or his vulnerability and innocence.

Forms of compassion

Boltanski (1999) distinguishes between three forms of emotional commitment in relation to distant suffering: the mode of denunciation, the mode of sentiment, and the aesthetic mode. The first refers to a perspective in which compassion (pity in Boltanski's terminology) is combined with indignation and anger and turned into an accusation of the perpetrator. The suffering is considered as unjust. In the mode of sentiment there is no search for a perpetrator to accuse. Instead attention is focused on the victim and a benefactor. The suffering is experienced as touching and compassion is tender-hearted and sympathizes with the victim's gratitude at receiving help from a doctor, a nurse or humanitarian workers. The aesthetic mode is described by Boltanski (1999: 115) as a third possibility, which 'emerges from the criticism of the first two. It consists in considering the unfortunate's suffering as neither unjust nor as touching, but as sublime.' As examples he discusses paintings, for instance those by Goya, in which the horrible and the grotesque sides of the unfortunate's suffering is revealed.

Looking at audiences' responses to televised distant suffering we may quite clearly recognize the mode of denunciation and the mode of sentiment. It is harder to identify the aesthetic mode as a form of compassionate reading. There are, however, two other forms of compassion, which may be identified. In one, compassion is combined with feelings of shame and in the other with feelings of powerlessness. This gives us four forms of compassion identified in audience reactions. Below they are named tender-hearted compassion, blame-filled compassion, shame-filled compassion and powerlessness-filled compassion:

Tender-hearted compassion focuses on the suffering of the victims and the responses of pity and empathy it gives rise to in oneself as a spectator: 'It breaks my heart when I see refugees. They are coming in thousands and they tell what they have been through. It's so terrible'; 'I felt pity for them

when they stood there in the mud and the cold weather. They had very little food and you could see the fear in their eyes.'

Blame-filled compassion brings up the suffering of the victims in combination with indignation and anger: 'I became angry when I saw the many innocent people and civilians who died and were stricken by the conflict.' The indignation may be directed towards someone seen as responsible for the excesses. In political conflicts it is often a person in power more than the specific perpetrator who executed the violent act. In the Kosovo Conflict Milosevic was an ideal enemy to accuse. He was conceived of as having an evil disposition, of being dangerous, powerful and inhuman both by the media and by the audience (Höijer et al., 2002): 'He is evil, manipulative, and stark mad'; 'He is a terrible man, a psychopath.'

Shame-filled compassion brings in the ambivalence connected with witnessing the suffering of others in our own comfortable lives and the cosiness of our living room. Shame is 'an emotional state produced by the awareness that one has acted dishonourably or ridiculously' and 'knowl-edge of the transgression by others' is part of the emotional state (Reber, 1985: 313, 695). Concerning distant suffering you know that you have transgressed the moral obligation to help suffering others. 'I had such a bad conscience and I almost did not manage to watch any more terrible scenes on television. And they weren't just scenes, it was reality.'

In the feelings of shame there may also be a component of anger or denunciation directed at oneself for being passive and not engaging in the destinies of the remote victims: 'I get furious with myself because I do nothing. You can't say that you do not have time. It's a question of priority. Certainly there is more to do.'

Being an immigrant from an area in conflict makes the shame even more pronounced. In relation to the Kosovo conflict immigrants from the Balkans experienced a specific deep shame related to questions of identity and solidarity:

> We helped our relatives with money as best as we could. But you constantly had the feeling that it wasn't enough. The only right way to help was to go down there. But I didn't and I really feel that I failed. I left my people in the lurch and I can't look them in the eye.

Powerlessness-filled compassion arises from a subjective awareness of the limits of the media spectator's possibilities to alleviate the suffering of the victims. It brings forth sentiments of impotence and powerlessness: 'You feel so helpless and there is so little you can do. You can of course give some money but that will not stop the war'; 'I got a feeling that it would never stop and I experienced so much impotency.'

The various forms of compassion may take different forms in the individual spectator, and they may also be represented simultaneously in

the same person. A spectator may for instance feel tender-hearted compassion, blame a perpetrator *and* experience powerlessness in relation to the same news story or reported encroachment. In the representative telephone interview study, 62 percent reported that they often or quite often had sentiments of sadness when watching news pictures about violence against civilians, and the same number, 62 percent, reported sentiments of anger. This study was not totally compatible with the face-to-face interviews, however, so one should not draw too strong conclusions about the extension of different types of compassion.

Distantiation from compassion

Far from everyone in the audience feels compassion with the victims of war and other conflicts. There are also different ways of turning one's back on the suffering of distant others. One strategy, though not a common one, is to reject the truth claim of the news reporting. Criticizing the news in general may also be a way of shifting focus away from the humanitarian tragedies. Another strategy is to dehumanize the victims in some way, or just to become numb or immune to remote human suffering.

Mostly people interpret the news referentially, that is, the reports are regarded as truthful descriptions of reality. To see pictures of streams of refugees and to hear a reporter talk about them is to believe that people are forced, by others or by circumstances, to flee from their homes in order to escape terror or other disasters. In political conflicts and wars such news pictures are also part of the propaganda war between the parties involved. People may be aware of that but still be overpowered by the impact of the photographic pictures of the suffering. Sometimes, however, a critical propaganda perspective may be strong and take over. This was the case when the interviewed Serbian immigrants, especially the male groups, saw the news about Kosovo-Albanian refugee streams. The news pictures were regarded as have been staged for propaganda purposes:

> On television all pictures may be arranged. They show the same strong pictures over and over again. They showed dreadful pictures, for instance they broadcast the same family on a horse-drawn cart several times. And they said that thousands of Kosovo-Albanians were hiding in the forest. But to me the pictures seemed incredible, arranged.

A more common critical perspective, which creates a distance from the human suffering, is to criticize the news in general for commercialism and sensationalism. News media give a distorted picture, according to this view, by paying too much attention to violence and human misery:

> The news reporting is focusing more and more on dead bodies and acts of violence. It seems to be the only thing of news value, and that can be quite

disturbing. Especially when they are reporting from hotbeds of war. If nobody has been shot or blown to pieces there are no reports. It makes you quite critical of the media.

Another way to form a distance is to apply an us–them perspective in which the culture, mentality and way of living and behaving of the others, that is, the suffering people, are dehumanized. With stereotyped thought figures such as 'In the Balkans they think only of vendetta', 'It is a totally different culture from ours', 'It is something about their temperament', empathy is turned away and the lack of involvement is rationalized and legitimized. Why bother about people who are primitive and uncivilized and not like us, civilized citizens in democracies? 'Personally I felt no compassion for the people down there', as one man who was interviewed about the Kosovo War said, 'I think they only have themselves to blame. There have been problems in the Balkans ever since World War I. They are no angels!'

Just becoming numb or immune to the pictures and reports about human suffering on a large scale is also quite a common reaction: 'I cannot engage in it any longer. A dead body no longer touches me.' Being fed with news about suffering may in the end lead to feelings of satiation and numbness. A common reaction among the audience of the Kosovo War was that pity for the victims gradually decreased over the period of the growing humanitarian disaster. According to NATO propaganda, the war was going to last for just a few days. Instead it lasted for 78 days and during this period the audience were repeatedly exposed to images of seemingly endless streams of refugees. The powerlessness over the situation, the never ending number of victims, the difficulty of understanding the Balkan situation and ethnic conflicts, and the inability of the media to give a background, made the audience less interested, numb and even immune to the human suffering. 'In the end you could not manage it any more', was one way of expressing how time undermined the feeling of compassion.

Gendered compassion

As shown in Table 1, women react with compassion more often than men. Gender differences were also very evident in the in-depth interview studies. Distantiated and repudiating interpretations were more common among male audience groups than among female. Groups of male engineers in Sweden and Norway sometimes even reacted quite cynically to the Kosovo-Albanian refugee catastrophe: 'I believe that those who run away are running away from taking active part in the conflict. Maybe they are cowards or something. Anyway they got away from responsibility.' And men more often said that the documentary pictures of children in need, or of mutilated or dead persons, did not move them. 'Seeing a dead body

doesn't affect me particularly, I guess I've become blasé' is a more typical reaction among men than among women.

To a greater degree than men, women focus on the humanitarian aspects of disasters, conflicts and wars, and make empathic interpretations:

> 'I feel so deeply sorry for the refugees.'

> 'It breaks my heart to see them. It was cold and they had almost nothing to eat. You could see the fear in their eyes.'

> 'I was moved by the children and the elderly people, the women who infirmly wandered about. It was summer, it was hot and I thought about how things were for them.'

Sometimes female viewers identify with the situation of the victims, going so far as to imagine themselves as distressed in the same ways: 'Imagine that someone came and put a gun to your head telling you to leave. Otherwise you will get shot. You have to leave your own home, the house you have bought and built yourself.'

There may be many factors contributing to gendered differences. Obvious social reasons for the difference are that women are fostered to show more feelings and mostly have the caring role in family life. Further, war is historically and culturally an extremely male domain in which glory, violence and manliness are called forth. To feel solidarity with victims simply does not accord with male ideals about heroic warfare and violence.

Men also mainly conduct other outrages, and the story about male violence is told again and again in the media. Elsewhere (Höijer, 1996, 1998) I have discussed how men as an audience must steel themselves in order to protect themselves against the myth of violence as a specific male characteristic, that is, against their fear of becoming a perpetrator of violence themselves. 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. This is an unacceptable idea, a painful experience, and the violence-imbued self-conception is something one tries to keep at arm's-length. This is achieved by not allowing oneself to react very strongly to images of death and suffering. Men shield and defend themselves by looking at the pictures without showing any outer signs of emotion. Women are not threatened in their identities at all in the same way when confronted with documentary depictions of the human suffering caused by some kind of violence. On the contrary, women may even be confirmed in their more positive self-conception, assured that violence is not part of feminine culture. Since women do not experience any threat to their self-conception, they can afford to remain more open to the depictions of suffering and have greater leeway for emotional reactions. They do not have the same need as men to dull their sensibility, but can surrender to feelings of sorrow, pain and compassion.

I will also bring up a difference in an inner moral voice between women and men, which gives different frames of references for interpreting a political and violent conflict. As suggested by Gilligan (1982) women's moral judgement focuses on care while men's moral judgement focuses on justice. Women construct the moral problem for human action in conflicts and choice situations as a problem of care and responsibility. Hurting someone is considered selfish and immoral. A female perspective thus calls attention to hurt, pain or suffering as something wrong and morally problematic. This is also often the case, as we have seen, when the female audience creates meaning out of the media reports on violent conflicts, wars and other catastrophes.

According to Gilligan (1982), men construct the moral problem as one of rights and rules and they reason about justice more than about care. From a justice point of view, violence could even be accepted under certain conditions, namely when it is used to rectify or to avenge a previous injustice. In such a perspective, questions of the suffering of human beings may be put in the background. This was done when a majority of the male population in the West supported the NATO bombings of Kosovo and Serbia. For instance, in March 1999, 65 percent of Norwegian men supported the bombings but only 44 percent of Norwegian women (Opinion, 1999).

We find the same gender patterns in relation to the military attack by the United States and Britain on Afghanistan following the terrorist attack of September 11th on World Trade Center and the Pentagon. At the beginning of October 2001, 80 percent of the male population in Britain supported military actions compared to 68 percent of females.[2] By the end of October 2001, public support among British women for the bombing had decreased to 51 percent.[3] Swedish opinion data from the beginning of November 2001 shows an even larger difference between the sexes. While 59 percent of the male population in Sweden supported the bombings only, 27 percent of the female population did so.[4]

From a justice perspective, it is morally right to bomb in order to rout the enemy and take vengeance for violent or unrighteous acts conducted by the enemy. From a care perspective, bombings are morally wrong because they will hurt and kill people and they will inevitably lead to new suffering among innocent victims.

Conclusion

In the critical media debate it is a quite common view that suffering is commodified by the media and the audience become passive spectators of distant death and pain without any moral commitment. Žižek (2001)

emphasizes the narcissistic traits of what he calls the capitalistic sub-
jectivity in which we are superficially touched and give money for charity
just in order to keep the distant other at arm's-length. Moeller (1999)
almost takes it for granted that the American audience she discusses does
not care about the human suffering it is fed with by the media. Tester, who
has addressed many important questions about the media and their
significance for the moral values among people and in society, also has a
mainly pessimistic view on the audience. He comes to conclusions such as:

> . . . it is quite likely that the media do not serve so as to sensitise us to moral
> problems. Quite the contrary; the media rather tend to have an anaesthetic
> effect. [. . .] It is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that the media mean the
> destruction of the moral values of solidarity. (Tester, 1994: 107)

In a later book Tester (2001) refers to studies showing plurality in the
audience's reactions. This complicates his view of the audience but he still
does not discuss his own theoretical construction of an audience that, he
then tells us, 'does not contain the ethical awareness that would make
statements of the ought binding or the practice of virtue possible' (Tester,
2001: 50). His book focuses on the compassion fatigue thesis and initially
he declares that he is not seeking an answer to the question whether
compassion fatigue really exists or not among the audience (2001: 2).

The value of discussing a theoretically constructed audience is, however,
limited. And when Tester (2001: 14) writes 'Evidently, compassion fatigue
is not felt by audiences alone' and then refers to how journalists, too, talk
of compassion fatigue, he certainly states that compassion fatigue is a
characteristic in audience reactions.

Even if it is complicated, not least because of the heterogeneity among
people with different social and cultural experiences, interests and social
backgrounds, we need to address real audiences. We need to ask about and
study how people as audience react to and interpret documentary media
reporting on violence and human suffering. In the present article results
from a few such studies have been presented. The conclusion from this
empirical research opposes, or strongly modulates, the thesis about a
pronounced compassion fatigue among people in general.

Instead we see a two-sided effect of global compassion on the one hand,
and ignorance and compassion fatigue on the other. And there are different
forms of compassion as well as different forms of indifference.

Pictures in the media of suffering people may really invite the audience
to experience moral compassion at a distance. They may mobilize
compassion. Crimes against humanity such as encroachment and violence
against people and populations have a strong appeal for the audience,
especially the female audience. It was, for instance, the discourse of global
compassion that dominated the spontaneous memories of the Kosovo War
most strongly among the women. The mass flight of the refugees from their

homes and the human suffering were what was in focus, and the audience remembered the television pictures of streams of refugees or pictures of crying people in refugee camps.

The other reaction to the media focus on distant human suffering, that is, turning away and not letting oneself be moved, is more common among the male audience than among females. We may find part of the explanation for this in the cultural expectations of boys and men, and ideals and myths of manliness. Compassion fatigue may be another reason for the distant-iation from the media pictures of innocent victims for war, conflicts and terror. According to Tester (2001: 13):

> Compassion fatigue is becoming so used to the spectacle of dreadful events, misery or suffering that we stop noticing them. We are bored when we see one more tortured corpse on the television screen and we are left unmoved. . . [. . .] Compassion fatigue means being left exhausted and tired by those reports and ceasing to think that anything at all can be done to help.

The concept 'compassion fatigue' seems to imply an earlier stage with some compassion. The large number of reports on suffering and the repetitive and stereotyped character of the depictions may tire the audience out. You do not need to be cynical and totally ignorant to other people's suffering in order to be fatigued and numbed. When the refugee catastro-phe in Kosovo continued for several weeks and the media reported on it almost every day, many in the audience became tired. Women, especially, reported how they could not stand watching in the end; and they told the interviewer how their compassionate reactions had turned into compassion fatigue. A subsequent new human catastrophe somewhere else in the world may, however, evoke their compassion again.

When discussing the impact of the growing television exposure of human suffering on the audience it is important not to simplify the discussion. We should not idealize the audience, believing that all we need to do in order to awake compassion and engagement is to expose people to pictures of humanitarian disasters. Neither should we believe the opposite, that the audience mainly turns away in cynicism and compassion fatigue, fed up with reports of expulsions, massacres, genocide, and terrorist and bomb attacks. And the media are not good Samaritans wanting to help the world, nor are they totally corrupted cynical and commercial agents who exploit and sell human suffering. There are different media systems, different news policies and different news journalists.

There are many questions that we need to address with systematic empirical research: questions of how different media report on different human catastrophes, questions of changes over time in media reporting, questions of how different audience groups react to different humanitarian disasters reported in the media, and questions of changes in audience reactions over time.

Notes

1. The questions were open-ended and the 500 respondents answered in their own words. The answers have then been categorized.
2. *The Guardian*/ICM survey. http://politics.guardian.co.uk/attacks/story
3. http://www.guardian.co.uk/waronterror/story/0,1361,583301,00.html
4. Survey conducted by Sifo, Sweden. http://www.svt.se/nyheter/dagens/special/bomb.htm

References

Andresen, Ø. (1999) *Organisasjonsdeltakelse i Norge fra 1983 til 1997*. Oslo: Statistisk sentralbyrå.

Beck, U. (2000) *What is Globalization?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bell, M. (1998) 'The Journalism of Attachment', pp. 15–22 in M. Kieran (ed.) *Media Ethics*. London: Routledge.

Boltanski, L. (1999) *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chomsky, N. (1999) *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo*. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.

Christie, N. (1996) 'The Ideal Victim', pp. 17–30 in E.A. Fattah (ed.) *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*. London: Macmillan.

Cronström, J. (2000) *Gränslöst II: om det symboliska TV-våldets inflytande på individer, medier och samhälle*. Stockholm: Institutionen för journalistik, medier och kommunikation (licentiatuppsats).

Delanty, G. (2000) 'Cosmopolitanism and Violence: The Limits of Global Civil Society', *European Journal of Social Theory* 4(1): 41–52.

Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Herman, E.S. and N. Chomsky (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Höijer, B. (1994) *Våldsskildringar i TV-nyheterna. Produktion, utbud, publik.* Stockholm University: Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, No. 5.

Höijer, B. (1996) 'The Dilemmas of Documentary Violence in Television', *Nordicom Review* 1: 53–61.

Höijer, B. (1998) 'Social Psychological Perspectives in Reception Analysis', pp. 166–83 in R. Dickinson, O. Linné and R. Harindranath (eds) *Approaches to Audiences*. London: Edward Arnold.

Höijer, B., S.A. Nohrstedt and R. Ottosen (2002) 'The Kosovo War in the Media – Analysis of a Global Discursive Order', *Conflict & Communication Online* 1(2): www.cco.regener-online.de

Höijer, B. and U. Olausson (2002) *Medborgare om medierna och Kosovokonflikten.* Örebro University: Studies in Media and Communication, No. 23.

Jeppsson Grassman, E. and L. Svedberg (1999) 'Medborgarskapets gestaltningar: Insatser i och utanför föreningslivet', in Erik Amnä (ed.) *Civilsamhället: Demokratiutredningens forskarvolym VIII*. Stockholm: Swedish Government Official Reports, No. 84.

Karvonen, L. (1999) 'Då demokratin svalnar: Om valdeltagande, förtroende och intresse', pp. 8–17 in H. Hvitfelt and L. Karvonen (eds) *Den svala demokratin*. Sundsvall: Demokratinstitutet.

Mellum, M. (2000) *Journalister i krig – en studie av norske avisjournalisters dekning av Kosovokrigen 1999.* Oslo University: Institutt for medier og kommunikasjon (hovedfagsoppgave).

Minear, L., C. Scott and T.G. Weiss (1996) *The News Media, Civil War, and Humanitarian Action*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Moeller, S.D. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*. New York: Routledge.

Natsios, A. (1996) 'Illusions of Influence: The CNN Effect in Complex Emergencies', pp. 149–69 in R.I. Rotberg and T.G. Weiss (eds) *From Massacres to Genocide: The Media, Public Policy, and Humanitarian Crises*. Cambridge, MA: The World Peace Foundation.

Nussbaum, M.C. (2001) *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Opinion (1999) *Landsomfattende meningsmäling 25 mars*. Bergen, Norway: Opinion AS.

Ottosen, R. (2002) 'Pressfriheten under press efter 11. September', in S. Finslo (ed.) *Norsk Redakørførenings Arbok* 2001. Kristiansand, Norway: Høyskoleforlaget.

Reber, A.S. (1985) *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*. London: Penguin Books.

Sassen, S. (1998) *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*. New York: The New Press.

Sznaider, N. (1998) 'The Sociology of Compassion: A Study in the Sociology of Morals', *Cultural Values* 2(1): 117–39.

Tester, K. (1994) *Media, Culture and Morality*. London: Routledge.

Tester, K. (2001) *Compassion, Morality and the Media*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Thörn, H. (1999) 'Nya sociala rörelser och politikens globalisering. Demokrati utanför parlamentet?', in Erik Amnä (ed.) *Demokratiutredningens forskarvolym, VIII. Civilsamhället*. Stockholm: Swedish Government Official Reports, No. 84.

Tvedt, T. (1993) *En studie av frivillige organisasjoner i norsk bistand*. Universitetet i Bergen, Senter for utviklingsstudier.

Žižek, S. (2001) 'Njutning förbjuden', *Dagens Nyheter* 22 August.

Birgitta Höijer is currently Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Örebro in Sweden. Her research interests include studies of the media and meaning creation of the audience.

Address: Media and Communication, University of Örebro, SE–701 82 Örebro, Sweden. [email: birgitta.hoijer@hum.oru.se]