

## **Distant Suffering in Audience Memory: The Moral Hierarchy of Remembering**

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Confronted with images of distant suffering on a frequent basis, television viewers are often invited to take a moral stance. This article argues that illustrative of the viewers' moral engagement with such news stories is the way they remember them. It studies the practice of media remembering as the discursive reconstruction of events witnessed through the media. Drawing upon empirical material from focus group discussions with Greek audiences, the article argues that there is a moral hierarchy in the way viewers remember distant suffering. This hierarchy, constructed through the intertwined processes of remembering and forgetting, reflects the political and cultural frameworks viewers employ in making sense of distant disasters.

*Keywords:* distant suffering, audiences, media memory, focus groups, cosmopolitan memory

### **Introduction**

The reporting of distant suffering has been at the forefront of public debates about the moral potential of the media in forging relationships of solidarity across borders. In reporting news of disasters, political crises, and humanitarian catastrophes, Western media frequently invite their audiences to make moral judgments with regard to the suffering witnessed, occasionally act upon it, and ultimately expand their moral imagination and extend their sense of responsibility toward distant others. This moral potential of the media has posed critical questions about audience engagement and overfamiliarization with suffering experienced in distant locales (Cohen, 2001; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001).

This article addresses these issues by exploring audience engagement with distant others as expressed through viewers' memories of stories of distant suffering. It takes as a starting point the assumption that mediated memories have a moral dimension insofar as they formulate discursive resources audiences employ in their understanding of other relevant events they encounter through the media. Their construction is also expressive of audience understandings of the world and the audience's engagement with the pain of others. In this context, the article suggests the practice of media

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remembering as an analytical category for the exploration of viewers' moral engagement with distant suffering. Media remembering is defined here as the discursive reconstruction of viewers' memories of events witnessed through the media. The focus on the discursive emphasizes the practice of remembering as much more than a mere reproduction of media reports of suffering. As a reconstruction of media stories of human pain, media remembering illustrates the process of turning memories of distant suffering into stories through discourse. What is particularly interesting in these stories is not what is remembered but rather how the stories are put together, which sheds light on the social discourses and resources people employ in reconstructing their memories as well as the cultural and moral meanings they endow them with.

This article, therefore, addresses two main gaps in the relevant literature. First, it offers an empirical footing to hitherto largely theoretical debates about audience engagement with news of distant suffering. Second, by focusing on the practice of remembering, the article explores the appropriations, (re)interpretations, and (re)articulations of media discourses by audiences, illustrating the mutually constitutive relationship between media texts and their viewers (Livingstone, 1993, p. 7) beyond the point of media reception, in the context of everyday discourses people employ to talk about and make sense of distant suffering. In doing this, the article also contributes to the proliferating field of mediated memory studies.

### **Reporting Disasters and the Hierarchies of Life and Place**

The significance of disasters as events that often fill the news has been recognized by early media research. Exploring the journalistic criteria of newsworthiness, Galtung and Ruge (1965) highlighted the Western bias in international news, whereby events concerning elite nations and people are more probable to become news, whereas "lower rank" countries mostly attract coverage at times of crises and disasters and only when satisfying a threshold of criteria to be considered newsworthy. Such hierarchies in the coverage of international news have since been the topic of much academic debate and research (Adams, 1986; Singer, Endreny, & Glassman, 1991). A common theme among these studies has been the observation that the severity of a disaster based on the number of victims can only marginally explain the extent of its coverage; organizational factors and social and cultural affinities play a significant role in determining the coverage a foreign disaster will attract (Adams, 1986).

More recently, a report published by CARMA International has concluded that "there appears to be no link between the scale of a disaster and media interest in the story" (CARMA, 2006, p. 6). The report indicates that Hurricane Katrina, although claiming around 2,000 lives, received far more attention than the Kashmir earthquake, the death toll of which approached the 80,000 victims. This discrepancy is attributed to "Western self-interests" in the coverage of different areas of the World (CARMA, 2006, p. 5).

Empirically informed studies on the mediation of distant suffering have illustrated the role of media representations in differently situating the viewers vis-à-vis the distant victims by making different demands on their political and emotional sensibilities (Chouliaraki, 2006; Joye, 2009). Chouliaraki,

employing a semiotic analysis to study television news of distant suffering, identifies three "regiments of pity" based on three modes of reporting: "adventure," "emergency," and "ecstatic" news (Chouliaraki, 2006). These types make different moral claims to the spectator: Adventure news only registers information without inviting emotion (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 106), emergency news proposes "a frame of action to the spectators themselves" (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 119), and ecstatic news constructs a relationship of identification between the viewer and the sufferer (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 175).

Despite the implicit assumption that these moral hierarchies of suffering in media reporting are significant for the ways audiences engage with the different events, the question of how actual viewers relate to distant suffering remains largely unexplored. In a few notable examples, Höijer (2004) has illustrated the complexity of audience responses to news of suffering and the dependence of compassion on visuals, whereas Seu (2010), focusing on the issue of audience (in)action vis-à-vis humanitarian campaigns, has addressed the different ways people discursively distance themselves from the suffering of others. More recently, Scott (2014), exploring people's mediated encounters with distant suffering through a variety of programming, has concluded that these encounters mostly involved "indifference and solitary enjoyment" (p. 3).

The present article aims to further this strand of research. At the same time, moving beyond the point of media reception and a focus on particular stories, it addresses how media reports of suffering are transformed in the context of viewers' discourses and the extent to which the latter reflect moral hierarchies similar to the ones relevant research has attributed to media texts. In that respect, it is important to explore how media stories of distant suffering are transformed in audience memory.

### **The Moral Dimensions of Mediated Memory**

The centrality of memory as a moral globalizing force has been acknowledged in the concept of "cosmopolitan memory," which is theorized as the basis for emerging moral interdependencies and transnational solidarities (Levy & Sznajder, 2002). The Holocaust has been extensively discussed as the epitome of such events, the globally shared memories of which are central in the construction of a global moral space, where distant others become part of a common global past and "new cosmopolitan sensibilities and moral-political obligations" emerge (Levy & Sznajder, 2002, p. 103; see also Levy & Sznajder, 2006; Zelizer, 1998). Levy and Sznajder (2002) place electronic media at the forefront of these transformations, because they facilitate a shared consciousness and make moral proposals to viewers around the world. In a comparative project on Global Media Generations, Volkmer (2006) and her colleagues studied the ways media-related memories can formulate a common ground for perceiving the world. The authors argue that formative news memories, such as the Vietnam War, the moon landing, or the death of Princess Diana, provide a framework for people's current perception of the world, which is generation-specific.

The media, as widely shared and used discursive resources, play a double role in the construction of publicly shared memories. First, they provide a reservoir of mediated experiences to become the "raw

material" for the construction of a remembered past; second, they are implicated in the "social definition of worthiness vis-à-vis remembrance" (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994, p. 164). The differential media attention and extent of reporting of different events is a case in point. The media provide viewers with not only experiences to be remembered but the resources to interpret these experiences and future ones of the same kind. As such, they are "technologies of memory" (Sturken, 1997, p. 10)—cultural resources instrumental in the construction, reservation, and reconstruction of public memory (Garde-Hansen, 2011).

The significant work on media and memory is largely influenced by Halbwachs' (1992) arguments on collective memory. Highlighting the mutually dependent relationship between individuals and society, the concept of collective memory points out that it is through this interactive relationship that people come to construct their memories. The individual mind, Halbwachs argues, is only capable of the art of recollection, when it places itself within social frameworks of memory (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38). These collective frameworks people draw upon to reconstruct an image of the past reflect the predominant thoughts of society, so when people remember, they do not retrieve the past from memory but actively reconstruct it on the basis of the present (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40). In other words, the way people remember past events reflects the way they think about the present as members of a social group. Collective memory as "a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past . . . is best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share" (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994, p. 4).

It is this socially constructed nature of audience memory that this article explores through the practice of media remembering. In doing so, the article focuses on remembering as a discursive process. Discourse is understood here as the social practice of producing meaning through language use, which takes place at the intersection of texts, processes, and their social conditions, both situational and institutional (Fairclough, 2001, p. 21). It is an intertextual practice, insofar as its articulation is constituted through a mixture of genres and texts (Fairclough, 1992). Audience discourses of remembering are, therefore, approached as intertextual practices, which in their (re)telling of media stories, draw upon a variety of resources. Some of these are explicitly intertextual, evident in references to specific images and reports of disasters, whereas others, as will be illustrated in the analysis, draw upon the viewers' personal experiences. Exploring the discursive reconstructions of media stories of suffering offers insights into how media texts are appropriated and recontextualized in everyday life, and the transformations they undergo as they move from contexts of mediation to those of consumption (Fairclough, 1995).

The intertextual nature of remembering is also highlighted by discursive social psychology, which describes remembering as a process of diffusion of discourses, personal and collective, past and present, "in a single task through which we construct a discourse that allows us to objectify our experience" (Achugar, 2008, p. 7). This approach emphasizes especially the dependence of the practice of remembering on the particular communicative circumstances in which it occurs (Middleton & Edwards, 1990, p. 11). Remembering as formulated through ways of talking is constructive and action-oriented; *constructive*, because it provides a particular version of events, and *action-oriented* because this version of events aims at doing something, for example arguing, justifying, or countering (Edwards & Stokoe, 2004). Remembering as a social practice is based on elaborations, rearrangements, and even omissions. In this context, remembering and forgetting are both aspects of the same practice of memory

construction; they are flexible practices and occasioned by the interaction of the communicative context in which they take place (Middleton, 1997).

In this sense, remembering stories of distant suffering becomes a practice not only of recollection but also of passing judgment about the events remembered. It is a reflexive articulation of the past intertwined with personal reaction (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Remembering as the retelling of events witnessed through the media is filtered through the moral evaluation people associate with that experience. Memories thus become "not only the simple act of recall but social, cultural, and political action at its broadest level" (Zelizer, 1998, p. 3). At the same time, being embedded within collective social frameworks, the discursive practice of media remembering also illustrates the ways people place themselves within the perspective of the group they are members of (Halbwachs, 1992), often, as will be discussed below, the nation. Remembering thus becomes a factor and indicator of social belonging and solidarity and of the normative order and moral imperatives that underlie such social relations (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994, p. 9). Through the articulation of their mediated memories, people construct versions of the events as well as position themselves in relation to the social world and others (Van Dijck, 2007).

Media remembering is, therefore, a practice of moral significance insofar as it is expressive of the viewers' moral attachments and situates them in relation to distant others whose presence on the screen makes claims to their sensibilities. It is also illustrative of the moral possibilities of global media in contributing to the emergence of postnational solidarities, because it is ultimately a practice of embedding media stories in broader meaning-making frameworks that viewers employ in understanding the world both local and mediated.

### **Exploring the Practice of Media Remembering**

The rest of the article draws upon empirical material from focus group discussions with Greek audiences to illustrate the moral nature of the practice of media remembering. In particular, I explore how Greek audiences remember disasters that occurred in distant locales but were extensively reported by Greek media. The analysis draws upon 12 discussions, which included 47 participants in total. Participants varied in terms of gender, and were divided into two age cohorts: younger people in their 20s and older people in their 40s and 50s. They also differed in terms of educational background and occupation, as indicators of socioeconomic status. To maximize group diversity, purposeful sampling was employed and discussants were recruited through the snowballing method. Groups were homogeneous and consisted of peers, a choice made on the basis that since peer groups preexist the research setting, their discourses are more reflective of everyday circumstances (Sasson, 1995, p. 20). The method of focus groups was used on the premise that it is through the interaction of discussion that commonsense discourses are more vividly articulated, negotiated, and illustrated (Billig, 2002, p. 16).

In addition to the viewers' memories of distant disasters, the discussions explored two other issues: participants' attitudes to charity and their general media consumption patterns, which are beyond the scope of this article. Discussions were triggered by questions about three major disasters, the Asian

tsunami of 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the Kashmir earthquake of 2005. Despite their obvious differences, the three events were chosen because they occurred around the time the research was conducted (the summer of 2006), their great destructive force, and the extensive media coverage they received. Discussions extended to many other events and issues participants found relevant. The focus here will be on the different ways events are constructed in the discursive process of media remembering. In narrating stories of suffering, viewers simultaneously constructed a moral hierarchy of remembering, reflecting the significance they attributed to the stories remembered as well as their moral engagement with the suffering victims. This hierarchy consists of events participants had forgotten, those that they remembered as iconic, and others that made them reflect on their agency as moral actors.

### **Banal Suffering**

Of the three events used as triggers for the discussions, Hurricane Katrina and the Kashmir earthquake, which had taken place in August and October 2005, respectively, seemed to have faded from viewers' memory. These "absences" were treated as equally important as narratives of other events discussed, because they are "just as socially constructed as memory itself, and with an equally strong intervention of morally as well as ideologically grounded claims to truth" (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994, p. 116). Exploring, therefore, the practice of media remembering presupposes the simultaneous study of practices of forgetting. Forgetting is not to be addressed as blanks in the memory of audiences; rather, what is of great significance is *how* these events that participants claimed not to be able to recall were discussed. By constructing meaning in discussion, viewers would draw upon other disasters and similar events either as points of reference or by way of confusion. The ways viewers make these associations during the practice of remembering are telling of the different ways they position themselves in relation to these specific events and the suffering of distant others overall.

### ***Hurricane Katrina: Remembering Through Stereotypes***

Characteristic of most discussions about Hurricane Katrina was that viewers' memories were not readily triggered. When shown photos of the events, it was common for group members to initially identify the disaster as a flood or even a hurricane, but only a few participants could name the disaster. The mention of the name Katrina sounded familiar to most respondents, but even then only a few could recall the particulars of the disaster.

There were two main elements in participants' narratives of Hurricane Katrina: the construction of the events as a political failure of the U.S. government and, closely related to this, the framing of the hurricane as a national disaster. Both of these aspects are expressive of an anti-American discourse, widespread and well-rooted in Greek culture (Calotychos, 2004). The focus on the unresponsiveness of the U.S. government due to its alleged racism and the construction of the victims as "poor black Americans" were characteristic of such anti-American discourses in audience memories of Hurricane Katrina, as evident in the following extract:

Simos: They knew that it was coming! And they were evacuating the cities.

Tina: They weren't evacuating it! Or rather they warned them at the last moment, and it was only White rich people that managed to leave and the Black ones who were extremely poor could not go anywhere.

(Man and woman, in their 20s, middle class, Focus Group 1)

The narrative is a combination of images and political analysis of the event. The victims are constructed as agents that *knew* about the disaster approaching. Later, agency—and blame—are placed on the authorities. The narrative also entails an account of racism, since it was only the “White rich people” who escaped the disaster. Similar political understandings of the disaster were expressed in other discussions.

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

Giota: But even there, you know what? I have noticed that their houses in the US are like fake ones! They should learn how to build a house! . . . In the films I watch, I mean, their houses are like that! You know, as the preconstructed houses look like! . . . I mean there are no bricks, no cement, no anything! What else could the hurricane do to them then?! Now, that it serves them right, this is not something you say but . . .

(Woman, in her 20s, working class, Focus Group 7)

Not recalling the disaster, the viewer draws upon other media images to reconstruct it—namely, general images of housing buildings in the United States, in this case from films. Most importantly, there is a latent anti-Americanism in her statements, placing responsibility on the victims as Americans despite the disclaimer of her prejudice (“not that it serves them right but . . .”). Broader cultural and political discourses with a national focus enter the discussion about distant suffering and are employed to fill in the memory gaps during the practice of media remembering.

Apart from resorting to cultural stereotypes to make sense of the disaster, discussants also used another important strategy to fill in their memory gaps about the event of the hurricane—namely, the use of relevant media images of flooding. The interplay between actual events and their stereotypes is evident in the quote below, where participants, after admitting not being able to remember the specific hurricane, start describing similar images:

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

Daphne: And the boat, people traveling on the boat trying to escape. . . . OK, well, over there . . .

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

(Women, in their 40s and 50s, middle class, Focus Group 4)

The event is described as a collection of indeterminate images, which are attributed by one of the participants to the broader category of hurricane as a disaster and a repertoire of similar images that are associated with such events. What is at stake here is the specificity of the event under discussion—Hurricane Katrina, which seems to have faded from viewers' memory and been assimilated to a similar mediated events. A similar point is made by the participant below, when asked what he can remember from the specific disaster:

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

(Man, age 25, working class, Focus Group 9)

The participant feels the need to justify his inability to remember the specific hurricane by referring to the frequency of similar events that take place in the United States and are broadcast by the media. The specificity of each disaster is lost in interchangeable images of tornados, disasters, and hurricanes. Apart from being constructed as an internal U.S. affair, then, memories of Hurricane Katrina were also reconstructed through the resort to stereotypes and similar media images.

### ***Kashmir: Remembering Individual Stories***

A similar practice of resorting to a repertoire of media images and template reporting was evident to a larger extent in participants' reconstruction of the Kashmir earthquake, which followed Katrina by only a few months and with far greater destructive force and death toll. Only in a couple of the discussions the earthquake could be remembered as a specific disaster; the following exchange was typical:

Can you remember anything about the earthquake in Kashmir?

Dina: A lot of people died then . . .

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

Dina: Was it about seven to eight Richter, what was it then?

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

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

Yes.

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

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

Dina: But I can't remember anything.

(Women, in their 40s and 50s, working class, Focus Group 2)

It is evident that viewers do not merely refer to the specific earthquake but rather draw upon images of similar media stories. They try to reconstruct the events, even after admitting they "can't remember anything." The story of the rescued child also seems to be associated with earthquakes in general rather than the one in Kashmir.

Children and mothers are often subjects of images of suffering, constituting the "ideal victims" (Moeller, 1999, p. 107) of media's formulaic reporting of similar disasters. These images are recycled over time in public discourse in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish among different events. This is evident in the extract below, where participants discuss the interchangeability of media images of earthquakes.

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

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

(Man and woman, in their 50s, middle class, Focus Group 11)

The interchangeable nature of images of earthquakes was also evident in another characteristic of the discussions about Kashmir: the focus on personal stories of survivors. In the following extract, the discussion about the Kashmir earthquake initiated a lively exchange of stories of human suffering caused by other earthquakes:

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

Mary: Wasn't it in Greece?

Vicky: The factory?

Mary: Yes, the factory of Ricomex!

Vicky: In Athens<sup>1</sup>!

Giota: And she was there for days . . .

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

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

Participants continued to discuss the collapse of the Ricomex factory, and then came back to similar stories that they could recall:

Giota: And then there was another one, with a little boy, Andreas<sup>2</sup>, I don't know where. . . . And it took them days to take him out of the ruins, but they rescued him in the end.

Vicky: I remember something else in Armenia<sup>3</sup>. . . a mother who had a . . . who was trapped with her child and in order to save it she had cut her fingers . . .

Giota: Yes, and she would feed the child!

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

(Women, in their 20s, working class, Focus Group 7)

Similar stories of survivors were mentioned in other focus group discussions, such as of a woman who "was trapped, and they found her a month later . . . and there was a pack of pasta and she survived on dry pasta" (Georgia, 56, middle class, Focus Group 5). Because of their emotionally compelling nature, human stories of individual suffering have a lasting impact on viewers' memory.

Nevertheless, what is being lost in the discussions is the specificity of the context in which these stories occur. The conversation becomes an exchange of stories of particular instances of horrific suffering, where the categories of time and space completely collapse and the historicity of the event is obscured. Susan Sontag (2003) makes a similar point with regard to photographic images of suffering. "The problem", she argues, "is not that people remember through photos, but that they remember only the photos", which "eclipses other forms of understanding and remembering (p. 89). This does not mean that harrowing images lose their power to shock, but "they are not much help if the task is to understand" (ibid.). In the same way, harrowing stories of specific sufferers are reconstructed by participants in the practice of media remembering, but they are devoid of their sociohistorical circumstances that would allow for better understanding of the predicament of the sufferers. The local (earthquake in Athens) is intertwined with the distant (earthquake in Armenia), and the discussion about the recent (Kashmir)

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<sup>1</sup> Participants here refer to the collapse of the Ricomex factory during the Athens earthquake of September 7, 1999. The collapse left 39 dead and a number of injured victims.

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Bogdanos was an 8-year-old boy who was extricated from the ruins of his home after a strong earthquake in the city of Aigio, Greece, in 1995. The rescue operation lasted for more than 20 hours and was covered live by the national media virtually for its entire duration.

<sup>3</sup> The participant seems to refer to the 1988 earthquake in the area of Spitak, Armenia.

brings to the fore images of the past. These associations point to the construction of the theme of human suffering caused by earthquakes as an interpretative category for a number of different events. At the same time, however, this process of categorization obscures the specificities of particular events.

### **Hurricanes, Earthquakes, and the Banality of Suffering**

In the process of the discursive retelling of the Kashmir earthquake as well as Hurricane Katrina, participants in the focus groups drew upon media images of trauma that seem to have accumulated over time into broader interpretative frameworks to which people resort to make sense of similar events. These discursive frameworks are acquired over a long period of exposure to similar media images and representations and shape understandings of subsequent mediated disasters of a similar nature (Kitzinger, 2000). Events, in this context, become "de-vented" (Silverstone, 2007, p. 62); they somehow lose their uniqueness and become part of a broader discursive framework, falling into "frames that they provide for each other as well as those that, in the media's own imaginary, lie close at hand in the present and popular reservoir of dramatic images" (Silverstone, 2007, p. 63). They are decontextualized from their specificities and become, through a process of osmosis, part of similar mediated narratives (Kitzinger, 2000, p. 76).

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

Mary: They did not show this as much as the tsunami!

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

(Women, in their 20s, working class, Focus Group 7)

The lack of uniqueness or novelty of disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes is employed here as an argumentative strategy to justify the fact that viewers do not remember Hurricane Katrina as easily and vividly as the tsunami in Asia.

By describing hurricanes and earthquakes as "typical" and "ordinary," viewers also construct the suffering that these disasters entail as ordinary, expected, and, ultimately, banal. Cohen describes the "normalization" and "routinization" of suffering as the loss of the potential impact of suffering due to the viewers' familiarity with it and the activation of "the memory trace that 'this is just the sort of thing that's always happening in places like that'" (Cohen, 2001, p. 189). This should not necessarily be translated as the viewers' loss of the sense of conventional definitions of normal and their emotional numbness toward

the suffering of others, as the compassion fatigue thesis implies (Moeller, 1999). Rather, what is at stake here is that particular areas are constructed as more exposed to disasters and the people living there as more vulnerable to trauma, as is evident in the extracts below, in which participants reflect on the Kashmir earthquake:

Vivi: Something that I always think about, when something like this happens, is why it is always that the poor people are hit! . . . the poorest people, the poorest places.

(Woman, age 40, working class, Focus Group 5)

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

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

(Men, in their 20s, working class, Focus Group 9)

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

The events become blurred with media images—the means through which they were supposed to be remembered (Zelizer, 1998, p. 202). These template images provide a contextual framework for viewers to make sense of the events they witness. At the same time, however, they undermine the events they contextualize by conflating the complexity of each individual event into a set of similar images (Zelizer, 1998, p. 226). What is precarious here is audience understanding of the particularities of a given disaster, which, in turn, can allow for a full moral engagement with the situation witnessed. As suffering becomes de-vented, it is evacuated by the dimension of historicity, necessary for understanding the distant other (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 43).

### **Iconic Suffering**

If hurricanes and earthquakes were constructed as banal through the practice of audience remembering, two disasters—the 2004 South Asia tsunami and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—were discussed as exemplary memories of global disasters. The extraordinariness of these events relate to their "novelty," as referred to by participants and in contrast to the "ordinariness" of earthquakes and hurricanes. This also has formed the basis for their appropriation into broader discourses, ultimately constructing them as "iconic events" in public memory. *Iconic* is used here to denote the events that come to mean something more than their individual components and acquire a mythic meaning, representing universal concepts, emotions, and meaning (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 36).

The tsunami and 9/11 were especially remembered and narrated in relation to their coverage, most of which was amateur footage reporting the events as they unfolded. The implications of this mode

of reporting for the audience were twofold. First, due to the use of unedited footage, the events were witnessed in a virtually immediate, intensely emotional way, as if the viewers were present in the scene of suffering. Second, these images were impressionable and dominant in audience discussions because of their spectacular character and, related to this, their novelty. In the following extract, the Indian Ocean tsunami is remembered as an unimaginable spectacle that viewers "had never before seen in their lives":

Tina: In the beginning, although we could see it as an image, I could not comprehend it. . . . Did you also feel this?

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

Simos: It was a show! It was an impressive wave that took everybody away!  
(Woman and man, in their 20s, middle class, Focus Group 1)

The sense of immediacy with the scene of suffering is expressed through the viewer's alleged move to avoid the wave. The emotionally compelling nature of the images of the tsunami disaster is conveyed through the use of the verbs *comprehend* and *feel*. This intense emotional engagement is linked to not only the sensed immediacy of the experience but the extraordinary nature of the event, "a show," its memory based on "impressive" pictorial images.

The September 11 attack on the World Trade Center was also remembered in terms of its media representations, the "images of people burning and falling of the towers" and of the planes hitting the towers. In the following extract, the group is asked to explain why 9/11 was the event that first comes to mind when they think of the concept of "global disasters":

Nikos: It was the most horrifying!

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

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

Sotiris: It was like a film! You see it and you can't believe it! As if it is fake!  
(Men, in their 20s, working class, Focus Group 10)

In terms similar to the tsunami, 9/11 is described as extraordinary, "something that had never happened before," and the attack is again constructed as a "terror spectacle" (Kellner, 2003), a "film."

A main characteristic of the articulation of remembering iconic disasters is the presence of the viewer in the narrative of the events in a way of emotional immersion. The use of affective vocabulary in the above extracts is indicative of this emotional positioning of the viewers. Remembering the disasters becomes an emotional enterprise that focuses on instances of affective intensity rather than a narrative of facts and sequences of events. It is this affective impact that seems to be the triggering point for viewers' recollections of the two events. It is also an element that links the two events in viewers' collective

remembering. They thus escape their individual meaning and become reference points in framing each other and in constituting points of comparison to other instances of suffering.

A particular characteristic of this emotional kind of remembering was the construction of the two events as “flashbulb memories”—a “mixture of personal circumstances and historical events in memory” (Pennebaker & Banasik, 1997, p. 5). Flashbulb memories describe the situation in which viewers not only remember the event itself but can recall their personal situation when they first heard about it. This is best illustrated in the following extract, where the group starts talking about September 11:

Mary: I was sitting exams for college and I was studying with the TV switched on! And while I was reading, I had the TV on, on mute. And I lift my eyes, I see an aeroplane on the TV, I say “what’s going on, are you kidding us?!” I say “OK”, I’m about to start again, I look again, a second one! I drop the books! (laughs) I was shocked!  
(Woman, in her 20s, working class, Focus Group 7)

Similar accounts were given by other participants recalling watching television in the afternoon of September 11, 2001, and suddenly being confronted with the incomprehensible sight of the Twin Towers collapsing. Although not as frequently, the Southeast Asian tsunami was also remembered by some participants as a flashbulb memory, as the quote below describes:

Dimitris: Well, I get into the house—listen to this—I get back home and suddenly I turn around, I hadn’t realized a thing, my sister was also there, and I turn and see the television, there was a huge wave on the screen at that moment, you know, there were people that had recorded the event with a camera, and they were showing this on the news, a huge wave, and I say “What is this?” I didn’t know. . . . First of all, I didn’t even know what “tsunami” meant. (Man, age 27, middle class, Focus Group 8)

The viewers position themselves as in a virtually unmediated relationship with the scene of the suffering. Through the use of temporal references (“while I was reading,” “suddenly I turn around”), the participants describe the spectacle of suffering as “an immediate reality” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 40), as if the events were unfolding in front of their eyes, in a dimension of “instantaneous proximity” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 164).

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

“reflexive contemplation,” by placing themselves within the spectacle of the disaster, by “watching” themselves watching the disaster (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 175).

It is exactly this positioning of the viewer as an immediate witness to the event and, thus, part of a historical context that renders the tsunami and 9/11 iconic in collective remembering. They are events through which viewers engage with and reflect on the global; however, they do this by placing themselves as participants in the events as they unfolded. This gravitation toward the self and the emphasis on the spectacular construct the events as iconic in memory but obscure the moral relationship between the spectator and the sufferer. If, through the normalization of earthquakes and hurricanes as banal in media remembering, understanding is suspended because of the decontextualization of the suffering from its historicity; in iconic disasters, understanding is overwhelmed by intense emotionality and the spectacularity of the events.

### **Cosmopolitan Suffering**

Another disaster was vividly recalled by all focus groups: the 1999 earthquake in Turkey. The earthquake occurred in Izmit, northwestern Turkey, and its death toll rose above 17,000 victims. The geographical proximity to Greece rendered it newsworthy, and its extensive media coverage was accompanied by many aid pledges. The earthquake was followed less than a month later by a strong earthquake in Athens, which, although of a much smaller scale and destructive force, was one of the strongest Greece has experienced in recent history. The subsequent exchange of support between the two countries came to be described by news media as the “Greek-Turkish earthquake diplomacy” (Ker-Lindsay, 2000), symbolic of an apparent overcoming of the mutual hostility between the two neighboring countries.

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

It was remarkably common for participants to turn the discussion to the Izmit earthquake when asked about their memories of the Kashmir one. The extract below is indicative of this tendency:

Do you remember anything about the Pakistan earthquake?

Mary: No! Nothing!

Vicky: Only about the Turkey earthquake!

How come?

Vicky: I don't know . . .

Giota: It sticks more with you because it is a neighboring country, isn't this why?

Vicky: Maybe.

Mary: About the Greeks that went there and helped, and there was talk about Greek-Turkish friendship and stuff.

(Women, in their 20s, working class, Focus Group 7)

Two interrelated reasons can be seen as the basis for this predominance of the Turkish earthquake of 1999 in audience memory. First, due to its geographical proximity, it is described as more relevant and, therefore, more impressionable. Second, the disaster is attributed a symbolic significance, because of the occurrence of the Athens earthquake a short time later and the consecutive media and political discourse on disaster diplomacy between the two countries. Audiences seem to reproduce this discourse in their remembering of the events. As one participant put it:

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

(Woman, age 54, middle class, Focus Group 5)

Unlike the disasters previously discussed, the Turkish earthquake is hardly remembered in terms of visual images of suffering, either in their template format discussed above or in specific visuals and reports, as in the case of the iconic disasters of the tsunami and 9/11. Rather, it seems that the Izmit earthquake of 1999 has become embedded in broader national and political discourses. It is not constructed merely as a disaster but rather as an event of political significance for the national community. At the same time, the earthquake was often referred to as an exemplary case of the compelling nature of mediated suffering and its alleged potential to connect people across geographical and cultural borders under the idea of a common humanity, as is evident in the following extract:

Litsa: I sent help to Turkey, after the earthquake in Turkey.

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

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

Popi: Muslims!

Peni: Turks!

Litsa: They were Turks! I mean, another religion and enemies, so to speak. But I didn't care about that, it didn't affect me. . . . I didn't care at all! The human being felt for the human being without caring about what and who they [the victims] are.

(Women, in their 40s and 50s, working class Focus Group 2)

The Turkish earthquake is constructed as a "landmark" event (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 61) in viewers' collective memory, in the sense that it symbolizes the overcoming of national hostilities and individual prejudices in the face of human pain. At the same time, however, respondents distinctively

position themselves as members of the national community when remembering the disaster. As such, they identify themselves in opposition to the Turkish victims, who are still defined as the "other," as "another religion," as the "enemy" even, to negate the significance of such categorizations when judged against the urgency of human pain. The recognition of boundaries of otherness goes hand-in-hand with the articulation of the discourse of a common humanity, by way of illustration of the "both/and" principle of cosmopolitan experience (Beck, 2006, p. 57), within which "there arises a space of overlapping but incompatible frames of reference and meanings" (Beck, 2002, p. 33).

The national context is used here as the "social framework of memory" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38), within which participants place themselves. The Izmit earthquake is attributed a meaning beyond its nature as a case of distant suffering; it is constructed through remembering as an incident of national significance and, therefore, of more immediate significance for viewers' lifeworlds. It becomes a "critical incident" in collective memory, because it constitutes a moment "by means of which people air, challenge and negotiate their own standards of action" (Zelizer, 1992, p. 4). The Turkish earthquake of 1999 is such a moment, during which audience members negotiate their moral agency vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others, in this case as members of a national community who are asked to overcome traditional hostilities to feel for the "enemy."

In this context, it appears that cosmopolitan connectivity as the reflective engagement with the distant other is only achieved in media remembering through the national framework. In the hierarchy of remembering that has been discussed here, the Turkish earthquake is the only event constructed as a landmark of moral connectivity among spectators and sufferers, where the viewers engage with the unfortunate both as the other and as a fellow human. The recognition of common humanity, in this case, is conditional on national recognition.

### Conclusion

Media remembering, as the discursive reconstruction of viewers' memories of the suffering witnessed through the media, has been illustrated as a complex process at the intersection of the intertwined practices of remembering and forgetting. This process, it has been argued, constructs a moral hierarchy of suffering in collective memory. At the bottom of this hierarchy, many events reported as disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes, are *de-vented* in audience memory and are remembered in terms of media templates that characterize the reporting of similar disasters. In this case, the suffering of others is described as inevitable, expected, and, ultimately, banal. Fewer events are constructed as *iconic* in the practice of remembering. Despite viewers' intense emotional immersion in the scene of the disaster, however, or rather because of it, audience engagement in remembering these disasters shifts emphasis away from the suffering and toward the viewer's own emotions. Finally, the case of the earthquake in Izmit, Turkey, in 1999 tops the moral hierarchy of remembering distant suffering. It was constructed in viewers' memory as a moment of actual *cosmopolitan engagement* with the sufferers, whose otherness is recognized and acknowledged but overcome in the construction of the victims as subjects of moral concern and solidarity.

The moral hierarchy of remembering distant suffering echoes in some respects the hierarchies of place and life in Western media reports of disasters. In a way similar to Chouliaraki's regimes of pity, the "banal remembering" of "ordinary" disasters and the "ecstatic remembering" of iconic disasters gravitate toward the personal emotions of the spectator and ultimately toward the imagination of a communitarian public. It is only in remembering the Turkish earthquake that Greek viewers come closer to a cosmopolitan disposition, where the sufferer is recognized both as other and as a cause for commitment, similar to the category of "emergency news" (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2008). Unlike this typology, however, identification with the Western victims was not the basis for the emotional involvement of the viewer with 9/11 and the Asian tsunami. What constructed these events as iconic was the sense of liveness and unmediated witnessing of the death of others. At the same time, cosmopolitan solidarity toward suffering victims, in this case of the victims of the Izmit earthquake, was expressed through a national framework of remembering. Exploring viewers' memories as an expression of their moral engagement with distant suffering indicates that they reproduce moral hierarchies of place and life similar to the ones constructed by the media, albeit in a non-straightforward way. These hierarchies reflect both predominant types of media reporting and, equally significantly, local and national frameworks of understanding.

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