

## **Building Bridges, Filling Gaps: Toward an Integrative Interdisciplinary and Mixed-Methods Approach for Future Audience Research in Relation to the Mediation of Distant Suffering**

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Based on extensive literature research and 11 expert interviews with academics familiar with the field of audience studies and mediation of distant suffering, this article provides a metadiscussion of the different paradigms and methodologies that can be used for further empirical audience research. It is argued that the “middle-way” paradigms such as critical realism, grounded theory, and pragmatism can productively serve as the basis for a common epistemic language in interdisciplinary research. A mixed-methods approach may serve well for a broad and holistic study of the audience. It is further argued that future empirical research of media users in relation to distant suffering could benefit from an interdisciplinary, mixed-methods approach.

*Keywords: paradigms, interdisciplinary research, mixed methods, audience research, distant suffering, expert interviews*

Within the field of communication sciences the possibilities for doing empirical audience research are seemingly endless. There is a plethora of theoretical and methodological perspectives originating from social sciences and humanities that can be borrowed from and applied to the investigation of audiences. Therefore, audience research has been inspired by disciplines ranging from experimental to social psychology, from cultural anthropology to moral philosophy, and from political science to sociology. In such an interdisciplinary research field as audience studies there is a constant search for compatibility between disciplines to find out how different ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions and perceptions can be mutually inclusive (Chouliaraki, 2015; Wang, 2014). This article uses Höijer’s (2008) description of ontology, which she describes as “the implicit and unproven assumptions about reality, . . . and taken-for-granted assumptions about some social reality” (p. 276). Traditionally, different disciplines can be aligned with different paradigms, each with its own associated ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions about the social nature of society. As Guba and Lincoln

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(2005) and Kuhn (1970) have argued, paradigms such as positivism and social constructivism, located on opposite ends of the paradigmatic scale, can seem to be too different in their basic ontological assumptions to easily reconcile. Of course, in reality, most academic research operates in grayer areas, and these will be discussed in further detail later in this article.

One outcome of these metatheoretical and metamethodological discussions within social sciences is that in the last few decades, a growing number of scholars have developed mixed methods to identify common ground in different academic ontological, epistemological, and methodological traditions by searching for more pragmatic, "middle-way" approaches for a holistic understanding of society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Harvey, 2002). Paradigms such as *grounded theory*, *critical realism*, and *pragmatism*, for instance, all seek to reconcile different methods and basic ontological assumptions (Dobson, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, 2002). The advantage of a mixed-methods approach for audience research is that one can gain qualitative insights about and acknowledge the diversity of media users, while more can be said about trends and regularities in a general, demographically representative population.

The central question to this article is how to further develop the study of audience in relation to distant suffering with the help of multiple disciplines and mixed methods. The reason for placing the study of audience and distant suffering central is that it is a socially relevant and topical issue that has drawn increasing scholarly interest in recent years, but it is in urgent need of more (disciplinary and methodological) reflection about which direction it can go from here. Much has been hypothesized on how media about distant suffering impacts Western media users, but these debates have often taken place on theoretical, ethical, and moral grounds, while others have focused on media content (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Cohen, 2001; Joye, 2010; Moeller, 1999). The last few years have seen a growing body of empirical audience research in relation to distant suffering (Höijer, 2004; Ong, 2015a; Ong, 2015b; Pantti, 2015; Scott, 2014; Seu, 2015). This turn toward empirical data is a clear sign that the subject of audience in relation to distant suffering is maturing into a broad, interdisciplinary field of scholarly interest (Joye, 2013).

So far, however, most empirical research has been of a more qualitative nature. Quantitative knowledge about people's reactions to mediated distant suffering is scarce, and the same goes for the application of mixed-methods designs. Considering the previously mentioned spectrum of different ontological standpoints toward empirical audience research, it is important to reflect on the range of possible paradigmatic approaches and methodological possibilities that could be appropriated for a better understanding of audiences in the face of mediated distant suffering. Therefore, the aim of this article is to (theoretically and methodologically) reflect on the current state of the art of audience research and mediated distant suffering and consider the direction this young body of research can take. This article is directed at academics who are interested in a more general metatheoretical discussion about audience research as well as academics who are interested in studying audience and mediated suffering.

The first part of this article argues that for broad interdisciplinary audience research to work, it is essential not to assume paradigms that might be considered to be on the far ends of the paradigmatic spectrum and instead search for bridges by looking into middle-way paradigms that are more open to

reinterpretation of ontologies and less traditionally aligned with specific methodologies. The second part of this article addresses these issues in the context of audience studies and mediated distant suffering.

### **Expert Interviews**

This article draws on an extensive literature review and on 11 expert interviews with scholars from different disciplines sharing research interests in audiences and/or mediated suffering. Academic experts were asked to reflect on the empirical study of the audience and future directions for the study of the audience in relation to distant suffering (for an overview of the interviewees, see Table 1). To hear a broad range of ideas and opinions while guaranteeing a sound, in-depth discussion of the broader themes and the case study, experts were selected on grounds of their extensive knowledge of the mediation of distant suffering and/or audience research, including a variety with relevant (mixed-) methodological expertise. By questioning researchers who specialize in the mediation of distant suffering as well as experts in audience research, it was possible to gain a better understanding of whether the opinions of the experts differ greatly, or whether there is consensus about how and in what direction future research of audience and distant suffering can develop.

As shown in Table 1, most of the experts interviewed perform qualitative research, and some specialize less in audience studies, which could lead to a biased result in the general discussion. Yet later in the article it becomes apparent that the qualitative researchers who are based outside of audience studies are equally enthusiastic about doing mixed-methods and interdisciplinary audience research. An explanation for this may be similar to the explanations Joye (2013) found during interviews with academic experts in the same field. He found some discomfort among academics working outside their own discipline and methods, and he describes the—sometimes very pragmatic—challenges and risks that make academics cautious about moving outside their disciplines. However, Joye also finds that, despite these risks and challenges, most experts agree that sharing (methodological) knowledge across disciplines is vital for the expansion of the research on mediation of distant suffering and they would do so more easily if not for these risks and challenges.

The scholars were presented with one of their key publications that generally reflects their expertise in their own field of interest (and, if applicable, to the field of mediation of distant suffering). Three main questions were central during the interviews: First, how the experts view the commensurability of different paradigms; second, what they think about the use (and increasing popularity) of mixed-methods and middle-way paradigms in the context of audience research, and, finally, what their ideas are on future research of audiences in relation to mediated distant suffering in light of these metatheoretical, multimethodological developments.

**Table 1. Overview of Interviewees (in Alphabetical Order).**

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Position and affiliation</b>	<b>Date of interview</b>	<b>Key publication</b>
Lilie Chouliaraki	Professor of Media and Communication, London School of Economics and Political Science (UK)	December 9, 2014	Chouliaraki (2006)
Simon Cottle	Professor of Media and Communication, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University (Wales)	December 9, 2014	Cottle (2014)
Suzanne Franks	Professor of Journalism, City University London (UK)	November 13, 2014	Franks (2013)
Maria Kyriakidou	PhD in media and communications, University of East Anglia (UK)	November 15, 2014	Kyriakidou (2014)
Johan Lindell	Lecturer in Cultural Politics, Communications and Media, Karlstad University (Sweden)	November 14, 2014	Lindell (2012)
Kaarina Nikunen	Professor of Journalism, University of Jyväskylä (Finland)	November 13, 2014	Nikunen (2014)
Jonathan Ong	PhD in sociology, University of Leicester (UK)	December 10, 2014	Ong (2015a)

Shani Orgad	Associate Professor of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science (UK)	December 11, 2014	Orgad and Seu (2014)
Kim Schröder	Professor, Department of Communication, Business, and Information Technologies, Roskilde University (Denmark)	December 15, 2014	Schröder, Drotner, Kline, and Murray (2003)
Martin Scott	Lecturer in Media and International Development, University of East Anglia (UK)	December 17, 2014	Scott (2014)
Karin Wahl-Jorgensen	Professor, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University (UK)	December 9, 2014	Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, and Cottle (2012)

*Note.* All interviews were conducted in person, except Schröder's and Scott's, which were conducted via Skype.

### **The (In)commensurability of Different Paradigms**

The first issue that was discussed during the interviews concerned the interdisciplinary and multimethodological nature of audience studies in general. We discussed the diversity of the paradigms in a field that is as interdisciplinary as communication sciences (including, or perhaps *especially*, audience studies). After all, depending on the kind of paradigmatic (and ontological) background(s) one adopts, there are different assumptions about the legitimacy of theories, the unit of analysis (small focus groups or a large unit of analysis with broad surveys), the role of the researcher (i.e., the level of subjectivity or objectivity), and the extent to which any obtained result is generalizable (Höijer, 2008). The methodological consequences of these questions are examined below, after the paradigmatic perspectives are discussed. When there is ambivalence about the paradigmatic perspective and associated theories, the cross-fertilization of different disciplines can become problematic. In a young, growing empirical field such as audience research on mediated distant suffering, similar ambivalences can be considered. For example, is the mainly qualitative nature of current research so far due to the field simply not having arrived yet at

a more quantitative turn? Or is this qualitative road taken because it is believed that the moral and emotional responses of the audience are too complex to be studied by quantitative means?

### ***Classic Paradigms and Middle-Way Paradigms***

Two classic paradigms are *positivism* and *social constructionism*, of which the more radical version of positivism is often presented as the antithesis of the most radical version of social constructionism (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Höijer, 2008). Classic social science disciplines such as sociology and psychology are often (though certainly not always) associated with the positivist paradigm and with quantitative methods and experimental studies (Alise & Teddlie, 2010; Höijer, 2008). On the other hand, the constructivist point of view is more often (though, again, not exclusively) linked with qualitative research and is traditionally aligned with methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups. Disciplines from the humanities are often affiliated with the social constructionist paradigm with its emphasis on uniqueness, ambivalence, and subjectivity (Höijer, 2008). A few decades ago, the incommensurability or incompatibility of these paradigms and their methodological traditions were often discussed (Kuhn, 1970; MacIntyre, 1977), but more recently there has been a growing interest in middle-way paradigms that seek to make different theories from different paradigms compatible while doing interdisciplinary research (Bryman, Becker, & Sempik, 2007; Shannon-Baker, 2015).

One such paradigm is the *critical realist* point of view, which most explicitly advocates an ontological middle ground (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Jensen, 2012). The critical realist paradigm (Bhaskar, 1975, as cited in Harvey, 2002) is seen to integrate the more positivist position of an objective and external level of empirical analysis while recognizing that meaning is constructed by, and embedded within, a social and cultural environment, rendering it still plural and to a certain extent unpredictable (Dobson, 2001; Harvey, 2002). The *grounded theory* perspective advocates the development of theory through posing open-ended research questions with open-ended data. This paradigm applies quantitative *and* qualitative methods to obtain as much data as possible for the further development of theories (Oliver, 2011; Rennie, 2000). Grounded theory, albeit originating from a constructivist tradition, is often seen as a pioneer in bridging seemingly dichotomous ontological and methodological assumptions (Oliver, 2011). A final paradigm worthy of consideration is the more methodological *pragmatic* approach. This paradigm is less concerned with metatheoretical questions and stresses the advantages of mixed-methods approaches (Onwuegbuzie, 2002; Shannon-Baker, 2015).

Because these three paradigms are intermediate on the paradigmatic scale, they often have been combined for research (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005; Schröder et al., 2003; Shannon-Baker, 2015). Oliver (2011) argues for the ontological and methodological integration of grounded theory with the critical realist paradigm. Proctor (1998) underscores the fruitful use of a combined pragmatist and critical realist perspective because they both "admit that all knowledges are partial and a certain degree of relativism is thus unavoidable" (p. 352).

### ***Challenges for Interdisciplinary Research***

While introducing the issue of (in)commensurability during the interviews, most experts were open to the use of multiple methods and the idea of combining different academic perspectives and paradigms in interdisciplinary research. Suzanne Franks summarized the advantage of using multiple perspectives as follows: "You get to cover a lot of ground, and if you are aware of the pitfalls in various areas, I think that it is a very good idea in principle" (personal interview, November 13, 2014). Shani Orgad, who, as a (media) sociologist, has done extensive—mainly qualitative—interdisciplinary research with social psychologist Irene Bruna Seu (e.g., Orgad & Seu, 2014; Seu & Orgad, 2014), noted how she and her colleague could "spot different things in the same pool of data," which resulted in new insights they "perhaps would not have identified otherwise" (personal interview, December 11, 2014). Simon Cottle was also positive about using different perspectives and theories (personal interview, December 9, 2014). He said it would be

foolhardy to simply go about researching audiences informed by only one approach or rooted within only one theoretical framework, because we know that different approaches often have something useful to say and to contribute. They help to sensitize us to the multiple dimensions and complexities involved and can qualify today's unfortunate tendency to overly *theoreticist* research or research that is sometimes willfully blind to discomfiting empirical complexities. (personal interview, December 9, 2014)

The upside of using different perspectives on the same subject can thus be that a more holistic and broad understanding of a subject can be reached.

There are, as Franks rightly noted, potential pitfalls and disadvantages to integrating different disciplines and perspectives in one research design. Orgad noted during the interview that interdisciplinary research should not be "fetishized" for its own sake, because this type of research poses various challenges. For example, she and her colleague could have very different *interpretations* and *priorities* in relation to objects of analysis. What becomes clear from Orgad's comment is that, in contrast with a study within one discipline, there is less clarity as to what the subject of analysis is and *how* it ought to be studied. There is always the problem of not being able to study *everything*. It appears that someone who is doing interdisciplinary research on his/her own would face such challenges even more. As mixed-methods audience researcher Kim Schrøder noted: "There is this constant frustration that you would like to have a firmer footing in the fields that you search into" (personal interview, December 15, 2014). By doing interdisciplinary research, one knows and applies a lot of information—for example, about the many *kinds* of reactions people can have to distant suffering—but the use of so many different perspectives may lead to a superficial knowledge and hence a superficial analysis. One might miss *other kinds* of reactions to distant suffering or have little *explanatory* information.

In addition to the risk of superficial analyses, some approaches may not complement each other and may lead to contradictory and less productive theoretical and methodological frameworks. Jonathan Ong argued: "I would say you need to be very careful and very judicious when you bring different points

of view together, because some of these are not natural bedfellows" (personal interview, December 10, 2014). There are many different motives for study, different outcomes, ethics, or interpretations. In other words, there may be entirely different points of view that are difficult to reconcile. During the same interview, Ong argued that if one aims at reconciling views as different as those of, for example, critical theorists and media effect scholars in one study, one may alienate all instead of build bridges. For example, from a strictly social constructionist approach, it may be difficult to accept a study that shows the general effects of humanitarian broadcasting messages of distant suffering on a general audience: The latter study would measure media *effects*, accept quantitative findings, and generalize these to the greater part of a population and thus ignore the dynamic, unique, diverse, and ambivalent nature of society that a social constructionist assumes. Aiming to bridge such diverging points of view would be futile.

Although there are challenges on the road toward interdisciplinary research, and some different paradigms may be less reconcilable, there are still possibilities. Martin Scott summarized the challenges—and possibilities—of using multiple perspectives accurately when he commented that "no audience research is ideal. There is no perfect answer, there's need for compromises between interdisciplinary, epistemological positions et cetera" (personal interview, December 11, 2014). When Guba and Lincoln (2005) wondered whether elements of paradigms can be brought together in research that "represents the best of both worlds" (p. 201), their answer is "a cautious yes" (p. 201, italics in original), and the interviewed experts echoed this. Such commensurability is, however, only possible with paradigms that share certain traits and assumptions so they "fit comfortably together" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 201). More specifically, to conduct mixed-methods and/or interdisciplinary research about audience reactions to distant suffering, the disciplines and/or methods need to have similar ontological and epistemological assumptions. A grounded theoretical approach can be combined with pragmatic or critical realist approaches, but a classic social constructivist point of view will be difficult to reconcile with a true positivist point of view.

### **The Search for Bridges**

Despite the seemingly incompatible points of view, some approaches are more appropriate for a shared epistemic language in which both qualitative and quantitative traditions can be applied. This is especially interesting since many of the empirical audience studies concerned with mediated distant suffering have been carried out qualitatively, often from a constructivist point of view (e.g., Kyriakidou, 2014; Ong, 2015; Scott, 2014). There are some quantitative studies, too (e.g., Lindell, 2012; McKinley & Fahmy, 2011; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014), but they are far less prominent in the current academic debate (for an overview of the debate, see Joye & von Engelhardt, 2015). One problem of this qualitative direction is that little can be said about viewers' thoughts on distant suffering at a greater, demographically representative scale. Yet one cannot simply study the audience by doing surveys, building on previous research without considering the qualitative—often constructivist—nature of this previous research. In addition, one can wonder whether this qualitative predominance is perhaps a conscious choice because of the morally and emotionally sensitive nature of the topic. Therefore, during the interviews, a second major subject addressed participants' thoughts about the future methodology of



the study of audience and whether future research could benefit from both qualitative *and* quantitative approaches—and, if so, how.

### ***Qualitative and Quantitative Research***

Qualitative and quantitative research have often been presented and discussed in congruence with the mutually exclusive nature of the classic paradigms (Feilzer, 2010). Several issues play a role in this quantitative-versus-qualitative debate, of which three are explicitly put forward here.

First, there is the previously mentioned argument of *incompatibility*. Those who favor quantitative research, with its connotation of a certain claim of truth due to survey- and experiment-related studies, can disagree with the relativist, interpretative theories and methods from constructivist (and qualitative) traditions and vice versa (Feilzer, 2010; Ruddock, 2001). Second, there is the often assumed difference in ontological and epistemological assumptions about the *level of analysis* of research (Della Porta & Keating, 2008; Höijer, 2008). From a positivist point of view if one is interested in how the majority of a population thinks about victims of distant suffering, one can use a large-scale survey. On the other hand, from a constructivist point of view, social behavior is regarded as diverse and ambiguous, and it may not be possible to measure people's diverse, unpredictable and overall complex feelings and reactions toward mediated distant suffering on such a large scale. From this point of view, qualitative research such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic fieldwork are more obvious choices of method. Following from this is a third difficulty—that of *generalizability* (Höijer, 2008). The generalization of survey results assumes a certain level of reliability and validity of a large unit of analysis that, from a strictly constructivist point of view, is impossible to measure since all situations are unique and interdependent of social and cultural context. As Ang (1991, p. 164, as cited in Höijer, 2008, p. 282) asserted: "In a sense, generalizations are necessarily violations to the concrete specificity of all unique micro-situations." Put into context, generalized findings about audiences' reactions to mediated distant suffering are, from a constructionist point of view, a violation—or at least a negligence—of all the diverse and unique ways that people can think about and react to distant suffering.

In reality, the dichotomy of the above discussion is far less apparent, and qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches are generally valued (for an overview of the diversity of approaches and paradigms used in social and behavioral sciences, see Alise & Teddlie, 2010, and in communication sciences, see Bryant & Miron, 2004).

### ***Methodological Bridges***

This article argues that mixed methods can serve as a methodological bridge, able to respond to both the merits and demerits of qualitative and quantitative methods. Quantitative research, such as experiments or surveys can be seen as an artificial—possibly unrealistic—representation of a situation, while qualitative research is difficult to generalize to a greater population (Yardley & Bishop, 2008). A study that combines qualitative and quantitative methods can help to decrease the "artificial" nature of quantitative research by complementing it with qualitative research. Proponents of mixed-methods approaches often emphasize the complementary nature of qualitative and quantitative data and the

similarities between qualitative and quantitative methods (Brannen, 2005; Feilzer, 2010; Omwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). Omwuegbuzie and Leech (2005), for example, point out that “both involve the use of observations to address research questions” (p. 379). Brannen (2005) argues that “both may be concerned with people’s views and actions” (p. 175).

During the interviews, most experts shared a positive opinion about the benefits of mixed-methods research. Indeed, Lillie Chouliaraki noted, “I think it is not only possible to reconcile quantitative and qualitative, I think that sometimes, depending on the research questions, it is also necessary to do so” (personal interview, December 9, 2014). Most believed that the interdisciplinary field inherently calls for a mixed-methods approach, although this would, as Chouliaraki rightly notes, also depend on the *kind* of research questions. The main argument heard from the interviewees was that within interdisciplinary research certain creativity in applying methods from different disciplines is expected and that methodological approaches can be tailored to answer one’s research question in the best and most complete way possible. If someone is interested in general demographic knowledge about, for example, an audience’s donation behavior, and is also interested in in-depth knowledge about people’s motivations to donate, then a mixed-methods approach can serve well.

Some experts suggested a deductive approach to look for trends among a wider audience through a survey, after which specific explanatory questions could be asked during qualitative research. Kaarina Nikunen, for example, stated: “I think that more general data from a survey could afterwards be explored more thoroughly by qualitative studies such as ethnographic fieldwork or in-depth interviews” (personal interview, November 13, 2014). Orgad noted: “If you can produce a quantitative snapshot of the public’s views, the information can indicate general tendencies. Then qualitative research allows you to go in-depth and go into the complexities of these tendencies so as to make sense of these trends” (personal interview, December, 11, 2014). Conversely, Schröder suggested an inductive approach, saying that doing qualitative research first can serve as a way to discover more dominant modes of discourse and a certain vernacular among viewers that afterward could be tested among a broader sample of an audience (personal interview, December 15, 2014).

To be clear, such multimethodological approaches are certainly not seen as the more legitimate methodology for research, nor are the examples of middle-way paradigms unique in their use of mixed methods. The use of mixed methods has been widely celebrated and used across various academic disciplines and paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The point is that when it fits the research question, the use of mixed methods ought to be practiced, and paradigms such as critical realism, grounded theory, or pragmatism can offer an interesting epistemic language by which further methodological bridges can be built.

### ***Theoretical Bridges***

Besides considering methodological bridges, it became evident during the interviews that theoretical frameworks are useful for a better delineation of research and for bridging ontological, epistemological, and methodological divides. Theories often align with specific schools of thought, but they are not necessarily bound to them and can move fluidly and flexibly across the paradigmatic continuum.

Therefore, theories can contribute to the cross-fertilization of different ideas in various areas of research. Chouliaraki noted that different theories can be regarded as “heuristic devices” for the purpose of finding direction in research (personal interview, December 9, 2014). Huiberts and Joye (2015) explain that several theories have been used in this way when they describe that the “construal level theory”—a theory based in social psychology that has been used to analyze social behavior in relation to (psychological) distance and has been applied in both experimental and social psychology—can serve well for learning about people’s relation to the mediation of *distant* events and peoples, including distant suffering. While this theory has been used in experimental studies by psychologists (e.g., Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006), based on positivist traditions, it could be used as a theoretical basis for both qualitative and quantitative studies.

That being said, it is important to keep an open mind and not delineate too much, because that would risk closing oneself off to other (new) possibilities, theories, and hypotheses and results. In addition, singling out one theory and applying it in too many different fields of research can be unfavorable. It can lead to a theory that is stripped from its original meaning. During the interview with Maria Kyriakidou, she used cosmopolitanism to exemplify this:

While a theoretical paradigm such as cosmopolitanism, can be useful as a theoretical framework, it has been used in so many different ways by so many different scholars from different traditions, it is now more critically regarded because the meaning of the concept has become increasingly difficult to pinpoint. (personal interview, November 15, 2014)

There is indeed the risk of theories—in this case, cosmopolitanism—being overused, overdefined in so many ways by so many disciplines, that they can become an empty signifier (for an extended discussion, see Kyriakidou, 2009; Lindell, 2014). Still, the term *cosmopolitanism* has been the subject of academic debate, and this example of a critical yet interdisciplinary academic dialogue can also be celebrated. It shows that borrowing different theories from different schools of thought can lead to an increase in shared academic vocabulary and interest. Thus, theories can keep the interdisciplinary academic dialogue going.

### **Searching for the Gaps**

So far, a rather metatheoretical discussion has been central to this article. It is argued that multiple methods and theories in an interdisciplinary field such as communication sciences, in a context of the softer paradigmatic approaches, can productively provide a holistic understanding of an audience. The third subject that was central during the interviews was how, in light of these metatheoretical discussions, research on audience and mediation of distant suffering can evolve in the future and how we, as academics, can expand our empirical quest. Before discussing the results of this final question, a brief overview of recent developments in the literature concerning audience and the mediation of distant suffering will be given.

### ***Audiences and Distant Suffering***

The study of media users in relation to distant suffering has been inspired by different theories from different disciplines, both from the humanities and social sciences. Kyriakidou (2014), for example, writes about people's "moral hierarchy of remembering" (p. 1474) and uses different concepts from social psychology. Von Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) apply ideas from a moral psychological standpoint in order to gain better empirical understanding of media users. Ong (2014) asks ethical questions regarding mediated distant suffering and proposes the use of mediation theory as a framework for further inquiry.

Lately, criticism has been leveled at the qualitative bias (Huiberts & Joye, 2015; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014). One problem with the predominance of qualitative studies is that they provide little insight into general, structural trends and regularities on a greater scale. In addition, there are calls for more recognition of the diversity of media users; ethnicity, age, religion, and political preference represent but a few aspects that are (as yet) underresearched (Huiberts & Joye, 2015; Ong, 2014). As such, there is a need to take the study of audience in relation to distant suffering out of its mainly qualitative shell and explore how different theories from other, less straightforward disciplines can be used to gain a broader and more integrated understanding of media users. For one, von Engelhardt (2015) draws on concepts from moral (experimental) psychology to expand current empirical knowledge. He does remark that "including experimental designs as well as longitudinal survey studies" can certainly be "thorny endeavors" (p. 705), particularly with regard to handling sensitive topics related to ethical and moral questions.

Chouliaraki (2015) describes the challenges for interdisciplinary research as the "challenge of combining different theoretical and methodological languages in studies on reception of mediated suffering with a view to producing *epistemic gains*," by which she means the "insightful and enhancing re-descriptions of reality, in ways that make a difference to how we perceive and act on the world" (p. 709, italics in original). There is, in other words, the need for a common epistemic *language*—across quantitative and qualitative demarcations—on which further research can be based. This does not mean that all research ought to assume the same ontological, methodological, or epistemological perspectives from one paradigm. Rather, it is important to understand and acknowledge the different ontological languages that exist within different paradigms and find ways to communicate these ontologies and their corresponding paradigms appropriately.

### ***Social and Moral Psychology***

Since 2014, there has been a remarkable rise in disciplinary diversity in the field of audience studies and distant suffering, and more daring empirical ventures for future research on audience and distant suffering have been undertaken (Kyriakidou, 2014; Pantti, 2015; Scott, 2014). During the interviews, a recurring subject was to include moral or social psychological theories for further advancement of the field. Kyriakidou said it will be interesting to see how affective and moral dispositions of people play a role in their social relation with the distant suffering (personal interview, November 15, 2014). Ong, too, underscored interesting findings from a social psychological point of view and opted to explore "these different types of moral reasoning from an anthropological point of view as this allows to observe people in time and different social contexts" (personal interview, December 10, 2014). Recently,

both qualitative in-depth academic endeavors, inspired by ethnographic approaches (Ong, 2015a) *and* quantitative studies (von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014), have already led to interesting new insights and questions. Ong (2015a) used concepts from moral anthropology and social psychology to include the victim in the discussion about mediated distant suffering by conducting ethnographic fieldwork and interviews. Von Engelhardt and Jansz (2014) have inquired into people's sense of moral responsibilities by using a survey that is partly based on social psychological concepts. Moreover, von Engelhardt and Jansz (2015) have argued to introduce the field of moral psychology, and Kyriakidou (2014) discussed the field of discursive social psychology to better explain people's "moral hierarchy of remembering" (p. 1474).

### ***New Media***

Another dominant subject of discussion during the interviews was about including new media—such as social media, user-generated content, and digital news—more, and more thoroughly. Text-oriented researchers and journalism scholars have already explored how new media can play a role in the mediation of distant suffering (e.g., Pantti et al., 2012). Yet empirical audience research has often been preoccupied by audiences in relation with traditional media (Scott, 2014; Seu, 2010), although this is also rapidly changing (Pantti, 2015; Scott, 2015; von Engelhardt & Jansz, 2014). As the field is advancing, so is the interest clearly moving toward the integration of new media into more classic audience research (see also Livingstone, 2004; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2013).

Possibilities on- and off-line in old and new media pose questions about the audience's perspective and perceptions of and reactions to images of distant suffering. Cottle raised questions about the differentiation of different types of media, which can "invite or encourage different responses as well as their interpretations, interactions and overlapping flows in today's more complex media ecology" (personal interview, December 9, 2014). Franks noted that new media can lead to more two-way communication, which could change the role of journalists in reporting disasters (personal interview, November 13, 2014). She continued to say that, because the journalist is now "just as much the receiver as supplier of information," this could change how dominant modes of discourse can develop, including how distant suffering is perceived, framed, and reacted to.

One should be cautious about regarding new media as heralding an entirely new age. When Karin Wahl-Jorgensen talked about the developments of new media and the many possibilities for research of media users, she said to be "cautious not to overstate that" (personal interview, December 9, 2014). She argued that optimistic ideas about the democratization and equal access to information, for example, need to be treated with caution (personal interview, December 9, 2014). Indeed, not everyone has equal access to new media, and even those who have access may not be as influential in their contribution to content as they think (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Goode, 2010). Johan Lindell stated that, "Online media users may be gatekeepers in more or less limited social networks. However, mainstream media tend to remain the dominant source of news" (personal interview, November 14, 2014). Scott, too, was skeptical and warned about optimistic ideas about new media possibilities since one might question whether media users will take advantage of these opportunities (personal interview, December 17, 2014). Whether increased visibility and a greater sense of interconnectedness toward distant suffering leads to more equally perceived responsibility and actions is still the question. Even if media users can be more actively

involved, ethical questions can be raised concerning the reliability and moral considerations of citizen journalists and other user-generated content (Lewis, Kaufhold, & Lasorsa, 2009; Singer & Ashman, 2009).

New media pose many new possibilities and methodologies (e.g., big data, crowd sourcing, social network analysis) for research that leads to new questions about media users, which is beyond the scope of this article (for an overview, see Halfpenny & Procter, 2015). For now, it is stressed that questions need to be raised about the attitudes toward and reactions to viewing of mediated distant suffering in particular and also methodological questions about *how* these issues can be studied. For example, questions might be posed about people's view toward distant suffering in an increasingly interconnected, globalized society or about people's reaction to distant suffering, both off- and online. This constitutes a large gray area that calls for more exploration. Echoing the previous discussion of methodological bridges, Jensen (2012) proposes that the online environment can lend itself to further integrated, complementary methodological approaches. Traditional qualitative research, such as digital ethnographic fieldwork, or telephone interviews could, for example, be complemented by quantitative explorations in the form of surveys (Jensen, 2012). Keeping in mind the previous questions about the audience in the face of (globalized) mediated distant suffering, multiple research questions can be formed and carried out in the context of a more integrated interdisciplinary mixed-methods approach.

#### ***Further Broadening of the Field***

All experts had in common the opinion that the field of research on audience and mediated suffering could benefit by opening up the field of interest entirely. From a grounded-theoretical perspective, an inductive approach is advocated. That is, new theories and hypotheses can be derived from open-ended data, and additional theories and hypothesis can be included in a later stage to either refute existing theories and discussions or expand and complement initial ideas and theories (Oliver, 2011; Rennie, 2000). It was remarkable how this grounded tradition was widely advocated among the experts during the interviews.

Although the experts recognized the value of existing theories and discussions about media users and distant suffering (e.g., the compassion vs. compassion *fatigue* debate, moral or ethical questions regarding cosmopolitanism and solidarity, media discourse of suffering in relation to donation, and audience in relation to new media; see Orgad & Seu, 2014), they also noted that the current field needs further expansion by opening up to new ideas. Wahl-Jorgensen emphasized how especially interdisciplinary research allows this expansion, because it avoids approaching questions within too-distinctive areas of research so that we can "start looking for ways that all of these areas are interlinked in various very significant ways" (personal interview, December 9, 2014).

Interdisciplinary and mixed-methods research could, for example, be conducted by designing a survey that is partly based on results of focus groups (e.g., focused on people's moral and emotional responses to distant suffering, theoretically based in communication sciences) and partly based on a social psychological standardized personality test (e.g., the Moral Foundations Questionnaire designed by Graham et al., 2011). Such a survey would be a tailor-made questionnaire with specific questions about

people's general responses to distant suffering, which can be linked with more general social demographic and (moral) personal traits throughout society.

Another option could be to apply a broadly defined research framework where both new and traditional media are studied in relation to people's moral, ethical dispositions toward distant suffering. Nikunen argued that cultural distance could be taken into account so that suffering closer to home yet culturally distant can be kept in mind (personal interview, November 13, 2014). Lindell suggested that it would be interesting to "study the dialectic relationship between discourse and audiences or citizens, and not confine ourselves epistemologically and methodologically in just one of these realms" (personal interview, November 14, 2014). Chouliaraki (2015) made a similar statement when she wrote about the relationship between media-text and audience: "We still need to insist more on theorizing the interaction between the two" (p. 710).

### **Conclusion**

In interdisciplinary research, including audience research, a wide range of disciplines, theories, and methods inspire and drive research efforts. This article asks questions about how, and to what extent, the plethora of differing points of view are compatible and can be used for further cross-fertilization of disciplines while keeping an eye on the same subject—that of audience and mediated distant suffering. Expert interviews were held to ascertain the level of consensus about interdisciplinary, mixed-methods research and future directions in this area. During the interviews, three developments in the empirical study of the audience dominated the discussion: (1) the inclusion of multiple disciplines from different paradigms in audience research, (2) the advantages and disadvantages of multimethodological approaches, and (3) the possible directions that future research can take.

Experts agreed on a more open-ended paradigmatic empirical approach toward future research. But some experts stressed that interdisciplinary research may, at times, be too superficial in its approaches, only scratching the surface, without specialized, in-depth knowledge. Interdisciplinary research finds itself on thin ice, balancing between superficiality and integration, between alienating and connecting different disciplines. To prevent ambivalence regarding future empirical research about media users in relation to mediated distant suffering, it is important to be aware of the different paradigms with different ontological assumptions and to know what direction future research can take.

Most research on audience and distant suffering has been done qualitatively, which is difficult to apply to a general, demographically representative population. It is argued in this article that middle-way paradigms and mixed-methods approaches can serve as an epistemic and as a practical language by which many additional questions can be explored. These paradigms emphasize the advantages of an ongoing ontological dialogue between disciplines and the search for ontological, methodological, and theoretical bridges.

Whether by an inductive or a deductive approach, most experts agreed that it would be beneficial to integrate theories from different disciplines and use multiple methods in future research of media users and mediated distant suffering. Theories from moral and social psychology recently have already been

integrated. It was noted that future research can be expanded by theories and methods and concepts from various disciplines. One can, for instance, combine qualitative studies that are predominantly based on theories from disciplines in the humanities with a quantitative study inspired by theories and methods from social psychology or sociology. This would lead to results that are applicable on a wider, demographically generalizable scale without ignoring socially constructed, contextual in-depth explanations and results.

During the interviews interesting questions were raised about the role of new media. New media can potentially change the role of the media user and therefore results in new questions about people's relation toward distant suffering. Such changes make demands to be more creative in future research (methodologically and theoretically) even more appropriate and relevant.

The empirical academic exploration of audience related to distant suffering has grown in the past and will expand even more in the future. With middle-way paradigms such as critical realism, grounded theory, and/or pragmatism as background, using mixed-methods approaches and asking open-ended questions, future research can integrate past and future knowledge and clarify much, both at a generalizable level through quantitative studies and in-depth by qualitative studies, and it seems that currently, academics are on the same page about this.

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