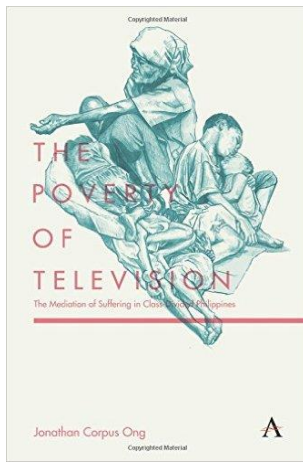


Jonathan Corpus Ong, **The Poverty of Television: The Mediation of Suffering in Class-Divided Philippines**, London, UK: Anthem Press, 2015, 226 pp., \$99 (hardcover).

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Jonathan Corpus Ong's *The Poverty of Television: The Mediation of Suffering in Class-Divided Philippines*, makes an original and important contribution to the field of media ethics and the mediation of suffering. Ong applies ethnographic tools to these fields, the analysis of which heretofore has been based mostly on normative positions and textual analysis. He argues that the study of media ethics in relation to the mediation of suffering must incorporate audience research. Rather than imposing the researcher's position on the morality of various forms of mediating suffering, Ong argues that study of the field must take on board what he calls "lay moralities" which is the "judgments of right or wrong that people make in relation to the media" (p. 15). The audiences' positions in relation to televisual representations of suffering are diverse and sometimes in opposition to common perceptions of media ethics and the mediation of suffering. Thus, Ong calls for a more reflexive approach, which will hopefully nuance our ethical understanding of mediated engagement with suffering.

The book asks, "How do audiences in their different contexts respond to televised suffering?" (p. 8) and identifies class as an explanatory factor in the variation in interpreting mediated suffering. This answer is based on 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Philippine capital of Manila, during which Ong explored audiences' engagement with the media and documented how Filipino audiences participate in the production of televisual representations of poverty and suffering and how they respond to these representations. By conducting ethnographic observations, focus groups, and interviews, Ong was able to discern and probe how audiences respond to various television genres which portray local and global suffering. The decision to conduct fieldwork in the Philippines and to include several television genres allows a fresh and rich understanding of the mediation of suffering from a non-Western perspective. Such a bottom-up exploration fills a yet-untreated gap in the literature, which thus far has focused mostly on Western news.

The book begins with a thorough and well-structured mapping of the moral turn in media scholarship. Chapter 1 explores the debate between different strands of media ethics (relativistic and universalistic; normative and empirical) and situates the study at hand as relevant to all these strands. Following the work of Boltanski (1999), Silverstone (2006), and Chouliaraki (2006), who theorized the educational and moral role of the media in facilitating fair, responsible, and just society in light of distant suffering, Ong makes a compelling proposal to advance this scholarship and introduces lay moralities to this field. In his view, normative ideals about the mediation of suffering need to be contrasted with and

validated according to what laypersons make of such mediated representations. Accordingly, Ong develops an original, bottom-up approach to the study of media ethics. Moreover, so far, the literature on media ethics and the mediation of suffering assumed the perspective of the Western spectator who watches faraway suffering from the safety of the affluent West. In an original dialogue with the literature on media witnessing, Ong contends that in the context of his book, the witness and the sufferer converge, since often the people who watch suffering on television and the people who appear on screen experience similar distress.

Chapter 2 integrates mediation theory and media ethics. This chapter also maps media ethics debates along what Ong calls “key moments of the mediation process”—ecology (media organizations and infrastructure), text, and audiences (p. 40). His argument here is that so far studies have focused mostly on one moment (text), while speculating about audience ethics and ecological ethics. Ong’s study takes a different approach, focusing on both production and audiences. The chapter then introduces the Philippines’ media landscape, which is necessary for understanding the study’s setting.

Chapter 3 is the first empirical chapter, although it opens with additional theoretical discussion, which accommodates the conceptual framework of the mediation of suffering in the Philippine context. The chapter points to the significance of class in responding to witnessing texts and suggests that the dichotomies of danger-safety and regular-exceptional (commonly used in the literature) do not apply in the Philippine context. In other words, the conditions in the Philippines do not fit the prevailing assumptions in the literature about the construction of suffering in space and in time, since poverty and suffering are routinely omnipresent, and therefore, the divisions of “in here” and “out there,” of “ordinary” and “extraordinary” collapse. The chapter gives a first taste of the ethnographic work and introduces the Filipino lay morality of identification and switching off.

Next, the book turns to discuss the engagements with the ethical propositions made by two television genres—entertainment and news. In chapter 4, Ong illustrates his arguments about suffering as entertainment by closely examining audiences’ engagement with the Filipino noontime television show *Wowowee*. Arguably, this television show employs poor people’s conditions to generate folk entertainment. In return for exposing their misery and participating in a talent contest, participants have an opportunity to win money and improve their living conditions. Ong examines the audiences’ views of that program in light of the theoretical debate on agency. His main finding is that people of different socioeconomic classes hold different understandings of what makes “proper” agency and victimhood, with audiences of higher economic status expressing far more stringent standards, while audiences of lower economic status are more accommodating. In addition to the question of whether these noontime shows manipulate and take advantage of their participants’ misery, Ong demonstrates how audiences of lower economic status feel as if their on-screen visibility empowers them.

As for the genre (the news), which often serves as the “usual suspect” for generating compassion (or compassion fatigue), here, too, Ong finds that economic class is an important factor in interpreting news about suffering. The poor understand it as a form of engagement with a larger (imagined) community of sufferers, while more well-to-do audiences understand news as something about a reality which is strange and unfamiliar. Audiences of higher economic status prefer to turn to other news sources

for information (such as the Internet) and as in the case of entertainment, they escape emotional engagement with sufferers. Audiences with less money, on the other hand, identify with distant sufferers and feel as if "this could have been me." Audiences of all classes, however, find justifications for why they should not do anything in response to the suffering they encounter on television.

The concluding chapter returns to the theoretical frameworks underlying this study. Drawing on his ethnographic fieldwork, Ong argues for the importance of studying audiences who actually live in conditions of poverty and interact with suffering as a corporeal, rather than a symbolic reality. Accordingly, Ong calls for a better integration of their perspectives into the study of the mediation of suffering. Indeed, the findings allow a better and more grounded understanding of which media texts invite moral judgment in each socioeconomic group. Ong's findings also challenge the prevailing perceptions of audiences' willingness to engage with representations of suffering and how different television genres facilitate different moral engagements. Notably, in the context of poorer Filipinos, entertainment is not a form of escapism. Rather, it is a manifestation of agency. These findings need to be taken into consideration by researchers who engage in textual analysis of representations of suffering, as they expand the possible interpretations of such texts. Thus, the book encourages reflexivity in relation to the position of the researcher and a more careful analysis of representations of suffering. It also encourages us to be more sensitive to the work that witnessing texts manage or do not manage to do.

Lastly, the book touches on two theoretical issues which may require further exploration. Toward the end of the book Ong returns to the question of cosmopolitanism and the media as a moral space. He admits that he "began this research with an interest in cosmopolitanism as a framework to understand audiences' moral obligations to their mediated others" (p. 159). However, his findings question the ability of mediation to facilitate cosmopolitan solidarity. In fact, his findings suggest that, at least in the Philippine context, the mediation of suffering fails to cultivate solidarity beyond one's class. The wealthier audiences he studies "turn a blind eye" (p. 162) to the suffering of others and are careless about the others' conditions. The poorer audiences consider themselves as unable to take responsibility for others' suffering due to their own deprivation. Thus, Ong shows how representations of suffering actually work to facilitate disintegration or indifference and do not manage to recruit audiences to be in solidarity with distant (or proximate) others on the basis of common humanity. Arguably, this is an example of a hyper-communitarian outlook, which fosters solidarity with a narrowly bounded community of the alike, whose members do not seem to care about people beyond their own class, even when they all belong to the same national community.

As for mediation and ecological ethics, Ong mentions the failure of the Philippine state to care for its citizens and argues that media organizations fill this vacuum by playing a role in improving the living conditions of citizens. Ong acknowledges the debate on mediation vs. mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Hepp, Hjarvard, & Lundby, 2015) and chooses to side with mediation. However, I believe the interrelationships of state-citizens-media in the Philippine context are, in fact, a suitable opportunity to consider the application of mediatization theory (Hjarvard, 2008). As the media play an active and prominent role in the wellbeing of Philippine citizens and as citizens adhere to what they understand as the media logic, this case study calls for a closer examination of the media's role in facilitating social processes and providing moral orientation.

In any case, Ong's bottom-up approach for the study of non-Western audiences' engagement with mediated suffering in the Philippines opens new horizons for understanding the role(s) of the media in facilitating moral and social processes. These important insights make a significant and compelling contribution to the field, which must inspire future studies, whether they focus on text, audiences, or media ecology.

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