

## Suffering Up Close: The Strategic Construction of Mediated Suffering on Al Jazeera English

TINE USTAD FIGENSCHOU  
University of Oslo

With national Western media as a point of departure, the literature on distant suffering emphasizes the geographical, cultural, and editorial distance between Western media professionals and viewers, and between both of those groups and the stories of suffering in the rest of the world. Through examples from the Qatari satellite channel Al Jazeera English, this article argues that mediated suffering can also be understood as something close to us. The channel literally goes closer and zooms in, exposes, personalizes, and authorizes the experience of suffering in conflicts and disasters. This construction of mediated closeness is suited to engendering strong feelings of compassion in media audiences, but it also serves to raise new ethical dilemmas in political argument and institutional strategy.

“Every death has a story and I am going to tell a few of them now.” The sharply dressed news anchor stands in front of a massive black studio installation. It is January 15, 2009, during the war between Israeli forces and Hamas on the Gaza Strip. On Al Jazeera English’s black interactive video wall, the channel shows 210 of the names of identified Gaza children killed in the war. Their names are written in white on a black funereal background (see Figure 1). The news anchor, Kamahl Santamaria, walks slowly along the video wall and gives brief biographical backgrounds of some of the dead children. He says:

Dena Balosha—just four years old when she was killed in her bed along with her four sisters in Jabaliya. Come with me and we’ll have a look at some other ones, two names, same surname—Lama Hamdan and Haya Hamdan—four and 12 years old; they died as they took out the rubbish near their home in Beith Hanoun. Ismail Hamdan, age 11 died two days later. And Fares Hammoudeh, only two years old; he died in his mother’s arms during the shelling of their house in Gaza City. There are lots of names there on the video wall—210 of the 300 children who have died in this conflict. Many have seen their parents and siblings die before their own eyes, but for those who’ve survived Israel’s onslaught, the emotional scars of what they’ve witnessed may never leave them. (Santamaria, *NewsHour* 18.00 GMT, January 15 2009, Al Jazeera English)

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Tine Ustad Figenschou: [tineuf@media.uio.no](mailto:tineuf@media.uio.no)

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Figure 1. News Anchor Kamahl Santamaria in front of the interactive video showing 210 of the names of identified Gaza children killed in the January 2009 war. Source: NewsHour 18.00 GMT, January 15 2009, Al Jazeera English.

In this article, I discuss and problematize the existing academic literature on distant suffering and mediated witnessing. The eloquent works of Boltanski (1999), Chouliaraki (2006), Frosh & Pinchevski (2009), Kitch & Hume (2008), Sontag (1977, 2003), Robertson (2010), Zelizer (1998), and others have provided insights into the media coverage of atrocities, suffering, and death. They probe into issues of the spectatorship of mediated suffering, and how media professionals and their audiences perceive these descriptions and visualizations of inconceivable pain. With Western media as a point of departure, these contributions tend to emphasize the geographical, cultural, and editorial distance between the media professionals and viewers in the West, and the stories of suffering in the rest of the world.

However, this literature also speaks of a potential for compassion in mediated representation, provided that the media change their narratives of distant deaths and crises, but this potential is not explored in much detail. The tradition of critical analysis of mainstream Western media is timely and important, but it has not reflected much on how other media cover civilian suffering. There has been a strong call for studies of mediated suffering on non-Western media [see among others Chouliaraki (2008), Hanusch (2010, pp. 168–171), Robertson (2010, p. 142)]. This article aims to address this lacuna by

using examples from two Al Jazeera English stories of mediated suffering. By looking beyond the Western media, I argue that mediated suffering can also be constructed as something *close to us*, rather than as something distant. This construction of closeness, I argue, may engender strong feelings of compassion in media audiences, but it also serves to raise new ethical dilemmas in political argument and institutional strategy.

### The New Visibility

According to Sontag, being a “spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century-and-a-half’s worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists” (2003, p. 16), The moral and political implications of being a spectator of the mediated suffering of others are analyzed thoroughly in the literature on distant suffering (see Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Ellis, 2002; Robertson, 2010). Numerous scholars have documented that the news media tend to focus more on civilian populations as victims of conflict and war than ever before (Höijer, 2004; Sontag, 2003; Zelizer, 1998), and that the understanding of armed conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes among people who have not experienced such crisis themselves is now chiefly a product of these media images (Chouliaraki, 2006; Höijer, 2004; Moeller, 1999; Sontag, 2003; Robertson, 2010). Through the media, and particularly through television images, the public has become aware of the sufferings of remote others and are challenged to include these strangers in their moral conscience. Consequently, a discourse of global compassion has developed in the intersection of politics, humanitarian organizations, the media, and the audience/citizens (Höijer, 2004).

There has been an unprecedented growth of satellite channels since the mid 1990s. The number of regional and international satellite channels that predominantly broadcast news has grown to more than 100 (Hafez, 2007; Painter, 2008; Rai & Cottle, 2007; Wessler & Adolphsen, 2008). Moreover, national governments have (re)entered international satellite news broadcasting and consequently many of those newer satellite news channels maintain a distinct editorial perspective on international affairs that reflects the interests of their government owners/sponsors (Figenschou, 2010). This intensification, diversity, and complexity of the contemporary global news media have contributed to an increased transnational awareness of “other” news stories. Today, the constant flow of images of distant suffering, e.g., genocide, famine, and absolute poverty, have produced what Thompson (2005) characterizes as a “new visibility.” Ellis (2002) illustrates the consequences and limitations of witnessing in the following quote:

Only in the second half of the century did commentators begin to explore its specific nature, which allows us to experience events at a distance, safe but also powerless, able to over-look but under-act. And, further, we are now able to understand how witness brings us into a complicity with those events: “We cannot say we did not know.” (Ellis, p. 15)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A growing number of academic works offer complex analysis of the act of witnessing and media witnessing. See among others the works of Ellis (2000); Frosh & Pinchevski (Eds., 2009); Peters (2001); Zelizer (1998, 2007).

### The "Economy" of Mediated Distance and Proximity

"Confronting Western spectators with distant suffering is often regarded as the very essence of the power of television," writes Chouliaraki (2006, p. 18), referring to a Western-centric perspective in the literature on distant suffering. From this perspective, the literature has identified and analyzed the "economy of witnessing" (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2009). While there should be no social boundaries for qualifying as a victim worthy of help, many never qualify as "worthy victims" in international politics and media (Höijer, 2004, p. 516). The literature on mediated-suffering documents a culturally constructed global hierarchy of civilian suffering, as the media give preference to certain victims over others. The news media do not primarily follow what Cohen (2001, pp. 170–171) has labeled "the principle of correspondence," because media attention is not rationally and objectively governed by the scale and seriousness of events (Chouliaraki, 2006; 2009; Cohen, 2001; Hanusch, 2008). The criteria of selection are extrinsic to the events' seriousness, following patterns deriving from the context (geopolitical interest, ideological affiliation, social and geographical distance) and the assumed newsworthiness of the event itself (Cohen, p. 171).

Deconstructing this political economy of mediated suffering is one of the key contributions of the current literature in the field. The literature is expanding the early insights on news determinants, such as Galtung and Ruge's (1965) article *The Structure of Foreign News*. Galtung and Ruge discuss the extent to which elite nations, elite people, personification, and negative events (crisis news or media spectacle) influence the determination of which stories become news and which are ignored. They argue that news from nations that are culturally distant and perceived as having a low international status need to personify and preferably be negative and unexpected, but nevertheless should conform to a pattern that is consistent with an audience's "mental pre-image" in order to qualify as newsworthy (p. 84). As a consequence, they found that news from more distant (peripheral/Southern) nations had to be event-based and simply presented so that the audience had something with which it could identify. Thus, over a period of time, it would facilitate an image of these nations as "dangerous, ruled by capricious elites, as unchanging in their basic characteristics, as existing for the benefit of the top-dog nations and in terms of their links to those nations." (ibid.)

All news reports are subject to a process of selection and symbolic particularization that defines whose suffering matters most to the audience, thus highlighting civilian victims who are perceived to be culturally proximate to the audience (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 187). In the contemporary global information landscape, where the Anglo-American mainstream news media remain the most influential, this implies a systematic emphasis on Western civilians (Chouliaraki, 2006; Hanusch, 2008; Moeller, 1999). Considering media professionals' news values in relation to nationality, it appears that home-country victims and death are considered extremely important. There also seems to be a further distinction between victims from culturally proximate countries and those from distant countries (Hanusch, 2008, p. 349). Moreover, violent deaths, accidents, and natural disasters are reported more frequently than other, slower causes of death (p. 346). Consequently, to "qualify" as newsworthy in the major Western media, victims in the Global South have to reassert their closeness to or relevance to a Western center, and/or offer a media-friendly, sensational story with dramatic visualizations of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 144). On

a sociocultural level, children, women, and elderly people are often seen as helpless in violent situations and humanitarian catastrophes (Moeller, 1999, p. 107), although there are cultural and historical variations in the victim status of women (Höijer, 2004, p. 517). Due to their need for protection, women and children are often accorded a more prominent position in news coverage.

The mediation of suffering has become more hierarchical in mainstream Western media as the economic downturn has accelerated changes in the news economy (Hamilton, 2010). Under the mandate of their corporate owners, many media professionals favor local stories over national and international ones to boost local readership/viewers and advertising (Ricchiardi, 2008a,b), reflecting the broader trend of news domestication (Clausen, 2003; Moeller, 1999). Within this business model of journalism, the cost of maintaining a global presence is perceived as exorbitant and the news nets of major mainstream Western media are shrinking. Particularly, the foreign correspondent sent abroad for a prolonged period, with the resulting expertise in the local language, culture, history, and customs, is a “vanishing breed,” substituted for by “parachute correspondents” and local stringers (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004; Hamilton, 2010). Where the mainstream media choose to post full-time correspondents reflects global power structures, and those regions and countries outside the news net remain underreported (Moeller, 1999, p. 26). This shrinking global presence also influences journalistic practices, and international reporting has been criticized for becoming standardized and generic, both because of parachute reporters who are reporting from the ground, and even more so because of “voiceover” journalism, where correspondents located at the nearest media hub or headquarters narrate other media’s videos (Moeller, p. 27).

By widening the perspective and including the new non-Western media, the distance and closeness to the mediated suffering will change. After all, the geographical and cultural distance or proximity to the events on the ground will naturally change according to the where we are in the world. For example, U.S. and Arab media have diverging perspectives on the war in Iraq and thus emphasize different humanitarian stories from that conflict. U.S. media are likely to focus on the hardships of American soldiers in Iraq, whereas Arab media concentrate more on the voices of the Iraqi civilian population. The geographical and cultural distance that characterizes both the literature on mediated suffering and Western mainstream media coverage of suffering outside the West is not universal. There are alternative editorial strategies for covering civilian suffering: Audiences outside the Western world may interpret images of suffering differently, while the Western politics of mediated suffering may be challenged in non-Western media.

### **Mediated “Closeness”**

Like the phenomenon of distant suffering, suffering up close is a complex phenomenon. Provisionally, the effect of proximity to suffering can be seen as achieved by the combination of two sets of conventions: *exposure*, achieved particularly via visuals and close-ups, and *individualization*, achieved particularly via various narrative techniques. Exposure in itself may not be sufficient to bring mediated suffering closer to the viewer. Thus other editorial techniques are employed to counter the distance between viewer and victim—such as emphasizing the victim’s agency, the juxtaposition between the mundane and the atrocious and giving the victim a voice that arguably construct mediated closeness.

To illustrate the argument, two stories broadcast on Al Jazeera English were selected, firstly because Al Jazeera has often been highlighted as a counterbalance to the sanitized, ethnocentric Western media, and secondly, because the two stories provide rich and relatively diverse cases.<sup>2</sup>

The first example, a story about traumatized and hospitalized Palestinian children during the war in Gaza involves extensive exposure via close-ups, particularly of children's suffering (see Figure 2).

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<sup>2</sup> They are not meant to be empirically generalizable and the account of them in this article does not constitute a textual analysis proper. Some more limited points are made in order to illustrate the article's conceptual main argument.



Figure 2. News report interviewing the traumatized children in Gaza's hospitals (Example one). Source: NewsHour 18.00 GMT, January 15 2009, Al Jazeera English.

During the Israeli operation "Cast Lead" between December 27, 2008, and January 18, 2009, a total of 1,400 Palestinians were killed in attacks by Israeli forces<sup>3</sup>. In this report, the constructed closeness comes primarily from the authentic documentation of the chaos in a Gaza hospital: It's noisy. We witness a series of harrowing images of wounded children, desperate relatives and helpless medical staff crowding the screen. The filming also contributes to the perceived closeness as the camera zooms in; sometimes it is shaky, the images are chaotic, and the camera moves quickly from one scene of suffering to the other. As viewers, we are made to feel as if we are present, witnessing the pain and confusion as well as the lack of adults who are able to protect the children, further reinforcing our compassion for them. There is a noticeable absence of any authoritative, omnipresent voiceover citing elite sources to buffer the impact of the suffering of these children. In contrast to most humanitarian crises coverage, here the children are not silent; they are allowed to speak for themselves and describe their own situation.

The other example illustrates editorial closeness as individualization via narrative. In contrast to the chaos in the Gaza hospitals, the report from the Sichuan earthquake is narrated in a calm, almost poetic style. The massive earthquake in the Sichuan province of China on May 12, 2008, killed at least 68,000 people, with many children among the dead<sup>4</sup>. The earthquake deprived thousands of small Chinese families of their only child. The report gives a personal portrait of two such parents, the Zhaos, as they prepare to bury their only son, Zhao Ji. The story is told according a classical narrative structure with a distinct and rounded storyline: The primary story line is the grieving parents' preparation for the funeral, and the report ends with their final farewell by their son's grave. A second story line, embedded in the first, is the father Zhao Xing Hua's personal description of the dramatic event — how he tried to rescue Zhao Ji from under the heavy debris, how he dug with his bare hands and found his son trapped in the ruins, what they talked about while his son was still alive, and eventually how Zhao Ji died, still trapped (see Figure 3).

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<sup>3</sup>In addition, some 5,000 Palestinians were injured, many maimed for life. Hundreds of those killed were unarmed civilians, including some 300 children, more than 115 women and some 85 men over the age of 50. Casualty figures are highly disputed. These numbers are provided by Amnesty International's (2009) report from the war.

<sup>4</sup>Thousands of school children were buried in the ruins, the official number of dead children never given. In the aftermath of the catastrophe, Chinese authorities have harassed and arrested human rights activists and journalists questioning the quality of the construction of the schools (Reporters Without Borders, 2009).





Figure 3. A personal portrait of two grieving parents who lost their only child in the Sichuan earthquake (Example 2). Source: NewsHour 18.00 GMT, May 18 2008, Al Jazeera English.

### Politicizing Civilian Suffering: The Exposure of the Victim's Pain

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag writes about the affective power of war photography: "Look, the photographs say, *this* is what it's like. This is what war *does*. And *that*, that is what it does, too. War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War ruins" (p. 7). A paradox of the contemporary Western mediation of suffering is the tendency toward more sanitized visualizations of international conflicts and a creeping visual conservatism in the Western media<sup>5</sup> (Griffin, 2004; Hanusch, 2010; Kennedy, 2008; Kitch & Hume, 2008; Robertson, 2004; Zelizer, 1998).

Although there is a plethora of graphic images available today depicting pain, suffering, and death, and more such images in the media than ever, Western mainstream media still attempts to conceal the painful realities of death.

The restrictions and limitations on what journalists capture on camera and what editors will show to the public are constantly negotiated while news producers and photo editors make decisions every day that shore up the wavering consensus about the boundaries of "good taste" (Sontag, 2003, p. 61). To media professionals, sensitivity toward the local audience and its advertisers constitutes an argument against airing a story's most graphic images. Also, ethical dilemmas over exposing private pain publicly, especially the pain of subjects closer to home, have made the Western media more discreet (Hanusch, 2010; Robertson, 2004; Sontag, 2003). Whereas the naked faces of Western victims have been covered or censored throughout the history of war photography, the Western media are more likely to publish full frontal views of the dead and dying in culturally distant and exotic places (Sontag, p. 63). On one hand, documenting and exposing the pain of others is an important reminder of the realities of life and death. On the other hand, although the exposure of the pain of ordinary people may evoke intimacy, the close-up also positions them as less powerful (Graddol, 1994, p. 146). Moreover, repeated formulaic close-ups of suffering may leave the viewer numb and apathetic (Moeller, 1999). Further, in the contemporary global media landscape, images can potentially travel faster and further than before, and the families of "distant" victims may be potential audiences.

The visual conservatism among American viewers and media professionals has been well documented in the literature of mediated human suffering, but it is unclear and under-researched whether other audiences share the same view. The limited empirical audience studies on graphic visuals indicate that viewers around the world may not share the American understanding of "good taste." In the survey of audience perceptions among Al Jazeera Arabic viewers, Fahmy and Johnson (2007) found overwhelming

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<sup>5</sup> After World War II, war has gone largely from being seen as a glorious and heroic pursuit to an evil of varying necessity, and with the changing perception of war comes new standards for visualizing atrocity (Zelizer, 1998, p. 211). Although the overall perception of warfare may have changed, the visual representation of war has varied from the graphic and close visualization of the war in Vietnam to the clean and aseptic visual representation of the Falklands War (1982) and the Persian Gulf War (1990–1991) (Zelizer 1998). Particularly in the ongoing "war on terror," the U.S. media have been less likely to publish graphic images than would have been the case 10, 20, or 30 years ago (Griffin, 2004; Kennedy, 2009; Robertson, 2004).

support for the channel's editorial policy of broadcasting graphic images. Nearly 9 in 10 supported the channel's use of graphic visuals, and in hindsight a similar percentage agreed that watching the graphic visuals from the Iraq war and the Palestinian/Israeli conflict was the right decision for them (p. 258). The study found that viewers wanted the channel to air graphic images showing the ugliness of war because they perceived the suffering to be part of the full and complete coverage. To them, the problem was not the sensationalism of the graphic images, but the act of atrocity and violence in the ongoing conflicts in the Arab world (p. 259). Fahmy and Johnson's study thus demonstrates that the exposure of suffering is politicized, and that the tolerance for close-ups of civilian suffering may be politically motivated. By emphasizing the sanitization of war images in Western media, the literature on mediated suffering largely neglects the politically inflected exposure of civilian victims presented in other media.

In her studies of audience compassion, Höjjer (2004, p. 521) finds that the visualization of the suffering is imperative and that compassion is dependent on visuals, as documentary pictures become evidence of suffering (p. 520). Secondly, Höjjer documents that the viewer's perception of the victim as helpless and innocent is a condition for being moved. In the literature on mediated suffering, the perceived graphic visual profile on Al Jazeera Arabic has been highlighted as a contrast to the bloodless Western television screens, and the visual exposure of suffering and death thus serves as a natural starting point for the present discussion about mediated "closeness."

The ugly face of war is exposed in all its horror in the Gaza report, zooming in on the devastated faces of wounded children and hearing their childlike, straightforward explanations of how they were hit and how their relatives died. The chaotic scenes outside and inside the Gaza hospitals open with diegetic sounds of desperate shouting and crying over dramatic background music. Throughout the Gaza report, we see images of more than 20 different dead or wounded children, four of them speaking on camera. The children are given a chance to tell the distant viewers about their situation, and the camera zooms in on their faces as they do so. However, their answers are brief and we do not meet them outside the hospital or in roles other than that of idealized victims (Højjer, 2004; Liebes, 1997). The first child talking to the camera, a boy about 10 years old, is closing his eyes in pain. Through tears and clenched teeth, he mumbles, "My brother was bleeding so much, and right in front of my eyes he died. My other brother Ismail also bled to death. My mother and my youngest brother, they are gone. Four brothers and my mother . . . dead."

The report consists of a number of brief interviews with other hospitalized children, cross-edited with close-ups of infants on the operating table, dead children on the floor being covered with blankets, hectic attempts to resuscitate a lifeless little body, desolate mute children and distressed adult relatives looking up in despair. The wounded children are eyewitnesses to gruesome atrocities against themselves and their family members. A girl with neat curls is being interviewed from her hospital bed. Appearing to be three or four years old, she describes, in a childish, matter-of-fact narrative, how she was shot: "I saw the soldier next to the shop. I looked for my mom. Then he shot me. One bullet hit my hand and the other went through my back and out of my stomach." It is deeply disturbing to see innocent toddlers describe the atrocities they experience in such a mundane tone, and their engagement with the camera and their voices convey a strong appeal to the audience.

Drawing partly on the aesthetics of raw documentary, the affective power of the Gaza report comes primarily from the authentic depiction of the chaos in the hospital: the images of wounded children, desperate relatives and helpless medical staff. The lack of an authoritative voiceover and elite sources puts the suffering of these children in the face of the viewer. The report is narrated from what Graddol (1994, p. 145) has labelled the “naturalist” tradition of television news, inviting the viewer to directly experience the situation: “From the naturalist perspective, a news report provides vicarious experience, an image of the world as we might expect to experience if we were to stand where the reporter stands” (ibid.). The camera angles, the noise, and the children speaking directly to us, pull us into the dramatic scenes in the hospital. The naturalist perspective is considered a powerful ideological tool because it gives a closer, more subjective view of the events, in contrast to the realist perspective in news, which stresses objectivity, distance and difference (Robertson, 2010, p. 28). The children are thus exposed as the most idealized victims of the Gaza war, whereas elite sources such as involved experts and adults—for example Palestinian parents, medical staff, politicians, NGOs and Palestinian armed groups—are conspicuously absent from the report. Likewise, the Israeli authorities identified as the perpetrators in the introduction to the report appear nowhere in this story. A strong political subtext is thus constructed for this representation of the suffering of children—they are the innocent victims of the Israeli war machine. Their pain and sorrows are exposed to document Palestinian suffering and struggle, and this politicization of suffering will be discussed in more detail in the conclusion.

In the following sections, I will demonstrate some of the other narrative techniques employed in the two stories to bring the suffering “closer to us.”

### **Agency: The Victim as an Active, Sovereign Subject**

It seems reasonable to say that a degree of individualization in mediated portrayal carries with it the promise of agency, of coming across as an active and sovereign subject. However, agency may vary even when actors are individualized in the news. In her book *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, Chouliaraki (2006) offers an analytical framework on how television texts shape the agency of spectators by establishing local relationships of pity between spectators and sufferers. Addressing how power works in global television, she asks how television texts participate in the production of hierarchies of suffering (Chouliaraki, p. 61).<sup>6</sup> Chouliaraki distinguishes between three news formats representing different ethical demands on spectators, and offering the sufferers different levels of agency.

The first category of news, labelled by Chouliaraki as “adventure news,” consists of random and isolated events that fail to make an ethical demand on spectators to respond to the suffering. Adventure news is characterized by simple multimodality (descriptive narratives that only register “facts”), singular space-time (the events are presented as a random singularity without benefactors and persecutors), and a lack of agency (the sufferers are annihilated and dehumanized) (Chouliaraki, p. 98).

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<sup>6</sup> She proposes a multimodal content analysis, including the mode of presentation of the news text, the correspondence between verbal narrative and image in the news text, and the aesthetic quality of the news text (see Chouliaraki, 2006, pp. 74-94 for a detailed presentation of the analytical framework).

The second category, “emergency news,” includes visually and verbally complicated narratives with increasing degrees of affective power; chronotopes (concrete, specific, multiple, and mobile space-time that contextualize the suffering and offer the sufferers a frame of action); and conditional agency (active and personalized sufferers, with a limited agency and call for immediate external intervention) (Chouliaraki, pp. 118–119).

The third format, “ecstatic news” is identified in cases of live news when the sufferers are represented as sovereign agents acting on their own suffering and in a relationship of reflexive identification between the sufferers and the spectators (Chouliaraki, p. 157). Sovereign agency here means constructing each actor in the scene of suffering as a thoroughly humanized and historical being, someone who feels, reflects and acts on his or her fate (pp. 158–159). The construction of the sufferer as a sovereign being is instrumental in achieving a relationship of reflexive identification between the distant sufferer and the spectator (p. 159). In Chouliaraki’s book, the ecstatic news category is illustrated through the complex, extraordinary live coverage of 9/11. Indirectly, this suggests that victims are portrayed as sovereign human beings primarily in extraordinary global media events like the terrorist attacks on America in 2001. Consequently, from her examples, victims portrayed with sovereign agency are presented as rare exceptions in the daily news flow. Also, agency is activated only when “the West is witnessing the West suffer” (p. 160). In later works, however, Chouliaraki (2008) finds initial evidence of satellite news stories that produce a sense of moral agency that transcends the West, through the citizen-generated content from the 2007 anti-government demonstrations in Burma.

In non-Western, nonmainstream media, the mediated suffering of others is individualized through a number of editorial techniques within the regular news formats. The Al Jazeera English report from Sichuan illustrates how a news report from a natural disaster on a massive scale is put into focus via three people and a funeral. We first meet the main actor in the story, Zhao Xing Hua, the grieving father, as he is digging through the ruins of what was once his house. He has lost his home, his business, and his 11-year-old son, Zhao Ji. He is turning every piece of debris to find what is left of the boy’s belongings to burn in the funeral rites. He is filmed digging, and the voiceover (narrated by correspondent Melissa Chan) explains what he is doing. Then he is interviewed on camera, recalling his traumatic last days and his desperate efforts to save his son: “I ran straight away to the school. The whole thing had collapsed. I cannot describe to you how it was. Children screaming, ‘Please help me! Help me!’ But I needed to help my son. I couldn’t lift any of the debris; I managed a bit and a bunch of children were able to escape. Then I got to my son, but I couldn’t get him.” After three days, he found his son, but he could not extricate him from the ruins. Had rescue workers brought heavy equipment in to lift the debris, more children would have survived, but they lacked the resources. Mr. Zhao looks into the camera and describes the moment Zhao Ji gave up: “He told me, ‘Daddy, I’m hungry,’ and then he died.” He bursts into tears and the camera zooms in on his eyes. In the next shot, he is filmed in profile, lying on his back. Smoking and suffering in silence, he looks somewhat like a brooding movie star.

We do not see any bodies in the Sichuan report, in contrast to the chaotic, bloodstained images most often associated with Al Jazeera. On the contrary, the story is filled with the absence of little Zhao Ji, the idealized victim. He is gone and his parents are in immense pain. In all his despair, the main actor in

the report, Mr. Zhao, is still portrayed with sovereign agency as a thoroughly humanized rational individual who feels, reflects, and acts on his fate. For instance, the report communicates his decision to have the family stay in his hometown because "people elsewhere would not understand his pain." Mr. Zhao comes across as a man who did everything in his power to protect his family and meet the extreme demands of the earthquake situation. His pain is exposed in a series of close-ups. He saved other children, dug through the rubble for three days; he lost everything. Yet he carries on, and we follow him as he is preparing his last goodbye and the ritual passing of his son on to the afterworld on the third day of mourning. Mrs. Zhao, on the other hand, is silent throughout the story. Always at her husband's side, she sits next to him when he is interviewed. She takes an active part in the preparations and the funeral ritual, but the only sound we hear from her is sorrowful moaning. Here, the extent of individualization seems to be gendered. Even though it looks as if she is trying to pull herself together on camera, she cannot hold back her tears. She projects her husband's emotions and thus serves as an emotional contrast to his strength. Still, her presence signals that they will go through the ordeal together, and this gives us a glimmer of hope for their future. Moreover, the parents' different reactions complement each other and give a complex picture of intense suffering. Corresponding with the clean emptiness in the images of the quake ruins, the sound design is similarly stripped down to only three voices: Melissa Chan's voiceover narrating the Zhao family's story; Mr. Zhao's descriptions of how they lost their son and his final goodbye; and the heart-wrenching sound of Mrs. Zhao's constant, deep weeping.

#### **It Could Have Been Me: The Ordinarity of the Victim**

In her moving analysis of the photographic images from the liberation of the concentration camps in 1945, Zelizer (1998) illustrates the limitations of Western journalistic practice when confronted with the immense and systematic atrocities of Nazi Germany. The reporters struggled to find metaphors powerful enough to capture what they were seeing in words, and "often the horror was communicated in the juxtaposition between the everyday and mundane and the atrocious" (p. 65). One iconic example is the image of massive piles of shoes, documenting the incomprehensible scale of the atrocities, and at the same time reminding the viewer of the life the prisoners had before the horror in the camps.

The contrast between the atrocious and the mundane has remained a key narrative in mediated suffering and death, with emphasis on the ordinarity of the victims and details of their daily lives before the catastrophe. More than anything, the mundane invites the viewer to identify with the victims, because if the victim was an ordinary person like us, then it could have been me. The mundane-atrocious juxtaposition is conveyed in many forms. It can be in the detailed written reports from the scene of destruction—in descriptions of what remains of the lives lived before the catastrophe hit, and similarly in images of destruction zooming in on the odd toy or kitchen utensil that survived the catastrophe. The victims' ordinarity is also underlined in obituaries. One example is the Pulitzer Prize-winning obituary series published in *The New York Times*, titled "Portraits of Grief," to remember the victims of September 11. In the series, the obituaries celebrated the typical qualities of the victims such as "love of family, a work ethic, generosity, humor, good health" (Kitch & Hume, 2008, p. 150).

In their extensive study of death and public grief in American media, Kitch and Hume (2008) demonstrate the complexity of the media narratives of the victims' ordinarity—the victims are "the

common man who was nevertheless ideal" (p. 150), ordinary people who did extraordinary things when circumstances called for them (p. 190). In this lies a reminder of our own vulnerability, but also a more optimistic message of the potential in all of us—just as anyone can be a victim, anyone can be a hero. In the study, it is stressed that the media narrative of these heroic "everyday American" victims is reserved for American victims, and otherwise parallel death events occurring outside the United States are systematically ignored or diminished (p. 198).

In the Sichuan story, the remains of the Zhaos' life before the earthquake play an important role in telling the story of who they were before the earthquake. In some of the first shots from the ruins of what was once their home, we see a yellow sneaker and a frying pan saved from the rubble by Mr. Zhao. Remains from the life they had play an even more symbolic role in the funeral of little Zhao Ji. The camera follows the Zhaos to their son's freshly dug grave. The parents carry bags and rucksacks, among them their son's Mickey Mouse bag. As they are filmed walking on a small path, the voiceover underscores the young parents' desperate situation: "Little Zhao Ji had no brothers and sisters because of the country's single-child policy. Now the Zhaos are on their own."

The affective climax in the report from Sichuan comes toward the end of the report, when Mr. and Mrs. Zhao place the boy's favorite things on top of his grave as a final farewell. Mr. Zhao speaks to his dead son and stacks a pile of well-used schoolbooks on the grave, along with a small keyboard, money, a half-empty bottle of Pepsi, some clothes, and at the very end, his soccer ball. It is through his favorite belongings—the remains of the everyday life of a young schoolboy—that the viewer gets to know the deceased boy. And moreover, because his favorite things were toys, money and soft drinks that any child would love, it reminds the viewer that although this time it was Zhao Ji, it could have been their own son or daughter, sister or brother. The images from the grave are not graphic, but they offer a rare, intimate, real-time documentation of private pain. Even at the graveside, the camera continues to zoom in on the Zhaos' grieving faces, and the audience witnesses the parents' emotional final goodbye.

### **A Journalism of Attachment: Authorizing the Victim's Voice**

The literature on mediated suffering mainly analyzes the political economy of suffering in mainstream Western media that are commercially governed by the taste and interests of domestic audiences (Chouliaraki, 2006; Moeller, 1999). By focusing on the distance and detachment in mainstream Western media, the literature thus ignores those media organizations that practice what Bell (1998) labels as "journalism of attachment." He defines this as "a journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor" (Bell, p. 16). By actively taking a position, journalism of attachment may give institutional authority to stories of civilian victims.

The video wall installation described in the beginning of this article was the introduction to the Gaza report. The video wall is one illustrative example of how Al Jazeera English's institutional authority is extended to the voiceless victims of the story: the children in Gaza. The video wall design bears a resemblance to the iconic Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Its somber, minimalist design,

displaying the names of 210 of the more than 300 dead Gaza children, written in white on a dark background, brings to the fore the extent of civilian suffering. The grand scale of this installation, together with the fact that Al Jazeera's staff has collected the names of children killed inside Gaza during the war, demonstrates the resources the channel has devoted to telling their story. By using the installation as a background and integrating it in the studio design, Al Jazeera lends maximum credibility to the story. Also, the fact that these short biographies are presented by the studio anchor, the public face of the news organization, makes them seem more important. Secondly, by highlighting the biographical background of some of the victims, the video wall personalizes the suffering of the many. By listening to short backgrounds of a handful of the 210 names, the viewer realizes that there are similar stories behind all of the other names on the wall. The concretization of where the children died ("in his mother's arms") and the mundane circumstances under which they were killed ("as they took out the rubbish near their home") brings the story even closer to viewers around the world. We all take out the rubbish. We have all, as children, sat on our parents' lap for protection. The introduction showing the video wall thus invites the viewer to reflect on the traumatized Gaza children as empathic individuals, thereby preparing the viewer for the account of personalized suffering in the upcoming report.

In the Gaza report, institutional authorization occurs primarily in the segue from the heavily authorizing studio introduction to the documentary evidence of suffering, without voiceovers. The report on the Sichuan earthquake features a different editorial technique for magnifying the victims' trustworthiness by lending their story institutional credibility. Throughout most of the report about the grieving parents in Sichuan, Al Jazeera English's correspondent on the ground, Melissa Chan, is on camera and in voiceover to explain the struggle and pain of the Zhaos as they prepare their final farewell for their son. She also contextualizes their loss and provides background information aggravating the tragedy: how China's one-child policy magnified the Zhaos' loss; how school buildings were the hardest hit; how little Zhao Ji probably could have been saved had rescue workers with heavy equipment reached the village in time.

At the graveside, toward the very end of the report, however, Chan transcends her professional voiceover and lends a personal voice to her interpretation of Mr. Zhao's final words to his son. "Here are your books, my son!" Chan says as Mr. Zhao is shown placing a pile of well-used schoolbooks on the grave. And as he holds up a football, Chan says: "And here, here is your soccer ball to play with." By literally giving her authoritative voice to Mr. Zhao, the correspondent assumes his persona, speaks his words and symbolically shares his pain. In both the examples here, the news anchor and the reporter in the field lend their institutional and professional authority to the civilian victims, and by this they exceed the "objectivity," distance and difference emphasized in the traditional "realist" news narratives (Robertson, 2010, p. 26).

### **The Strategy and Ethics of Giving a "Voice to the Voiceless"**

Distance is partly a matter of the basic technical, physical, and psychological distance between the viewer in the living room and the victim on the screen, as the literature on mediated suffering argues. However, the Western perspective in the news media, as well as in the literature, reinforces this distance



in mediated suffering. In other words, the element of distance in the representation of mediated suffering becomes intensified as the geographical, cultural and political distance between event and reporting increases. By looking beyond the mainstream Western media, I have demonstrated various editorial techniques used to counter the distanced mediation of human suffering, and I have argued that human suffering may also be constructed as something close to us.

The Al Jazeera English reports from Gaza and Sichuan illustrate how media outside the mainstream Western media ecology use alternative approaches to human suffering. Al Jazeera English literally goes closer and zooms in, exposes, personalizes, and dramatizes, politicizes and authorizes the perspective of the victims on the ground. The network's screening of graphic, gory images has been a controversial and much-debated issue (Hanusch, 2010; Sontag, 2003). Al Jazeera English's exposure of human pain (both loud, bloody, and silent pain), in contrast to the sanitized Western images of suffering, has been demonstrated through the two examples discussed in this article. More important, it is only when the exposure and documentation of civilian suffering is combined with editorial techniques to personalize and authorize the exposed pain that the suffering is brought closer to the viewer. By documenting the suffering of others, and to varying extent portraying them as sovereign subjects, giving them a voice, stressing the ordinariness of the victims (it could have been you), and then authorizing their stories, Al Jazeera English brings the distant suffering of these Palestinian and Chinese civilian victims closer to viewers.

Another key point in this article is that these editorial techniques are not necessarily or essentially more charitable or benevolent than those of the Western media. It seems clear, however, that they reflect an editorial agenda and strategy that is qualitatively different from that of the mainstream media in the West. Al Jazeera English aims to balance the information flow between the South and the North—a flow that historically has run from North to South, from rich countries to poor. It has been described as the first well-funded news channel with a radically different take on international news (el-Nawawy & Powers 2008; Figenschou, 2010; Painter, 2008). The channel has an explicit editorial emphasis on reporting forgotten stories from the perspective of the voiceless—the global South, the underprivileged, the subaltern, the underdog, and the disenfranchised. To implement its alternative agenda, Al Jazeera English has an extensive Southern presence, hiring local correspondents and benefitting from cooperation with its Arabic-language sister channel, Al Jazeera Arabic. For Al Jazeera English, the institutional authorization of “the voiceless” is part of its editorial distinctiveness and branding strategy in the global media market (see Figenschou (forthcoming)). This strategy ties in closely with the mediated public diplomacy strategies and foreign policy line of its owner, the Emir of Qatar (ibid.). Particularly, the politicization of the Palestinian cause, demonstrated by the idealized Palestinian children, corresponds well with the foreign policy of Qatar, the wider Arab criticism against the Israeli occupation, and public support for the Palestinian cause in the Arab world. Therefore, the report from the Sichuan earthquake was included to illustrate that the editorial strategy of being “a voice of the voiceless” goes beyond Al Jazeera's Arab “home region.”

The editorial exposure of suffering up close brings about a new set of ethical concerns. According to the Al Jazeera Network's (2004) *Code of Ethics*, the channel will “. . . adhere to the journalistic values of honesty, courage, fairness, balance, independence, credibility, and diversity, giving no priority to commercial or political considerations over professional ones.” In the Sichuan and Gaza cases, however,

the channel's teams go further both in exposing the sufferers and in aligning themselves with the sufferers than do mainstream Western media.

Both being exposed and being strategically co-opted carries a risk for those exposed. How do the media of attachment handle these dilemmas? Elaborating on the dilemma of exposure, Boltanski (1999, p. 33) writes:

A picture which goes too far in the realistic description of details, one which might be described as repulsive, may actually be denounced on the one hand as *reductive*, inasmuch as the person is entirely defined by their suffering, and on the other hand as taking the suffering away from the person inflicted by it in order to *exhibit* this suffering to those who do not suffer.

Al Jazeera English aims to give a voice to the underrepresented, marginalized and subaltern. This editorial agenda carries a heavy responsibility, as the emphasis on the voiceless potentially risks overusing the emotive stories of suffering, and could lead to the habituation and normalization of mediated atrocity (Sontag, 2003; Zelizer, 1998).

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