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Towards an Ordinary Ethics of Mediated Humanitarianism: An Agenda for Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

This article takes stock of the insights and approaches advanced by the last 15 years of critical research in humanitarian communication and distant suffering while arguing for a new agenda for ethnography. Ethnography lays bare the messy and fertile terrains of human experience and disrupts idealized figures of witness and sufferer, aid worker and aid recipient, event and the everyday. Bringing into dialogue the anthropology of aid literature and media and cultural studies, this article proposes three important shifts for future research: (1) a focus on processes rather than principles in production studies of humanitarian communication, (2) a focus on ethics arising from everyday life rather than from events of distant suffering, and (3) a focus on the lifeworlds of the poor and vulnerable rather than those of witnesses.

This article reviews the foundational questions and approaches in the field of humanitarian communication and considers how ethnography can generate theoretical disobedience by shedding light on issues beyond its main preoccupations. I argue that ethnography can offer sharper critique of media and technological harm through more granular accounts of mediated humanitarianism while simultaneously recasting afflicted people and their motivations, aspirations, and compromises as central to current debates about the ethics of witnessing "distant suffering" (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2012; Frosh, 2011; Pinchevski, 2009; Silverstone, 2007). In making this argument, this article takes specific inspiration from recent works in the anthropology of humanitarianism whose analytical attention has expanded beyond critique of the politics of aid distribution to accounting for human agency in the everyday acts of moral striving that both aid actors *and* afflicted people engage in. The aim here is thus to also contribute a decolonial critique of mediated humanitarianism that wishes to shake up the field's longstanding preoccupation with the moral responsibility of the privileged media witness or aid worker for greater attunement to afflicted people's own moral reasonings and everyday relations. As anthropologist Clara Han warns in relation to traditional critique of humanitarianism, "I do worry that this critique of humanitarianism, by staying within an opposition between those who perform distinctive labors of feeling compassion and those who perform the labor of providing proof [of pain and suffering] through their bodies, keeps in place those 'poor'" (Han 2004: 91).

This paper thus considers the opportunities for ethnography to advance debate in the field by shifting attention to the *ordinary ethics* of mediated humanitarianism. In anthropology, Veena Das conceptualizes *ordinary ethics* as an approach that considers the ethical as a "dimension of everyday life in which we are not aspiring to escape the ordinary but rather to descend into it as a

way of becoming moral subjects" (Das 2012: 134). Ordinary ethics in the context of mediated humanitarianism would then aim to descend into the everyday routines of producing, encountering, and experiencing media narratives and technological interventions in the humanitarian-development field. Such an approach would crucially aim to challenge some of the essentialisms found in the literature that have tarried extensively on the phenomenology of the witnessing of "distant suffering" by (privileged Western) media producers as well as (privileged Western) media audiences while leaving out the textures of feelings of afflicted people themselves. In attending to afflicted people's improvisations and arts of everyday living, we find opportunities to develop more specific vocabularies to describe and evaluate the harms and healing they experience in their mediated everyday lives.

Humanitarian Communication and Its Foundational Questions

Should atrocity be dramatized, or should we be content with stoic enumerations of tragic facts? How can we use photographs to move people into urgent action without reducing their subjects to generic victims needy for Western benevolence? These were the philosophical thought experiments posed by Boltanski (1999), Ranciere (2009), and Sontag (2003) that have been reinterpreted by in scholars in media and cultural studies engaged in normative debate around the ethics of mediating distant suffering and the moral obligation of media witnesses (e.g., Ashuri and Pinchevski, 2009; Chouliaraki, 2012; Frosh, 2011; Madianou, 2013; Markham, 2017; Orgad and Seu, 2014; Silverstone, 2007; Vestergaard, 2009).

Rejecting the resigned pessimism of Boltanski and Sontag however, media and cultural studies scholars are adamant that mediation by and in itself is not always the culprit behind

contemporary failures of empathy and moral imagination between viewers and their distant others. While photographs tend to (an)aestheticize and screens literally flatten, diverse possibilities remain open for humanitarian care and political solidarity in everyday life. For every moral mistake committed by media producers who inadvertently harm the aid beneficiaries who are subject (or object?) of their representation (e.g., Wright, 2016), there are also achievements to appreciate: from the hospitable island dwellers in Chios openly welcoming refugees (Chouliaraki and Georgiou, 2017) to the concerned YouTube influencers uploading “amateur fundraising” videos on behalf of faraway victims of calamity (Pantti, 2015).

Defined here as both a method of gathering and recording evidence through participant observation as well as an intellectual commitment towards "thick description" (Geertz 1973), ethnography creates significant opportunities to advance debates in humanitarian communication by laying bare the messy and fertile terrains of human experience that philosophical thought experiments bracket out. In anthropology, ethnography involves a scholarly endeavor against essentialism that generalizes behavior, ignores internal variation, and "den[ies] the relevance of agency itself" (Herzfeld 1996). Attending to variation and complex operations of power through ethnography draws out specific motivations and challenges across various subject-positions in the field of humanitarian communication: whether they may be the producers of media representations of "distant suffering", the audiences (and witnesses) of such representations, or the wounded subjects who are recipients of aid or subjects of representation. In this light, we can also think about the holistic approach of ethnography as sharing similar principles with the theory of mediation as advanced by the late Roger Silverstone (2005).

In this current political and technological moment, this commitment to capture multiple positionalities and possibilities of human agency may also function to counter-balance recent trends that appear to revive hypodermic needle assumptions of media effects and their passive audiences. Media and information studies' recent anxieties as expressed in concepts of dataveillance (van Dijck, 2014), data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias, 2018), and technocolonialism (Madianou, 2018) characterize mediation as enforcing totalizing logics of domination, which if applied to the context of the humanitarian refugee camp or technologized disaster response, empties out contingency, dissent, and surprise, thus spiraling into despair. Refugees and disaster-affected communities are dehumanized as they become data points, their voices scrambled and garbled when captured and distorted by "innovative" audit systems of humanitarian agencies (Latonero and Kift, 2018). This is alarming and convincing, but certainly not the last word.

I suggest here that media studies needs more ethnography to produce a holistic social critique of mediated humanitarianism. We need to direct scholarly energy to addressing the specific vulnerabilities in the field of media witnessing at the same time that we recognize actually-existing practices of audiences, donors, media producers and digital workers that are worthy of emulation. We also need ethnography that can speak back to normative theory in the similar way anthropologist Veena Das develops the approach of ordinary ethics through ethnography. As mentioned earlier, ordinary ethics involves a "descent into the everyday" and recounting people's diverse, even contradictory, judgments of value through routine and practice. Instead of imposing and testing how transcendent "first principles" apply to everyday experience, an

ordinary ethics of mediated humanitarianism argues that moral striving is in fact intrinsic to the everyday in processes of moral reflection, justification, and action.

In making this argument, I aim to first take inspiration from the anthropology of humanitarianism and the ways in which ethnographic inquiry is applied when offering both critique of the aid enterprise and discussing how wounded subjects make sense of violence and poverty, charity and kindness, in their everyday lives. Following this, I aim to review and "read diagonally" media studies' writings on mediated humanitarianism to capture important insights that open possibilities for further ethnographic inquiry. Although few actual studies of humanitarian communication fulfill the traditional golden rule for one-year long ethnographic fieldwork in anthropology (Madianou 2009), many are effective in sketching the complex motivations and experiences of various subjects in the field as they correspond to specific moments of mediation. In the section "From Principles to Process", I discuss how production studies of humanitarian communication can move beyond obvious cases of media harms to theorizing the ordinary ethics of "translation work" in everyday routines of humanitarian-media work. I also highlight here the opportunities and risks our field faces in the recent trend of media researchers' collaborations with humanitarian agencies: on one hand qualitative methods offer opportunities to record perspectives not captured through other means and may enhance practice, but these also raise new questions of research ethics, complicity, and legitimization of the aid industry. In "From Event to Everyday", I explore how "distant suffering studies" and media witnessing theory can use ethnography to shift concern from conditions of witnessing peak tragedies to exploring how political solidarity manifests in the quotidian. Finally in "From Objects to Subjects", I discuss the significance of conducting research beyond the lifeworlds of

witnesses and donors to the lifeworlds of the poor and afflicted. This chapter's critical review of the literature of humanitarian communication will be supported by insights and questions I have personally uncovered from my own research projects and collaborations that endeavor to speak back to normative questions of how we should live in conditions of complex mediation and "everyday suffering" (Ong, 2015a).

Ordinary Ethics in the Anthropology of Humanitarianism

Certainly, there are shared ideas and principles between humanitarian communication scholars and anthropologists of humanitarianism that present a starting point to reflect on how both fields may share analytical resources. For instance, there is strong kinship in the lament of depoliticization in contemporary operations of humanitarianism. The anthropologist Didier Fassin has advanced critique of the centrality of "humanitarian reason" in public life, where compassion and mercy as structures of moral feeling have taken over as the dominant framework for politics. Humanitarian reason has entailed a "translation of social reality into [a] new language of compassion," in which "inequality is replaced by exclusion, domination is transformed into misfortune, injustice is articulated as suffering, violence is expressed in terms of trauma" (Fassin, 2012: 4-6). Fassin has keen interest in how humanitarian reason is translated into organizational procedures; for instance, in his analysis of how immigration officers evaluate and prioritize asylum-seekers' cases, which contain records of their high-emotion appeals and medical experts' testimonies. Fassin is concerned with how humanitarian reason and its "politics of life" requires the production of "public representations of the human beings to be defended (e.g., by showing them as victims rather than combatants and by displaying their condition in terms of suffering rather than the geopolitical situation)" (Fassin, 2007: 501). Through an

examination of how contemporary “compassion protocols” in asylum cases tend to be favorable to those who effectively communicate physical evidence of their pain and suffering rather than those who simply share emotional narratives of political persecution, he discovers that “being in danger because of one’s political activity or one’s belonging to a persecuted group is secondary to the threat to one’s body from pathology” (Fassin, 2012: 443).

It’s not difficult to see here the resonances between Fassin’s work and media studies’ own concerns about the hierarchies of human life reproduced by the structures of global news media according unequal attention and emotion to Western victims of atrocity versus non-Western deaths that remain unreported (Chouliaraki, 2006; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle 2012). There is surely common ground in the analysis of narrative: between analyzing the genre of the asylum-seeker’s written appeal and the news broadcast of natural disaster, there is shared concern with how human bodies are rendered visible and valuable and what emotional registers are used to tug at heartstrings and gain (news) value.

Anthropological work on humanitarianism has done much more however in attending to the ordinary ethics in humanitarian workers' processes of moral striving with keen awareness or defeated resignation to the structural conditions of injustice they find themselves in. I suggest this is what humanitarian communication needs more of.

First, there is a need to grapple with the diversity of social identities within the professional field of humanitarianism and record how paradoxes intrinsic to the ethos of the field are worked through in everyday social relations. It is commonplace to talk about the “paradoxes” of

humanitarianism which include the possibility that humanitarian action can enhance the power of the very forces that are the source of suffering (Hickel, 2017) or neglect power inequalities between expatriate and local aid workers (Denskus, 2017). What ethnographies of humanitarianism help illuminate are the effort and endurance of the whole range of humanitarian workers and volunteers in engaging with these paradoxes such that we can more thoughtfully arrive at judgments of success or failure. For instance, there is Anne-Meike Fechter's concept of aid work as "moral labor", which refers to the commitment of aid workers to constantly engage with "questions of what is the right course of action when faced with morally complex situations" (Fechter, 2016: 3). This moral labor extends beyond the schedule of a nine-to-five job and seeps into decision-making in the household and building relationships with people from the local community—spheres where aid workers' self-interest, personal ideals, and professional obligations entangle and conflict often with unpredictable consequences for self and others. Examining everyday life as a site of ordinary ethics that involve habituation and commitment is something media studies has only begun to explore (e.g., Markham, 2017; Ong 2015a), as I discuss more fully in a later section, and the anthropology of humanitarianism offers inspiration.

Following this approach, anthropologists balance empathy with judgment and develop nuanced accounts of human agency. Ilana Feldman's inquiry into aid workers in Palestinian refugee camps opens up the question of what humanitarian actors do in the case of protracted conflict where "nothing you can do seems likely to have much effect" (Feldman, 2015: 429). States of permanent crisis and chronic suffering pose a unique challenge to humanitarianism though recent events and global trends suggest this is increasingly the norm (Vinck, Bennett and Quintanilla 2018). With Feldman's ethnography, we gain detailed description and conceptual clarity of how

“endurance” becomes a guiding principle and practical program that aid workers enact within a state of despair—with both productive and problematic consequences. Faced with circumstances that are unlikely to change, the aim of endurance is to find ways of *living better* and *living otherwise* (Feldman, 2015: 433). Through documenting what aid workers think and feel about the psychosocial programs and entertainment spaces developed in the refugee camp, we are made aware of individual motivations and collective efforts, and recognize their limits: “[these interventions] are always at risk of being swallowed up by the greater despair that surrounds them. That they continue to emerge is itself noteworthy” (Feldman, 2015: 434). As I aim to argue in later sections where I also discuss media studies’ own discussion of refugees and their mediated everyday lives, ethnographic work is much more than just a romantic celebration of coping mechanisms; it can provide both detailed vocabulary and enlarged perspective from which we cast normative judgment about good and bad practice. In other words, ethnography can be seen as a way of making humble the universal concept or the ideal expectation.

Second, we need more sustained engagement with the “lifeworlds of the poor” (Han, 2014)—the web of everyday relations, meaningful rationalities, and strategic calculations behind their direct experiences with “humanitarian reason”. For the anthropologist Clara Han, this effort stems from a desire to engage “philosophy that does not do violence to everyday life and might appreciate the everyday as an achievement” (Han, 2014: 71). Whereas philosophy or sociology might begin with judgments of the contemporary moral order and a critique of the violence it enforces, anthropologists attend to subjects’ domestication of this violence and the “deep moral energy” they muster to “knit their lives back together” and live with dignity (Das, 2007: 92) that is at the *heart* of the approach of ordinary ethics. This requires an analysis that moves beyond the

singular moment of tragedy or rupture and a discussion of how subjects persist to inhabit the world through routine or ritual.

Recognizing harm means perceiving both its forgotten history and specter in the present moment. Rather than simply fixing analysis into an originating moment of disaster or event, we need understanding of their relation with existing structures of oppression—from hierarchies of gender and caste (Das, 2007) or race and class (Adams, 2013). From this situation we appreciate the force behind local idioms, such as the impersonal and non-instrumental acts of kindness in Clara Han's Chilean *poblacion* (Han, 2014: 84) and the silent acts of mourning and mischief imbued with spiritual meaning and political protest in Veena Das' Indian village (Das, 2007: 48). At the same time, we are able to hear the full interlocutory force of affected people and their experiences when their words and actions are directly engaged with. For instance, Greg Beckett opens the conversation of the Haitian earthquake humanitarian response by quoting his local guide Timo, who said, "All of these foreigners—why are they here? They come and go. They wave food all around. We sniff at it but we don't get it. They treat us like animals. Haitians are dogs now" (Beckett, 2017: 36). Beckett then proceeds to derive from the ordinary utterance "*we are dogs now*" its profound philosophical meaning when Haiti's cruel histories of colonialism and slavery manifest in the present in Haitians' relations with foreign aid.

In the next three sections, I discuss how an approach of ordinary ethics can further advance scholarship in humanitarian communication along three of its research strands: a) the production studies of humanitarian communication, b) "distant suffering studies" and media witnessing, and c) the everyday experiences of afflicted people.

From Principles to Process: Production Studies of Humanitarian Communication

In the field of humanitarian communication, some recent studies have aimed to demystify the idea of the humanitarian enterprise as a monolithic entity by actually discussing the politics and processes of production in humanitarian communication. Most of the studies here are not doing production ethnographies in the tradition of media anthropology or media production studies of actually conducting long-term participant observation, such as by being embedded in the organization (Born, 2005) or following and interacting with producers and actors on the set (Mayer, 2011), but are nevertheless ethnographically inspired by seeking to understand the social identities of humanitarian communication workers and digital humanitarian volunteers. These studies offer significant insights and seed new questions and can become the starting point for productive engagement with an ordinary ethics of humanitarian communication.

For instance, Shani Orgad conducted in-depth interviews with 17 professionals working in UK nongovernmental organizations to understand the decision-making that goes behind representational choices in fundraising and marketing campaigns. Orgad specifically aims to “build on production studies in the cultural industries involving mediated communication” and on the “small but significant research on NGO communication production” (Orgad, 2013: 295). Her inquiry led to the discovery of the “parallel universes” that exist within NGOs: bottomline-focused marketers willing to deploy shocking if stereotypical imagery and the idealistic advocacy professionals seeking alternatives. Orgad’s work takes the now-accepted thesis of the neoliberal marketization of the humanitarian field a step further by discussing how it is exactly experienced, accepted, and resisted on the frontline by the whole range of professionals. Orgad

points to the structural forces and organizational arrangements that enforce such neoliberal logics but also attends to cases in which *some* NGOs and *some* individuals actually stand up against it. Some questions remain unanswered and open to exploration for more direct reflection on ordinary ethics here: What were the personal and structural conditions that enabled those pockets of resistance? Were Orgad's nuances isolated cases of bravery or are there larger lessons to be learned for how aid agencies might support these workers, champion their principles, and institutionalize new policies?

Previously I conducted in-depth interviews the media producers in charge of recording and broadcasting charity appeals and the process by which they recruit their subjects and elicit from them "raw emotion" for the camera (Ong, 2015b). Engaging with the broader normative debate in the humanitarian communication literature on how the genre of the negative imagery humanitarian appeal that uses "shock effect" when evoking pity for its subject reproduces symbolic violence through dehumanization (Chouliaraki, 2012), I discussed how producers situated in the Philippines as representative of the global South became aware of this critique but rejected it as Western middle-class discourse that could not apply in the context where poverty and extreme inequality are facts of life (Ong, 2015b). Hearing producers' justifications of their continued use of close-ups of emaciated bodies and tearful testimonies to catch audiences' attention, I became conscious about the ways that moral principles are negotiated across diverse cultural contexts and translated into local organizational arrangements and genre transformations. I discovered how everyday routines of media production serve as occasions for ordinary ethics that in which individuals state personal convictions or express moral justifications within messy arrangements that often end in collegial compromise.

Ethnography in humanitarian communication can also produce definitive judgments about media harm and symbolic violence. Kate Wright's (2016) deep dive into the collaborative projects between aid agencies and news organizations used interviews and document analysis to carefully piece together some of the scandalous choices that went behind the news coverage of humanitarian atrocity. Sharply focusing on the uses (and abuses) of aid agencies' engagements with interpreters who are fluent in the local language and act as cultural intermediaries, Wright demonstrated producers' haste and carelessness that led to clear violations of company policy around informed consent and protection. Situating her case studies within the broader politics of voice and listening, she arrives at clear judgment of "imperialistic ventriloquism" in the intercultural exchanges that transpired.

In the wake of the European "refugee crisis" and the broader trend in the humanitarian sector to test and adopt technologized solutions in emergency response, there is a new emerging strand of what I would call "humanitarian technologies production" research. This set of studies investigates the broader political economy as well as implementation procedures of humanitarian technologies in crisis contexts: from interactive feedback platforms (Madianoue et al., 2015, 2016) to identification and surveillance systems (Latonero and Kift, 2018) to humanitarian radio (Fluck 2017). These studies point to systemic logics on the one hand, such as how neoliberalism and datafication work together in humanitarian audit cultures that reduce beneficiaries to figures meant to please evidence-obsessed donors (Madianou et al., 2016). They also show extraordinary outcomes when strong work ethic and an ethos of community participation meet (Fluck, 2017). The language of "risk and opportunities" informs this line of research which adopts ethnographic

methods and commitment to long-term immersion. As I will discuss in a later section, these studies also increasingly shed light on the actual uses of local communities with humanitarian technologies and open up understanding of the lifeworlds of afflicted people.

An important caution for future studies on “humanitarian technologies production” comes from Koen Leurs and Kevin Smets’ exhaustive review of digital migration studies who observe academics’ growing proximity with the burgeoning digital migration industry that is too often bullish about the promises of connectivity: “it is important to realize that our social-justice approaches, methodologies, tools, and findings may be co-opted or used in unintended undesirable ways”, such as for surveillance mechanisms that end up doing harm to affected communities (Leurs and Smets, 2018: 10). Many humanitarian communication academics have recently authored public policy reports aimed at the humanitarian-development sector proposing valuable (and rare!) policy recommendations that are actually based on qualitative data and rigorous fieldwork (Gillespie et al., 2016; Latonero et al., 2012; Madianou et al., 2015; Orgad and Vella, 2012). The field of mediated humanitarianism would benefit from a period of pause and reflection on questions of methodology, ethics, and complicity in these critical collaborations. We need to discuss how we ourselves translate principles of integrity and independence in collaborations that flow from humanitarians’ or governments’ agenda, and also from our own academic bureaucracies’ increasing pressures to measure and instrumentalize research “impact” (Watermeyer and Hedgecoe, 2016). Adopting an ordinary ethics approach invites reflexivity about the tension between scholars’ and organizations’ various aims and diverse unintended consequences of intervention, collaboration, and publication.

From Event to the Everyday: Distant Suffering Studies and Media Witnessing

In the afterword to the special issue on “Audiences of Distant Suffering”, co-edited by Stijn Joye and Johannes von Engelhardt (2015), Lillie Chouliaraki (2015) reflects on the development of the field of “distant suffering studies”. She charts the field’s development as at once inspired by longer debates in journalism studies of values in news and photography but also more recently influenced by media and communications’ studies moral-ethical *turn*. In mediating human vulnerability, she identifies questions that require empirical exploration: “how do viewing publics engage with spectacles of suffering? Under which conditions do they turn from viewing to acting? And how does the digital fusion of audiences with users affect the mediation of human vulnerability?” (Chouliaraki, 2015: 709). There has indeed been a productive set of studies precisely committed to engaging with these questions of ordinary ethics, but we need more ethnographic explorations that, first, draw the interrelations between the mediation of crisis and actual audience response and second, move beyond originating moments of peak tragedy and actually explore political solidarities in the everyday.

Audiences’ reception of distant suffering have been examined in relation to global disasters on Scandinavian television (Höijer, 2004), global disasters on Greek television (Kyriakidou, 2008), news and documentaries on UK television (Scott, 2014), images of children in UK humanitarian appeals (Seu, 2015), Nordic news broadcasts about the Arab spring conflicts (Ahva and Hellman, 2015), and global disasters in Flemish media (Huiberts, 2018). Diverse methods are used ranging from focus groups to in-depth interviews to surveys to media diaries, and we can glean from these provocative sociological insights. The gendered nature of audiences’ discourses of compassion is a key contribution of Birgitta Höijer, who identifies that females are more likely to

express compassion while men “shield and defend themselves by looking at the pictures without showing any outer signs of emotion” (Höijer, 2004: 527). The classed nature of responses is sensitively unpacked by Maria Kyriakidou who find that working-class Greeks’ engagement with distant suffering involves emotional identification but lacks in political solidarity as they themselves have been let down by political institutions and distrust that official authorities could alleviate the misery of distant others (Kyriakidou, 2008: 282).

Drawing from social psychological theory, Bruna Seu’s (2003; 2015) scholarship on audiences’ denial strategies and moral justifications has been a particularly productive resource to think through questions of ethics in our mediated everyday lives. She argues that compassion fatigue is not a result of information overload or normalization, but is in fact an “active ‘*looking away*’” [emphasis in original] (Seu, 2003: 190). Her interviews uncover that participants routinely used clichéd psychological terms such as “desensitization” when talking about why they turn away from humanitarian advertisements. My only critique is that while Seu’s approach is useful in the ethical critique of audience responses, particularly in its clear normative position that compassion fatigue is an individual moral choice rather than a consequence of historical forces or media saturation, its limitation lies in its inability to link the individual moments of “turning away” with the specific visual or rhetorical prompts that might trigger these undesirable actions. Elsewhere, I have discussed how audience studies on distant suffering tend to overemphasize the sociological factors shaping audiences’ discourses and miss out on engaging with the process of mediation (Ong, 2014). This is precisely the gap that an ordinary ethics of media witnessing can fill. Spending time with people in everyday life can offer possibilities of locating how moral

discourses work and live through subjects just as subjects themselves can creatively remake these.

This leads me to discuss the second crucial opening for the value of ordinary ethics in distant suffering studies: exploring how political solidarity actually manifests in habit and practice. Tim Markham's (2017) work is most instructive for how attentiveness to quotidian routines are potentially generative of insight into the nature of political commitments and ethical self-projects. Markham's pushes back on distant suffering studies' insistence on audiences' compassion fatigue as the originating problematic which prompts scholarly search for moments of ecstatic engagement, such as the expressions of discourses of compassion that we reviewed earlier. For Markham,

“Engagement with the world is not all or nothing but enacted haphazardly through the minutiae of life... what makes our selves just liveable – having a consistent sense of who we are and how we are seen – in everyday contexts may, while in situ we might look disengaged, distracted or self-regarding, over time can congeal into something more substantive: an orientation to the world that is sufficiently generic that means our selves are not in jeopardy in each encounter with actual others, but also that we are nonetheless able to recognize the profundity of the subjectivity of others undergoing conflict and violence” (Markham, 2017:16).

Adopting a phenomenological lens, Markham prompts from his journalist respondents extended narrations of both their personal rituals and professional routines in order to reconstruct the

ongoing making of their political-ethical subjectivities. In this perspective, what may be considered trivial practices, such as regularly posting and self-promoting their projects on Facebook and Twitter, may be understood as sustaining their broader political commitments toward human rights and social justice. Sociability and personal enjoyment, rather than being judged as the absence of political engagement, can thus be understood as sustaining political commitment: professional convivialities such as exchanging gossip and making plans for dinner are crucial aspects of daily routines that “sustain that sense of passion and commitment over time” (Markham, 2017: 19). Ethnographic studies focused on ordinary ethics are needed to take this insight forward and understand how diverse communities undergo this complex and never-ending process of political subjectification, which is work “that plays out in [the dance of] everyday life” (Markham 2017: 4). Markham arrives at rather optimistic readings about his respondents’ political commitments since war reporters compared to other professionals would likely already have qualities of political awareness and cosmopolitanism, and so it remains to be seen how likely that everyday routines of sociability and social media activity congeal to political activity for ordinary people. I would be curious how we can take forward Markham’s approach to theorizing the interplay between abstract principles and habituated experiences for Mervi Pantti’s (2015) amateur fundraisers (Pantti 2015) and Kaarina Nikunen’s (2018) hashtag activists, for example.

This epistemic shift in the study of how people engage with distant suffering from analysis of events of peak tragedy to everyday routines has also been previously argued by Paul Frosh (2011) and Martin Scott (2014). Indeed, this opens up an avenue for ethnographies of media

witnessing that is committed to recreate the “texture of the ordinary that might have been easily missed in a lofty aerial view of [people’s] lives” (Das, 2007: 301).

From Objects to Subjects: Attending to the Lifeworlds of Afflicted People

The lives at stake of whom we still know too little about are those of afflicted people, particularly those in the global South where economic insecurity, political instability, and environmental degradation are most acute and heighten risks of calamities and natural disaster. An approach of ordinary ethics in humanitarian communication should aim to dwell in the lifeworlds of the poor, where there is “the mystery of the political” in the “indirection of language and action, the dispersal of power, the functioning of gossip, organizational charts... that hint at what they are supposed to describe” (Fischer, 2014: 191). In recording how people think and what they feel about media or technological interventions done in their name, ethnography struggles to preserve through narrative people’s status as agentic subjects and overcome representational modes that simplify or objectify. Ethnography here is doubly committed to “follow the trail” of violence as it burrows itself deep into the everyday, just as it respects the ordinary as the privileged site by which subjects maintain dignity, claim selfhood, and affirm their place in the community and the wider world.

There is a long history even within media and communications research that humanitarian communication can draw from when attending to the ordinary ethics of afflicted people. Both the media anthropology literature (McDonald, 2016; Miller, 2011; Postill, 2008) and development communication research (Tacchi, 2015; Tufte, 2012) have paid attention to the various collision points between local cultural and community norms with global values and processes as well as

development interventions that aim for social or behavioral change. There are crucial distinctions to note: some strands of development communication work such as those on diffusion of innovations subscribe to top-down models of media power that are reductive of people's social identities and cultural contexts (e.g., Atkin, Hunt and Lin, 2015), while other "culture-centered approaches" such as in health communication end up overly essentializing culture by using it as a crutch to explain away social difference without returning to important questions of media power (e.g., Dutta, 2008).

A more useful roadmap for humanitarian communication research is the work of Payal Arora investigating digital media practices among poor communities in both urban and rural India. Arora and her colleague advance an important political point:

"the ICT for development community (ICTD) tends to privilege what are and what are not desired/legitimate developmental impacts of technology. New media practice in emerging economies that are substantively oriented towards leisure - play, entertainment and pleasure, are duly relegated as anecdotal" (Rangaswamy and Arora, 2015: 3).

Arora and her colleague find problematic the normative premise behind some development communication research that reduces technologies as instruments aiming for public knowledge and political empowerment for needy "third world" subjects. Interviewing both rural farmers and slum dwellers, Arora argues it is not only meaningful but also just simply *accurate* to account for richness of media practice in the lifeworlds of the poor.

In another project, my colleagues and I have argued that “slow research in emergency contexts”, which involves long-term immersion in local communities, more faithfully captures drawn out processes of personal recovery and community rehabilitation especially from natural disasters. Investigating the uses of communication technologies in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, we interviewed both humanitarian workers implementing technological innovations and compared their narratives with the experiences of affected people. Our ethnographic commitment that meant immersion in communities for over 12 months and keeping in touch with them through site visits as well as chatting as *friends* on Facebook deepened our understanding of the cultural and political norms in the region as well as their personal beliefs and aspirations that went behind their diverse (and “unintended”) uses of media and communications technologies.

For instance, we understood better why affected people’s negativity and even outright hostility toward aid agencies’ beneficiary selection criteria weren’t registered on the SMS feedback platforms implemented by aid workers. We discovered from our interviews with both aid workers and affected people that technological platforms such as SMS and the databases that catalogue people’s feedback inadvertently introduced “digital distortions” that privileged and prioritized humanitarian-bureaucratic response only to particular kinds of feedback (Madianou et al., 2015, 2016). In a report aimed at humanitarian policymakers, I together with other colleagues also showed that local populations felt “obliged to be grateful” to foreign workers based on cultural norms around debt and face and proposed frameworks aiming for community immersion and donor flexibility that could empower aid workers redirect emergency resources to emergent concerns (Madianou et al. 2015, 2016).

Engaging with the lifeworlds of the poor often meant de-centering or expanding humanitarianism and following what people were truly invested in as they maneuvered their way through new life obstacles. I recall here the story of how humanitarian radio in the disaster zone shifted their programming from traditional serious humanitarian content, such as talk shows that broadcast information about aid agencies' shelter or livelihood projects, to softer popular content that resonated with people's social and emotional needs. Humanitarian radio programming launched a cooking show in the days leading up to Christmas in response to local people's discontent with the canned sardines that have been staple to their diet for over one month from government and charity donations. As one aid worker shared with me,

“Christmas was a time when people people felt the hardship of having been through a disaster because well, if you don't know what to give your kids even for dinner on Christmas, let alone presents, that is something that I think breaks parents' hearts and that is also what they communicated to me like, ‘We're gonna eat sardines again because that is the main dish, sardines and rice. So what the radio did was having a cooking show and having a young woman who was telling about different recipes, how to do different dishes with sardines like sardine meatballs and sardines in tomato sauce and to answer this lack of options that [they] had.”

This example extends Roger Silverstone's (1994) idea that media are significant resources for providing reassurance and “ontological security” particularly in the context of crisis and disaster. In the context of the refugee camp, Saskia Witteborn (2015) and Mirjam Twigt (2019) have also written about the importance of entertainment media in affirming community and neutralizing

feelings of anomie and isolation after calamitous events. Reducing entertainment media consumption and digital leisure as mere “coping mechanisms” of the poor simplifies what it means to heal and inhabit the everyday.

Beyond designating respondents as disaster victims or camp dwellers, ethnographies that engage with ordinary ethics can also better explore the range of people’s subjectivities: as parents, neighbors, citizens, workers, lovers. In another project that engaged with broader humanitarian policy debates on “aid localism”, I tried to shade in the social identities of local tech workers in the disaster zone—locals aspiring for personal mobility in short-term work arrangements with aid agencies (Ong and Combinido 2018). This project helped me understand the ways in which local workers strategically navigated their position of being doubly marginalized in the aid agency—as being local and doing low-status tech support—and the social conditions by which they overcome organizational obstacles and seek to achieve their own dreams. I see this narrative as contributing to break taboo and confront power hierarchies in the aid sector which as we have learned in the wake of #MeToo and #AidToo has long silenced narratives of abuse both sexual and racial (Costello 2017).

At the same time, sex and romance are ordinary and meaningful aspects of human experience. Investigating people’s social attachments and modes of repair should include concern for how bodies commingle and repurpose their wounds and allow for their undoing and regeneration. As I have discussed in the context of affected people’s uses of dating and hook-up apps in the “queer time” of disaster, touch and intimacy offer reparative possibilities, affirm affective

investments to the future, and even embolden political expressions of queer identity and community (Ong 2017).

Conclusion

Through an excursion into the anthropology of humanitarianism and a diagonal reading of existing research in humanitarian communication that are ethnographically inspired, this essay retraced the important insights of ethnography that can deepen our understanding of the everyday experience of mediated humanitarianism. Working around the “impasse of disappointment” (Henderson 2013: 134) that has accompanied both recent social theory of humanitarianism and media theory around datafication and data colonialisms, ethnography seeks to embed the politics of humanitarianism within the politics of the everyday. Applying the concept of *ordinary ethics* in humanitarian communication, I have identified how “a descent into the everyday” entails commitment to capture in granular detail the processes of moral reasoning and striving that media and technology workers, aid organizations, media witnesses at home, and—most crucially—afflicted people themselves engage in. Ordinary ethics does not mean being an apologist and shying away from normative pronouncement of exploitation or dehumanization through media or aid interventions: it actually means greater precision in identifying how power is dispersed, exercised, and disguised through code, procedure, or everyday exchange.

In three separate sections that correspond to sub-fields of humanitarian communication, I have pointed to new avenues for future research. For future research on the production of humanitarian communication and humanitarian technologies, I suggest that production ethnographies can better unpack organizational politics between aid agencies and technology

organizations to uncover the misguided motivations or incentives that end up dealing harm and exploitation on afflicted people. For research on the media witnessing of distant suffering, I suggest that audience ethnographies that descend into people's routines and rituals can reorient our normative expectations around the temporality of (privileged Western) audiences' engagement with suffering others. And crucially for much-needed ethnographies on afflicted people themselves, I suggest that it is high time that their own sense-making of the media narratives and aid interventions invoked in their behalf forms basis for future critique of exploitation or dehumanization they are assumed to be subjected to. Ethnography potentially contributes a decolonizing perspective to the field of humanitarian communication by investing in afflicted people's complex journeys of endurance and resistance, complicities and compromises, and thus rejecting tendencies of prior research to essentialize and fix the tragic narrative or redemptive moral arc on some people but not others.

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