

The Researching and Teaching Communication Series

Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere

edition lumière
Bremen 2015

Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

© edition lumière Bremen 2015

ISBN: 978-3-943245-37-0

JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Edited by: Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier, Andreas Hepp, Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, Hannu Nieminen, Risto Kunelius, Tobias Olsson, Ebba Sundin and Richard Kilborn.

Series: The Researching and Teaching Communication Series

Series editors: Nico Carpentier and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

Photographs: François Heinderyckx (section photographs)

Print run: 600 copies

Electronic version accessible at: <http://www.researchingcommunication.eu> and <http://www.comsummerschool.org>

The publishing of this book was supported by the University of Bremen, the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and the Slovene Communication Association.

The 2014 European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School (Bremen, August 3-16) was sponsored by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and significantly funded at the expenses of the Federal Foreign Office (AA). It was also supported by the University of Bremen, ZeMKI, Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research, the „Communicative Figurations“ research network, the Graduate Center of the University of Bremen (ProUB) and by a consortium of 22 universities. Affiliated partners of the Summer School were the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) and the International League of Higher Education in Media and Communication (MLeague).

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier and Andreas Hepp
Introduction: Researching the transformation of societal self-understanding 7

PART 1 RESEARCH

SECTION 1: JOURNALISM AND THE NEWS MEDIA

Leif Kramp
The rumbling years. The communicative figurations approach as a heuristic concept to study – and shape – the transformation of journalism 23

Bertrand Cabedoche
New challenges for journalism education. A contribution to UNESCO politics .57

Eimantė Zolubienė
Risk discourse in news media. Power to define danger? 69

SECTION 2: REPRESENTATION AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Ebba Sundin
The role of media content in everyday life. To confirm the nearby world and to shape the world beyond our reach 83

Saiona Stoian
Media representations of suffering and mobility. Mapping humanitarian imaginary through changing patterns of visibility 93

Maria Schreiber
“The smartphone is my constant companion”. Digital photographic practices and the elderly 105

SECTION 3: PUBLIC SPHERE, SPACE AND POLITICS

Alexandra Polownikow

Bringing qualities back in. Towards a new analytical approach for examining the transnationalization of public spheres..... 119

Hannu Nieminen

Three levels of the crisis of the media – and a way out 131

Simone Tosoni

Beyond space and place. The challenge of urban space to urban media studies 145

Magnus Hoem Iversen

Employing a rhetorical approach to the practice of audience research on political communication 157

SECTION 4: RETHINKING MEDIA STUDIES

Georgina Newton

Socialist feminism and media studies. An outdated theory or contemporary debate?..... 171

Irena Reifová

Theoretical framework for the study of memory in old and new media age 183

Maria Murumaa-Mengel, Katrin Laas-Mikko and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

“I have nothing to hide”. A coping strategy in a risk society 195

SECTION 5: ACADEMIC PRACTICE

Nico Carpentier

Recognizing difference in academia. The sgridge as a metaphor for agonistic interchange 211

François Heinderyckx

A practical guide to using visuals to enhance oral presentations in an academic context 227

Leif Kramp

The digitization of science. Remarks on the alteration of academic practice ... 239

PART 2**THE EUROPEAN MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL 2014 AND ITS PARTICIPANTS**

Andreas Lenander Ægidius.....	255
Susanne Almgren	256
Sara Atanasova.....	257
Shani Burke.....	258
Simona Bonini Baldini.....	259
Rianne Dekker	260
Stephanie de Munter	261
Flavia Durach.....	262
Scott Ellis.....	263
Paula Herrero	264
Gabriella Fodor.....	265
Antje Glück.....	266
Magnus Hoem Iversen	267
Søren Schultz Jørgensen	268
Ralitsa Kovacheva	269
Linda Lotina.....	270
Aida Martori.....	271
Saadia Ishtiaq Nauman	272
Georgina Newton	273
Can Irmak Özınanır.....	274
Bina Ogbebor	275
Arko Olesk	276
Ezequiel Ramón Pinat.....	277
Daria Plotkina	278
Alexandra Polownikow.....	279
Kinga Polynczuk-Alenius	280
Subekti W. Priyadharna.....	281
Song Qi	282
Michael Scheffmann-Petersen	283
Monika Sowinska.....	284
Maria Schreiber.....	285
Saiona Stoian	286
Jan Švelch	287
Robert Tasnádi	288
Michal Tuchowski.....	289
Jari Väliverronen.....	290
Monika Verbalyte.....	291
Susan Vertoont	292
Yiyun Zha.....	293
Dan Zhang.....	294
Eimantė Zolubienė.....	295

Media representations of suffering and mobility. Mapping humanitarian imaginary through changing patterns of visibility

Saiona Stoian

Abstract

Recent research on media and suffering highlights, on the one hand, the moral implications of mediation as a process through which various regimes of ethical and imaginative engagement are negotiated and, on the other hand, the structuring effects of media representations which, through their symbolic circulation, simultaneously reinforce and draw upon a humanitarian imaginary. The present paper wishes to expand these concerns in a different disciplinary field, that of mobility studies, in order to ask how the visibility patterns of suffering, informed by the humanitarian imaginary, are further incorporated into a certain understanding of the mobility/immobility dialectic, and how this incorporation affects, in return, the way we view suffering. One of the arguments is that physical vulnerability as “the clearest manifestation of our common humanity” (Chouliaraki, 2013: 26) is gradually replaced, in the context of heightened mobility, by a vocabulary of psychological and emotional trauma aided through media witnessing and testimony. In contemporary society, mobility has become not only a source of symbolic capital, but also an ideal in itself, promoted and reinforced through the logic of the network society. However, as a resource, mobility is not accessible to everyone to the same degree and, while mobility studies have acknowledged the relationship between mobility and emergent forms of social inequality, a systematic analysis of the relationship between mobility/immobility and suffering is yet to be tackled.

Keywords: media representations of suffering, humanitarian imaginary, melodrama of mobility, public culture

Stoian, S. (2015) ‘Media representations of suffering and mobility. Mapping humanitarian imaginary through changing patterns of visibility’, pp. 93-103 in L. Kramp/N. Carpentier/A. Hepp/I. Tomanić Trivundža/H. Nieminen/R. Kunelius/T. Olsson/E. Sundin/R. Kilborn (eds.) *Journalism, Representation and the Public Sphere*. Bremen: edition lumière.

1. Introduction

A growing body of research (Tester, 1999; Boltanski, 2004; Chouliaraki 2006a; Silverstone 2007; Frosh, 2011) concerning the moral consequentiality of mediation has privileged media representations of suffering as a site of inquiry into the increasingly relevant role media play in our imaginary engagement with alterity. While otherness, as a distinctly modern category, has a rich history, ranging from early sociological accounts regarding the status of the stranger in the modern metropolis' ecology (Park, 1915, Simmel 1950,[1908]) to post-colonial musings regarding "*the subaltern subject*" (Spivak, 1983), it is through the lens of mediation and the concept of 'distance' that otherness acquires analytical strength. A concern with distance thus opens up an analytical space where mediation is treated not only as one of the core mechanisms in the production of publicness as a category which negotiates between individual pursuits of meaning, institutional frameworks and dominant symbolic regimes or imaginaries, but also as one of the main means of approaching "*otherness as a problem of representation*" (Chouliaraki and Orgad, 2011: 342).

What Chouliaraki terms an "*analytics of mediation*" aspires to connect the embeddedness of media texts in technological artefacts which engage us through specific multimodal properties with the embeddedness of media texts in social relationships in order to understand how media, as a vehicle of symbolic interaction, manage to either undermine or to foster "*a global public with a sense of social responsibility towards distant sufferers*" (Chouliaraki, 2006b: 3). In a similar manner, drawing on Levinas' work, Pinchevski (2014: 65) envisions the distance implicit in the act of mediation as the conceptual basis for a new media meta-ethics that would "*attend to alterity as it undergoes mediation*" by evoking "*the very fact of mediation – the fact that no message passes without the contamination of passage*". The study of mediated suffering therefore poses a challenge not only in terms of finding the 'proper distance' between those who suffer and those who do not, but also in terms of including this inquiry in the broader efforts of understanding how media ultimately mould and alter not only the way we communicate, but also the way in which communities of meaning are formed in a fundamentally decentred society.

In this context, an increasing interest in imagination and the imaginary reveals a potential line of inquiry not only into the performative quality of media texts as forms of mediated (inter)action, e.g. research on empathic arousal and the narrative imagination in fiction films (Landsberg, 2009), but also into how the symbolic circulation of media representations of suffering simultaneously produce and reproduce patterns of visibility and interaction with on-screen suffering, i.e. a humanitarian imaginary understood as "*a communicative structure that disseminates the imperative to act on vulnerable others through a wide repertoire of popular genres*" (Chouliaraki, 2013: 172). Rather than

being the exclusive ethos of international NGOs or disaster relief agencies, humanitarianism established itself, with the help of popular culture and mass means of communication, as a modern discourse whose claims, resources and symbols inform our engagement with mediated suffering. Vestergaard (2013: 2) integrates the ongoing reliance of humanitarian NGOs on means of mass communication into a broader process of “*gradual displacement of power from the humanitarian organizations to external stakeholders*”. The humanitarian NGOs’ awareness raising job is gradually shifted towards media outlets, especially the news industry, mass media thus becoming instrumental not only in getting the message across, but also in creating and fostering the moral environment in which NGOs and other organizations communicate.

Charles Taylor (2004) envisions the concept of ‘modern social imaginary’, understood as a common understanding which makes possible common practices and a shared sense of legitimacy, as inseparable from the emergence of a distinctively modern moral order. According to Taylor, modernity should be understood not only in terms of higher-order processes such as industrialization or the development of the nation state, but also in terms of collective representations of how we ought to live together in society; this vision of a world inhabited in common being informed by a pre-existing moral background. What distinguishes, according to Taylor, the modern moral order from previous social mores and conventions is a form of stranger sociability facilitated initially by structures such as the market (which enables exchanges of goods and services on contractual terms) or the public sphere (allowing discussion between strangers on issues of common interest), but which has now become increasingly dependent on means of mass communication.

The “*imagined communities*” (Anderson, 2006[1983]) of modernity therefore rely on a form of stranger sociability facilitated by shared social imaginaries, whose circulation is now facilitated by means of mass communication: “*modernity relies on a special form of social imaginary that is based on relations among strangers; the stranger sociability is made possible through mass mediation, yet it also creates and organizes spaces of circulation for mass media*” (Gaonkar, 2002: 5). This insight concerning the role of imagination in fostering a form of solidarity possible by virtue of representation as opposed to the mechanical solidarity characteristic of pre-modern societies (Durkheim, 1994: 1893), seems to be confirmed by research on empathic arousal. According to Coplan (2011: 5) high-level empathy involves complex imaginative processes which allow another’s experience to be replicated while self-other differentiation is maintained. While low-level empathy is presumed to involve fast spread of emotion through mirroring or contagion, high-level empathy is always mediated, because it involves representing on an imaginary level another’s emotional state rather than simply identifying with it.

2. Media, suffering and mobility: theoretical explorations

Although mobility is not restricted to contemporary times, the unprecedented complexity of the relational dynamics between flows of people, objects and information in light of processes such as deterritorialization, transnational migration, globalization and global connectivity seems to pinpoint mobility as “*a general principle of modernity similar to those of equality, globality, rationality and individuality*” (Canzler et. al., 2008: 3). Increased circulation and movement can thus be considered together with the imaginary construction of sociability through representation as two chief characteristics of modernity, a fact which explains the growing interest towards mobility as “*both physical bodies moving through material landscapes and categorical figures moving through representational spaces*” (Delaney, 1999 apud. Cresswell, 2006a: 4). Focusing on the relationship between the increased mobility of social life and the increased mobility of media representations, Appadurai (1996: 3) considers media and migration as two of the major forces contributing to the rupture between the pre-modern and the modern through their “*joint effect on the work of the imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity*”.

In this sense, mobility acquires a double status, on the one hand, as a process by virtue of which meaning and representations circulate, aided by the media, and, on the other hand, as a reality which appeals to representation in order to give meaning to movement. The first instance is characterized by a performative understanding of mobility, where “*society is held together by the social imaginaries created and maintained through circulation*” (Valaskivi and Sumiala, 2014: 231), while the second instance approaches mobility in terms of social constructions which distinguish between what can be considered movement and what cannot. Reflecting on the need to combine the representational and the performative aspects of movement, Lee and LiPuma (2002: 192) argue for a rethinking of circulation in terms of a cultural phenomenon “*with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and the interpretative communities built around them*”.

A potential means of approaching movement as a cultural phenomenon involves considering the social production of mobility through representations within contexts of social and cultural power relations, a ‘discursive analytics of movement’ (Frello, 2008) thus inquiring into how “*movement is made meaningful, and how the resulting ideologies of mobility become implicated in the production of mobile practices*” (Cresswell, 2006a: 21). Rather than being solely a matter of physical or virtual entities moving through time and space whose movement can be measured and planned, mobility is also about the production of meanings which integrate movement and its social, moral and emotional implications into imaginaries of (im)mobility. In this sense, mobility

bears an ambiguous position in the contemporary world, on the one hand, as a source of symbolic capital, an ideal reinforced by the logic of capitalism and the network society, and, on the other hand, as a source of anxiety, movement being the object of intense surveillance, regulation and mechanization through timetables and security protocols.

Boltanski and Chiapello (2007[1999]) approach mobility as the *modus operandi* of contemporary society in the context of a broader concern with the ‘spirit of capitalism’, meaning the totality of discourses that justify people’s commitment to capitalism and renders this commitment an attractive option in light of changing value systems. Mobility is thus understood in the context of developments rejecting hierarchical forms of corporate organization in favour of a vocabulary of flexibility, adaptation to challenges and creative problem-solving. This change in management style has determined themes of competition to assume unprecedented salience, and has generated a new form of mobility-valuing meritocracy: the ideal work is project-based (thus, assuming a temporary, yet cyclical quality), while the ideal workforce is evaluated in terms of its ability to keep up, to sustain the network and to increase, through each project, its employability. The willingness and ability to be on the move, and to successfully correlate adaptability in work relations with mobility in emotional and private life establishes itself as an imperative in the context of contemporary organizational culture.

However, research on the organization of mobilities and emergent forms of inequality, highlights the relational character of mobility as a category which depends on excluded others in order to assert itself. Taking as paradigmatic example the tourist, MacCannell (1999) argues that not only work, but also leisure is subjected to the tensions of a movement/stasis dichotomy according to which the tourist depends on the relative immovability of the locals or the natives who help stage this leisure activity as an authentic touristic experience. As Malkki (1992: 29) argues: “*the spatial incarceration of the native operates [...] through the attribution not only of physical immobility, but also of a distinctly ecological immobility. Natives are thought to be ideally adapted to their environments*”.

While these excluded others need not necessarily correspond to traditional vulnerable social categories, there is still the question of how differential access to mobility reflects structures and hierarchies of power and how the “*idealisation of movement, or transformation of movement into a fetish, depends upon the exclusion of others who are already positioned as not free in the same way*” (Ahmed, 2004: 152). The relationship between suffering and mobility can therefore be understood only in the context of a complex interplay between movement and fixity as two “*meta-narratives that inform more specific, more local, more contextual attitudes towards mobility*” (Cresswell, 2006a: 55). This means that mobility is not only differentiated in terms of

access or potentiality (from latent to manifest mobility), but also in terms of its metaphorical understanding, mobility meaning different things and being invested with different moral implications according to the perspective from which it is approached.

In this sense, Cresswell (2006a) distinguishes between ‘a sedentarist metaphysics’ and ‘a nomadic metaphysics’ as two major worldviews from which most metaphors of mobility originate. The concept of ‘sedentarist metaphysics’ was initially coined by Liisa Malkki (1992), who argued through her work on refugees that rooted conceptions of identity and culture can be understood as part of a broader narrative through which territorial displacement is seen as pathological, and as bearing significant moral consequences, the loss of one’s roots meaning the loss of one’s moral compass. A ‘sedentarist metaphysics’ privileges concepts of place, home or roots as centres of meaning related to notions of attachment, loyalty and emotional involvement to which they lend moral weight, mobility being seen as either deviant (it threatens the authenticity of territorialized identity and therefore the moral order upon which it relies), or as a strictly necessary, rational enterprise which is goal-oriented. This instrumental view of mobility justifies movement in terms of the push-pull factors of the place of origin and the place of destination, mobility being the end-result of *“the rational decision that one place is better in some quantifiable way than another”* (Cresswell, 2006a: 29).

Meanwhile, a ‘nomadic metaphysics’ invests dynamism, flux and flow either with a subversive meaning (emancipation from structural constraints) or with connotations of progress, opportunity, creativity and self-determination. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007[1999]) illustrated the way in which a positive valuation of mobility is incorporated into the workplace as well as into private life through a rhetoric of development: similar to self-actualization, increasing one’s employability is also a constant work in progress realized through an accumulation of diverse experiences and projects. On a broader level, the relationship between diversity and mobility endows movement with the metaphorical value of adaptability, openness towards difference and a cosmopolitan outlook, fact which determined some to associate this nomadic metaphysics with a class-restricted type of mobility:

being a true “cosmopolitan” hinges on one’s ability as a traveller to distance oneself from one’s cultural background and to engage in other cultures. And this in turn depends on the movement being voluntary [...] Real cosmopolitans are likely to be diplomats and intellectuals, rather than work migrants and refugees who, like tourists, are characterized by attempting to build “surrogate homes” in order not to become involved with other cultural experiences and surroundings (Frello, 2008: 34).

However, attempts to account for a less constricted notion of cosmopolitan identity which focuses on practices of consumption, daily routines and mundane interactions as the locus of a ‘banal cosmopolitanism’ (Beck and Sznaider, 2006), as well as the framing of mobility in terms of a fundamental right in liberal-democratic societies (Cresswell, 2006b), have rendered mobility as freedom one of the key metaphors of this nomadic metaphysics.

3. Dramatizing the mobility/immobility dialectic

Considering the meta-narratives of mobility described above as two ends of a spectrum which can include a variety of localized regimes of mobility, the paper argues for a need to study the relationship between media representations of suffering and mobility in terms of a patterned visibility through which suffering is mobilized in order to invest mobility with different meanings. Rather than treating movement and stasis as two dichotomous categories, this approach focuses on mobility and immobility as a *dialectic* relationship which stimulates the melodramatic imagination: what are the circumstances in which mobility can turn into immobility and the other way around and how do media construct this tension in terms of suffering and hope? By approaching the humanitarian imaginary as one of the basic mechanisms through which compassion is publicly communicated, suffering thus appears as a consequence of the ambiguous status mobility holds in contemporary society: a threat towards attachment and moral order, as well as a vital resource which is differentially accessed.

Chouliaraki’s (2013: 27) description of the humanitarian imaginary as a communicative structure “*founded on a theatrical arrangement that separates safe spectators from vulnerable others and communicates its moral message through the staging of spectacles of suffering*”, places media-enabled visibility of suffering at the heart of contemporary public culture. In a similar manner, Gusfield (1984, [1981]: 53), speaks of “*the drama of public reality*” as the way in which neutral, technical facts such as statistics or demographics regarding troubling realities are transformed into public problems through a work of dramatization which translates abstract knowledge into “*facts of dramatic significance, implying attitudes and commitments, arousing images and values*”.

Media representations of suffering therefore serve to embed narratives of mobility into a social context in which definitions, meanings and responsibilities are negotiated and “pathologies” of movement are constructed through dramatization. This is particularly relevant given the increasing interest towards the social and cultural transformations generated by transnational mobility and the transnationalization of family ties in the context of labour migration and ‘mobile livelihoods’ (Olwig and Sørensen, 2002), where an imaginary of abandonment or home-longing coexists with an imaginary of unhindered

movement and work opportunities. The reverse situation is also possible, Huang and Yeoh (2007) arguing through their research on transnational domestic workers' abuse by their employers (i.e. maids working in Singapore) that restricting one's mobility is a frequently used means of coercion in such households, home becoming synonymous in these accounts with a cage or a prison.

The tensions co-existing inside this mobility/immobility dialectic render distance and movement as much a matter of geography as they are a reinterpreting and restructuring of emotional bonds. While bodily vulnerability has traditionally been considered "*the clearest manifestation of our common humanity*" (Chouliaraki, 2013: 26) and therefore the foundation of humanitarian solidarity, suffering is rewritten in the context of fluid identities and borders through a vocabulary of psychological and emotional trauma, aided by media witnessing and testimony. This transition from the biological life to the biographical life takes place through a psychologization of suffering, a process which translates "*social inequalities in terms of psychic suffering and proposes listening [...] as a response to social difficulties*" (Fassin, 2012: 23). In this context, media witnessing appears as a complex process performed in, by and through media: "*it refers simultaneously to the appearance of witnesses in media reports, the possibility of media themselves bearing witness and the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events*" (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009: 1). Technological mediation has rendered witnessing as the primary mode of relating to suffering in the contemporary world; the challenge of translating the experience of suffering into language generating numerous questions regarding the ethics, aesthetics and politics of representation. Suffering becomes not only a matter of corporeal pain, but also a matter of value conflicts dramatized in and through the communicative structures and aesthetics of contemporary media.

4. Conclusion

The paper argues for a performative understanding of media representations as instances of mediated interaction with suffering in the context of: a. the emergence of a modern form of stranger sociability made possible by virtue of representation (the social imaginary) and b. the media-enhanced circulation of representations which simultaneously nurture and draw upon the social imaginaries that hold society together. As one of the main mechanisms through which solidarity with distant others is mundanely communicated, the humanitarian imaginary represents one of the key catalysts in activating such a sensibility. The humanitarian imaginary should therefore be understood not

in terms of one specific genre or the other, but as a constellation of popular genres which work together in order to create the moral climate within which we interact with suffering.

Correlating the increased mobility of social life and the increased mobility of media representations, the paper approached movement as a discursively produced category which reunites the empirical reality of moving bodies and the circulation of meanings, ideologies and imaginaries of im(mobility) and suffering. In this sense, the paper argued for a need to consider mobility as a cultural phenomenon, and to inquire into how movement is made meaningful through certain patterns of visibility, the relationship between suffering and mobility being approached in the context of a dialectical relationship between movement and fixity.

It is not only that mobility comes to mean different things depending on the meta-narrative in which it is embedded, but the actual relationship between movement and immobility is a flexible and fluid one, each category being subjected to the permanent danger of transforming itself into its opposite. This inherent instability and the way in which suffering dramatizes the social, moral and emotional implications of this dialectic stimulate the melodramatic imagination, the drama of public reality revealing a constant negotiation of responsibilities, faults and expectations.

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Biography

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