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The Technopolitics of Compassion

A Postphenomenological Analysis of the Digital Mediation of Global Humanitarianism

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THE TECHNOPOLITICS OF COMPASSION

The Technopolitics of Compassion

A Postphenomenological Analysis of the Digital Mediation of Global Humanitarianism

Daniel Møller Ølgaard

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Abstract. Humanitarian organisations are central actors in the mediation of humanitarian disasters as objects of public, political and moral concern. Consequently, if we want to understand this key dynamic of world politics we have to understand how aid organisations use media. But whereas extant knowledge about media and global humanitarianism focuses primarily on issues related to discourses and images of distant suffering in mass media this dissertation argues that contemporary humanitarianism is incomprehensible without a detailed understanding of the socio-technological processes of digital mediation through which the suffering of global south others is increasingly witnessed, pitied and responded to by caring publics in the global north. Offering a postphenomenological perspective supplemented by key insights from science & technology studies and critical theory, the dissertation opens up analyses of the digital mediation of global humanitarianism to questions about power at the intersection of the technological materialities of digital media and the imaginaries invested into them. Applying this framework in a detailed analysis of the use of social media, virtual reality and donation apps for humanitarian purposes, the dissertation subsequently identifies the specific and problematic ways in which the visibility of humanitarian disasters, the emotional engagement of caring publics and everyday forms of humanitarian action are shaped in and through processes of digital mediation. Based on this, the dissertation proposes the term 'the technopolitics of compassion' to emphasise the global power asymmetries that are perpetuated and compounded by the aid sector's use of digital media while keeping open the possibility of thinking about and using digital media differently.

Key words: Humanitarianism, digital media, technopolitics, postphenomenology, mediation theory, power, materiality, imaginaries, social media, algorithms, virtual reality, apps

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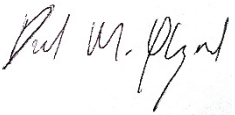
Signature  Date 2022-05-04

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To Line

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Introduction

Imagine this: it is early morning and you are struggling to get out of bed. In a last attempt to prevent the inevitable, you pick up your phone from the bedside table. With a gentle touch, you open up the Instagram app and instinctively begin to scroll through your feed. At first, nothing exciting seems to have happened since you last picked up your phone. Then an image catches your attention. A blanket-wrapped infant, with nothing but stitches where his left eye is supposed to be, is looking at you through the white glow of the high-resolution screen. His name is Karims, the caption below the image tells you. When he was just three months old, he lost his eye in a missile strike that also killed his mother. Appalled by Karims' tragedy, you first feel hopeless at the thought of the millions of children who live their lives in the shadow of war and disaster. But then you notice that the image is accompanied by a bright, yellow donation button. Immediately, apathy is replaced by a desire to help. And so, with only a few swipes with your thumb and a gentle touch with your index finger, you make a modest contribution that you are nevertheless assured will make a difference. For good measure, you also share the appeal with your friends and encourage them to do the same. Invigorated by this, you put down your phone and finally manage to get out of bed.

While I expect that many readers will find the scene unfolding above to be familiar, the purpose of this imaginary encounter with Karims' misfortune is not to illustrate some universal human capacity for benevolence when faced by the suffering of distant others. Indeed, it seems naive to believe in, much less rely on, such ideals when, today, there seems to a growing belief that we cannot or should not feel morally responsible for the wellbeing of those living in the distant elsewheres of the Global South,[1] thus leading some to wonder whether the cosmopolitan spirit of humanitarianism is dead (see e.g.

[1] In this thesis, 'the Global South' refers broadly to countries, communities and individuals in the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Oceania, which are mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalised.

Braidotti, Hanafin and Blaagaard, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2013; Duffield, 2019).[2] Instead, the scene demonstrates how compassion—a key emotion in liberal-democratic thought (Käpylä and Kennedy, 2014) and a central force in world politics (Ure and Frost, 2014)—is elicited in our media-saturated present, and illustrates that the crucial role of media in this regard is that it affords Western publics with an opportunity to care at a distance, and underlines the hardly disputable fact that the management of such sentiments is crucial to the success of humanitarian organizations. It thus serves as an important reminder that media is an essential component of global humanitarianism and that it has arguably been so 'ever since individuals or organizations began to undertake humanitarian action over long distances and across frontiers' (Paulmann 2019: 1). Indeed, the recognition that the ability of publics in the Global North[3] to witness, care for, and respond to the suffering of Global South others exists, primarily, in mediated form is a crucial starting point for this thesis.

But the fictive encounter with Karims also underlines the need to critically examine how new ways of caring at a distance are transforming how the compassion of Western do-gooders is elicited and managed in the digitalized societies of the Global North. Indeed, while smartphones, social media platforms, and other digital technologies offer new possibilities for witnessing, engaging with, and responding to the suffering of distant others, they also

[2] It is worth noting in this regard that the thesis was finalized before, and in the immediate aftermath, of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and that it was thus too early, at the time of writing, to say anything about whether and how this will force us to reconsider this particular claim. On the one hand, the willingness of European countries and the US to welcome Ukranian refugees (which stands in stark contrast to the dominant political attitude towards refugees from the Middle East and Africa) might signal a return of liberal internationalism and cosmopolitan values in world politics. On the other, the incessant framing of Ukranian refugees as 'Western', 'Europeans' and 'neighbours' could also be read as an entrenchment of the communitarian attitude that is at the heart of the nationalist ideologies that have come to increasingly influence politics and societies around the world in recent years.

[3] Similar to Emmanuel Wallerstein, I use the term 'the Global North' to refer to countries and citizens in affluent and politically powerful regions such as North America and Europe.

introduce new problems. For example, many of us encounter humanitarian appeals on social media platforms like Instagram as the result of a decision made by an algorithm that has identified us as a potential donor based on our recent search queries, online purchases, or geographical whereabouts, which raises concerns about the role of algorithms in managing how humanitarian issues are shown and seen, and what inversely remains invisible. Moreover, while social media platforms such as Instagram afford users with new ways of translating their compassion towards vulnerable others into action, by sharing humanitarian appeals with friends or donating money with the click of a thumb, they also induce concerns about whether such sporadic forms of engagement are becoming a proxy for global solidarity and socioeconomic change (see e.g. Hoskins, 2020) as well as the global hierarchies that they might implicitly reinforce (see e.g. Shringarpure, 2018).

Compelled by these observations, this thesis demonstrates that, while the aid sector's growing use of and reliance on digital media might initially appear unproblematic or even morally beneficial, the use of digital media also sustains long-lasting problems and introduces new risks to the field of global helping. In doing so, it resonates with a growing scholarly scepticism towards the techno-utopian visions that seem to permeate the aid industry,[4] which tends to frame digital media and technological innovation as the solution to some of the sector's biggest challenges (see e.g. Vestergaard, 2008; Madianou, 2013; Zuckerman, 2013; Scott, 2015; Duffield, 2016; Hawkins, 2018; Shringarpure, 2018; Gray, 2019; Schwittay, 2019; Hoskins, 2020; Ross, 2020a). In more concrete terms, while both scholars and humanitarian professionals have drawn attention to the potential of new digital media technologies in facilitating public mobilization and activism in response to

[4] These 'techno-utopian visions' are implicit, for example, in the belief of Bill Gates—whose fund The Gates Foundation is an influential actor in the global aid sector (Fejerskov, 2020)—that '[w]ith the technology we have today, and with the innovations that are still to come, anyone with an internet connection, a few dollars to give, and the time to do a little digging can become a more-informed donor' (Gates, 2013). But techno-utopianism is also prevalent in contemporary forms of aid delivery and humanitarian governance, in which technological innovations are increasingly seen as providing simple and cost-effective solutions to complex problems (see e.g. Abdelnour and Saeed, 2014; Morozov, 2013)

distant suffering in recent years (see e.g. McPherson, 2007; Watson, 2010; Meijer, 2012; Meier, 2015; Mortensen, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015), this thesis challenges this optimism by demonstrating how digital media technologies are used to elicit and govern the compassion of Western audiences and how these processes of mediation enforce global power asymmetries and unequal enactments of privilege. As a result, the benevolent image of digital media becomes circumspect.

To be sure, the aim of this thesis is not to deprecate humanitarian organizations and their use of digital media altogether. Rather, the aim is to question *specific* ways of showing, engaging, and responding to the suffering of distant others as a starting point for imagining alternative ways of mediating injustices and human vulnerabilities as objects of public and political concern. Rather than articulating a critique of digital media *per se*, I instead want to compel scholars, humanitarian professionals as well as the wider public to think about how digital media can be used differently. Inspired by the postphenomenological philosopher Paul-Peter Verbeek, who has argued that 'we cannot be human without technologies' (Verbeek, 2015a), this thesis starts from the assumption that we cannot be humanitarians without media, with 'humanitarians' denoting organizations and individuals in the Global North involved in helping Global South others. But, like Verbeek, it also maintains that even though global humanitarianism is already always mediated, the way we think about and use media for benevolent purposes matters with regards to socio-political effects. From this perspective, the knowledge generated by the thesis becomes an important contribution to the task of imagining new ways of using digital media so as to mitigate the ethico-political issues it identifies.

Rethinking mediation

This thesis has grown out of a general curiosity as to how the compassion of caring publics in the Global North—to witness, to care, to give—is elicited, cultivated, and managed through the use of media. My primary interest in this regard has been to critically consider the ethico-political implications of the use of digital media to present the human consequences of distant disasters

as an object of moral concern. Therefore, the thesis is also necessarily framed by an extensive scholarly literature that, especially since the 1990s, has critically analysed the mediation of distant disasters and catastrophes as objects of moral and political concern (see e.g. Arendt 1973, Boltanski, 1999; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001; Sontag, 2003; Chouliaraki, 2006a; Silverstone, 2007; Orgad and Seu, 2014a; Hutchison, 2016). Together, the work of these scholars underlines the hardly disputable fact that, as Suzanne Franks states, '[o]ur awareness of nearly all humanitarian disasters is defined by the media' (Franks, 2013: 3) and that, as Keith Tester argues, 'if we want to understand modern humanitarianism, we need also to understand modern media culture, because the two are inextricably entwined' (Tester, 2010: viii).

But whereas the authors cited above are primarily concerned with the representation of humanitarianism in traditional forms of mass media such as television, newspapers, and photography, the thesis adds to these insights by providing a detailed analysis of the *digital* mediation of global humanitarianism. By *global humanitarianism* I am, broadly, referring to the 'organization and governance of activities designed to protect and improve humanity' (Barnett, 2011: 10) that are carried out by UN organizations, NGOs, or government agencies in the Global North, whose object of protection and alleviation is primarily conflict and disaster zones in the Global South.[5] On the one hand, this thesis thus understands global humanitarianism as a fundamentally cosmopolitan political project in the sense that its founding principle is the recognition of Global South others as equal members of a common humanity. On the other hand, it posits that we must also regard global humanitarianism as a politics of inequality because it focuses primarily on vulnerable populations in the distant elsewheres of the postcolonial locales in the Global South. Indeed, as Fassin (2011: 3) notes, this 'tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance, is constitutive of all humanitarian government.'

[5] Barnett (2011: 10) additionally distinguishes between two branches of global humanitarianism: the emergency branch, which focuses on symptoms, and the development branch, which adds the ambition of removing the root causes of suffering. However, in spite of efforts to integrate discussions about emergencies and development, it is the former branch that is still primarily associated with humanitarianism.

While some have suggested that global humanitarianism acquired its contemporary ethos and institutional form with the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1863, the humanitarian project that I study in this thesis arguably did not emerge until after the end of the Second World War, when the civilian suffering and population displacement that characterized the war led to a new understanding of what constituted a humanitarian emergency. As a consequence of this, war was no longer the sole focus of humanitarian action. Instead, a broader concern for disasters and catastrophes was promoted with 'renewed efforts to articulate humanitarian norms and build institutions to enforce them' (Calhoun, 2008: 83). But it is also crucial to note in this regard that, since the 1990s, these humanitarian ideals and institutions have increasingly come under pressure by the 'new wars' (Kaldor, 2001) that began occurring during this decade as well as the deepening entanglement of relief agencies, militaries, Western governments, and corporate interests (Dillon and Reid, 2009). For these reasons, global humanitarianism has been described as being in a 'crisis' ever since (Barnett and Weiss, 2008; Duffield, 2016). This is important in the context of this thesis—as we shall also see below and in Chapter 1.1—because this (self) perceived 'crisis' of global humanitarianism helps explain the sector's turn to, and growing reliance on, media.

Whereas global humanitarianism describes institutionally organized attempts to help victims of war and disasters in the Global South, *mediation* is used in this thesis to refer to the processes through which humanitarian organizations bring distant suffering and relief efforts in the Global South into the perceptual field of caring publics in the Global North. Today, as Orgad & Seu (2014b: 3) remind us, humanitarian organizations are key actors 'in the mediation of distant suffering and the global production and dissemination of images and stories of disasters and atrocities.' But developments in the field of media have also been fundamental to the emergence of the global brand of humanitarianism described above. Indeed, both the globalisation and popularisation of humanitarianism in the 1940s and its eventual crisis, beginning in the 1990s, are seen by many as intrinsically entwined with innovations and shifts in media culture. For one, the institutional, organizational, and operational transformation of humanitarianism in the 1940s occurred alongside the proliferation of mass

media technologies such as television, which became increasingly accessible to publics in the Global North during the following decades (Lawrence & Tevenor, 2019). Similarly, the 'crisis' that began in the 1990s coincided with the emergence of satellite TV and 24-hour news channels, which caused an explosion in images of humanitarian suffering, raised concerns about 'compassion fatigue' among western audiences (Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001), and fuelled lively scholarly debates about the relationship between how the suffering of distant others is shown and seen via these new forms of media, and the kinds of moral responsibility they instil in viewers as well as the responses they are meant, but often fail, to elicit (Orgad & Seu 2014b: 8). Informed by these observations, this thesis is underlined by a similar concern with the proliferation of digital media as potentially having a profound impact on the practices and ethics of global humanitarianism.

In addition to describing the processes through which humanitarian disasters enter the global stage, the term mediation is also employed here to distinguish the analytical approach to the study of media that is adopted in this thesis from analyses of the 'mediatization' of global humanitarianism. Whereas 'mediatization theorists' generally focus on how humanitarian organizations submit, unilaterally, to the logics and interests of media institutions (see e.g. Benthall, 1993; Cottle and Nolan, 2007), my critical examination of the digital mediation of humanitarianism more closely resembles the approach of 'mediation theorists' who study what media do and what we do with media in pragmatic and situational terms (see e.g. Chouliaraki, 2006a; Silverstone, 2007; Vestergaard, 2011; Orgad and Seu, 2014a; Ong, 2019). The benefit of this approach, as Couldry (2008: 373) argues, is that 'mediation theory provides more flexibility [for] thinking about the open-ended and dialectical social transformations which … may come in time to be articulated' as a consequence of the emergence and proliferation of new media technologies. It does so because, rather than identifying an all-encompassing 'media logic' that dictates how humanitarian organizations operate from the top-down, as mediatization theorists do, mediation scholars focus on the multi-faceted and multi-sited micro-processes through which media technologies come to 'change the social and cultural environment that supports it as well as the relationships that individuals, in the public and in

humanitarian organizations, have to that environment and to each other' (Vestergaard, 2011: 24).

What is further implied by this is that mediation theory is also a theory of power. As Chouliaraki (2006b: 157) notes: 'Media discourse on distant suffering, for instance, operates as a strategy of power in so far as it selectively offers the option of emotional and practical engagement with certain sufferers and leaves others outside the scope of such engagement, thereby reproducing hierarchies of place and human life.' Whereas mediatisation theorists conceptualize the social and political power of media as the ability to unilaterally dictate the operations and logics of humanitarian organizations, mediation theorists focus on how humanitarian discourses in the media 'articulate "universal" values of human conduct [and] how, in so doing, [they place] human beings into certain relationships of power to one another' (ibid). They generally do so by analysing the role of mediated narratives and images in relation to 1) how humanitarian disasters are made visible to or seen by caring publics in the Global North, 2) how the emotional engagement and moral responsibility of these audiences are cultivated, and 3) the form of action and agency that are promoted thereby. For example, Bleiker *et al.* (2013) have analysed how the visual framing of boat refugees in Australian newspapers implicitly dehumanises these vulnerable others; Chouliaraki (2008) has similarly demonstrated that humanitarian media discourses are increasingly communitarian (as opposed to cosmopolitan) in how they frame the responsibility of Western audiences to care and show compassion when faced by humanitarian disasters; and she has also problematized the forms of agency promoted in mediated representations of humanitarian disasters as being constitutive of sporadic and individualized responses at the expense of sustained forms of collective action (Chouliaraki 2013).

Framed by these insights, this thesis critically studies how the suffering of distant others is made visible to the public, how it is presented as an object of emotional and moral concern, and the forms of action that humanitarian organizations promote through the use of digital media. Of particular interest here is what the ethico-political implications of this are in terms of the sentiments and unequal relationships of power that the use of digital media generates or sustains. But the thesis also aims to rethink what mediation *is* and how we can study it in light of the proliferation of new, digital media

technologies. It does so because, while most of the literature on mediation provides valuable knowledge about the visual and textual content of specific media texts (see e.g. Chouliaraki 2006b) or the attitudes of particular audiences (see e.g. Ong, 2019), it fails to account for the technical peculiarities and characteristics of new digital media technologies in these regards. This lack of attention to the digital transformation of mediated humanitarianism in the extant literature is particularly unfortunate when taking into account that there are crucial differences between how digital and pre-digital media technologies operate. Firstly, because digital media objects are composed of code, they can also be described mathematically and manipulated, for example via algorithms. According to the media scholar Lev Manovich, a key difference between pre-digital and digital media is thus that digital media is interactive and programmable whereas pre-digital media is one-directional and pre-programmed (Manovich, 2001).[6] For example, what characterizes digital images, texts, and sounds is that they can be manipulated and recombined to form new media objects and thus allow digital media users to remix, remediate, and recombine media texts in new ways to produce new forms of content (see e.g. Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013). In addition to this, digital media has introduced new forms of computationally-driven automation that operate alongside, above, and beneath human intentionality (Manovich, 2001). As a consequence of this, many of the processes related to the identification and curation of media content, which used to be performed by humans, have been automated through the use of algorithms.

By failing to consider the technical characteristics and capacities of digital media, the extant literature on mediated humanitarianism cannot adequately account for the impact that the digital media revolution has on global humanitarianism. To name one example, even if Hutchison's (2016) account of the formation of transnational communities of pity in the wake of humanitarian disasters generates valuable knowledge about the role of media

[6] In total, Lev Manovich identifies five principles that define digital media. In addition to 'numerical representation,' 'modularity' and 'automation' as discussed above, these also include 'variability' and 'transcoding.' These principles are not to be understood as 'absolute laws,' Manovich writes, but rather as 'general tendencies of a culture' undergoing digitalization (Manovich, 2001).

technologies, such as the television and the newspaper, in mobilizing transnational responses to distant suffering in the wake of disasters, she does not take into account how the proliferation of digital media has profoundly reshaped how *ad-hoc* communities of solidarity are constituted and maintained across borders. This lack of attention to the digital-technological media ecology, in which humanitarian disasters and distant suffering are increasingly seen, felt, and responded to, is not only symptomatic for the extant literature but, as Ross (2019) points out, also downright puzzling when considering that recent accounts, such as Hutchison's, of the mediation of global humanitarianism,—which place particular emphasis on photographic images, arrive 'at a historical moment when the work of photojournalism is being crowdsourced from mobile devices and when the images produced are being intensively remediated by digital platforms and the algorithms behind them' (ibid: 264).

Moreover, by ignoring the peculiarities of digital media, the extant literature on media and humanitarianism also fails to account for the risks and problematic consequences associated with the proliferation of digital media, both in the aid industry and beyond. To return to the example of Hutchison, by not paying attention to new digital media platforms in her study of the media-enabled formation of transnational political publics in the wake of disaster, she also misses the potentially harmful effects of the algorithms behind these technical infrastructures; for example, in relation to what kind of communities and sentiments are promoted and sustained through algorithmically- governed processes of mediation. This omission is particularly unfortunate when considering that there seems to be a growing recognition among scholars that, contrary to what some might claim, algorithms are not neutral intermediaries but embody specific ideas, values and beliefs, and sometimes even 'feed (into) specific forms of violence' (Bellanova *et al.*, 2021: 121). Similarly, in humanitarian studies, there seems to be an emerging realization that analyses of contemporary aid must be more attentive to the potential risks and harms that are generated by the use of digital technologies in relation to the delivery and governance of aid, to name just two examples (see e.g. Sandvik, Jacobsen and McDonald, 2017). By failing to take the constitutive effects of digital media into account, the extant mediation literature similarly fails to recognize the risks and harms that

are caused by the use of digital media to elicit compassionate impulses among caring publics—to witness, to pity, to give—when faced by the suffering of distant others.

Considering these shortcomings, it is obvious that we cannot rely solely on the existing mediation literature when studying the ethico-political implications of the humanitarian sector's increasing interest in, and reliance on, digital media. Echoing Jackson's (2019) claim that the emergence and proliferation of new digital media technologies 'means we need to interrogate if and when new media itself impacts the politics we study [and] whether these structures might have implications for the questions we ask' (2), this thesis thus aims to rethink mediation theory. As will be developed below, it does so by offering new concepts and new methods with which to study the digital mediation of global humanitarianism. Specifically, it proposes an alternative approach informed by postphenomenological thought as well as key insights from science and technology studies and critical theory, which analyse both the material characteristics and technical capacities of particular digital media technologies and the beliefs, ideas, and visions that are invested into them by users.

Studying the digital mediation of global humanitarianism

This thesis argues that global humanitarianism is incomprehensible without a detailed understanding of the digital media technologies in, and through which, the distant elsewheres of humanitarian disasters in the Global South are increasingly made visible and actionable to caring publics in the Global North. Rather than studying the visual and textual content of specific media texts or the attitude of audiences, as mediation scholars have primarily done, it suggests that the ethico-political implications of the digital mediation of global humanitarianism can be better understood by focusing on what digital media technologies can do, how humanitarian organizations think about the communicative possibilities that they introduce, and how they are subsequently used in practice.

Inspired by Barnett (2013), the thesis pays dual attention to the 'emergence' and 'constitutive effects' of digital mediation in order to generate knowledge about 1) the socio-technological processes through which digital media technologies are adopted, appropriated, and used for humanitarian purposes (emergence), and 2) the potential risks and harm generated by this (constitutive effects). I am guided in this regard by the following research question:

> How are digital media technologies used for humanitarian purposes and what are the ethico-political consequences of this?

As will be developed in Chapter 3.2, the thesis provides an answer to this question by examining paradigmatic examples of three digital media technologies that have received considerable interest in the humanitarian sector in recent years. These are: the social media platform Facebook, the virtual reality experience Sense of Home, and the donation app ShareTheMeal. To study these varied cases, the thesis first theorizes mediation from a postphenomenological perspective (in Chapter 2) and by developing a multi-sited and multimodal, qualitative methodology (in Chapter 3) that combines research methods that enable me to 1) describe what these digital media technologies can *do* in technological-material terms, and 2) identify the beliefs, ideas, values, and visions that are invested into them by humanitarian organizations and caring publics. Bringing together these perspectives, the thesis finally discusses the ethico-political implications of specific ways of thinking about, and using, digital media for humanitarian purposes.

Technopolitics

The perhaps most crucial contribution made by the thesis relates to the knowledge it generates about the constitutive effects—or ethico-political implications—of the use of digital media for humanitarian purposes. Specifically, it offers novel insights into the power relations that are generated and sustained by the use of digital media technologies for humanitarian purposes, which are described in terms of a 'technopolitics of compassion' and foregrounds problematic aspects of these power relations while simultaneously keeping open the possibility of thinking about and using digital media differently. I am inspired in this regard by scholars such as Edwards and Hecht

(2010) who define 'technopolitics' as 'hybrids of technical systems and political practices that produce new forms of power and agency,' and thus position 'technology' and 'politics' as dynamic and co-constitutive processes. What is implied by this, as Edwards and Hecht (ibid: 256-257) further argue, is that 'technologies are not in and of themselves technopolitical. Rather, the practice of using them in political processes and/or toward political aims constitutes technopolitics.' Inspired by this, I similarly employ the term 'technopolitics' to emphasize that the power relations and ethico-political consequences that are constituted by the use of digital media for humanitarian purposes are fundamentally contingent, ambiguous and thus amendable.

But whereas literature on technopolitics has traditionally been concerned with the development, implementation and regulation of digital-technical systems at the macro-level of national- and international politics (see e.g. Carpenter, 2010; Gagliardone, 2014), the technopolitics of compassion that is identified in this thesis is better understood as a 'technopolitics of the everyday' that unfolds at the micro-level of digitally-mediated forms of global humanitarianism. The thesis thus also responds to recent calls for a deepened engagement with manifestations of global structures of power in the intimate and seemingly mundane contexts of the everyday (see e.g. Solomon and Steele, 2016; Åhäll, 2016). Moreover, whereas literature on 'technopolitics' tends to focus on the emancipatory potential of digital media technologies in terms of a radical redistribution of power through new, technologically-enabled forms of democratic participation, social justice or similar (see e.g. Kellner, 2001; Schaupp, 2021), this thesis discusses the technopolitics of compassion in terms of the involvement of particular processes of digital mediation in the enactment and enforcement of global inequalities.

While it might be said that the thesis provides a Western-centric account of mediated forms of global helping, I thus conversely argue it performs a postcolonial critique of global humanitarianism. Indeed, by turning its critical-analytical gaze back towards ourselves in the Global North rather than towards vulnerable others in the Global South, the thesis generates knowledge about the implication of digital forms of mediation in the reinvigoration of colonial relationships of dependency and global power asymmetries. The value of the thesis as a postcolonial critique—that focuses on aid organizations in the Global North, written from my particular positionality as a

Scandinavian researcher—finds further support in the writings of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Rather than appointing myself as a spokesperson by allowing individuals or organizations in the Global South to speak through my thesis—something which Spivak (1988) has forcefully problematized—I examine how the production and positioning of Global South others as 'subalterns' is performed through and sustained by processes of digital mediation. While it does not allow these subalterns to speak, it *does* thus nevertheless produce insights into how socio-technological processes of mediation reinvigorate colonial hierarchies and inequalities in the present, written from the perspective of someone who, as a researcher from the Global North, is complicit in this problematic dynamic of world politics. Doing so, as Spivak (ibid) further argues, is necessary in order to grasp the 'colonial debris' that endures in and continues to haunt our postcolonial present.[7]

What is further implied by this is that the contributions that are made by this thesis are also relevant beyond academia inasmuch as it generates concepts and insights that can enable humanitarian organizations and caring publics to reflect critically on how they use digital media for benevolent purposes. I am inspired in this regard by the words of Isabelle Stengers, who writes that: 'To resist a likely future in the present is to gamble that the present still provides substance for resistance, that it is populated by practices that remain vital even if none of them has escaped the generalized parasitism that implicates them all' (Stengers, 2010: 10). While I am critical towards the kinds of digital mediation that I examine herein—from the use of social media and virtual reality to the emergence of donation apps—the thesis thus nevertheless retains a belief in the possibility of mediating global humanitarianism differently and in the necessary involvement of the aid sector as well as the wider public in this transformation.

[7] 'Colonial debris' is a term derived from Ann Laura Stoler's work on the durability of colonial formations in both tangible and intangible forms. According to Stoler (2016: 5), contemporary global inequalities are often nothing more than 'refashioned and sometimes opaque reworkings … of colonial histories.' Crucially, by 'colonial debris,' Stoler is thus not describing a single or dominant sovereign empire but invites us instead to assess the impact of the ghost of colonialism in social contexts and political formations in the present.

Postphenomenology

The second contribution made by this thesis relates to the way it studies how digital media technologies are adopted and used for humanitarian purposes. Specifically, it offers a novel theoretical and methodological approach that enables us to study digital mediation as a *socio-technological* process that is shaped equally by the ideas, beliefs, and visions invested into the use of digital media for humanitarian purposes and by the material-technological configuration of these media technologies. Based on this, it opens up the study of the digital mediation of global humanitarianism to questions about power at the intersection of the technological materialities of new digital media technologies and the imaginaries that circumscribe them.

As will be explained in detail in Chapter 2, I develop this approach by engaging with postphenomenological thought (see e.g. Verbeek, 2011; Ihde, 2016) as well as key insights from critical theory (Feenberg, 2017) and science and technology studies (STS) (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015). In general terms, postphenomenologists such as Don Ihde argue that our collective interpretations and embodied experiences of the world around us are not only culturally or socially conditioned but also materially and technologically produced, while postphenomenologists such as Paul-Peter Verbeek (as well as STS scholars such as Jasanoff and Kim) interject that we must also take into account the experiences and interpretations of thinking, feeling, and acting human subjects who exist in digitally-mediated relations to the world around them. Bringing together these perspectives, the postphenomenological theory developed in this thesis proposes that we must analyse global humanitarianism as both 'technologically' and 'socially' mediated, by focusing on the constitutive role of the technological-material configuration of specific media technologies as well as the collective ideas, beliefs, visions and expectations—or imaginaries—that human subjects invest into them.

To explain this in more detail, it is helpful to distinguish between two dominant perceptions of the role of technology in politics where, as demonstrated by Jasanoff (2006), the relationship between the technological and the political is primarily described in terms of either 'interaction' or 'co-production.' The interactional group, as Mayer, Carpes, and Knoblich (2014: 5) write, 'deals with the question of how established practices or principles such as sovereignty, state authority or foreign policy are challenged by

technological changes or scientific knowledge' (see e.g. Brunstetter and Braun, 2011; Simmons, 2013). Conversely, the co-production camp of scholars starts from the assumption that 'the realities of human experience emerge as the joint achievements of scientific, technical and social enterprise' (Jasanoff, 2006: 17) and zooms in on the 'emergence of new structures, actors, practices, and identities' as well as the 'sites of contestation, resistance and negotiation' where they come into being (Mayer, Carpes and Knoblich, 2014: 5; see also Whatmore, 2009; Flyverbom, 2011; DeNardis, 2014).

Clearly, this thesis—in the way it studies processes of digital mediation as constitutive of specific ways of showing, feeling, and responding to humanitarian issues—analyses the techno-politics of compassion as a form of co-production. Concretely, it analyses the emergence of specific forms of global helping as co-produced by material and ideational factors, focusing equally on the technological configuration and affordances of specific digital media technologies and on the imaginaries invested into them. As already noted, this is a valuable contribution to the study of media and humanitarianism because existing ways of theorizing and analysing mediation are inadequate in explaining the socio-technological processes through which digital media technologies are adopted, appropriated, and employed for humanitarian purposes or to account for the ethico-political implications of this. But the thesis also carves out a conceptual middle-ground between social constructivist and technological determinist perspectives, maintaining that the significance of ideational and material factors cannot be established *a priori* because this is a key analytical task. By doing so, it provides a postphenomenological alternative to prevalent ways of understanding the crucial significance of things, artefacts, and devices in world politics in recent years (see e.g. Sassen, 2008; Connolly, 2011; Chandler, 2018; Grove, 2019).

In addition to the meta-theoretical debates that are referred to above, the postphenomenological approach developed in this thesis also contributes to recent work on the role of images, emotions, and practices in world politics. For example, Chapter 4 contributes to recent work on the role of images in world politics (see e.g. Bleiker, 2018) by examining the socio-technological dynamics through which specific ways of showing and seeing humanitarian issues are constituted and sustained through the interplay between the technological configuration of digital media and the intersubjective meanings

invested into them by humanitarian professionals. This is a valuable contribution to the literature on images and world politics because, in doing so, the thesis enables scholars to take both the material-technological and social dimensions of the global circulation of images into account when studying how specific images become globally and politically significant. In addition to this, Chapter 5 provides a novel perspective on emotions and world politics (see e.g. Koschut, 2020) by examining the ethico-political consequences of how virtual reality experiences are designed to elicit the emotional engagement of audiences by enabling new forms of embodied immediacy and mediated proximity. This is a valuable contribution because it enables scholars to study emotions as not only socially and culturally but also *technologically* constituted dimensions of world politics. Finally, Chapter 6 contributes to the development of 'practice theory' in the study of world politics (see e.g. Bueger and Gadinger, 2018) by generating insights into the forms of transnational political action and agency that are made possible by the emergence of humanitarian donation apps. This is a valuable contribution because it enables practice theorists to grasp the significance of digital media in relation to how human beings constitute social realities by acting in and on the world around them.

In sum, the postphenomenological approach to the study of digital mediation, as well as the use of the term 'the technopolitics of compassion', thus constitute the most crucial contributions that this thesis makes to the prevalent scholarly literature.

Outline of the thesis

As described above, this thesis examines the digital mediation of global humanitarianism through a postphenomenological approach, which it applies to study the use of three specific digital media technologies for humanitarian purposes, and finally discusses the implications of this in terms of a 'technopolitics of compassion' that foregrounds the problematic consequences of the digital turn in global helping.

The thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 defines and locates 'the technopolitics of compassion' based on an examination of the historical and

technological transformations through which 'compassion' has become an object that is 'sold' and governed by humanitarian organizations through the use of media. To this end, the chapter brings particular attention to how shifts and transformations in media culture intersect with, and shape, practices and ethics of global humanitarianism. Based on this, the chapter finally introduces the concept of 'mediation' as a fruitful approach to the study of the role of media in global humanitarianism, focusing specifically on the contributions and shortcomings of this particular theory in relation to the emergence of digital media as a way to make obvious the need to rethink how the mediation of global humanitarianism is being studied in the extant scholarly literature.

Picking up where Chapter 1 ends, Chapter 2 begins by asking how might we—in broad theoretical terms—develop an understanding of 'mediation' as a socio-technological process that shapes how human users see, feel for, and respond to humanitarian disasters? In providing an answer to this question, the chapter draws the contours of a postphenomenological theory of digital mediation that rethinks and rearticulates the definitions and concepts used by mediation theorists. In doing so, it enables a dual analysis of the material composition of digital media technologies and the imaginaries that circumscribe them, as a way to critically interrogate the power relationships that are generated and sustained by the humanitarian sector's use of digital media.

Building on this, Chapter 3 draws the contours of a methodological approach to studying digital mediation that is 'multi-sited' in the sense that it examines the digital mediation of global humanitarianism in multiple socio-technological settings, and 'multimodal' because it employs multiple methods to collect insights about, and study, these varied contexts from a number of analytical vantage points. While this research strategy is grounded in the postphenomenological theory of digital mediation developed in Chapter 2, it also draws on the work of scholars from other qualitative research traditions such as digital ethnography and human geography. Bringing these varied methodological approaches together, Chapter 3 ultimately suggests a non-prescriptive and eclectic approach to the study of the digital mediation of global humanitarianism in concrete socio-technological settings.

The first issue that will be analysed through the theoretical and methodological approach presented in Chapter 2 and 3 is the question of how

humanitarian disasters are shown and seen on social media, which is the focus of Chapter 4. Of particular interest in this chapter are the social media algorithms that increasingly govern what is shown and seen and what inversely remains invisible on online platforms such as Facebook. To this end, the chapter analyses how specific ways of framing the suffering of distant others as an object of political and moral concern are generated and sustained by the concrete ways in which social media editors in humanitarian NGOs think about algorithms. Based on this, the chapter identifies and critically analyses the productive power of 'algorithmic imaginaries' in relation to the constitution of specific regimes of (in)visibility in humanitarian communication online, and discusses the ethical implications of this.

In Chapter 5, we move from the proliferation of social media in humanitarian communication to the growing popularity of virtual reality (VR) technology as a tool with which to mediate humanitarian disasters to both political decision makers and the broader public. Of particular interest in this chapter are the kinds of emotional engagement that this particular media technology is believed to make possible. Concretely, the chapter analyses the 'imagined moral affordances' of the virtual experience Sense of Home—what those responsible for developing it think about the experiential and moral possibilities introduced by VR—coupled with an embodied and subjective reading of its content. Based on this, the chapter ultimately demonstrates how particular ways of thinking about and using VR promote certain forms of audience engagement with the suffering of Global South others, and critically considers the ethico-political implication of this.

Third and finally, Chapter 6 examines one of the new ways in which ordinary people are able to respond to humanitarian disasters in their digitalized everyday by analysing the World Food Programme's donation app ShareTheMeal (STM). Of particular interest in this chapter is how the app is designed to manage users and how users adopt, appropriate or resist these programmed forms of behaviour. Specifically, by mapping the functions and features of the app and analysing the reflections and experiences of a sample of potential users, the chapter reveals how everyday forms of digital humanitarianism are shaped in the interplay between what STM can do and how users think about it. Based on this, the chapter finally discusses the ethical-political implications of app-based donations.

Finally, the thesis ends with a brief conclusion that summarizes and discusses its findings in relation to two overarching ambitions: the formulation of a critical theory of digital mediation and the articulation of a critique of digital humanitarianism. In light of these insights, the concluding chapter finally discusses how the thesis contributes to the importance of thinking about and using digital media differently.

Chapter 1

Locating the technopolitics of compassion: Media, power, and humanitarianism

Before theorizing and analysing the digital mediation of global humanitarianism in concrete socio-technological settings, this chapter prepares the ground by locating humanitarian compassion as an object of technopolitics, which is elicited by humanitarian organizations on and through the use of media. In doing so, it makes obvious the need for a more detailed understanding of how humanitarian sentiments are elicited and managed through processes of digital mediation. It begins by tracing compassion as a crucial force in world politics—from the past to the present—as a frame through which to grasp the humanitarian sector's growing reliance on media, to appeal to and manage the compassionate sentiments of Western publics. Building on this, it then details how and with what consequences 'compassion' has more recently also become a marketable commodity that is branded and 'sold' on and through media in order to attract donations. Finally, it discusses the contributions and shortcomings of mediation theory as a resource for understanding how the aid industry's use of media to 'sell' and manage compassion shapes how humanitarian disasters enter the perceptual field of Western audiences, how these publics are invited to care at a distance, and how they can respond. In doing so, the chapter ultimately makes obvious the need for a new theoretical and methodological approach, which can more adequately account for the specific and, at times, problematic ways in which the aid industry's turn to, and growing reliance on, new, digital media technologies is transforming the practices and ethics of global humanitarianism.

1.1 Governing compassion

A crucial starting point for this chapter is the observation that 'compassion' is a central political force in our contemporary world. As Michael Barnett (2011, 49) has argued, '[t]he revolution in moral sentiments and the emergence of the culture of compassion is one of the great unheralded developments of the last three centuries.' Indeed, as Käpylä and Kennedy (2014: 256) write:

> Today, compassion is seen as an important [emotion] that extends the boundaries of the self and works for the alleviation of human suffering 'out there'. Because of this, it has been—and still is—a normative and prescriptive emotion with a positive valence and benevolent image: we are compassionate, and if we are not, we certainly should be!

To grasp the political significance of compassion, one place to begin is in 1755 when, on the morning of November 1, a powerful earthquake struck the city of Lisbon in Portugal, reducing two-thirds of the city to rubble and killing around 60,000 people. As if this was not enough, the earthquake also generated a tsunami that is believed to have produced waves up to six metres high at the port of Lisbon, thus destroying large parts of this crucial European commercial hub, and as much as 20 metres high when reaching Cadiz in Spain. Further demonstrating the enormous scale of the disaster, damage was reported as far away as in Algiers, 1,100 kilometres east of Lisbon. It should thus come as no surprise that the earthquake would haunt the popular imagination of Europeans for centuries, through paintings and literature. The status of the disaster as a seminal event in European history was only further cemented by the fact that the earthquake provoked unprecedented levels of aid from across the European continent. Encapsulating this altruistic spirit, Immanuel Kant wrote a number of essays in response to the disaster, explaining how the earthquake was a natural phenomenon and not a punishment from God and how, in the face of the inhospitality of nature, we must come together as a cosmopolitan community (Kant, 2015).

As should be evident from this, the Lisbon earthquake is invoked here as an illustrative precedent to what we know today as 'global humanitarianism.' As encapsulated in the writings of Kant, the earthquake in Lisbon represents one of the first challenges to the widely held belief at the time that catastrophes

were a punishment from God and thus made obvious the need to ground altruism in a distinctly humanitarian and secular concept of morality. Moreover, as also expressed in the writings of Kant, the Lisbon earthquake demonstrated the increasingly interconnected nature of the world and thus foreshadowed the need for *international* responses to catastrophic events for not only moral but also economic reasons, not least because Lisbon was an important European trade hub at the time. But the Lisbon earthquake is also read more broadly—by this author at least—as a historical precursor to the consolidation of what (Fassin, 2012) calls 'humanitarian reason' and thus foregrounds how, today, discourses and practices such '[l]istening to excluded and marginalized individuals, assisting the poor and disadvantaged, granting recognition to sick immigrants and asylum seekers, showing compassion for Aids orphans and disaster victims, testifying on behalf of populations afflicted by wars' have become 'attitudes and actions that we automatically believe to be good, for causes that we deem just in and of themselves' (Fassin 2012: 244). From this perspective, disasters such as the Lisbon earthquake are important historical resources for grasping how 'moral sentiments'—emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others—have become 'essential forces in contemporary politics' (ibid: 1).

As already noted, compassion represents the most complete manifestation of these sentiments.[8] Käpylä and Kennedy (2014) argue that compassion could even be regarded as the *key* moral emotion of liberal modernity. For example, Jacques Rousseau—a foundational thinker in liberal philosophy—argued that

[8] Other emotions such as 'sympathy' or 'empathy' might also be relevant in this context but they do not encapsulate the public and political dimensions of emotions as well as compassion does. Boltanski (1999: 6), inspired by Hanna Arendt, uses the concept of pity instead of compassion. For him, compassion is without generalizations, it is purely local and specific and it is linked to the face-to-face presence of particular individuals. Pity, on the other hand, 'generalises and integrates the dimension of distance,' and is thus political. A politics of pity, according to Boltanski (ibid: 12) is 'not just concerned with one unfortunate and a particular situation. To be a politics it must convey at the same time a plurality of situations of misfortune, to constitute a kind of procession or imaginary demonstration of unfortunates brought together on the basis of both their singularity and what they have in common.' That is exactly what is meant by compassion by this and other authors (see also Höijer, 2004).

compassion is the 'democratic emotion par excellence' since 'shared suffering creates bonds of affection and with them the sense of common humanity required to support the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity' (in Ure & Frost 2014: 2). While much can be said about the problematic underpinnings of the writings of Rousseau and other enlightenment thinkers, his words nevertheless illustrate that the social and political capacities of compassion have long been acknowledged and thus provide support for a central claim made in this thesis: namely that compassion is not simply an internal emotional state experienced by individuals, as argued by influential authors such as Nussbaum (2001), but an object of politics in its own right (see also Ahmed 2004). Indeed, as Bleiker & Hutchison (2014: 492) argue, so 'compelling is the case for emotions that few would now explicitly challenge the claim that emotions play political roles.'

Another important definitional distinction emerges from this. Rather than understanding emotions as 'latent'—as felt by and contained in individuals—this thesis is inspired by a growing field of social and political scientists who perceive them as 'emergent' properties of social and political life (ibid: 995-6). Rather than examining how pre-defined, pre-existing (or latent) emotions influence politics, these scholars demonstrate 'how specific emotions are constituted by and function in particular cultural and political environments' (ibid: 496). From this perspective, the political dynamics of emotions do not relate simply to the phenomenological experiences of individuals but to the wider sociocultural processes and conditions through which emotions are performed, cultivated, and given meaning to, and through which they subsequently come to matter publically and collectively (see also Linklater, 2014). In this understanding, compassion is inherently political in the sense that it emerges from, rather than causes, politics.

In adopting and extending an understanding of emotions as emergent to the study of the technopolitics of compassion we might thus say—as Käpylä & Kennedy (2014) do—that 'compassion is not the endogenous moral compass we often take it to be' but rather 'a result of subtle forms of cultivation, power and governance.' To explain this through the example of the Lisbon earthquake, it would thus be inaccurate to argue that the unprecedented level of aid from all over Europe in response to this disaster was indicative of the moral character of human beings, as Kant would most likely claim. Rather, these responses must be perceived as constituted by

specific and subtle forms of governance that generate or sustain specific ways of seeing, feeling, and acting in response to disasters and catastrophes. In this sense, compassion does more than make us feel something in relation to the suffering of distant others and compel us to act; it also regulates such social and cultural relations and thus becomes complicit in the production of specific forms of social organization and political order. To paraphrase Didier Fassin once again, the feeling of compassion that might compel someone to donate money to charity might also simultaneously perpetuate and reinforce a hierarchical division between those that give and those that receive and (Fassin 2012: 3). In this sense, the politics of compassion is also a politics of inequality.

In addition to this, and contrary to how Rousseau perceived it, such observations also demonstrate that compassion is an *ambivalent* emotion. From this perspective, compassion is neither inherently good nor inherently bad but can become complicit in a manner of political processes and purposes—including 'calculating' (Woodward 2004) or even 'malevolent' (Garber 2004) ones. Indeed, as Head (2016) has demonstrated in her analysis of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, depending on the context in which they are mobilized or appealed to, emotional sentiments might both inform non-violent forms of resistance or be used to normalize and justify military practices of violence. Compassion does thus not necessarily lead to or sustain a democratic society, as argued by Rousseau. Rather, its socio-political effects depend entirely upon the contexts and processes through which it comes to matter collectively, that is, beyond the disparate experience of individuals.

When trying to grasp the politics of compassion in the present, it is thus important to take into account that the ways in which compassionate sentiments are constituted, given meaning to, and come to matter have changed fundamentally since the Age of Enlightenment. Indeed, in recent decades alone, our ability to see, feel for, and respond to the suffering of distant others has continuously expanded and transformed in scale, range, and character. This development has been driven in equal parts by the proliferation of information and communications technologies, such as photography and, later, television, the internet, and smartphones (Paulmann, 2019) as well as the emergence and consolidation of supra-national

institutions such as the UN and a range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that operate across geographical, political, and cultural divides (Calhoun, 2008). As part of this development, what is perhaps best described as a 'global discourse of compassion' can be said to have emerged at the intersection of governments, NGOs, the media, and citizens in recent years (Höijer, 2004). In the context of international politics—as Ure & Frost (2014: 102) have shown—this is evident, for example, in 'the ever-wider acceptance by states that they should be moved by the suffering of other states after they have experienced famine, war, state failure, environmental disasters such as a tsunami or a volcanic eruption.' In the context of broadcast media and popular culture, it is evident in the increasing victimization of civilians in war reporting, or in televised charity appeals such as LiveAid, that have become increasingly crucial in bringing together and constituting caring publics in and through media (see also Tester, 2001: 139).

But nowhere is this 'global discourse of compassion' more evident than in the context of global humanitarianism which relies, if not entirely then at least substantially, on the management of the compassion of individuals—to witness, to care, and to give—when faced by the suffering of distant others. Indeed, whereas global humanitarianism—understood here 'as the increasingly organized and internationalized attempt to save the lives, enhance the welfare, and reduce the suffering of the world's most vulnerable populations' (Barnett, 2013)—was founded on principles such as political neutrality and impartiality, today, compelling audiences to witness, care for, and respond to the suffering of distant others has become equally integral to the humanitarian project.

An early precursor to this development—which Chouliaraki (2013) has called 'a historical turning point' in global humanitarianism—was the war in Biafra in 1968 which, in the period after decolonisation and during the Cold War, became the first highly publicized humanitarian disaster, as images of starving children spread rapidly through newspapers and television. According to Chouliaraki, the Biafran war thus marks the point when 'the Cold War and the explosion of the media came together and ushered a paradigmatic change in the ways in which we are invited to perceive ourselves as moral actors' (ibid: 2), thus providing us with an early example of humanitarian organizations' now systematic use of emotionally appealing

campaigns to create moral attention to suffering and crisis and to accumulate funding for foreign aid. As Shringarpure (2018: 179) writes, 'Biafra thus not only solidified humanitarianism's complex yet inextricable link with media but made that relationship most visible and prolific to the Western gaze.' In more general terms, the war in Biafra thus embodies what I term 'the technopolitics of compassion' in the sense that it foregrounds the humanitarian sector's ever-growing reliance on media technologies for eliciting, directing, and managing the compassionate sentiments of caring publics towards the suffering of distant others.

Not surprisingly, the increasing interdependence between humanitarian organizations and media in the decades that followed the Biafran war has attracted growing scholarly interest, especially since the 1990s (see e.g. Arendt 1973, Boltanski, 1999; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001; Sontag, 2003; Chouliaraki, 2006a; Silverstone, 2007; Orgad and Seu, 2014a; Hutchison, 2016). One of the central questions that has driven scholarship on this topic is how, and to what extent, the use of media for humanitarian purposes translates into moral and political responses. Such questions are underpinned by a fundamental concern with the gap between mediated representations of distant suffering, the emotions they elicit, and the actions that they are supposed to provoke. For example, in a recent article, Hoskins (2021) asks why, 'despite the instant availability of billions of images of human suffering and death in the continuous and connective digital glare of social media, the catastrophes of contemporary wars, such as those in Syrian and Yemen, unfold relentlessly.' To be sure, the problem, according to Hoskins (ibid), is not a *lack* of compassion. Indeed, 'the saturation of information and images of human suffering and death' in the digital age 'has not ushered in a new era of "compassion fatigue."' Rather, the problem is that we tend to 'misconstrue the velocity of linking and liking and sharing as some kind of mass action or mass movement' (ibid), leading to a culture in which humanitarian compassion is expressed through, and limited to, isolated acts of clicking with the mouse on a PC or tapping the index finger on a touch screen as a proxy for moral action (see also Frosh 2018).

Resonating with the claim that compassion is an ambivalent political emotion whose social and political significance is constituted through subtle forms of governance and power rather than an endogenous moral compass,

Hoskins and others thus highlight how the mediation of humanitarian disasters is sometimes ethico-politically problematic in terms of how humanitarian disasters are framed, how distant audiences are invited to care, and how they are encouraged to respond. In doing so, these authors not only bring attention to the role of media, however. They also emphasize the persistent and problematic legacy of colonialism in the aid industry. For even though humanitarianism is by no means an exclusively Western project, it is nevertheless deeply entangled 'with imperialism and the belief that Western style governance and the capitalistic mode of production offer a route to modernity, development and better life for the colonialized' (Kotilainen 2016: 72). In this sense, 'global humanitarianism' can be seen as referring

> both to the present configuration of institutions that attempt to save lives and reduce the suffering of the world's most vulnerable populations *and* to a global culture [that] governs the planet through various combinations of paternalism, inequality and violence in ways that uphold western hegemony and imperialist politics. (Chouliaraki and Vestergaard, 2021: 3)

For example, pointing to the emergence of 'new wars' and the securitization of aid during the 1990s and 2000s, Hardt and Negri (2000: 36) claim that the media campaigns of humanitarian organizations play a central role in preparing Western publics for humanitarian interventions based on the use of military force. Hence, as (Dillon and Reid, 2009) have further demonstrated, the aid industry cannot simply be seen as a 'force for good' since humanitarian organizations are often complicit in the maintenance of a global political order in which Western states legitimize the use of violence against some, based on the promise to protect and improve the lives of others (see also Duffield 2001).

Similarly, while contemporary ways of mediating humanitarian disasters may appear to be a long way from the historical dynamics of colonialism, scholars have continuously demonstrated that the humanitarian sector 'still actively grapples with the power relationships of orientalist subalternity as these re-emerge on its practices and platforms even as humanitarian messages aim at empowering those they represent' (Chouliaraki & Vestergaard 2021: 3). For example, to return to the work of Hoskins (2021), the naïve belief that the instant availability of millions of images of suffering must necessarily lead to alleviatory action ignores fundamental questions related to the cultural

frames through which the suffering of vulnerable Global South others is perceived and through which, as Butler (2009) has demonstrated, their pain is sometimes rendered 'ungrievable' and thus unworthy of protection. Similarly, as Choularaki and Vestergaard (2021: 3) have pointed out, humanitarian organizations continue to present 'emaciated children in emergency aid campaigns [or] voiceless prisoners [as] powerless objects of our compassionate intervention' which 'speak[s] precisely to this continuing affinity of humanitarian communication with a neocolonial imagination, despite the 21st-century social media platforms and big data that promise radical innovation.'

Together, the work of these authors makes it obvious that the legacy of colonialism must still be at the centre of critical scholarship on media and humanitarianism. Indeed, while the war in Biafra unfolded in a period of economic and political decolonisation, it can, somewhat ironically, be said to have fuelled the emergence of a new humanitarian sensibility that enacts and extends colonial power dynamics into the present. In this sense, the war is exemplary of how the use of media for humanitarian purposes reinvigorates colonial formations in both tangible and intangible forms and how, as a consequence of this, the mediation of global humanitarianism reworks colonial histories in our postcolonial era (see also Stoler, 2016). Crucially, by 'colonial power dynamics' I am thus not referring to the resurrection of an imperial empire or a colonial world order but, rather, to the enactment of colonial divisions and hierarchies through the mediated refashioning of Global South others as present-day subalterns (see also Spivak, 1988). Yet, while the question of colonial debris is central to my critical inquiry into the technopolitics of compassion, it is not the *only* historical condition that matters in this regard. Equally important is the recent neoliberalisation of the humanitarian sector, which has repositioned compassion as a commodity with market value that is not only mediated and governed for moral and political reasons but which is also increasingly branded and 'sold' by humanitarian NGOs in order to attract public and private funding in an increasingly competitive global aid field. Indeed, as we shall see below, the neoliberal turn has thus not only further entrenched the aid sector's dependence on media but also fundamentally rearticulated how media is employed for humanitarian ends.

1.2 Commodifying compassion

To understand the impact of neoliberalism on the humanitarian sector's use of media it is necessary to understand, in the first place, what the 'neoliberal turn' is. As briefly indicated earlier, at least since the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 and the adoption of the first Geneva Convention in 1864, humanitarianism has been regarded as relief work in times of war. Later, emerging out of the shadows of the Cold War and propelled by the New Left and counter-cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a new wave of humanitarianism—often referred to as 'direct humanitarian action'—started to appear on the global stage (Chiapello and Boltanski, 2007). Led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and spearheaded by organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), direct humanitarian action's radical promise was to challenge the conventions of Cold War sovereignty, hold powerful states accountable for their use of military force, and promote solidarity on the part of those living in the affluent 'first world' with those exposed to violence or poverty in what was then referred to as 'the third world' through the use of media.

While influential at first, the ideals and practices that characterized this emerging cosmopolitan internationalism started to erode during the 1990s and seemed to vanish entirely at the start of the 2000s. Central to this development were the 'new wars' (Kaldor, 2001) of the 1990s, followed by the so-called War on Terror in the early 2000s, which not only challenged the cosmopolitan ideals of liberal internationalism but also imposed restrictions and significantly restricted humanitarian NGOs' autonomy and political room for manoeuvre (Duffield, 2016). Indeed, during these decades, perhaps best exemplified by the wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, global solidarity became increasingly subsumed by a biopolitical logic of governance that framed war and military violence—not coincidentally referred to as 'humanitarian interventions'—as the best way to protect and improve human life (Dillon & Reid 2009). As if this was not enough, in 2008, the world was suddenly confronted by the collapse of the global financial system which replaced more than two decades of economic growth with austerity policies that decreased public spending on everything from welfare to foreign aid. Case in point, in 2012, United States—the world's biggest state donor—reduced

its aid budget by $3.5 billion compared to the year before. Indeed, as recently as 2021, in what is perhaps the most recent manifestation of a decade-long trend of decreasing government spending on humanitarian and development assistance, another of the world's largest state donors, the United Kingdom, lowered its aid budget from 0.7 to 0.5% of GDP.[9]

But while humanitarian organizations—like so many others— emerged from the 2000s and early 2010s disillusioned by violence-induced fear and austerity-fuelled uncertainty, somewhat paradoxically, the sector's belief in 'the market' as the best solution to the self-perceived crisis that it suddenly found itself in not only persisted but intensified in the years that followed the War on Terror and the financial crisis. Indeed, during the past decade or so, in what is often described as a neoliberal turn that promotes market-oriented solutions to humanitarian issues, aid organizations have become increasingly interwoven with, and reliant on, the public and the corporate sector and less dependent on state funding. The use of celebrities for humanitarian advocacy (Bergman Rosamond, 2019), the rise of corporate partnerships (Gregoratti, 2014), the increasing influence of philanthropy and private foundations in humanitarian affairs (Fejerskov, 2020), as well as the emergence of ethical consumption (Richey and Ponte, 2011) as central to global helping are just a few examples of how the full power of markets, corporations, and global capitalism have become implicated in, and reshaped, the humanitarian sector in recent years. Consequently, as Richey, Hawkins and Goodman (2021: 3) observe:

> The state is no longer the repository for responsibility and power in solving humanitarian crises or development needs. States are now facilitators and/or 'invisible hands' in for-profit partnerships that turn on the reputational and real capital of […] global corporations, the personal, media and celebrity capital of global mega-stars, the marketing power and capital of charities and the 'choice' power of consumers.

No longer just a moral endeavour—if it ever was—the humanitarian sector has brought the market in and transformed into a multi-billion dollar industry

[9] For reference, the UN recommends that high-income countries spend at least 1% of GDP on aid and humanitarian assistance.

fuelled by private donations and bolstered by marketing techniques honed by corporations (Kennedy 2009). It should come as no surprise, then, that humanitarian organizations and non-profits spend a significant portion of funds on public communication and fundraising. Though actual figures are rare, a recent survey by the Thomson Reuters Foundation (2015) found that ActionAid, one of the world's largest international NGOs, spends 17.4% of its financial resources on marketing and fundraising, Plan International 14.2%, and MSF 13.8%. Even if they are few and far between, these numbers are nevertheless testament to the fact that the neoliberal turn in global humanitarianism has also been accompanied by a 'competitive commodification of compassion' (Lawrence and Tavernor, 2019). That is, in order to succeed in a market-driven aid field, humanitarian organizations must 'sell' humanitarian disasters as objects of emotional and moral concern, and must do so in competition with other NGOs also appealing for funding. Consequently, while humanitarianism is essentially 'the act of people helping people', most scholars and observes thus acknowledge that, today, 'humanitarianism is also a business driven by market forces and by agencies seeking to maintain and expand market share' (Smillie and Minear, 2004: 11).

The re-articulation of humanitarianism as a commercial activity was initially seen by many as introducing a moral conflict by staging distant suffering as media spectacles. Because images of disaster are everywhere, or so the argument goes, we become 'so used to the spectacle of dreadful events, misery or suffering that we stop noticing them' (Tester, 2001: 13, see also Moeller, 1999). But if compassion is a commodity with market value then, certainly, 'compassion fatigue' must be detrimental to an aid industry that relies on being able to appeal to, and shape, the emotional engagement and moral responsibility of publics in the Global North when faced by distant suffering. Indeed, the humanitarian sector seems to think so. Indeed, in recent years—as e.g., Vestergaard (2008) has shown—the marketing and branding strategies of humanitarian NGOs have become increasingly reflexive with regard to the perceived threat of compassion fatigue to global humanitarianism. As a consequence of this, more and more often, such strategies are intended to inform ways of 'selling" humanitarian disasters and global helping that rely on positive messages that appeal to the moral responsibility and -agency of the audience in mundane and sometimes even

playful ways rather than through spectacular and shock-inducing frames' (see also Chouliaraki, 2010).

As an example of this, Vestergaard (2008) emphasizes Amnesty International's (AI) internet-based campaign 'See what you can do' which promotes the agency of the individual in creating global change: 'By using the interactive affordances of this medium [i.e. the internet],' Vestergaard (ibid: 488-9) writes, 'AI do not push themselves upon the audience, cry for help or even indicate that they need support' but rather offer 'the public an opportunity to respond morally [to] their knowledge of suffering and thus provide them with the means to defy compassion fatigue.' The argument I want to state here is *not* that campaigns such as AI's 'See what you can do' are more or less market-oriented than those that employ spectacular images of dismemberment, suffering and pain. Indeed, as Chouliaraki (2010: 120) has argued,

> both "shock effect" and "positive image" campaigns are situated squarely within a market logic of persuasion, insofar as they communicate emotion to their own ends. The production of negative or positive emotion, in these appeals, are at once articulations of political passion at the service of legitimizing public action on suffering and simultaneously strategies of the market at the service of legitimizing the humanitarian brand itself.

What the AI campaign 'See what you can do' *is* indicative of is rather a broader shift in the sensibility of neoliberal, commercialised forms of humanitarian communication. Chouliaraki (2010: 108) has described this shift as the emergence of a 'post-humanitarian logic,' which is characterized by 'a clear, though not linear, move from emotion-oriented to post-emotional styles of appealing' that privileges 'a short-term and low-intensity form of agency, which is no longer inspired by an intellectual agenda but momentarily engages us in practices of playful consumerism.' Another key feature of 'post-humanitarian' campaigns such as AI's 'See what you can do' is thus also that they emphasize the simplicity of actions required to help rather than the reason for the suffering such actions are meant to alleviate. In doing so, they depart from the assumption that knowledge about the suffering of distant others can generate the feelings that will prompt people to respond. Rather than justifying their appeals by educating the public about the causes or consequences of disasters, post-humanitarian campaigns thus instead present

people with simple, less time-consuming ways in which to help alleviate the suffering of distant others anytime, anywhere.

Yet, such campaigns not only provide the public with new opportunities for altruism. The rise of the post-humanitarian sensibility described above has also been accused of being ethico-politically problematic because what matters in post-humanitarian appeals are not the beneficiaries but the benefactors. That is, they focus on what *you* (the Western spectator) can do rather than the moral question of *why* you should do something. As Chouliaraki (ibid: 121) argues, by 'removing the moral question of "why" from humanitarian communication' post-humanitarianism may thus lead to a 'perpetuation of a political culture of communitarian narcissism [that] renders the emotions of the self the measure of our understanding of the sufferings of the world at large.' More worryingly, 'this narcissistic sensibility fails to recognize is that [it] is actually inscribed in systematic patterns of global inequality and their hierarchies of place and human life – hierarchies that divide the world into zones of Western comfort and safety and non-Western need and vulnerability' (ibid). What is at stake with the rise of post-humanitarianism is thus not only a shift in the rhetorical and aesthetic style of humanitarian appeals but also a profound shift in the ethics of global humanitarianism.

While not necessarily unique to the digital age, the rise of a post-humanitarian sensibility in humanitarian communication is emphasized here because it coincides with, and frames, the emergence and proliferation of the use of new digital media technologies in recent years. Indeed, like the early forms of online humanitarianism, such as the internet-based campaign analysed by Vestergaard (2008), the kinds of digital media technologies that have emerged in recent years, often referred to as web 2.0 applications, are similarly claimed to engage the public and enable them to act at a distance in new and innovative ways (McPherson, 2007; Watson, 2010; Meijer, 2012; Mortensen, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). For example, McPherson (2007) argues that humanitarian organizations and non-profits should regard social media platforms as 'social movements' because they contain a wide range of tools that allow users to create change by responding to, sharing, and creating online content. Similarly, the growing use of virtual reality technology in humanitarian communication has been framed as supplying the aid sector with 'the ultimate empathy machine' with which to appeal to and cultivate

the engagement of Western publics and political decision-makers by offering a see-for-yourself style experience of humanitarian disasters and the misfortune of distant others (Nash, 2017). Like the examples provided earlier, these emergent media technologies are thus framed primarily in post-humanitarian terms that emphasize the convenience and (pleasurable) experiences they offer audiences as much as their ability to educate the public about the human consequences of catastrophes and injustices.

In addition to being prescient examples of how the humanitarian sector thinks about the possibilities offered by digital media, these arguments are also symptomatic of a more general attitude in the aid sector towards technological innovation as providing politically neutral tools that improve global helping. As Jacobsen (2015) has argued, the increasing focus and reliance on technological solutions to humanitarian issues in the aid sector in recent years is informed by 'a powerful humanitarian–technology nexus through which humanitarian actors assert that new technologies enable humanitarianism to become more efficient, neutral and uncorrupted and technology companies assert that the deployment of new technologies in the humanitarian field demonstrates that they are neutral, positive and beneficial to humanity.' What is concealed by such arguments, however, is the fact that digital media technologies are far from neutral. For one, while providing new opportunities for humanitarian organizations, digital media technologies such as social media platforms and smartphones are also 'commodities crucial for the expansion of global capitalism' (Enghel, 2015: 15). According to Zuboff (2019), the proliferation of digital media technologies should even be grasped as an enabling condition for the emergence of an entirely *new* socioeconomic doctrine described by her as 'surveillance capitalist'.

Crudely put, 'surveillance capitalism' is a mode of accumulation that is unique to the digital age and which relies on the collection of vast amounts of data through which corporations seek to 'know' and predict our behaviour as consumers (see also Beer, 2018).[10] Indeed, today, with every online donation,

[10] The Covid-19 pandemic seems to have further consolidated the influence of surveillance capitalism in our social and political lives by ushering in what Klein (2020) refers to as a 'pandemic shock doctrine' that has further strengthened ties between surveillance-

every 'share' on Facebook, every tap of the finger on your keyboard and movement of your mouse, data is being collected, stored, and added to an ever-expanding database of user data. But it is not only what we do online that is increasingly monitored. Ubiquitous mobile media such as smartphones, home assistants, and other 'smart' devices can record the conversations we have in their presence or map the paths we travel (Ash, 2018). And with the application of neural networks and artificial intelligence to these data, we have become subjects of corporately-owned, algorithmic models of prediction which claim to 'know' our most intimate emotions and desires (McStay, 2018).

The turn to digital media has thus not only provided the aid industry with new communication tools. It has also introduced new actors and new kinds of economic interests to the field of global helping that are not necessarily congruent with the ethico-political ambitions of humanitarian NGOs and non-profits (Fejerskov, 2020; Olwig, 2021). As a case in point, what is often referred to as 'digital humanitarianism' (Meier, 2015) to describe new kinds of humanitarian action, has been accused of exacerbating global inequalities. For one, these 'new technological approaches to ameliorate humanitarian work,' as Shringarpure (2018) argues, are accompanied by a '"Digital Savior Complex" [sic] which not only transforms complex crises into quotidian cyber realities but also furthers existing colonial hierarchies between the savior and the saved.' What is at stake in this new technopolitics of compassion, as Madianou (2019: 10) demonstrates in her critical analysis of the growing reliance on data analytics and biometrics in the management of refugees, is thus the entrenchment of already-existing power asymmetries between benefactors and beneficiaries, which has resulted in a 'technocolonial' regime of global humanitarianism in which 'beneficiaries produce value through their data and participation in humanitarian experiments, which is then used for the benefit of stakeholders, including private companies.'

Taken together, the critical work of these and other authors thus demonstrate how the neoliberal logic underpinning the sector's turn to digital media is rearticulating and extending the humanitarian sector's colonial

capitalist corporations and public institutions in the effort to fight the global spread of the disease (see also Ølgaard, 2020a).

heritage into the digital age by perpetuating a hierarchy in which the commercial interests of a global elite of multinational corporations are increasingly allowed to shape global helping in problematic ways. In this sense, as Duffield (2016) argues, we might say that, when harnessed for neoliberal ends, the use of digital media for humanitarian purposes risks locking in the existing negativities of both colonialism and capitalism. Therefore, we must dig deeper into the details of global humanitarianism in the digital age; that is, into the platforms, devices, and messages that humanitarian organizations use to elicit, govern and 'sell' compassion as well as the unequal power relationships that they reify, expand, and deepen in the process. These are the issues to which the chapter now turns.

1.3 Mediating compassion

So far, we have seen how a 'historical shift' in global humanitarianism has positioned media as a valuable resource for appealing to, and managing, the compassion of Western audiences towards the suffering of distant others. We have also seen how a neoliberal turn in the aid industry has since intervened with this development by rearticulating compassion as a commodity with market value that is branded and 'sold' on and through media in an increasingly competitive global aid industry. But while these developments are helpful in locating compassion as an object of technopolitics, they tell us little about how humanitarian compassion with the suffering of distant others is elicited, shaped, and managed on and through media in more concrete terms. This is where 'mediation theory' enters the frame, providing a conceptual and methodological apparatus through which to grasp the social and political implications of how humanitarian disasters are shown and seen, how Western publics are invited to care for the suffering of distant others, and the forms of action available to them in and through media.

In general terms, 'mediation theorists' perceive the relationship between media and global humanitarianism as *situational*, that is, as constituted in the interplay between institutions, technologies, practices, and discourses and argue that neither the dynamics nor the implications of these relations can be understood fully without paying attention to multi-sited and multimodal

processes of 'mediation' (see *inter alia* Chouliaraki, 2006a; Silverstone, 2007; Vestergaard, 2011; Orgad and Seu, 2014a; Ong, 2019). Whereas the related field of 'mediatisation theory' describes the meta-processes through which society submits to a particular media logic at the macro-level, 'mediation,' according to the renowned media scholar Roger Silverstone, thus denotes what media does and what we do with the media in pragmatic and context-dependent terms. According to Chouliaraki (2006b), another prominent mediation theorist, the problem with mediatisation theory's focus on meta-processes lies in the fact that questions about media and global helping come to be treated as grand questions that are the concern of grand theory. For this reason, media is generally regarded by mediatisation theorists as having an unidirectional impact on humanitarian organizations, which have no choice but to submit to the institutional logics and commercial interests of the 'media regime' they operate in (Benthall, 1993). As argued by Cottle and Nolan (2007: 863-4), the media is thus seen as both 'indispensable and inimical to [the] aims and ideas of global humanitarianism' in the sense that

> NGOs need the media to bring public attention to humanitarian emergencies to mobilize support for vital assistance, but in order to attract the media spotlight they deploy communication strategies which practically detract from their principal remit of humanitarian provision and symbolically fragment the historically founded ethic of universal humanitarianism.

As opposed to this, mediation theorists analyse the micro-processes through which media technologies 'change the social and cultural environment that supports it as well as the relationships that individuals, in the public and in humanitarian organisations, have to that environment and to each other' but also take into account that 'the social is itself a mediator: the information delivered by media is mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption' (Vestergaard, 2011: 24-25). To this end, most mediation theorists focus equally on the humanitarian messages conveyed through media and on the social processes of interpretation through which these messages are given meaning and come to matter socially and politically. Particularly influential in this regard is Chouliaraki (ibid) who has developed 'an analytics of mediation' that focuses on the mediated relationship between humanitarian organizations and the public through the analysis of specific media texts. Here,

the use of the word 'analytics', which Chouliaraki borrows from Foucault to distinguish her approach from a grand theory of power, 'aims at describing how discourse manages to articulate "universal" values of human conduct at any historical moment and how, in so doing, it places human beings into certain relationships of power to one another' (2006b: 157).

As should be obvious from this, mediation theory is thus also a theory of power. Indeed, as Chouliaraki (2006b: 157) notes: 'Media discourse on distant suffering, for instance, operates as a strategy of power in so far as it selectively offers the option of emotional and practical engagement with certain sufferers and leaves others outside the scope of such engagement, thereby reproducing hierarchies of place and human life.' For example, as further described by Chouliaraki, the techniques of camera employed in media coverage of disaster, as well as their visual effects, place spectators in a specific relationship with vulnerable others. Concretely, she argues, visualizing a disaster 'through a street camera places the event in the temporality of emergency, of frantic and contingent activity, and endows it with the aesthetic quality of testimony, the first-hand knowledge of the eyewitness' which in turn 'offers a sense of close proximity to the scene of suffering and organizes the spectacle of suffering around action that may alleviate the sufferer's misfortune' (ibid: 158). As opposed to this, visual techniques such as 'the long shot of a city skyline … entails an interest in historicity and analysis rather than actuality and activity.' More generally, media representations of distant suffering are thus regarded by mediation theorists as performative in the sense that 'they enact forms of agency towards suffering, which may or may not be followed up by their publics' (Vestergaard, 2011: 28). What is implied by this is thus that a humanitarian organization 'does not simply address a constituency ready for social action [but has] the power to constitute this audience as a body of action in the process of narrating and visualizing distant events' (Chouliaraki, 2008: 832).

Of interest here is thus how media representations of distant suffering are constitutive of discursive regimes of meaning that have a cultural and social significance beyond the media representations themselves. Critical studies of mediation thus mostly start, but do not end, at the site of textual and photographic framing of disasters in and through media. Rather, the production of humanitarian disasters as a media spectacle is seen as arising out

of the *interplay* between the production of meaning through specific media texts (both written and photographic) and 'the social relationships of viewing' through which these texts are interpreted and negotiated (ibid). Put in more concrete terms, analyses of mediation take into account 'the social relations of viewing that map out the world in terms of spectator zones and sufferer zones' (ibid: 165). While 'clear cut distinctions' are difficult to make in this regard, these social relations are primarily defined by scholars such as Chouliaraki in terms of 'a historically shaped topography of power, whereby it is the West that watches the rest of the world suffer' (ibid; see also Boltanski, 1999: 3 – 54). To be sure, this power asymmetry (which is embedded in the very act of seeing, feeling, and responding to the suffering of distant others in and through media) does not in and of itself produce the economic and political divisions of our world 'but it certainly reflects them and consolidates them' (Chouliaraki 2006b: 166).

In sum, an analytics of mediation, as developed by Chouliaraki and others, can thus be said to bridge empirical analyses of social processes unfolding at the micro-level with questions pertaining to the constitution and maintenance of global hierarchies and political divisions at the macro-level. To understand this in more detail it is helpful to zoom in on the overarching themes in the literature on mediation and global humanitarianism. One of these is the question of how humanitarian disasters are represented, aesthetically and visually, via words, photographs, videos, or similar. For example, Bleiker *et al.* (2013) have examined the visual framing of refugees on the front pages of Australian newspapers to argue that the prominence of photographs portraying asylum seekers in large groups—and the relative absence of images that depict individual asylum seekers with recognizable facial features—implicitly frames refugees as a threat to sovereignty and security rather than as a humanitarian issue. In this way, as the authors argue, the visual framing of refugees in Australian media comes to sustain the country's militarised border protection policies. As concurringly argued by Campbell (2007), photographic depictions of humanitarian disaster must thus be regarded as 'visual performances of the social field' in the sense that they structure our encounters with distant others. In more general terms, the work of these scholars demonstrate how 'regimes of visibility'—orders of meaning that focus our vision on some things rather than others—are constitutive of social

and political hierarchies (see also Brighenti, 2010). While words, speech acts, and other forms of aesthetic representation matter in this regard, images are seen as particularly central because of their epistemic authority and because, during the last few decades, still and moving images have become culturally dominant forms of representation that have fundamentally altered how we experience the world around us and expanded who has the ability to both show and see (see also Mirzoeff, 2009).

Intimately related to the study of how humanitarian issues are made visible to Western audiences and what remains unseen is another issue: the question of how the mediation of disasters shape the emotional attitudes of these spectators. Images are generally also seen as central in this regard since they provide 'visual quotations' (Sontag 2003: 22) that often linger in the mind of viewers and shape their emotional attitudes. Some even argue that humanitarian compassion 'depends on visuals' (Hoijer, 2004). Indeed, a growing number of scholars increasingly see images as having a particular capacity to invoke emotions (see also Adler-Nissen, Andersen and Hansen, 2020). For example, Chouliaraki (2008) has studied visual representations of distant suffering not only as 'regimes of visuality' but as 'regimes of pity' which can be studied as 'semantic fields where emotions and dispositions to action *vis-a-vis* the suffering "others" are made possible for the spectator' (see also Hutchison 2016). Specifically, Chouliaraki distinguishes between 'adventure news' which present distant suffering as 'random or isolated curiosities that make no emotional demand on the spectator,' 'emergency news' that call for emergency action in the form of an external intervention but through which sufferers are also presented as helpless and 'ecstatic news' which also contains appeals to action for spectators but does so through images or words that present sufferers as 'somebody who feels, reflects, and acts on his or her fate,' thus demonstrating how specific ways of representing disaster invites the spectating public to care in different ways (ibid: 375-379). In this regard, media has both been accused of numbing viewers (Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001) and celebrated for its ability to 'bring us phenomenologically closer and provide socio-cultural immediacy' and to thus help mitigate 'the cultural and moral distance between people who live far away from each other and [provide] a sense of involvement with distant events and lives' (Vestergaard,

2011: 26).[11] While offering a seemingly conflicting perspective, the assumption that unites these arguments is that the images and words through which humanitarian disasters are mediated has a crucial impact on the emotional reactions of audiences.

Another related but distinct issue is the response (or the lack thereof) of Western spectators when confronted with the consequences of distant humanitarian disaster via media. The work of Boltanski (1999) is regularly emphasized as an important reference point in this regard. In his book *Distant Suffering* he asks: 'What are the morally acceptable responses to the sight of suffering on television, for example, when the viewer cannot act directly to affect the circumstances in which the suffering takes place?' In response, Boltanski argues that spectators can actively respond—involving themselves and others—by speaking about what they have seen and how they were affected by it through a rhetorical repertoire of 'denunciation,' 'sentimentality' and 'sublimation.' In his perspective, the public is thus assumed to have a limited form of agency in mediated encounters with distant suffering, not only based on their ability to speak about what they have seen. However, a number of scholars have recently problematized or at least pluralised this notion of agency by examining the ways in which particular forms of agency are encouraged by specific media texts. For example, Chouliarki (2010) has examined the 'post-humanitarian sensibility' that pervades global humanitarianism as a departure from Boltanski's rhetorical repertoire of sustained moral attention that instead privileges 'a short-term and low-intensity form of agency, which is no longer inspired by an intellectual agenda but momentarily engages us in practices of playful consumerism' (ibid:

[11] As will be developed in Chapter 5, what Silverstone (2007) calls 'proper distance'—the exact degree of proximity required in mediated experiences of distant suffering—is generally regarded as important in this context (see also Chouliaraki and Orgad, 2011). Discursively, Vestergaard (2011: 31-32) argues, proper distance is achieved when we are brought neither *too close* to specific instances of suffering to recognize our shared humanity with victims—as images of death and dismemberment are accused of doing—or *too far* to appreciate what Judith Butler calls 'the precariousness of the other'—as images of the smiling, grateful faces of poor children are accused of doing. In balancing such forms of representation, Vestergaard (ibid: 32) further argues, 'humanitarian discourse may advance an ethics of care and responsibility, and cultivate an ideal identity for humanitarian audiences as citizens of the world – as cosmopolitans.'

107). Madianou (2013) has similarly observed that online campaigns informed by a post-humanitarian sensibility translate into a 'fetishization of action' which favours sporadic forms of consumption behaviour that are entirely decoupled from an understanding of the complex causes of the humanitarian issues that the campaigns address. Taken together, these scholars thus regard responses to mediated humanitarian suffering as something that is shaped by the forms of agency that are enabled and promoted in the mediated interplay between humanitarian organizations and the public.

While often analysed as interdependent issues, we see here that the extant literature on the mediation of global humanitarianism is in fact underlined by several issues pertaining to 1) the role of media representations in constituting specific 'regimes of visibility,' 2) the relationship between media representations and the emotional engagement of audiences, and 3) the kinds of action and agency that are made possible or encouraged in mediated accounts of humanitarian issues. But while the accumulated work of these authors is helpful inasmuch as it allows us to consider the power relationships that are produced and sustained in the mediated interplay between humanitarian organizations and the public, and brings attention to the many sites and processes through which these relations are reproduced and consolidated, it fails to adequately account for the digital-technological contexts these processes increasingly unfold in. Indeed, since the extant literature predominantly focuses on analysing the meaning of specific media texts rather than the socio-technological processes through which these texts circulate, it cannot account for how the specific media devices and platforms that humanitarian organizations employ actively mediate and shape how humanitarian issues are made visible, felt, and responded to in the digital age.

This omission is particularly puzzling when considering that researchers in other fields have already demonstrated that generating knowledge about the technological *form* of specific media devices is crucial in order to understand their socio-political effects. A relevant example of this is the specific 'visibility regimes' introduced by digital media. For example, Noble (2018) has shown how stereotypes of African women influence the algorithms that sort and prioritize the Google search results of millions of users performing billions of searches on a daily basis. For example, typing 'three black teenagers' into Google in 2010 provided users with police mug shots of African-American

individuals and a search for 'black girls' redirected users to a porn site. In this way, Noble further argues, supposedly neutral algorithms come to sustain a colonial cartography of racialized divisions in the intimate setting of everyday life. While generating and managing visibility has long been crucial to the humanitarian sector—indeed, humanitarian organizations 'are awash with material, mediated, and managed visibilities' (Flyverbom *et al.*, 2016: 98)—the proliferation of digital-algorithmic media can thus be said to have fundamentally altered how such visibilities are generated and governed. The recent emergence of machine-learning algorithms that adjust according to the input they receive from users and govern relatively autonomously only further emphasizes the need to understand how algorithms participate in the management of the online visibility of humanitarian issues.

Another prominent issue is the relationship between media representations of distant suffering and the emotional engagement of audiences. As we have seen, in addition to 'regimes of visibility,' extant scholarship on mediation and humanitarianism already recognizes the significance of discursive 'regimes of pity' that structure audience feelings and emotional dispositions vis-à-vis the suffering of distant others. What is missing from this literature, however, is an attention to the forms of emotional engagement and the 'structures of feeling' that are propelled by new digital media technologies. For example, examining what he refers to as 'the power of viral expression in world politics,' Ross (2020b) demonstrates how algorithms and specific forms of digital labour participate in the distribution, acceleration, and amplification of affective forms of political expression (ibid: 166). In this sense, Ross helps us grasp how the content of media texts is equally, and often also less, significant in structuring the emotional engagement of audiences in encounters with distant suffering than the technological-material form of the devices and platforms on and through which these mediated experiences unfold.

A third and final example is the question of the forms of agency and action that are made possible by digital media. While we have already seen that the extant literature defines responses to mediated forms of human suffering as constituted in the interplay between media, humanitarian organizations and the public, these scholars have yet to critically analyse the specific forms of agency and action made possible by the emergence of digital media technologies. For example, since 2016, Amnesty International has employed

so-called 'digital volunteers' or 'decoders' in order to detect destroyed villages in remote parts of Darfur in Sudan, hold multinational oil companies accountable for oil spills in Nigeria, and analyse the civilian destruction caused by the bombardment of Raqqa, Syria by France, UK, and the US in 2017 through satellite imagery and social media data. In more general terms, these 'digital volunteers' are thus exemplary of the wider claim that, today, anyone with a computer and internet access can become a humanitarian actor (Meier, 2015). But they also raise questions about the risks related to the emergence of digitally-mediated forms of humanitarian action. For example, as Gray (2019) critically asks, the shift 'from individual testimony to the commensuration, quantification and analysis of injustice "at a distance" in Amnesty's digital decoder initiative might … displace or distract from compassion for the individual that is elicited by testimony from those present in space and time?' (ibid: 986). 'Conversely,' as Gray further argues, Amnesty's digital decoder project may also be accused of focusing *too* much on the analysis of specific injustices through digital data rather than 'relating incidents of abuse to broader narratives and structures of colonialism, energy politics, capital, class, patriarchy and power' (ibid: 987).

Taken together, these perspectives all exemplify how the growing prevalence of digital media technologies in the aid industry is transforming global humanitarianism by *actively* mediating and (re)shaping how audiences are invited to see, feel for, and respond to the suffering of distant others. In a more general sense, these examples thus exemplify how visibility, emotions, and action are both socially- and *technologically*-mediated features of global humanitarianism. Whereas an analytics of mediation, as defined by Chouliaraki, focuses on the content of media texts in the context of discursive regimes of meaning, an analysis of *technological* mediation thus begins instead by paying attention to the specific media technologies employed by humanitarian organizations. Whereas an analytics of mediation focuses on how media texts participate in socio-cultural processes of meaning-making, an analysis of technological mediation examines how humanitarian compassion—seeing, feeling, and responding to the suffering of distant others—is shaped by the socio-technological processes of mediation through which these sentiments are appealed to and managed.

By this, I do not mean to reject nor question the scholarly and public value of the knowledge generated by the work of mediation theorists such as Chouliaraki. Rather, I want to make obvious the need for a different analytical starting point than the one currently employed in the extant literature on media and humanitarianism. What this thesis offers is thus new concepts and new methods that open up the study of the mediation of global humanitarianism to questions about the socio-technological processes through which Western audiences see, feel, and respond to humanitarian disasters Indeed, that is the task that the following chapters seek to accomplish.

Chapter 2

Theorizing digital mediation: A postphenomenological perspective

In the previous chapter, we saw how the growing reliance of humanitarian organizations on digital media forces scholars to reconsider how humanitarian disasters are made visible, how Western publics are invited to care, and how they can respond to these mediated representations. In this chapter, I thus ask: How might we—in theoretical and conceptual terms—develop a preliminary understanding of 'mediation' as a socio-technological process that shapes how human users see, feel for, and respond to humanitarian disasters? In providing an answer to this question, the chapter draws the contours of a postphenomenological theory of digital mediation that rethinks and rearticulates the definition adopted by most mediation theorists. Specifically, it proposes a dual attention to the material composition of digital media technologies as well as the imaginaries that circumscribe them in the study of media and global humanitarianism as a way to critically interrogate the power relationships that are generated and sustained by the humanitarian sector's use of digital media.

The chapter begins by engaging with what many have termed a 'new materialism' (NM) in social and political theory to grasp the socio-technological dimensions of mediation. In discussing the emergence of new materialist philosophies in relation to mediation, I also bring in central insights from science and technology studies (STS) as a way to attend *empirically* to the socio-material dynamics theorized in NM thought. Next, I add to this by drawing on postphenomenological thought in order to make obvious the need for a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which human subjects make sense of, and give meaning to, socio-technological processes of mediation. In doing so, I seek to ground the meta-theoretical

reflections on materiality and technology that are found in NM thought and the empirical understanding of the social dynamics of technology at the macro-level of national and international politics that are found in STS through a postphenomenological lens. Specifically, the chapter engages with what Verbeek (2020) refers to as the 'political hermeneutics of technology' in order to emphasize the political dimensions of digital processes of mediation at the level of subjective forms of everyday experience. Bringing together these perspectives, I end the chapter by describing how a postphenomenological perspective opens up the study of the digital mediation of global humanitarianism to questions about the power relations that are generated and sustained by the aid sector's use of digital media.

2.1 Materialities and imaginaries

The theoretical starting point for this thesis is the recognition of the need to extend a dominant understanding of mediation as sociocultural processes of meaning-making to include an attention to the technological devices, platforms, and infrastructures through which these processes unfold.

In embracing this stand point, the thesis intervenes into a broader theoretical debate between media scholars such as Chouliaraki, or Couldry and Hepp (2017) who argue that what media does and what we do with it unfolds in, and is determined by, the social field on the one hand, and a group of media scholars, inspired by the work of influential figures such as McLuhan (1994) and Kittler (1999), who maintain that what media is and what it can do is determined by material factors on the other. According to the latter group, as the sociologist Ian Hutchby argues, social constructivists go too far when they reduce the study of media to the study of human representations and interpretations since, as Hutchby humorously notes, not all social interpretations of media are equally valid; it is not possible to eat soup with a radio, for example (Hutchby, 2001: 442-443). That is to say that there must

be some essential and material characteristics of a technological device that 'constrain the ways that they can possibly be "written" or "read"' (ibid: 447).[12]

Rather than synthesizing these seemingly contradictory perspectives, this thesis identifies a theoretical middle ground that regards the 'material' and the 'social' dimensions of media as intimately interrelated and interconnected. By this, I do not want to argue that any philosophical and analytical distinction between what we refer to as 'the social' and 'the material' are meaningless in the study of media but that we must be attentive to the contingent and co-productive relations between them. In doing so, we arrive at a theoretical understanding of mediation as *socio-technological* processes that unfold in the interplay between the material configuration and mediating capacities of specific media technologies and the beliefs, ideas, visions, and expectations invested into them by human users.

Rethinking materiality

My interest in mediation as a socio-technological process is underlined by a basic observation that, today, the question of 'materiality' is not as straightforward as it perhaps once was. For what is 'technonology' and how does it 'matter,' in the first place? Providing an answer to this question makes necessary an engagement with the so-called 'new materialist' (NM) perspectives that have swept across and influenced disciplines such as philosophy (Harman, 2010; Levi, 2011), human geography (Thrift, 2008), media studies (Hansen, 2004), political theory (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010) and international relations (Sassen, 2008; Connolly, 2011; Grove, 2019) in recent years. Speaking against both social constructivists—who are accused of being overtly focused on speech acts, discourses, and semiotics—and traditional materialists—who are accused of promoting an essentialist and deterministic reading of material artefacts—these scholars generally perceive 'matter' as contingent, dynamic, and even 'vibrant' forces

[12] After all, as Parikka (2015) notes, everything from the computer chips that power our smartphones to the cables and satellites that transport data around the globe are made from minerals and energy, all of which are harnessed from natural elements that existed on this earth long before humans emerged. For this reason alone, he further argues, media can not *only* be studied as sociocultural processes of meaning-making (ibid).

(Bennett 2010) that flow through and across human and non-human bodies. According to new materialists, a concept such as agency is thus not an inherently human or material entity but *distributed* among human- and non-human actors, resulting in a 'flat ontology' of social and political life that pays attention to the intimately interrelated and crucial role of corporeal and non-corporeal bodies in social and political life, without privileging one over the other (Bryant 2011).

Coole and Frost (2010) have identified two reasons for the need to rearticulate the question of materiality along these lines. The first is a shift in the way the natural sciences conceptualize matter:

> The great materialist philosophies of the nineteenth century, notably those of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, were themselves hugely influenced by developments in the natural sciences, yet the new physics and biology make it impossible to understand matter any longer in ways that were inspired by classical science (ibid: 5).

One such shift which has received considerable attention in recent years is the emergence of quantum physics. Crudely put, quantum physics seeks to explain phenomena that are considered 'nonsensical' or counter-intuitive in classical physics and thus unsettles traditional notions of matter. As Coole and Frost (ibid) note:

> While Newtonian mechanics was especially important for … older materialisms [such as Marx and Freud], for postclassical physics matter has become considerably more elusive (one might even say more immaterial) and complex, suggesting that the ways we understand and interact with nature are in need of a commensurate updating.

In response to this, NM scholars promote a pluralistic, non-deterministic understanding of the 'vibrant materiality' (Bennett 2010) of things, artefacts, and devices and how such entities come together, albeit often only temporarily, to form emergent functional structures or 'assemblages'.[13]

[13] Widely regarded as the originator of the term (together with Felix Guattari), Gilles Deleuze defines an 'assemblage' as 'a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them across ages,

One of the insights that I draw from NM is thus the theoretical understanding of the fluid role of 'things,' devices, and technological artefacts in social and political life that emphasizes processual change and precarious wholes as opposed to stable structures and entities. More specifically, paraphrasing Parikka (2015), we might say that NM compels us to attend to 'the various materials, components … networks, and genealogies in which media technologies are being produced.' A new materialist perspective on media is particularly pertinent in relation to the study of *digital* media technologies, which have unsettled traditional notions of materiality much like quantum physics did in the domain of the natural sciences. It is difficult, for example, to describe digital data in conventional material terms since you cannot see or 'feel' it. An obvious example of this is so-called 'cloud technologies' where users can store their data on external, networked data bases rather than on their own PC. But while the 'cloud' itself might seem wholly immaterial or even invisible to most, it still very much relies on material entities such as data cables made of copper and rare minerals mined in the Global South and data centres that consume endless amounts of energy, to name just a few examples.

A less theoretical but equally crucial reason for rethinking materiality is the need to critically examine how our world is being materially and ideationally reconstituted by new scientific discoveries and technological innovations. This seems particularly pertinent in the context of our current era, which many have described as 'the Anthropocene' to denote how humans are now more influential in shaping the planet than forces of nature (see e.g. Chandler, Müller and Rothe, 2021). For this reason, as Coole and Frost argue:

> As critically engaged theorists, we find ourselves compelled to explore the significance of complex issues such as climate change or global capital and population flows, the biotechnological engineering of genetically modified organisms, or the saturation of our intimate and physical lives by digital, wireless, and virtual technologies. (Coole & Frost 2010: 5)

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sexes and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning' (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987: 69).

To this end, NM theorists rearticulate the question of power by examining how specific 'orders emerge in particular ways, how they are held together, somewhat precariously, [and] how they reach across or mould space' (Müller, 2015: 27). In doing so, they arrive at an understanding of power that takes the role of non-human objects and processes seriously without succumbing to technological determinism. From this perspective, power does not belong to particular human or non-human entities but exists only in the dynamic relations that are established between them when they come together to form functional assemblages.

Yet, however valuable this perspective might be, NM does not in and of itself provide the analytical tools needed to examine the fluid dynamics of power in particular socio-material settings. While some, like Curtis & Acuto (2014), have drawn extensively on NM thought to develop more systematic ways of studying the materiality of world politics, it is thus necessary to engage with ideas and perspectives from disciplines that are more obviously oriented towards empirical analysis in order for the theoretical arguments presented above to become applicable analytical concepts. To this end, the chapter now turns to science and technology studies (STS) as a way to analyse the power relations at play in *specific* socio-technological processes of mediation. Particularly central in this regard is the study of how social norms, beliefs, and visions participate in the development and use of technological-material artefacts and how these 'sociotechnical imaginaries' thus cement certain social relationships of power in the process.

Sociotechnical imaginaries

In many ways, STS can be said to adhere to the theoretical position promoted in NM literature by promoting an interest in the 'more-than-human' features of social life while rejecting notions of technological determinism. Rather than analysing the role of non-human things or processes in our social and political lives, as Tsinovoi (2020) writes, STS scholars can instead generally be said to study technology 'as part of hybrid arrangements where meanings and identities of subjects and objects are enacted in practice through the webs of association within which they are embedded.'

A crucial difference between STS and NM, however, is that instead of providing a meta-philosophical account of the complex and interwoven relationship between the social and the material, STS scholars study the social dynamics of technological devices empirically, as they unfold through and intersect with specific events, fields, practices, or processes.[14] Central to the empirical examination of 'hybrid arrangements' or socio-material entanglements is the concept of 'co-production.' According to Jasanoff (2006: 2-3), co-production is:

> shorthand for the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it […] Scientific knowledge, in particular, is not a transcendent mirror of reality. It both embeds and is embedded in social practices, identities, norms, conventions, discourses, instruments and institutions – in short, in all the building blocks of what we term the social. The same can be said even more forcefully of technology.

From this perspective, humans, society, and technology cannot be seen as distinct 'poles' between which there are interactions; instead, both human beings and technological devices are the *result* of such continuous interactions. Neither humans nor technologies are thus pre-given entities but instead mutually shape and co-produce each other in the relations that come about between them. For example, using the disagreement between those that claim that 'weapons kill people' and those that claim that 'people kill people' as an illustrative starting point, Latour (1994) has argued that neither is right since the gun cannot be seen as the sole actor in a shooting (as the former would argue) nor can the gunman (as argued by the latter), since the shooting would never occur without both of them. Instead, the gun can be said to translate a human intention (such as the lust for revenge) into a form of action (shooting someone with whom you have a grudge). In this sense, the role of the gun is not simply that of a neutral intermediator of human intentions.

[14] For example, Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) have studied how Facebook's infamous 'Like' button enables multiple data flows between various actors which they argue creates a new form of connectivity and introduces an alternative internet infrastructure best described as a 'Like economy.'

Instead, we must regard the gun (and other technological artefacts) as a *mediator* that actively shapes human actions.

While STS scholars generally recognize that the range of possible actions one can undertake through media technologies is constrained by their material configuration, they thus also question the empirical utility of this assumption because 'one is still left with determining how to identify the "actual" constraining and enabling features among those identified by social actors' (Rappert, 2003: 574). Instead, STS scholars argue that what a technological device can do as well as the possibilities for interpreting and acting in the world it affords to users is both relational and situational and thus not an inherent or universal feature of the media technology itself. In this sense, the affordances, or action potentials, of particular forms of media are not defined solely by their material configuration nor by the ideas or beliefs they represent but is 'co-produced' through the socio-material relations that arise between technological artefacts and human users in and through practice (see also Nagy and Neff, 2015).

To develop knowledge about the co-productive dynamics of technological artefacts such as media devices, STS scholars have increasingly turned to the study of 'sociotechnical imaginaries' in recent years. According to Jasanoff and Kim (2009), who coined the term, 'sociotechnical imaginaries' describe how visions and ideas of scientific and technological progress carry with them implicit ideas about public purposes, collective futures, and the common good. Put differently, 'sociotechnical imaginaries' are future-oriented ideas and beliefs invested into technological progress by political institutions, government offices or other collective, political actors. Crucially, these 'beliefs' are more than fleeting ideas and partisan perspectives; they are collectively held and institutionally stabilized forms of knowledge that shape human society (see also Mager and Katzenbach, 2021). For example, as Kim and Jasanoff (2009) demonstrate in their comparative study of the development and regulation of nuclear power in the US and North Korea, different ways of imagining and envisioning nuclear technology—as a problematic technology that must be regulated in the US and as a technology necessary for economic development in Korea—underpin and shape these two countries' different responses to nuclear catastrophes such as Three Mile Island and Chernobyl.

Whereas STS literature has traditionally tended to focus on scientific disciplines, labs, clinics, and other professionally and scientifically bounded spaces of expertise, literature on sociotechnical imaginaries thus instead foregrounds the development, promotion, and employment of technology by non-scientific actors such as politicians, corporations, and international institutions. In this sense, the study of sociotechnical imaginaries in STS also opens up the study of the social dynamics of technological-material artefacts to questions about politics and power that relate to issues beyond scientific knowledge. Indeed, as Kim and Jasanoff argue, technological visions 'and the politics built upon them, have the power to influence technological design, channel public expenditures, and justify the inclusion or exclusion of citizens' (ibid: 120). In this sense, as they further argue, sociotechnical imaginaries are intimately 'associated with active exercises of state power, such as the selection of development priorities, the allocation of funds, the investment in material infrastructures, and the acceptance or suppression of political dissent' (ibid: 123).

Even though most STS scholars would challenge the social constructivist notion that social actors 'attach' meaning to technological artefacts, literature on sociotechnical imaginaries nevertheless emphasizes that technologies (and scientific knowledge, for that matter) are not objective and neutral phenomena but interwoven with the political and social fabric of society. Yet, while opening up the study of the social dynamics of technology to questions about politics and power, the extant literature on sociotechnical imaginaries also has analytical blind spots of its own. Crucially, since the majority of this literature focuses on the visions of technological progress promoted by nation states or multinational corporations, it does not account for how sociotechnical imaginaries are generated, enacted, negotiated, challenged, or resisted at the micro-level of more mundane contexts of social and political life. Hence, by focusing on events and processes that unfold at the macro-level of national and international politics, the extant STS scholarship misses the quotidian practices and everyday processes of digital mediation that are the focus of this thesis.

Yet, as will be developed below, we can mitigate this shortcoming by supplementing STS with insights from postphenomenological theory, which draws particular attention to the material specificities of digital media technologies and the imaginaries invested into them at the micro-level of

subjective experiences and interpretations. In doing so, postphenomenology ultimately allows us to open up the study of mediation to questions about how, in addition to our embodied experiences of the world around us, digital processes of mediation also intervene into and reshape our collective, cultural frames of interpretation.

2.2 Technology and mediation

It is helpful to begin this section by noting that, in many ways, postphenomenological thought is built on concepts, theories, and methods similar to, or drawing directly on, those employed in and developed by STS. Indeed, Don Ihde—one of the discipline's foundational figures—describes postphenomenology (PP) as adding pragmatism to phenomenology (Ihde, 2016), thus making obvious STS' and PP's shared intellectual debt to American pragmatists such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. In this sense, and in Ihde's (2009: 22) words, PP is most accurately described as a 'step away from generalizations about technology *überhaupt*' as found in the high-altitude perspectives of classical phenomenologists such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, 'and a step into the examination of technologies in their particularities' without losing sight of questions about human perception and existence.

The prefix 'post' in PP does thus not refer to a shift in the subject matter of phenomenology but rather to a shift in its methods and analytical orientations. Much like STS, PP can be said to promote an 'empirical turn' in philosophies of technology. Yet, as opposed to STS—a sociological discipline whose analytical area of interest is intentionally broad—PP scholars focus specifically on theorizing and analysing the mediating capacities of technologies. In doing so, they point to the idea that technologies shape human experiences and intervene into our collective, cultural frames of perception and interpretation. In broad terms, PP is best described as a theory that begins from—but does not end with—the question of technological mediation. For postphenomenologists, 'technological mediation' does not just denote the relation between humans and technology but is also part of the human condition—that is, we cannot be human without technologies.

And in this sense, they view the relations between humans and technology as part of a much larger relation between humans and the world (Verbeek, 2016). Building on this, PP goes against classical phenomenology, which focused on technology as a broad social and cultural phenomenon, and instead focuses on the mediating capacities of specific technologies. In doing so, postphenomenologists also depart from classical phenomenology's often gloomy diagnosis of technological alienation and instead analyse how technologies generate and organize new relations between human subjects and the world around them.

The question that we shall now turn to is thus *how* postphenomenologists theorize technological mediation, both in relation to human-technology relations and to the broader interpretative relation between humans and the world around them. As we shall see, an answer to this question brings us into dialogue with two prominent postphenomenological thinkers. These are: 1) Don Ihde, whose concept of 'material hermeneutics' describes how our collective frames of cultural interpretation are not just socially but also technologically produced, and 2) Peter-Paul Verbeek, whose work on 'political hermeneutics' seeks to position the question of how such technological mediations are embodied and attributed with meaning by human subjects at the centre of postphenomenological thought.

Material hermeneutics

The starting point for PP is that we cannot be humans without technology. Indeed, according to postphenomenologists, technologies help us develop knowledge about the world around us, they shape our moral actions and decisions, and even influence our metaphysical and religious frameworks (Verbeek, 2011). For example: 'MRI scanners provide neuroscientists with a highly specific way to access the brain, while obstetric sonography informs ethical decisions about abortion, and IVF reorganizes the boundary between the given and the made, or fate and responsibility' (Verbeek, 2015: 30). Similarly, Ihde (2021) has argued that scientific instruments and new imagining technologies have reshaped our collective perception of ancient history and the origins of civilisation. For example, by emphasizing ancient objects such as the mummy 'Otzi'—which Carbon 14 analysis has dated as

5,300 before the present—he repeatedly demonstrates how much of our collective scientific knowledge about the past is only possible because of our contemporary instruments and techniques.

Together, these observations encapsulate what Ihde (ibid) refers to as the 'material hermeneutics' of technology to describe how shared interpretations and imaginaries (in addition to embodied experiences) are not only culturally or socially conditioned but also materially and technologically produced. But postphenomenologists also maintain that the ways in which technologies shape human experiences and cultural interpretations are not singular, uniform, or even straightforward. Central in this regard is the notion of 'multistability', which denotes that technologies can have different purposes and meanings for different users in different contexts (see also Ihde 2009). One way to illustrate this is by distinguishing between different types of relations between humans, technology, and the world. For example, Ihde (ibid) distinguishes between embodied, hermeneutic, alterity, and background relations. The phone is an example of an embodied relation between humans and technology: we speak *through* the phone rather than to the phone and the technology thus comes to form a unity with its human user. Hermeneutic relations, on the other hand, are relations where humans read and actively interpret technological representations to understand the world, such as a doctor who uses an MRI or ultrasound scanner. In the third type or relations, the alterity relation, the world becomes a background to human-technology relations. Finally, there are background relations in which technologies form the context of human existence rather than being experienced themselves, such as the humming of a refrigerator or the warm air emanating from an air-condition machine.

In addition to distinguishing between different types of human-technology-world relations, postphenomenologists also distinguish between different forms of influence that technologies exert on humans. For example, according to Tromp, Hekkert, and Verbeek, (2011), the impact of technologies on humans can be located somewhere on a continuum between 'hidden' and 'apparent', on the one hand, and between 'weak' and 'strong', on the other. Strong, apparent influences are best described as 'coercive' such as the influence exerted by cars that will not start if the driver has alcohol in his blood. Weak, apparent influences, on the other hand, influence our

behaviour without being coercive and are thus perhaps best described as 'persuasive.' An illustrative example is sleep-monitoring apps that provide users with a warning on their smart phone when it is time to go to bed. On the other side of the continuum, hidden and weak influences are 'seductive' in the sense that their impact is sub- or non-conscious and relatively 'mild' or limited, like removing graffiti to prevent further vandalism or installing a sofa to promote social interaction at the workplace. The final type of influence, both strong and hidden, is best understood as 'decisive' or 'implicative' because it limits what we can do without this influence necessarily being noticed. Think, for example, about Google's content-moderation software that sorts search results for under-age internet users to prevent them from being exposed to violent or pornographic images when searching the internet through Google.

I draw two insights from this. One is the recognition of the intimate relationship between how specific media technologies shape the relationship between humans and the world around them, both at the micro-level of embodied experience and at the macro-level of cultural and collective interpretations. The other is an attentiveness to the multistable nature of the power relations at play in these processes of technology mediation and specifically to the hidden and non-coercive nature of these forces, which—as will be elaborated in Chapter 2.3—brings PP into conversation with a broader literature on the 'productive' and 'modulatory' dimensions of digitally-mediated power. Together, these insights explain how, in shaping human experiences of the world around us, processes of digital mediation also shape our collective frames of interpretation and that the ways in which they do so are dynamic and contingent.

But, as we shall see, what is missing from this equation is the role of the human subjects who participate in, and make sense of, processes of technological mediation from specific vantage points and in particular social contexts. In bringing the subject back in, as the next section does, we add to existing knowledge about the 'material hermeneutics' of digital media in order to grasp the 'political hermeneutics' of technological mediation.

Political hermeneutics

While PP literature generally offers valuable insights into processes of mediation and the kinds of power relations at play therein, postphenomenologists also seem to be realizing that the discipline's persistent emphasis on the role of materiality and technology in the way humans relate to each other and the world around them has its limitations in the sense that it does little to account for the thinking, feeling, and acting human subjects implicated in processes of mediation. Technological mediation, as Veerbek notes, thus 'deserves to be studied in a more comprehensive and systematic way, covering the full depth of the various dimensions of the relations between human beings and reality' (Verbeek, 2015b: 192). And in order to do so, as he further argues, one must account not only for the mediating capacities of technologies themselves but also for 'how humans give meaning to these mediations—both empirically and conceptually.' Postphenomenology, as Verbeek (ibid) subsequently notes, is thus in need of 'one more turn after the material turn' that brings attention to the social and political dynamics of processes of technological mediation.

As part of this turn, PP literature on the material hermeneutics of technology has been supplemented with an interest in the ways in which humans *give meaning* to technologies and their role as mediators, amounting to what Verbeek (2020) refers to as the 'political hermeneutics' of technological mediation in order to add to the material hermeneutics proposed by Don Ihde by 'politicizing' it. Of interest in this regard, as Verbeek notes, are questions such as: how 'do scientists actively engage with perceptual technological mediations when interpreting reality?' or how 'do moral decisions take shape in the active interplay between material mediations and human appropriations?' (ibid). To be sure, his intention behind asking these questions is to demonstrate that, while most postphenomenologists study processes of technological mediation, they generally do not do so in ways that take into account the role of human subjects therein.[15] For example,

[15] A similar point can be made about the adjacent field of STS. To take one prominent example, while the work of Hacking (1983) explicitly emphasizes the role of scientific instruments such as microscopes in the production of scientific knowledge, it focuses on the knowledge objects and their scientific status produced thereby rather than the

while Ash (2015) recognizes that technological processes of mediation can only be accessed through human modes of experience and knowledge, he nevertheless focuses on developing concepts that investigate the way that technological objects or artefacts appear to one another in ways that exceed or confound human sense. Moreover, at the opposite end of the spectrum of postphenomenological theory, while Hansen (2004, 2006) foregrounds the crucial role of the body as the agent that filters information and points to the fundamental implication of humans in digital-technological processes of mediation, his work does not take into account the role of thinking, speaking, and intentional human subjects but rather that of 'affective bodies,' with 'affects' denoting sub- or non-conscious sensations 'that passes through the body and can often be felt, often at a speed beyond and magnitude beneath the perceptual thresholds of the unaided human perceptual apparatus' (Hansen 2004: 159).

In many ways, Verbeek's work thus offers an alternative to the perspectives of these PP scholars that is in many ways similar to the one put forward by Janasoff and Kim (2009, 2015) in STS. For one, Verbeek focuses on what people *do* with and *think* about technologies rather than speculating about the sub- or non-conscious processes through which technology conditions or attunes them, thus providing a view of the human subject as an *active* political participant (or agent) in processes of technological mediation that is missing from Hansen's account. Moreover, rather than studying processes of mediation from 'the outside' through the interactions of multiple entities that can be empirically observed—as Ash does—Verbeek's theory of technological mediation instead analyses processes of technological mediation from 'the inside' through the experiences and interpretations of thinking, feeling, acting

processes through which scientists embody, discuss, appropriate, or resist these technological-scientific processes of mediation. Similarly, while Latour's (1994) reflections on the gun as a form of 'technical mediation' of human intentions demonstrate how social practices are translated as human beings form relationships with technical artefacts, his (as well as other STS scholars') symmetrical treatment of human and non-human actors make it impossible, or at least difficult, to specify the particular role of human ideas, values, norms, or imaginaries in processes of technological mediation (but see Jasanoff and Kim, 2015).

human subjects who exist in technologically-mediated relations to the world around them. In more specific terms, and much like Jasanoff and Kim, Verbeek thus foregrounds the crucial role of individual or collective ideas, beliefs, values, and emotions that arise from the use of digital media.

In sum, whereas both STS scholars and postphenomenologists have 'tended to downplay the specific role of the subject in human-technology relations, or even refuse to think in terms of subjects and objects,' the postphenomenological theory of technological mediation proposed by Verbeek (2015b: 194) makes 'it possible to bring the mediated subject to the centre again.'[16] But contrary to Jasanoff and Kim, whose work focuses on the beliefs, ideas, and visions of nation states and political elites in relation to technological development and regulation, the postphenomenological perspective offered by Verbeek instead begins from the mundane, technologically-mediated experiences of the everyday. There are several examples to draw on to illustrate what such a sensibility entails. One is in the work of Bucher and Helmond (2017) who have studied social media platforms as objects of 'intense feelings' that become subject to various interpretations and are endowed with different forms of meaning by users. The kinds of actions or experiences that social media platforms such as Twitter 'afford' users with are thus not established only by the technical capacities and potentials of these platforms but are rather the outcome of both their functionality and the beliefs or meanings that users associate with, or derive from, them. 'Clearly,' as the authors argue, 'features such as the "like button" on Facebook suggest the action of clicking it, but are also open to a variety of other possibilities and interpretations' depending, for example, on users' emotional relationship with this feature or their preconceived beliefs about it (ibid). As Nagy & Neff (2015: 6) similarly note, whereas an important theoretical concept in the study of technology such as 'affordances' was

[16] That is not to say that postphenomenologists accept the Cartesian division between object and subject since the core epistemological idea of postphenomenological theory, as Verbeek (2015b: 194) argues, 'is that technologies help to shape the reality of the phenomena that are being studied.' Technological mediation is not a 'phenomenon that takes place "between" a pre-given world of objects and pre-given human subjects. Rather, human beings and their world are constituted through the "act" of mediation' (ibid).

originally conceived to understand the link between perception and action in environments that were not technologically-mediated, today, media users:

> need to explore mediated environments socially, culturally, and cognitively before they can use them effectively. Affordances in mediated environments are subject to cognitive as well as emotional processes. We may feel an online site is less adaptive than it actually is. The perceptions of affordances are as much socially constructed for users as they are technologically configured.

Indeed, the digital revolution only seems to have made the relationship between the material configuration of technologies and the beliefs or emotions associated with them by users even more intimate. For example, as McStay (2018) has demonstrated, technologies such as the Apple Watch and Amazon's Smart Home Sensors interpret users' emotions, moods, and intentions by analysing our conversations or measuring our pulse, resulting in the emergence of what McStay refers to as 'emotional AI'. Consequently, the actions or experiences suggested by digital media technologies are increasingly co-produced by the emotional and bodily states of users, which further brings into question the claim that processes of technological mediation are shaped primarily by the material configuration of devices, independent of human experiences and interpretations.

By bringing the subject back in, as suggested also by Nagy and Neff (2015: 1), Verbeek's political hermeneutics thus urges us to consider digital mediation as both material and 'imaginary' processes 'that emerge in the interplay between users' perceptions, attitudes, and expectations [and] between the materiality and functionality of technologies.' In doing so, he reminds us of the importance of the ideas, beliefs, and perceptions of human subjects in even the most mundane processes of technological mediation and that such processes are inherently multistable in the sense that they can be interpreted and appropriated in a number of ways, depending on the social and political contexts in which they unfold. In this sense, and as will be developed below, the postphenomenological approach proposed by Verbeek thus opens up the study of the digital mediation of global humanitarianism to questions about the asymmetrical positionalities of subjects and unequal power relationships that are generated and/or sustained thereby.

2.3 Mediation and power

So far, we have theorized the concept of 'digital mediation' by discussing and drawing out crucial insights from new materialist (NM) philosophy: science and technology studies (STS) filtered through the lens of postphenomenology (PP). In doing so, we have arrived at a theoretical account of mediation that includes the interplay between the material composition and mediating capacities of specific media technologies and the imaginaries of human subjects engaged in processes of mediation. This final section brings together and builds on this by rearticulating the question of power, which is central to the extant mediation literature, from a postphenomenological perspective.

Specifically, it carves out a conceptual space between macro- and micro-political perspectives on power on the one hand, and between those that view power as 'repressive' and those that view power as 'productive', on the other. Conceptualizing power along these lines is pertinent to a theorisation of digital mediation based on insights from PP since, in recent years, critics have repeatedly expressed concern about an alleged 'critical' deficit in this particular discipline. For example, Kaplan (2009) has questioned if PP's analytical focus on human-technology relations is ill-suited for attending to social and political issues at the macro-level, Bantwal Rao *et al.* (2015) argue that PP scholars have failed to conceptualize both power and resistance adequately, and Kinkaid (2020) has even claimed that the decentring of the human subject that characterizes much of PP literature makes it impossible for the discipline to account for social differences and inequalities. However, as will be demonstrated, these concerns ignore the specific ways in which PP thought can be used to make visible the power relations constituted by, or sustained through, processes of digital mediation.

To develop this, I begin by situating PP in relation to a number of tensions between conflicting theories of technology and power; namely between micro- and macro-political perspectives on the one hand, and between conceptualisations of power as repressive and productive, on the other. Discussing these divisions in relation to the theory of digital mediation outlined in this chapter clarifies exactly *how* an attention to the power relations at play in processes of mediation enables and informs the emergence of a critical sensibility that takes into account the global inequalities and

injustices that might be enacted or exacerbated in and through specific processes of digital mediation, as analysed in Chapter 4, 5, and 6.

Between micro- and macro-political perspectives on power

The Frankfurt School offers some of the most important critical engagements with power and technology in modern thought. Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), inspired by Marx, were among the first to provide a systematic critique of technology in the light of the industrial revolution. But they were not alone in this regard since scepticism towards technology was a pronounced feature of European thought in the first half of the 20th century, visible also in conservative critiques of modernity (see e.g. Mumford, 1934; Ellul, 2011) and in the writings of Heidegger (1977) on the question concerning technology. The anti-technological orientation of the Frankfurt School was additionally motivated by their dislike of the US which was seen as a symbol of the triumph of capitalist technology and the primary proponent of what Marcuse (1991) termed 'technological rationality'.

Monumental in this regard is Horkheimer and Adorno's (1947) work on 'the culture industry' wherein they proposed that mass media and popular culture renders people docile and content no matter how dire their socioeconomic circumstances are and manufactures false needs that can only be met and satisfied by the consumption of capitalist goods. In this sense, their work is exemplary of the Marxist hermeneutical tradition in critical theory which aims to unveil the material base and capitalist-economic interests behind social, cultural, and political forms of progress as constitutive of a 'false consciousness.' But while the Frankfurt School's critique of technology was shaped in this regard by Marx's dialectical materialism, they also went beyond Marx's conception of technology as 'machinery' in order to capture its cultural dimensions. Specifically, they claimed that the economic interests of capitalism extend beyond the factory and into the cultural domain, reducing 'culture' to the maximization of profit and turning art into commodities.

In contrast to conservative critiques, such as those mentioned above, some members of the Frankfurt School nevertheless held a firm belief in the possibilities of technology in relation to the creation of new cultural realities. What was needed was a critique of modern, capitalist technologies and the

emergence of technological rationality, not a regression to a pre-technological age. The writings of Walter Benjamin are particularly noteworthy in this regard. Benjamin was particularly intrigued by the new forms of aesthetic experience that were made possible by new media technologies generally, and cinema notably, as well as their inherent social and political dynamics. While, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, the cultural industry alienates and ultimately sedates audiences, thus preventing them from becoming revolutionary subjects, Benjamin (1986: 13) identified a potential for mobilizing the masses through cinema inasmuch as the media technology technically reproduces objects of art, thus making them more easily accessible to the masses. According to Benjamin, this revolutionary potential was visible, for example, in how the 'reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction towards a Chaplin movie.' While Benjamin's work was situated within the hermeneutical tradition—like the rest of the Frankfurt School—he thus also tried to move beyond it by 'redeeming' human experience (Loveluck, 2011).

While much has since been said both about the limits of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of mass media as transmitters of the capitalist ideology as well as the somewhat *naïve* belief in its revolutionary potential showcased by Benjamin, these perspectives are nevertheless brought forward here to show that their disagreement can essentially be boiled down to a difference in perspective. For whereas Horkheimer and Adorno are concerned with the power of technology to alienate the masses and suppress revolutionary change at the level of culture and ideology, Benjamin focuses on the possibilities that new media technologies create for human subjects to perceive, think, or imagine the world differently. In this sense, the disagreement between members of the Frankfurt School not only illustrates the richness of the group's writing on media and technology but must also be read as symptomatic of a persistent tension between what we might call micro- and macro-political perspectives on power that reverberate in and through contemporary strands of critical thinking.

On the one hand, reinvigorating Adorno's view of mass media as transmitters of a capitalist ideology, scholars such as Galloway (2004) and Chun (2011) have claimed that digital technology is a functional analogy to ideology inasmuch as computational software embodies particular protocols and logics and valorizes

specific individuals or ideas over others without having to communicate any kind of formal ideology to the user.[17] To Galloway (2004), the ideological power exerted by computational devices is thus exemplary of how particular forms of control and centralized authority persists in spite of the decentralization often associated with the digital revolution and the rise of what the sociologist Manuel Castells' has famously referred to as the 'network society' (see also Bratton, 2015). On the other hand, extending Benjamin's interest in technology at the level of human subjects and aesthetic experience to the digital age, STS scholars such as Bucher (2017) have moved away from Galloway and others' focus on the implicit logics, decision structures, and 'protocol power' of software and towards an examination of what she terms the 'micropolitics' of power imbued in the affective and phenomenological dimensions of software generally and algorithms in particular.[18] What interests Bucher (2017) in this regard is the question of how algorithms and people interact by examining how internet users perceive and make sense of algorithms in their everyday lives.

In recent years, however, critical theories of technology have attempted to bridge this divide between macro- and micro-political perspectives of power. Prominent among these is Feenberg (2017b) who employs insights from STS to update the critical theories of the Frankfurt School and to provide a critique of the technological rationality or 'technosystem' of the present. 'Technosystem' is employed by Feenberg in this regard to denote 'the field of technically rational disciplines and operations associated with markets, administrations, and technologies' (ibid: x). Specifically, Feenberg

[17] To return to an earlier example, remember Noble (2018) who has shown how stereotypes of African women are enacted and enforced by the algorithms that sort and prioritize the Google search results of millions of users performing billions of searches on a daily basis. For example, typing 'three black teenagers' into Google in 2010 provided users with police mug shots of African-American individuals and a search for 'black girls' redirected users to a porn site. In this way, Noble argues, supposedly neutral algorithms come to sustain a colonial cartography of racialized divisions in the intimate settings of everyday life.

[18] 'Micropolitics' is employed in this context with reference to Foucault's (1998: 26-27) notion of 'microphysicsm' that 'refers to the barely perceived transitions in power that occur in and through situated encounters' and the idea that 'different qualities of encounter do different things' (Bissell, 2016: 397).

supplements the Frankfurt School's conception of technological rationality as situated within various socio-political contexts (such as capitalism) that establish their influence and limits with an attention to the definition, selection, and application of those principles in and through everyday practices (ibid: 15). Yet, while the theoretical approach presented by Feenberg is both novel and valuable in the context of this thesis, his critical theory of technology would benefit from moving beyond the broad descriptions and analyses of an abstract and all-encompassing 'technosystem' to provide a critical account of *specific* processes of technological mediation.

This is where PP enters the frame once again. For, like the work of Feenberg (2017b), the postphenomenological perspective offered by Verbeek also has the potential to bridge macro- and micro-political perspectives on technology, but he does so through the study of *specific* technologies in *specific* socio-political contexts. In illustration, Verbeek (ibid) employs Rosenberger's (2017) examination of hostile forms of architecture such as spiked armrests on public benches that prevent homeless people from sleeping on them. Specifically, he demonstrates that the relations between people and park benches are multistable in the sense that park benches 'do not have a fixed essence but can be interpreted in multiple ways' and that the aim of hostile architecture is exactly to 'reduce this multi-stability by blocking the "material interpretations" that enable homeless people to be in specific places' (in Verbeek 2020: 143-144). In doing so, Rosenberger reveals 'how dominant [i.e. privileged] users of technologies lose the capacity to see other stabilities than the one that is most obvious for them, and therefore they typically fail to see how the material environment excludes other forms of use and types of users' (in Verbeek 2020: 144), amounting to a political hermeneutics of technology: specifically, by 'organizing perceptions and interpretations,' as Verbeek further writes, the park benches come to 'embody subtle forms of power.'

The postphenomenological perspective presented by Verbeek thus effectively shows how, in shaping human experiences of the world, technologies also actively shape how we interpret it. In doing so, he dissolves the divide between macro- and micro-political perspectives of technology and power by attending to how the microphysics of everyday, experiential encounters with technology examined by Benjamin and Bucher intersect with questions about cultural hermeneutics such as those addressed by Adorno, Galloway, and others. In this

sense, the perspective employed here performs what Solomon and Steele (2016) refer to as a 'micro-move' in the study of processes of technological mediation and the power relations at play in the sense that, while it begins from the micro-dynamics of technologically-mediated forms of human perception and experience, it certainly does not end there. Instead, it uses knowledge about the micro-level as a starting point for inquiring about technology and power at the macro-level of collective sense-making.

From repressive to productive power (and back again)

Accompanying tensions between micro- and macro-political perspectives on power is a tension between scholars who view power as 'repressive' and those that view power as 'productive'.

Many scholars have explicitly or implicitly theorized the power relations at play in and through processes of digital mediation in terms of sovereign domination, repression, and control. For example, Bratton (2015) examines the intersection of software and sovereignty to describe how digital technologies sustain and reinforce a geopolitical order already in place while reminding us that they enact this order 'in different ways and at different locations' and thus forces us to reconsider the very boundaries within which sovereign forms of governance, war, and security can be said to operate. As Bratton further argues, digital technologies do not only have geopolitical implications—as evidenced by the ongoing Sino-US conflict over the Chinese technology company Huawai as well as NSA's data-based surveillance of European heads of state—but are also geopolitical conditions in their own right. Specifically, digital devices, platforms, and infrastructures—from smart grids to social media platforms, smart watches and the internet of things—are part of a coherent whole that is both a computational mega-structure and a new global architecture of governance. This is evidenced perhaps best by the growing interest of both states and Big Tech companies such as Google and Facebook in forming private-public partnerships that not only make the capacities and capabilities of these corporations available to states but also enhances the influence of private actors on all aspects of our social-and political lives. As argued by Klein (2020) and Ølgaard (2020b), this development only seems to have been further accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Taken together, these perspectives remind us that we live in a time when states and corporations increasingly gather and analyse digital traces left behind by users and where our social and political lives are increasingly intervened in, controlled, and manipulated through data analytics and computational protocols which pose a threat to human autonomy and democratic rights, rearticulate geopolitical order, and exacerbate global inequalities. But the power of technology can not *only* be perceived as repressive and described in terms of sovereignty, domination, and control. Equally central to critical inquiries into digital mediation are forms of power that are not bent on domination and which are thus more adequately described as *productive*. Rather than physical or structural violence, these forms of power operate through the willing participation of the governed as opposed to their forced submission. Whereas repressive power describes the authority to decide over, dominate, or punish others, as discussed by Barnett and Duvall (2005) and conceived by Foucault (1998: 92-95), productive power instead denotes the capacity to shape human subjects' self-understandings and perceived self-interests. In this sense, productive power can be understood as the 'socially diffuse production of subjectivity in systems of meaning and signification', which 'concerns discourse, the social processes, and the system of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced, and transformed' (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 43).

Postphenomenological thought already seems to be sensitive to the productive forms of power at play in technological processes of mediation. On the basis of Ihde's 'praxis-perception model' of human technology relations, Verbeek distinguishes between the different influences that technologies can have on human actions and practices, on the one hand, and on their perceptions and frameworks of interpretation, on the other. The latter dimension, he argues, is particularly central to PP since the aim of postphenomenological analyses is not simply to show how technology 'directly' or 'physically' shapes the behaviour of people but, rather, how technologies help shape (and are shaped by) the perceptions and interpretations on the basis of which people make decisions to act (Verbeek 2020: 143). Case in point, as argued by Bucher (2017) and shown in Chapter 4, we thus need to think about digital technologies, such as algorithms, not only as segments of code that determine what we see on social media platforms

but also as cultural objects circumscribed by social imaginaries that are productive of specific forms of online *subjectivity*. Doing so, as written by Bucher (ibid: 62), demonstrates how 'different ways of thinking about what algorithms are … affect how [algorithmic] systems are used.'

A postphenomenological theory of digital mediation not only adopts and extends established knowledge about productive forms of digital-algorithmic power to the study of global humanitarianism, however. Focusing on the technological-material characteristics of digital media also opens up the analysis of mediation to questions about forms of power that are currently not well-described in the literature. This is particularly valuable since, as noted earlier, the digital revolution has created a need to rethink the kinds of power relations identified by scholars *before* the emergence and proliferation of the internet and digital media technologies. As a case in point, Beer (2018) has demonstrated the need to update the panoptic mechanism of power identified by Foucault for the digital age by attending to the visions, practices, and 'data imaginaries' that have helped constitute data analytics as a valuable (and profitable) form of knowledge production. Whereas in the clinic or the prison, the disciplinary power of surveillance and observation relies on the fact that those being observed have an awareness of an all-seeing and all-knowing observer, what Beer (ibid) refers to as the 'data gaze' seems to have no such disciplinary function at all because there is no human observer 'in the loop'. Indeed, today, we seem to voluntarily share all kinds of personal information through our apps and social media platforms. Understood as a specific form of knowledge production, as Beer subsequently argues, the power of data analytics is thus not enacted through disciplinary measures such as panoptic surveillance but, rather, through a gaze that, to the extent it even recognizes them, does not care about human populations and embodied individuals but instead targets their data double or 'dividuals' (see also Savat, 2013).

To say that populations and embodied individuals have been replaced by 'dividuals' in the data gaze is to say that 'we as discrete selves are not indivisible entities; on the contrary, we can be divided and subdivided endlessly' (Williams 2005) as the data traces we leave behind online are analysed and interpreted to create behavioural profiles or to predict and shape our future consumption habits, to name just a few examples. Deleuze (1992) has famously defined this form of power in terms of a transition from a

disciplinary, form-imposing mold (where subjects are defined according to pre-existing categories such as gender, sexuality, insane, or criminal) to a self-regulating, non-disciplinary model of power which operates through the 'modulation' rather than the production of subjectivities. Rather than operating in the enclosed institutional spaces of the clinic, the asylum, or the prison, the modulatory gaze operates in and through the fluid and non-fixed spaces and temporalities that characterize life in the digital age. According to Deleuze, 'what counts [here] is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position … and effects a universal modulation' (ibid: 7). For example, inspired by this perspective, Cheney-Lippold (2011) has demonstrated that computer algorithms have the capacity to infer categories of identity upon internet users based on their web-surfing habits. To this end, the author employs the concept of 'modulation' to describe the 'soft biopower' at play in such processes of technological mediation. Unlike 'conceptions of hard biopower that regulate life through the use of categorizations', as Cheney-Lippold (ibid: 175) writes, 'soft biopower regulates how those categories themselves are determined to define life' in less obtrusive ways. In this sense, soft forms of biopower (or modulation) 'supplement the discursive production of categories' meanings' as it increasingly also through data analytics that categories such as gender, sexuality, and political orientations emerge and change and 'not just through discourse and its subsequent naturalization' (ibid).

Another defining feature of modulatory power is that it is *pre-emptive*, that is, aimed at anticipating events or actions before they occur (Savat 2013: 29). Modulatory power operates through pattern recognition rather than panoptic surveillance, analysing the data and lines of binary code generated through digital processes of mediation which may, for example, involve practices such as sharing, liking, or commenting on online content. At the level of the everyday, modulation thus takes the form of a 'mnemonic control' concerned 'with life's non-lived or not-yet lived potential' that operates by targeting life's emerging qualities 'which are calculated by drawing on digitized databases from across institutional settings that carry the trace of the individuals' institutional behaviours to be read as a statistical profile of the individual's behavioral [sic] tendencies' (Clough, 2012: 23-28). As a consequence of this, human subjects do not have to submit to a specific mold (as in disciplinary

societies) because they, themselves, have become the model according to which the overall system is produced (Savat 2013: 25). Think for example about a Facebook feed that changes and shifts according to the feedback provided by individual users through their online behaviour patterns, which are tracked and analysed by Facebook's ranking algorithms, resulting in a highly individualized, but nevertheless algorithmically managed, media experience.

While the postphenomenological theory developed by Verbeek does not attend to 'modulation' explicitly, other postphenomenologists have discussed and developed the concept for the study of digital media. For example, Ash *et al.* (2018) have developed a vocabulary of 'frictions' to examine the modulatory power relations that play out on and through the use of mobile media (see also Raunig, 2016; Rose, 2016). *Frictions* are characterized in this regard as 'practical, affective, and emotional contestations', either in the form of 'blocks or obstacles that interrupt, slow or stop' processes of technological mediation or 'sites of grip, encouraging someone to continue using or engaging [with media] because of the contestation faced by the user' (Ash *et al.* 2018: 1140). In this sense, and as developed in Chapter 6, the power relations at play in processes of technological mediation do not, then, necessarily result in a smooth, continuous, and all-encompassing control but are rather fragile and contingent, operating through the 'continuous management of different forces and tensions' (ibid: 1142).[19]

In summary, the postphenomenological perspective presented here focuses on productive and modulatory forms of power that play out in and through processes of technological mediation. Attending to the production or modulation (as opposed to the domination or punishment) of human subjects does not mean, however, that a postphenomenological theory of digital mediation is blind to questions about inequality and difference. Rather, and as will be developed below, by theorizing productive and modulatory forms

[19] It is worth noting, as will also be developed later, that Ash *et al.* also define modulation in a slightly different way than it has usually been defined by focusing on the micro-dynamics of how modulation plays out in technologically-mediated forms of social life rather than on the top-down categories introduced (and imposed) by data analytics as in the work of Cheney-Lippold (2011) and others.

of power, the postphenomenological perspective serves as a valuable point of departure for further inquiries into the subtle, implicit, and perhaps less obvious ways in which processes of technological mediation might become complicit in sustaining or exacerbating (global) differences and inequalities. Indeed, making obvious the role of productive forms of power in this regard is the last step needed to formulate a postphenomenological theory of digital mediation capable of informing both empirical analysis of, and critical thinking about, digital mediation.

Subjectivity and difference

We saw above that the power relations at play in processes of digital mediation can not only be accounted for in terms of their repressive mechanisms, but must also be understood as productive and modulatory. However, as also indicated above, my interest in the micro-dynamics of these forms of power is not limited to the generative or 'positive' effects of such power relations.

As discussed also by Foucault in *The Will to Knowledge* and *Society Must be Defended*, productive forms of power do not necessarily result in greater levels of social equality or justice. Quite the contrary, they often become complicit in, or sustain, power relations that operate through hierarchical and repressive divisions between human subjects (Foucault, 1998, 2003). For example, Achille Mbembe has argued that what Foucault described as 'biopolitics'—the management of life in order to make it prosper—has given way to a 'necropolitics' which is focused on creating surplus value from death (Mbembé, 2003). Today, as Jasbir Puar similarly notes, discussions about biopolitics and necropolitics must be intertwined because, while 'the latter makes its presence known at the limits and through the excess of the former; the former masks the multiplicity of its relationships to death and killing in order to enable the proliferation of the latter' (Puar, 2007: 32). While Foucault (2008) presented 'biopower' as a mechanism for protecting and improving the conditions in which people live, he himself even acknowledged that this often manifests itself through the punishment, domination, or repression of individuals or populations that do not fit the normative categories or molds according to which 'the good life' is defined and governed and thus result in what Butler (2009) has described as a division between

'grievable' and 'non-grievable' lives that renders some lives expendable in the effort to protect and improve that of others. Together, the work of these authors thus demonstrates how repressive and productive measures can co-exist within a biopolitical system (see also Epstein, 2008; Altermark, 2018).

Yet, while foundational to my way of thinking about the intimate relationship between repressive and productive forms of power, scholarly discussions about biopolitics as a mode of governance in world politics also tend to be concerned with forms of power directed at populations and exercised globally (see e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2000; Duffield, 2001; Dillon and Reid, 2009)[20] and are thus less sensitive to the micro-dynamics through which productive, soft, 'positive' or modulatory forms of power become complicit in sustaining global inequalities from the bottom-up. For this reason, some researchers have instead employed a critical sensibility, similar to the postphenomenological perspective outlined above, to the study of processes of technological mediation. To return to an example that has already been briefly discussed, while Cheney-Lippold (2011) describes the identity categories inferred on internet users by computer protocols and algorithms as a form of 'soft biopower', he nevertheless acknowledges that the 'identifications that make us as subjects online are becoming more opaque and buried away from our individual vantage points and removed from most forms of critical participation,' thus placing the power to 'categorize' both individuals and populations in the hands of computer software, algorithms and the corporations that produce them rather than public institutions and elected political representatives. An equally noteworthy example of the intimate link between repressive and productive forms of power in processes of digital mediation comes from the work of Madianou (2013). Based on her analysis of the 'Kony2012' online campaign, Madianou (2013: 258) notes that, while generating new opportunities for engaging Western spectators in the suffering of distant others, humanitarian campaigns on social media also tend to portray victims in problematic frames 'as completely disempowered and in need of Western intervention' and thus enact colonial divisions

[20] In doing so, the work of these authors also arguably goes against Foucault's original intentions. As we have seen, Foucault (1998: 96-97) espoused studying power bottom-up by starting from its micro-expressions.

between saviours and those in need of being saved that exacerbate existing global inequalities (see also Shringarpure, 2018).[21]

Together, these perspectives raise concerns about the productive or generative aspects of technological mediation as complicit in sustaining repressive and unequal subject positions. At the same time, however, these scholars also tend to assume quite a lot about the human subjects who are produced or modulated. For example Cheney-Lippold (2011: 165) argues that 'categories of identity are being inferred upon individuals based on their web use' and employs the concept of modulation in this regard to denote 'a continuous control over society that speaks to individuals in a sort of coded language, of creating not individuals but endlessly sub-dividable "dividuals" [which] become the axiom of control, the recipients through which power flows as subjectivity takes a deconstructed dive into the digital era' (ibid: 169). In doing so, Cheney-Lippold implicitly equates the ideal influence of technologies on users with how power operates *in practice* (see also Ash *et al.,* 2018: 1140). Indeed, the extant literature on digital modulation generally assumes that those that design digital technologies or infrastructures have complete control over what they do, how they work and can thus anticipate what their social effects will be (Zwick and Denegri Knott, 2009: 224). Such accounts also tend to inform an overly simplified form of analysis that:

> either dissolves power into the networks, assemblages or ecologies that enable relations of control (such as the database the marketers construct and use) or, often implicitly, re-centres power in the designers of manipulative algorithms or interfaces or systems (such as the software and IT engineers who manage these databases). (Ash *et al.* 2018: 1140)

As opposed to this, the postphenomenological theory of digital mediation developed here enables a more detailed examination of the many ways in which human users experience, perceive, enact, appropriate, or resist specific

[21] For the sake of transparency, it should be noted that Madianou (2013: 251) conversely also recognizes that Kony2012 'triggered an unprecedented public debate across media platforms, old and new, about the ethics of representing suffering, humanitarian communication and citizen engagement more broadly' that opened up new spaces and opportunities for thinking about the mediation of humanitarian disasters differently.

forms of technological mediation. Doing so generates valuable knowledge about the situated and contingent nature of the productive, modulatory forms of power that play out therein and how they might, often implicitly, work to sustain or exacerbate repressive social divisions and inequalities.

In addition to this, a critical theory of digital mediation also promises to generate valuable knowledge about processes of mediation that are characterized by a more 'open' subject position vis-à-vis the power relations at play herein. For example, as will be explored in Chapter 6, this might include forms of power that operate through a dynamic form of modulation characterized by shifting modifications of relations with and between users that are *dynamic* or contingent upon input and thus open to change, appropriation and resistance rather than controlling the user. Nevertheless, a postphenomenological perspective also helps us recognize how, in spite, or perhaps because of, the seemingly soft forms of power that play out in processes of digital mediation, we must still scrutinize them since such processes might nevertheless be conducive of problematic forms of global helping. Indeed, while not controlling the user like a self-deforming cast, even modulatory power relations might still perpetuate unequal subject positions—for example between donors and beneficiaries and between saviours and the saved—that can further entrench global hierarchies of power such as those rooted in the violent structures of colonialism and capitalism (as elaborated in Chapter 1).

In sum we might say that, by recognizing and theorizing the dynamic, multistable but also ultimately unequal and repressive power relations constituted in the situated interplay between digital media technologies and human users, a postphenomenological perspective offers a valuable theoretical starting point from which to examine the digital mediation of global humanitarianism from a critical perspective. Building on this, the next chapter thus describes *how* I will study digitally-mediated forms of power in specific socio-technological settings by outlining the research design and research methods employed in this thesis.

Chapter 3

Studying digital mediation: A multi-sited and multimodal research strategy

The previous chapter theorized digital mediation from a postphenomenological perspective. This chapter builds on this by developing an analytical approach to the study of the mediation of global humanitarianism that allows me to study the use of digital media and the power relationships constituted thereby with an analytical attention to their technological materialities and the imaginaries invested into them by users. Indeed, providing a precise methodological reference to *what* I study and *how* I study it—as this chapter does—is crucial because the aim of this thesis is to provide a detailed analysis of specific processes of digital mediation in concrete empirical settings.

To this end, the chapter draws the contours of a research strategy that is 'multi-sited' in the sense that it analyses the digital mediation of global humanitarianism in multiple socio-technological settings, and 'multimodal' inasmuch as it employs multiple, heterogeneous methods to study these varied contexts from a number of vantage points. While this approach is grounded in the postphenomenological perspective outlined in the previous chapter, it has also been developed in dialogue with scholars from other qualitative research traditions. Therefore, it is also important to note at the outset that the analytical approach proposed in this chapter does *not* constitute a coherent analytical framework. Quite the contrary, it can better be understood as a non-prescriptive, eclectic research strategy that engages with, and draws on, methodological resources from the work of multiple scholars from disciplines such as media studies, human geography, and digital ethnography. In discussing and evaluating these methods, the research strategy developed

below is thus best described as a methodological bricolage that translates and (re)combines pre-existing concepts and methods in new ways rather than crafting new ones.

The chapter proceeds in three steps. It begins by providing a bridge between the theoretical definitions presented in the previous chapter and my methodological choices. It then outlines my research design, with a particular emphasis on the selection of cases and analytical focus, as well as the structure of the analytical chapters. It ends by introducing the methods I have used for studying the digital mediation of global humanitarianism and by detailing how I have applied them in practice.

3.1 From theory to analysis

The first issue this chapter discusses is how the analytical approach employed in this thesis is informed by the postphenomenological theory of mediation developed in the previous chapter. To repeat a crucial point, whereas the mediation of global humanitarianism has predominantly been studied as a dialectical relationship between particular media texts and the social contexts in which they are read and interpreted, this thesis begins by studying the digital media technologies themselves as well as the experiences, interpretations, and beliefs that are invested into them. In doing so, the thesis seeks to generate knowledge about the power relations at play in processes of digital mediation by studying the material configuration of particular digital media technologies, as well as the experiences and imaginaries invested into them, as conducive of specific ways of using them for humanitarian purposes.

We are reminded here that a postphenomenological approach to digital media does not denote a shift in the subject matter of classical phenomenological inquiries—namely how technologies shape human experiences of the world around them—but rather a shift in its methods and philosophical orientations. As noted earlier, such a shift is necessary to account for the many ways in which digital media intersect and interfere with the sensory capacities and perceptual fields of humans. Indeed, whereas the phenomenologists of the 20th based their analysis of technologically-mediated forms of 'being' on abstract 'arm-chair' theorizing about technology as a social

and cultural condition, postphenomenologists instead draw methodological inspiration from empirically-grounded disciplines including, but not limited to, ethnography, media studies, and STS (Aagaard *et al.*, 2018). As will be developed in this chapter, this may involve qualitative methods aimed at examining the configuration of the digital media technologies themselves as well as interviews, questionnaires, and auto-ethnography aimed at studying the forms of use and experience related thereto; methods which, together, allow researchers to study how specific technologies interfere with, and shape, the relations between human subjects and the world around them in particular ways in specific contexts.

It should also be noted at the outset that—albeit closely related theoretically—the methodological approach employed in this thesis differs markedly from the methodological approach to the study of digital media that has been adopted by many STS scholars in recent years. Illustrative of this is the work of Richard Rogers, wherein he claims that we cannot begin to understand the socio-political implications of digital mediation without paying attention to the often hidden data infrastructures and flows that underlie them. Therefore, Rogers introduces a distinction between 'digitized' and 'natively digital' media, where 'digitized' refers to the kind of media which have been translated or adopted for the digital sphere and 'natively digital' refers to the kinds of media that are unique to the digital age (Rogers 2013). According to Rogers, whereas the study of 'digitized' media might involve traditional methods such as interviews, surveys or similar, studying 'natively digital' media technologies additionally requires computational methods such as 'web crawling,' 'data visualisation' and 'crowdsourcing' that allow researchers to follow the often hidden and networked dynamics of digital data infrastructures as they intersect and interfere with social and political life (see also Marres and Gerlitz, 2016).[22]

A crucial reason for my choice not to embrace digital-computational methods as enthusiastically as many STS scholars have is the

[22] To name one illustrative example, the extraction of meta-data about the spread of particular forms of digital content on Twitter enables scholars to map how political publics are formed by visualizing the patterns and connections forged by the online circulation of images, and hashtags on this online platform (Marres, 2015).

acknowledgement that the hype surrounding the new analytical possibilities afforded by these methods also implicitly enforces the belief that digital data contains information that can be translated into knowledge about the social domain of human interactions. What is implied by this belief is that if social scientists can simply gain access to large amounts of digital data (often referred to as 'Big Data') and learn to use the computational tools needed to visualize, analyse, and interpret these vast data sets, we will also be able to generate new insights into the social and political dynamics of digitalized societies. The problem with this belief, however, is that digital data are not untarnished resources of knowledge. As Lupton (2015: 101) writes, rather 'than pre-existing items of information, digital data are co-produced or co-authored by those who make the software and devices that elicit and archive them, the coders who generate the algorithms in the software and those who use these technologies.' Because of this, the 'data that researchers have at hand are always configured via beliefs, values, and choices' (Lindgren 2019: 2) and, for this reason, knowledge cannot just be derived directly from the analysis of digital data. Moreover, even if a lot of work has been done to combine computational tools and qualitative analysis through mixed-methods frameworks in STS and related fields, these tools are nevertheless not particularly suitable for analysing digital mediation from the postphenomenological perspective applied in this thesis, where the focus is the embodied experiences and hermeneutic frames of interpretation of human users of digital media. For example, it is doubtful if, and unclear how, data analytics can help generate insights into how human subjects involved in processes of digital mediation make sense of and interpret the digital data infrastructures that underpin them.

Rather than drawing on the digital-computational methods that have become prominent across the social sciences in recent years, the postphenomenological approach presented in this chapter instead draws on qualitative research methods from a number of disciplines that have instead adopted a digital-ethnographic approach to the study of digital media. In general terms, a digital-ethnographic approach is characterized by the adaptation of ethnographic, qualitative research methods to the study of societies, cultures, and practices that are generated and maintained through digitally-mediated forms of interaction (Hjorth *et al.*, 2019). Whereas other,

closely related ways of studying the social and cultural dimensions of digital media such as 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2008) perceives 'the digital' as immaterial cyberspaces where disembodied selves form virtual communities, digital ethnographers instead start from the observation that, today, digital media is entirely interwoven with everyday life, at least for most of those living in the Global North. Paraphrasing Hine (2015), digital ethnographers can thus be said to study the 'embedded, embodied and everyday' dimensions of digital media and thus, at least implicitly, agree with postphenomenologists that the digital and the non-digital (or the online and the offline, for that matter) cannot be meaningfully separated but must be analysed as intimately interconnected dimensions of human existence.

In theoretical terms, digital ethnographers and postphenomenologists can thus both be said to perceive digital mediation as multi-sited processes that unfold across many socio-technological contexts. To this end, digital ethnography offers a varied selection of methodological tools that can help researchers study and trace these processes across multiple sites of embodied experience and across multiple digital-technological mediums (ibid: 61). To provide an illustrative example, when you see an image of human suffering on Facebook, that image has most likely travelled across multiple online and offline sites, from the geographical site in which it was captured to the device that recorded it; from the platforms on which it circulates and to the offline and online sites in which people talk about and attribute it with meaning. At each site, as digital ethnographers have demonstrated, different methods must be utilized to account for everything from the algorithms that manage the online circulation of the image, the socio-technological contexts in which it is consumed, or the thoughts, ideas, and ambitions of those that published it in the first place. In this sense, the multimodal methodology advocated by digital ethnographers thus allows qualitative researchers to take stock of both the technological materialities of digital media and the social imaginaries that circumscribe their use from multiple analytical vantage points.

Taken together, in adopting a digital-ethnographically inspired approach, this thesis thus performs a multimodal analysis of multi-sited processes of digital mediation. Rather than examining the often invisible data infrastructures and protocols that govern digital media platforms—as STS scholars such as Marres (2015) and Rogers (2013) do—it analyses these

processes in terms of what particular media technologies can do and in terms of what users think about and do with them in practice. To this end, the thesis employs qualitative-ethnographic methods that highlight both the technological affordances of digital media devices and the role of thinking, feeling, and experiential human subjects that use them.[23] In doing so, it produces what digital ethnographers refer to as 'theoretically enriched descriptions' (Hine 2015: 56) of digital mediation in practice.

3.2 Research design

The previous section defined this research project as a multi-sited and multimodal study of the digital mediation of global humanitarianism that draws methodological inspiration from digital ethnography. But what do the terms 'multi-sited' and 'multimodal' imply, more concretely? In providing an answer to this question, the following section attends to the 'multi-sitedness' of the study by discussing my methodological considerations related to case selection and the organization of my analysis. Building on this, section 3.3 describes its multimodality.

Generally, this thesis is structured around three in-depth case studies, each of which generates detailed insights into a specific digital media technology and how it is employed for humanitarian purposes. These are: 1) the use of the social media platform Facebook for humanitarian communication; 2) the mediation of the refugee crisis that is performed in the Red Cross' Virtual Reality experience Sense of Home; and 3) the everyday forms of humanitarian action that are made possible to users of the World Food Programme's donation app ShareTheMeal. Since the cases will be presented in detail in the individual chapters, the purpose of this section is to explain the rationale behind the choice to employ case studies as a research strategy as well as the choice to focus on *these* specific digital media technologies as opposed to others.

[23] This also runs contrary to the work of many STS scholars, who tend to emphasize the agency of technical devices, systems, or infrastructures at the expense of the humans involved in processes of digital mediation.

While case studies can be utilized for a range of scholarly purposes, this thesis employs the case study as a qualitative research strategy inspired by ethnography, in which each case is studied for the sake of providing 'thick', or detailed, descriptions of one or more socio-technological contexts rather than broad, generalizable explanations for socio-technological phenomena. This does not mean that the thesis does not want to say anything about global humanitarianism more generally, however. Indeed, as John Gerring argues, what defines case studies is the 'reliance on evidence drawn from a single case and its attempts, at the same time, to illuminate features of a broader set of cases' (Gerring, 2007: 29-32). According to Gerring, case studies should thus be regarded as the 'intensive study of a single unit or a small number of units (the cases), for the purpose of understanding a larger class of similar units (a population of cases)' (ibid: 37). Indeed, by tracing their differences and similarities, this thesis discusses the chosen cases in relation to the broader question of how and with what consequences global humanitarianism is increasingly digitally mediated.

Specifically, Facebook, Sense of Home, and the ShareTheMeal donation app are examined in this thesis as 'paradigmatic cases' that highlight socio-technological dynamics that are in many ways unique to each media technology, but which might nevertheless offer a number of 'reference points' for broader discussions about the digital mediation of global humanitarianism (see also Flyvbjerg, 2006: 332). Hence, the cases have been selected in order to offer varied and detailed insights into the issues identified in the extant literature on media and humanitarianism. For one, as elaborated in Chapter 1.3, the emergence of social media platforms have forced scholars to rethink how humanitarian disasters are shown and seen by the public, due in great part to the growing reliance on algorithms for sorting and curating digital information (Brighenti, 2010: 91-108; see also Bucher, 2012; Tsinovoi, 2020). That is why the question of how algorithms shape how humanitarian disasters are shown and seen by caring publics in the Global North is the focus of Chapter 4. Similarly, as noted earlier, the rise of VR in the aid industry has been accompanied by claims about the novel experiential and emotional forms of audience engagement it enables, thus raising questions about the 'regimes of pity' (Chouliaraki, 2006a) made possible by this particular media technology. For this reason, the question of how audiences are invited to 'care'

for vulnerable others in and through virtual encounters is the focus of Chapter 5. Lastly, donation apps are widely believed to have introduced new ways of responding to humanitarian disasters that are both more accessible and less time-consuming than traditional forms of everyday humanitarian action and which are claimed to be more appealing for a new generation of potential do-gooders that have been born and raised in the digital age. In Chapter 6, I thus ask what kind of 'everyday humanitarianism' (Richey, 2018) that donation apps encourage, and discuss what this might tell us about the nature of global helping in the digital age.

There are two important questions to address in light of this: the first is the question of *why* I have chosen to focus on three very *different* digital media technologies as opposed to one or a number of similar ones; and the second is why each media technology is analysed in relation to only *one* as opposed to all three of the issues identified in the extant literature. Concerning the first question, the reason for focusing on media technologies that are fundamentally different in technical terms is the observation that, to draw principal conclusions about a broad research problem, variation in its empirical manifestations is necessary. That is to say that no single empirical instance of a complex issue, such as the digital mediation of global humanitarianism, can provide enough variation from which to draw more principal conclusions. Hence, I have chosen to prioritize empirical variation in my selection of cases. At the same time, however, I have also chosen to study each media technology in relation to only *one* of the issues identified in the extant literature rather than in relation to all three. While this might seem counterintuitive at first, the reason for this is to make room for a more exhaustive analysis of each media technology. In this way, when read individually, the analytical chapters provide a detailed understanding of *one* media technology in relation to *one* theoretical issue whereas, when read together, the chapters provide varied perspectives that allow me to draw conclusions that relate to broader issues beyond the specific contexts that I study.

Balancing a sufficient level of analytical detail with the need for empirical variation is also the reason for limiting my analysis to three media technologies, since analysing the complex technological configuration of these devices, as well as the social imaginaries that circumscribe them in practice, presupposes a great deal of familiarity with both the media technologies

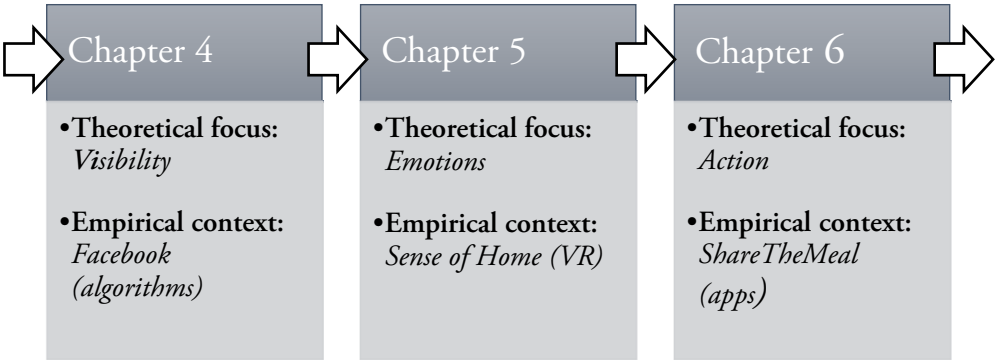

Figure 1: Research design

themselves and the social contexts in which they are employed. Considering this, I reached the conclusion that analysing three cases was both manageable in terms of detail and sufficient in terms of variation. But why *these* three media technologies and not others, then? When selecting from the vast pool of digital media technologies that have emerged and proliferated in recent years, it was essential that the media technologies I chose to study had not only recently begun to receive substantial interest from the humanitarian sector but that they had also—in spite of this—already been employed extensively across multiple humanitarian agencies. The rationale behind this was to ensure that the conclusions drawn from the analysis of these specific media technologies have relevance beyond the confines of the socio-technological contexts that I study. Indeed, it is because of their perceived cultural 'newness' and the broader public interest that surrounds them, together with their recent consolidation within the humanitarian community, that Facebook, Sense of Home, and ShareTheMeal have been chosen as cases through which to study the digital mediation of global humanitarianism.

In summary, the research design of this thesis thus organizes the analytical chapters according to a specific theoretical issue and a specific digital media technology. As shown in Figure 1 (above), each of the chapters will analyse the digital mediation of global humanitarianism by focusing on *one* specific digital media technology in relation to *one* of the theoretical issues identified in the extant literature only. The theoretical and empirical insights generated

by this will be discussed at the end of each chapter while the final, concluding chapter will combine the insights generated by the individual chapters to answer the research question and point forward to future avenues for research.

3.3 Research methods

Whereas the previous section defined what a 'multi-sited' analysis of the digital mediation of global humanitarianism entails, this section attends to the 'multimodality' of my research strategy, which draws on qualitative research methods from a number of scholarly fields, of which digital ethnography is the most central but which also includes media and communication studies, critical software studies, and human geography. Doing so, as will be elaborated below, allows me attend both to the unique characteristics of each of the digital media technologies that I study *and* to the varied ways in which they are employed for humanitarian purposes. To this end, my multimodal research strategy draws on both traditional qualitative methods such as interviews, which are well suited for studying the various subject positions and experiences of human users in processes of digital mediation, as well as less traditional qualitative methods that focus on examining the affordances and technical configuration of the digital media technologies themselves. I begin this task by introducing these various methods before detailing how they have been employed in this thesis.

Introducing research methods

To study the digital mediation of global humanitarianism, I use four methods that help me generate knowledge about the technological-material realities of digital media technologies as well as the imaginaries that are invested into them. Specifically, I have employed semi-structured interviews, media logs, an embodied reading, and the so-called walkthrough method, each of which are introduced below.

Semi-structured interviews

To repeat a crucial point, one of the principal ambitions of this thesis is to understand the beliefs and imaginaries invested into the use of digital media for humanitarian purposes across a varied selection of socio-technological contexts. To this end, interviews are a valuable qualitative method inasmuch as this particular data collection technique allows me to gain an in-depth understanding of the thoughts, ideas, and ambitions of human actors involved in processes of digital mediation across diverse contexts.

The specific interview technique I employ in this thesis is the semi-structured interview, which is characterized by the use of open-ended questions according to a loosely defined and thus flexible interview structure. In the most basic terms, semi-structured interviews can be described as conversations that pursue certain themes determined by the researcher beforehand, but which, because of the open-ended questions, do not have a pre-destined path and for which there is thus no predetermined outcome that the interview must necessarily lead to. Such interviews have multiple benefits. For one, they allow the interviewees to talk about the topics and themes the researcher is focused on in their own words and according to their own experiences, thus providing detailed and nuanced insights into their everyday encounters with digital media technologies. Moreover, the flexible and open-ended structure of the interviews makes it possible for the researcher to explore questions or themes that emerge during the interview that they had perhaps not planned to explore.

For this reason, semi-structured interviews allow unexpected, unknown, or neglected perspectives to be brought to the fore and thus implicitly reduce the authority of the researcher by providing a stronger voice to the interviewees, who might more easily steer the interview in the direction that they deem relevant. This is further underlined by the fact that the informal and relational nature of semi-structured interviews allow interviewees to enter into a dialogue based on which the researcher might come to challenge, refocus, or question their assumptions about the research topic. Together, these features make semi-structured interviews an efficient tool for studying the beliefs and imaginaries that surround and circumscribe the use of digital media technologies for humanitarian purposes.

Media logs

In addition to interviews, another technique that is used for generating knowledge about the imaginaries and beliefs that are invested into the use of digital media for humanitarian purposes is the media log method that grants researchers access to the *in situ* and *ad hoc* thoughts of human subjects involved in processes of digital mediation.

Media logging refers to any kind of tracking or logging of media use by a human or a machine. As a research method, it usually denotes the systematic collection of information about how specific individuals consume media over a period of time, most often through questionnaires in which respondents can detail how, where, when, and for what purposes they use particular media technologies. Yet, whereas such media logs are usually employed in large-scale studies where the responses of media users can be quantified and compared (Picone, 2019: 150-1), the media log method employed in this thesis is better described as an open-ended, small-scale, qualitative survey that allows respondents to produce relatively lengthy written answers in which they can detail their reflections about, and experiences with using, a particular media technology. The benefit of this, as Albudaiwi (2017: 1716) notes, is that open-ended survey questionnaires allow:

> researchers to take a holistic and comprehensive look at the issues being studied because open-ended responses permit respondents to provide more options and opinions, giving the data more diversity than would be possible with a closed-question or forced-choice survey measure.

While other digital-ethnographic methods, such as traditional interviews or so-called 'go-along interviews'[24] might have similar benefits, what separates the media log method from these is that it allows respondents to detail their thoughts and reflections in relative privacy, without the researcher being physically present. In this sense, the media log method more accurately mimics the intimate, everyday contexts in which most digital media devices are predominantly used (Miller *et al.*, 2021). This also has the advantage that

[24] 'Go-along interviews' as employed, for example, by Jørgensen (2016), are interviews in which respondents are encouraged to *show* rather than simply tell how they use a specific media device.

the media log is easier and more flexible for respondents to participate in than interviews in the sense that—while an interview usually requires them to be present at a specific place for a specific interval of time—respondents can detail and write down their reflections in a media log anywhere, anytime. This is particularly crucial because another reason for employing media logs in this thesis is that, whereas the interviews I have carried out were conducted before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the restrictions imposed to curb the global spread of the disease forced me to come up with alternatives. While transitioning from in-person to online interviews would in many aspects have been the 'simple' solution to this predicament, doing so would have prevented me from taking advantage of the more seamless integration of the media log method into the everyday forms of digital media use that I wanted to study.

Together, these features make the media log a valuable method for generating knowledge about the thoughts, beliefs, and imaginaries of people involved in processes of digital mediation, particularly in settings where it is not possible to conduct interviews or where the knowledge generated by interviews could benefit from being supplemented by additional sources of data.

Embodied reading

In addition to studying the imaginaries invested into the use of digital media for humanitarian purposes, the other central ambition of this thesis is to generate knowledge about the technical affordances and material configuration of digital media technologies. For this purpose, embodied readings of digital media—through which the researcher details their own experiences of using a particular media technology—emerge as a valuable tool for generating insights into how digitally-mediated experiences of humanitarian disasters are designed to generate specific forms of embodied and emotional engagement on the part of viewers.[25]

[25] It is worth noting in this context that the chapter in which I employ the embodied reading method was originally intended to rely instead on participant observations and interviews. While this would no doubt have provided me with valuable knowledge about the emotional engagement of digital media audiences, the restrictions imposed by the Danish government to stop the spread of Covid-19 effectively prevented me from employing these methods since the Red Cross Denmark, that was the focus of

While embodied readings have been employed by a number of scholars for varied purposes (Dyvik, 2016; Hast, 2018), the embodied reading I perform in this thesis is a methodological technique that has been developed by this author for another research project with a theoretical focus that is at least somewhat similar to that of this thesis. In the most general of terms, an embodied reading of digital media, as conceived in this thesis, involves some form of personal engagement with one's own sensibilities in the form of the critical reflections generated when trying to make sense of digitally-mediated experiences (Ølgaard, 2020b). Embodied readings are thus somewhat similar to auto-ethnographies in the sense that they generate knowledge based on subjective experiences. But whereas auto-ethnographies can focus on many different themes, an embodied reading focuses specifically on those instances where a digitally-mediated experience resonates emotionally and affectively with the researcher in one way or the other. For example, feeling the hairs in your neck stand up, experiencing pleasure, or even disgust, are all embodied cues that help the researcher choose which specific aspects of a digitally-mediated experience to investigate and reflect on in more detail (ibid).

The purpose of an embodied reading of digitally-mediated experiences is thus not to provide evidence of the embodied effects of digital media on human users but rather to use the reflections generated thereby as a point of departure for discussing how digitally-mediated experiences of humanitarian disasters intersect with and shape the emotional engagement of audiences more widely. Together, this makes an embodied reading a valuable tool for analysing the technological and aesthetic configuration of digitally-mediated experiences through a postphenomenological approach, which focuses dually on the technical specificities of digital media and the imaginaries of human subjects that are involved in processes of digital mediation.

Walkthrough

The second method I employ to generate knowledge about the technical affordances and material configuration of digital media technologies is the walkthrough method developed by Light *et al.* (2018).

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this particular case study, did not host any public VR events during the period when I was conducting the research.

In general terms, the walkthrough is a flexible, qualitative method with which researchers can perform a critical analysis of a given media interface by systematically stepping through the various stages of its everyday use. When conducting a walkthrough, researchers identify and describe certain 'mediator characteristics' to understand how an interface relates to and seeks to manage users. These may include details about: how 'the app guides users through activities via the placement of buttons and menus'; 'arrangements that mandate or enable an activity, including pop-up windows, compulsory fields and requests made by the app to link with other user accounts'; the 'text embedded in user interfaces, such as the order of drop-down menu options; the categories available (e.g. sexual identity categories on dating apps) and their discursive power to shape use'; and 'the look and feel of the app and its likely connotations and cultural associations' (ibid: 891-892).

In identifying and describing these mediator characteristics, the walkthrough method allows researchers to examine digital media interfaces as composed of discrete objects and components that operate both independently and in concert to manage users. In this sense, the walkthrough helps researchers understand how apps are designed to manage users; for example, through the discrete placement of buttons and menus, the colour of backgrounds, or the design of sound effects and haptic feedback. The walkthrough is thus a valuable method for examining the material composition and mediating capacities of specific digital media technologies. Moreover, it is helpful in identifying technical functions and features that could be analysed further by studying how users enact, appropriate, or resist these intended forms of use, as the media log allows me to do.

Employing research methods

As described in the previous section, semi-structured interviews, media logs, embodied reading, and walkthroughs are thus the methods I use to study the digital mediation of global humanitarianism. This section shifts the focus from my methodological choices to the question of *how* these methods have been employed to study the three cases. Figure 2 (next page) provides a visualized overview of my chosen research methods in relation to the research design.

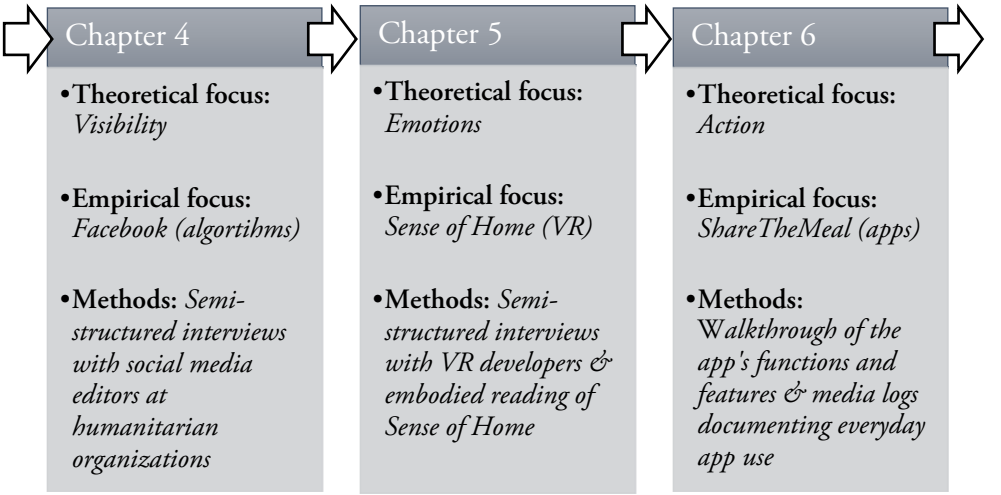

Figure 2: Research methods

Semi-structured interviews with social media editors and VR developers

While the methods I employ have generally been selected to study a particular media technology, I employ semi-structured interviews across the study of two cases. The first case is the use of social media, which is analysed in Chapter 4. Specifically, this chapter analyses semi-structured interviews with six social media editors across five major international humanitarian organizations in Denmark, focusing on how their beliefs about algorithms shape how humanitarian disasters are made visible to the public. Semi-structured interviews are a valuable method in this regard because they allow me to go beyond the technical, legal, and institutional challenges related to the complex task of studying the social media algorithms themselves, by examining instead how specific ideas and beliefs about these algorithms shape the humanitarian messages that are published on social media. Indeed, the reason for focusing on social media editors (as opposed to other humanitarian professionals) is that these are the individuals who are tasked with crafting, publishing, and evaluating the public communication of their organization on social media platforms. Crudely put, what social media editors think about algorithms and the meanings they invest into them are thus more likely to have a direct impact on how humanitarian messages and aid appeals are formulated,

discussed, and disseminated compared to the beliefs of people in the organization who are not part of these processes in their everyday work.

The other case that I studied through semi-structured interviews is the use of virtual reality (VR) to mediate humanitarian disasters, which is the focus of Chapter 5. Specifically, and together with the embodied reading detailed below, this chapter draws on the analysis of two semi-structured interviews with those responsible for developing and disseminating Red Cross Denmark's VR experience Sense of Home, focusing on their ideas, beliefs, opinions, experiences, and expectations as well as how they shape the mediation of humanitarian disasters performed therein. Because I had already decided what VR experience I wanted to study, identifying relevant interviewees was relatively straightforward. In short, the interviewees were asked to participate because of their varied but central role in the process of developing and disseminating Sense of Home and because of the insights each of them could, therefore, generate into the technical affordances of VR, the kinds of beliefs and imaginaries invested into it in the aid industry, and how all of this shapes the ways in which humanitarian disasters are mediated in this particular VR experience. Therefore, one interviewee is an employee at the Red Cross Denmark (RCD), who was responsible for developing and disseminating Sense of Home to the public, while the other is the head of the production company VRPro, who was hired by the RCD to both produce the virtual video itself and deliver the technical solutions necessary to disseminate the experience publically.

My preparations for the interviews were similar in my study of both cases and mostly consisted of me writing down a few central themes and a number of key words that I had identified as crucial, based on the extant scholarly literature, and thus wanted to explore further together with the interviewees. I also spent some time before each interview reading up on the interviewees' respective organizations and exploring concrete examples of how their organizations utilize digital media technologies. Together, these preparations allowed me to present myself as knowledgeable about the interviewees and thus prevent them from feeling that they were wasting their time talking to someone who knew nothing about their professional role and their organization. The interviews generally lasted around an hour, some a bit less, some a bit more. I began by briefly introducing what the study was about,

and how the interview would proceed, before asking for (and receiving) oral permission to include quotes from our conversation in the thesis along with their first names and affiliation. Because the transcripts of the interviews would have to be translated to English before appearing in the final thesis, I also promised the interviewees that they could read the chapter before its publication in order to ensure that my translations were correct.

During the interviews, the relatively large amount of time the interviewees generally agreed to spend with me, as well as the semi-structured nature of the interviews, allowed me to provide the interviewees with plenty of time to explore, reflect, and respond freely without having to steer the conversation in a specific direction. Throughout the interviews, I would thus only intervene in order to encourage them to explore something further if they had either stopped talking or if I felt that the issue was worth exploring further before moving on to something else. By limiting my impact on the conversation in this way, I wanted to display my curiosity to the interviewees and clearly signal that they were the experts and that I was simply there to learn. In those rare cases where I did intervene more forcefully, this was mostly done to encourage the interviewees to be as concrete as possible, e.g. by asking them to provide examples that were helpful in exploring the connection between their beliefs, opinions, or experiences with digital media and the way in which they employ it in practice.

In addition to recording the interviews with a Dictaphone, I also wrote down short, note-form reflections or spontaneous follow-up questions on a piece of paper while the interviewees were talking. Recording the interviews allowed me to be present while the notes assisted me in identifying and exploring crucial themes or questions further. When time permitted, I would also sit down immediately after the interviews to recap what the interviewees had told me as well as the themes or questions I would like to explore further in future interviews. Together, the recordings and notes were thus instrumental to the on-going process of analysing and interpreting the insights generated by the semi-structured interviews both during and after they took place.

Finally yet importantly, it is worth noting that both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 analyse the use of digital media by humanitarian organizations located in Copenhagen, Denmark. The reasons for limiting my national-geographical focus to this particular city and country were many, but a few seem worth

outlining here. First and foremost, Copenhagen is a relevant location in which to study global humanitarianism because the city is a hub for both international and Danish humanitarian NGOs. Indeed, in addition to representations of large international NGOs such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Save the Children, Church Aid, and Oxfam, several UN agencies including UNHCR, WFP, UNDP, and UNICEF have offices in the city. Copenhagen thus offers a variety of agencies and organizations to select from, which is valuable when identifying research participants.

In addition to this, Copenhagen is also an interesting geographical context in which to study global humanitarianism because it is located in Denmark, which—together with its neighbouring countries Norway and Sweden—has for many years been regarded as a 'humanitarian superpower' but which also exemplifies how gendered, nationalistic, and racialized ideologies have become increasingly influential across Scandinavian societies and politics in recent years (see e.g. Loftsdottir and Jensen, 2016).[26] Denmark is thus an interesting geographical context in which to study mediated humanitarianism because the country is illustrative of a more general trend wherein cosmopolitan values and humanitarian sentiments increasingly intersect with, and are replaced by, nationalist policies and ideologies (see also Braidotti, Hanafin and Blaagaard, 2013).

Another, more pragmatic reason for my choice to focus on aid organizations located in Copenhagen was that, since I live here myself and because Danish is my native language, this allowed me to conduct the interviews in the context of the everyday professional settings of the interviewees in a language that they were comfortable talking (given that all of the interviewees were Danish). This was particularly important because, as already noted, the primary aim of the interviews was to compel interviewees to share personal experiences and beliefs; details which they were probably more likely to share in a familiar setting where they would feel comfortable.

[26] In recent years alone, Denmark's increasingly strict immigration and refugee policies have led to several indictments in the European Court of Human Rights, and the Danish government's choice to use development funds for handling refugees has meant that, ironically, Denmark itself is currently the largest recipient of Danish aid.

For this reason perhaps, I generally found the people I interviewed to be extremely open and willing to share their beliefs, opinions, and experiences. Indeed, not a single interviewee I spoke to refused to answer any of my questions. Quite to the contrary, several interviewees expressed an interest in the study and my findings and I even agreed to share the results with several of them and their colleagues. The problems I did have in terms of access related instead to those who denied my request for an interview, either by not responding or by stating that they did not have time for it. However, in spite of the fact that about half of my interview requests were either not responded to or rejected, I do not regard this as an indication that humanitarian professionals generally did not want to talk to me but rather as a symptom that they are generally dedicated to, and busy helping, those in need.

Embodied reading of Sense of Home

In addition to the interviews I conducted with developers of the VR experience Sense of Home, Chapter 5 additionally relies on an embodied reading of the virtual experience offered therein. In the most general of terms, reading Sense of Home from an embodied perspective represents a 'recognition that we access the world through our bodies because we are always bounded in space and time' (Dyvik 2016: 63). But my embodied reading of Sense of Home is not simply utilized to generate knowledge about how it affected this particular author. Rather, I employ the method as a point of departure for studying the emotional engagement of Western audiences in humanitarian VR experiences more generally. To this end, my embodied reading relies on what Synne Dyvik—drawing on the work of Antonius Robben—calls the 'ethnograhic imagination' of the researcher, which involves taking a 'leap of analytic and interpretive faith' when I employ what I think that I already know about humanitarian VR and the emotional engagement of audiences to, 'quite literally, imagine myself in someone else's shoes' (ibid: 64). This involved asking myself questions such as: why do I feel sorry for this virtual other, why am I moved by this particular sequence or this particular story, how are these experiences similar to or different from how others might feel when watching Sense of Home? To this end, my embodied reading of Sense of Home also relied on the accentuation of objects, characters, sequences, or aesthetic techniques that, based on my ongoing dialogue with

the extant scholarly literature, emerged as crucial aspects of how audiences are addressed and managed in this particular VR experience. Specifically, I would ask myself if there were certain characters or aspects of this or that sequence of Sense of Home that were particularly moving or appealing to me and, if so, why. Together, by mobilizing my embodied sensibilities and ethnographic imagination in dialogue with extant scholarly knowledge about humanitarian VR, my embodied reading of Sense of Home thus begins the difficult task of making sense of the many ways in which audiences' emotions are addressed and managed in virtual experiences of humanitarian disasters.

The actual process of reading and writing about the virtual experience offered in Sense of Home from an embodied perspective began in the canteen of the production company VRPro's office in Copenhagen. Sitting on a chair at a table in an otherwise empty room, I was handed an Oculus Go headset and was immediately transported to a war-torn Aleppo. While I did not quite know how to make sense of the experience back then, it certainly stuck with me, compelling me to watch Sense of Home again and again on YouTube using my Google Cardboard VR headset. During these repeated screenings, all of which took place in my office or at home over a period of a week or so, I began writing down reflections about the virtual experience offered in Sense of Home systematically. By relating these notes to insights from the extant scholarly literature on humanitarian VR, I then began identifying central questions and themes that could be explored analytically. Together, these reflections and ideas would eventually frame my final 'proper' experience of Sense of Home, which took place using state-of-the-art VR technology in the basement of the Red Cross Denmark's (RDC) headquarter in Copenhagen while seated on the red bench that RDC had also used for public screenings. While writing up the analysis, I would also occasionally re-watch the virtual video with my Google Cardboard headset in order to remind myself what the experience felt like. Together, the knowledge generated by this not only made possible the translation of my embodied experience into writing but also implicitly informed my interviews with those responsible for developing and disseminating Sense of Home (as detailed above) by framing the questions I asked and the themes we jointly explored.

In addition to the analytical possibilities described above, an embodied reading also poses a number of epistemological challenges. One, as argued by

Catherine Baker, is that the translation of embodied experiences into writing inevitably reduces their complexity. In this sense, the translation of embodied, subjective experiences into scientific writing thus raises concerns about the power of the researcher in establishing normative forms of truth at the cost of alternative readings (Baker, 2016: 120-4). Yet, as I have also argued elsewhere, while these are important concerns to keep in mind, if scholars such as myself want to study how virtual experiences engage audiences emotionally we must experience, ourselves, how they *feel* and in order 'to share this knowledge with others we have to translate those embodied feelings into words—even if these words might often seem insufficient' (Ølgaard, 2020a: 172). I am inspired here by Roland Bleiker and Morgan Briggs who remind us that the 'role of the author' in social science 'cannot be erased' and that, as the authors subsequently note, 'research should [thus] not be presented as if there had been no other possibility from the beginning, as if the facts lay out there, ready to be discovered and unveiled in their authentic meaning' (Briggs and Bleiker, 2010: 780). Whereas most social science inquiries seek to erase the author, this thesis thus instead actively engages with and mobilizes this specific researcher's embodied experience of Sense of Home as a way to generate knowledge about the emotional engagement of audiences in VR.

Another epistemological concern relates more specifically to the ability of an embodied reading of Sense of Home performed by me, as an embodied researcher, to produce knowledge about the emotional engagement of Western audiences in virtual experiences of humanitarian disasters. As a (relatively) young man born and raised in Denmark with an interest in global affairs, I certainly fit the mould of Sense of Home's target group in some aspects while, in others, I also differ from it quite substantially. Most obviously, due to my position as a researcher and teacher, my embodied experience of Sense of Home, and the reflections it gave rise to, was informed by and viewed through the lens of the critical scholarly literature on humanitarian VR that I had read beforehand. In this sense, I did not approach Sense of Home from the same subject position as more casual viewers would, inasmuch as my pre-conceived scepticism towards the claimed possibilities of VR most likely shaped both my embodied experience and emotional reactions to Sense of Home. Yet, although I was likely not affected by Sense of Home in the same way as most viewers were, an embodied reading of this particular

VR experience grounded in my specific positionality still has something valuable to say about the emotional engagement of audiences in VR. Most importantly, as someone who studies the use of VR for humanitarian purposes from a critical theoretical position, I am able to use my embodied experiences of Sense of Home as a point of departure for interrogating and reflecting critically on aspects and features of VR that might go unnoticed by the casual viewer but which are nevertheless crucial to understanding how audiences are addressed and engaged emotionally in virtual experiences of humanitarian disasters.

While my embodied reading of Sense of Home is not scientifically 'objective' in any traditional sense of the word, it does nevertheless fulfil the criteria for what Anna Leander calls 'strong objectivity' in ethnographically inspired research (Leander, 2016). It does this by being transparent and reflective about the positionality of the researcher and the epistemological challenges related to this while maintaining that the personal, emotional, and embodied engagement of the researcher with the researched is 'no regrettable inevitability but a potential to be used and mobilised' (ibid: 462). Indeed, by explaining how I mobilize my personal, emotional, and bodily involvement with Sense of Home, I merely put into words something which is a crucial aspect of most research projects but which many scholars fail to account for in methodological terms.

Walkthrough of the ShareTheMeal app

Having explained the methods employed in Chapter 4 and 5, I turn to Chapter 6. In this chapter, I rely equally on the walkthrough method (Light, Burgess and Duguay, 2018) through which I map the primary functions and features of the World Food Programme's donation app ShareTheMeal together with an open-ended questionnaire—which I refer to as a media log—in which a small sample consisting of 10 potential app users have documented their initial experiences of, and reflections on, using the donation app for the first time.

Whereas the media log is employed to study the beliefs, expectations, and experiences of app users (as developed in the next section), the walkthrough method is employed to study the technical configuration and affordances of the ShareTheMeal donation app for the sake of understanding how the app

is designed to manage user behaviour in specific ways. Indeed, according to the scholars who developed the method, researchers can employ the walkthrough technique to 'systematically and forensically step through the various stages of app registration and entry, everyday use and discontinuation of use' through which they can form a 'foundational corpus of data … for further user-centred research that can identify how users resist these arrangements and appropriate app technology for their own purposes' (ibid). Similarly, as will be developed in the next section, the knowledge generated by my walkthrough of the ShareTheMeal donation app frames my examination of user experiences through the collection of media logs.

In concrete terms, my walkthrough of ShareTheMeal was performed through a detailed, step-by-step observation and documentation of the app's many screens, features, functions, and possible activities. This involved slowing down and emphasizing even seemingly-mundane forms of action and interaction facilitated by the app in order to make them visible, salient, and thus available to further critical analysis. I began the research process by downloading the app from Google Play before opening it up for the first time, just like any potential user would (except for the fact that iPhone users would download the app through the Apple iStore instead). I proceeded by going through the app for the first time in a sporadic and improvised manner in order to achieve a more general sense of the app and to mimic its everyday use. After this, I then began the process of stepping through the different features and functions of the app systematically and forensically. During this process, which was repeated several times, I continuously paused in order to take screen shots and write down reflections as they appeared in response to my use of the app's many functions, both in isolation and in relation to the other features of the app. As part of this, I also logged into the app through my Facebook account and made a small donation, all in order to get a more complete understanding of what the app could do.

Walking through the app in this way, I paid particular attention to technical aspects like the placement, design, and animation of buttons and symbolic elements such as images and text. While this is in many ways similar to the techniques employed in user experience design or other forms of commercial app development, the walkthrough method employed in this thesis is underpinned by a postphenomenological understanding that frames

my analysis of the technical features of the app and enables a critical interpretation of the ways in which specific buttons or functions are designed to manage (or modulate) users in specific ways. In walking through the app with this particular set of theoretical lenses, my mapping of the ShareTheMeal app not only describes the technical and symbolic dimensions of the app but also critically scrutinizes the connection between the app's formal features and its intended forms of use.

In addition to the analytical possibilities described above, my use of the walkthrough also forced me to confront a number of methodological challenges. One of these was the dynamic nature of apps, which was evident, for example, in the fact that one of the primary features of the app was removed and substituted by a new feature during the few months in which the research for Chapter 6 took place. As a consequence of this, the data generated by my initial walkthrough (when this particular feature was still part of the app) was not compatible with the data generated through the media logs (which were formulated and circulated after the feature had been replaced). While this particular issue was easily solved by conducting a second walkthrough, this also implies that even the most detailed forms of app analysis can never generate more than a snapshot of its functions and intended forms of use at a particular point in time.[27] Yet, in spite of, or perhaps *because* of, this, a walkthrough still has something valuable to say about apps as sociocultural artefacts in the sense that it establishes a foundation of detailed knowledge upon which more wide-ranging forms of critical analysis might be built. Indeed, by interpreting the results of my walkthrough of ShareTheMeal through the theoretical lens of postphenomenology, and using this knowledge as a foundation for formulating and employing open-ended questionnaires in which potential users were able to describe and reflect on how they navigated, appropriated, or resisted the app's intended forms of use, this thesis does exactly that.

[27] Moreover, as Chun (2016) has argued, this is not just a challenge in relation to the study of apps but is symptomatic of life in digitalized societies, where more and more aspects of the everyday are enabled by computational software and devices that are constantly and continuously modulated and adjusted which, according to the author, has resulted in a cultural condition where we must constantly 'update to remain the same'.

Another methodological challenge relates to the networked nature of apps and the potential connections that might be forged between the researcher and other app users while conducting a walkthrough. For example, as a part of my walkthrough of the ShareTheMeal app, I registered as a user by logging into the app with my Facebook account. By doing so, I also made myself visible to other users and made it possible for them to connect with me, which might disturb or even put the privacy of other users at risk. While the ethical problems associated with this are arguably more pronounced in the study of dating apps or similar (see also Light, Burgess and Duguay, 2018: 895-6), I still took precautions to mitigate these risks; for example, by not inviting anyone to connect with me and making sure that no profile pictures and user names were visible on the screen shots I took to document my walkthrough. These precautions do little, however, to mitigate the more general issue of how, by signing up and being visible to other users, the researcher conducting a walkthrough might also have an impact on the technical configuration of the app itself, for example by generating metadata which can be used by the World Food Programme to analyse how the app is used and to then reconfigure it. Moreover, as Aradau, Blanke, and Greenway (2019) have shown, many humanitarian apps collect and share such forms of metadata with major technology corporations such as Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon whose applications are built into the source code of most commercial apps, thus raising further concerns about data privacy and security. While little can be done by individual researchers to mitigate the many risks associated with this, we must at least be transparent about and reflect critically on the embeddedness of our research in these digital-capitalist infrastructures.

Media logs by users of the ShareTheMeal app

In addition to walking through the ShareTheMeal app, Chapter 6 also analyses 10 media logs in which a small sample of potential app users have documented their immediate reflections and experiences while using the donation app for the first time. It is important to note at the outset that, just like Chapter 4 and 5, Chapter 6 was also originally intended to rely on additional data – in this case, derived from interviews with the developers of the ShareTheMeal app itself. But in spite of numerous requests, none of them agreed to talk to me due to a combination of sick-leave and the professional

and personal burden related to the Covid lockdown in Berlin where the World Food Programme office responsible for the app is located. Indeed, in light of the Covid-19 restrictions in place at the time when I conducted the research, one of the primary benefits of the media log method was that it removed the need for physical contact between researcher and respondent. An added benefit of this was that it provided me with the opportunity to rely on a more diverse group of respondents without having to travel large geographical distances.

In spite of this, I still had to face issues relating to participant selection and access, namely in regard to how to identify and reach out to individuals that could provide relevant perspectives and input. First, in order to achieve a broad geographical representation among respondents, I decided to reach out to students at Lund University, which has one of the highest rates of international students among Swedish universities, Malmö University—which also has a diverse mix of students—and Copenhagen University, which also welcomes a multi-national group of students. I did this by publishing calls for research participants via a group on Facebook for students in political science at Copenhagen University, and with the help of colleagues from Lund and Malmö who circulated the call via course pages and email lists. I am not aware of exactly how many students my call reached, but 12 agreed to participate and out of this group, a total of 10 ultimately submitted their answers to the open-ended questionnaire. Out of these 10, four were students that responded to my call for participants on a Facebook group for political science students at Copenhagen University, three came from Lund University master's program in Global Studies, and three were from Malmö University, with an equal representation of genders and varied national backgrounds, thus reflecting the relatively diverse group of students that they were recruited from.

The choice to focus specifically on students that study political science and international affairs was in many ways a pragmatic one. This is a group of students that I have relatively easy access to due to my current employment in a political science department and previous studies in international politics. Moreover, one can reasonably assume that these students have an interest in global politics, making them an obvious target group for the kind of app that I study. Finally yet importantly, most of the students who are currently undertaking undergraduate or graduate education in Sweden and Denmark

were born somewhere between the early 1990s and the early 2000s. This is crucial because research has shown that internet and app-based forms of charity appeal predominantly to these younger generations for whom large donations are often less accessible and for whom the internet and mobile media devices are an engrained part of their everyday lives (Inside Charity, 2018).[28] For example, in 2017, the online crowdfunding platform GoFundMe (which is also accessible via an app) processed around 30 donations every minute, with people born between 1981 and 2012 accounting for more than half of these (ibid). In addition to this, the report also documented that Millennials and Generation Z made up nearly 50% of all donors on the popular crowdfunding platform. Together, the user experiences analysed in this thesis are thus arguably representative of what one can reasonably assume to be an intended audience for humanitarian donation apps such as ShareTheMeal, both in terms of interests and age.

Having identified and recruited respondents, another crucial task was to develop the open-ended questionnaire—the media log—that they would be asked to fill out during or immediately after using the app for the first time. In dialogue with the knowledge generated by my walkthrough of the app and the extant scholarly literature, I decided to structure the questionnaire around six boxes in which respondents were asked to: 1) describe (in detail) what they can do with the app; 2) describe which app functions seemed most relevant or intriguing to them and why; 3) describe their overall impression of the app in regard to its design and functionality; 4) describe the overall feel of the app; 5) describe their impression of the donation function; and 6) reflect on whether or not the app encouraged them to donate, and why or why not.

While I made a conscious effort to formulate the questions so they would be easily understood by the participants, I did nevertheless use more ambiguous terms such as 'the feel of the app' which might be interpreted differently. The use of ambiguous terms together with the open-ended nature of the questions was part of a conscious effort to compel respondents to reflect freely about terms such as 'the feeling of the app' in order to allow them to develop an opinion or belief that might in turn reflect and thus generate insights into a specific bias or certain preconceived assumptions on which they

[28] These generations are thus also sometimes referred to as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001).

based their answers. To this end, aside from encouraging them to develop and describe their experiences and thoughts at length, I thus chose not to include any pointers on how the questionnaire should be filled out, in order to allow the respondents to interpret my open-ended questions and respond to them as freely as possible. For this reason perhaps, responses to the questions also varied greatly from respondent to respondent, both in terms of length (from between a few lines to half a page) and style (some were mostly descriptive while other were more reflexive and critical). In spite of, or perhaps because of, this variation, the media logs ultimately produced both rich and nuanced insights into how a small albeit varied sample of potential donors use and think about the donation app ShareTheMeal.

But the process did not end there. After compiling the questionnaires, I coded them manually to identify collective forms of use and experiences across the individual submissions. In doing so, I identified a number of interrelated issues, some of which resonated with the knowledge generated by the walkthrough and the insights provided in the extant scholarly literature, and some of which provided new perspectives. These were: 1) the emotional relations or connections forged by users when using the app; 2) the feeling of effortlessness when using the app; 3) the impact of technical friction in the form of bugs or design-related obstacles on user experiences and perceptions; and 4) the crucial role of cultural memories and associations in shaping how respondents perceived and used the app. Together with the knowledge generated by the walkthrough, the shared beliefs and experiences of respondents in relation to these issues are the primary foundation on which my critical interrogation of humanitarian donation apps in Chapter 6 rests.

Chapter 4

Selling the distant other online: How algorithmic imaginaries shape the visibility of humanitarian issues on Facebook

The first issue that will be analysed through the theoretical and methodological approach presented in Chapter 2 and 3 is the question of how humanitarian disasters are shown and seen on social media. As already noted, the digital revolution in media affairs forces us to rethink the issue of visibility in light of the emergence of algorithmically-governed media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Rather than focusing on the aesthetic qualities and discursive significance of mediated representations of humanitarian issues, as the extant scholarship on media and humanitarianism does, this chapter thus instead examines the socio-technological conditions that shape how humanitarian disasters become visible to the public on algorithmically-governed digital media platforms, and considers the ethico-political implications of this.

4.1 Setting the stage

In March 2012, Invisible Children—a small, US-based NGO—released a video on YouTube titled 'Kony2012.' The video marked the launch of a campaign calling for the arrest and prosecution of Joseph Kony, then the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, who was accused of committing war crimes and human rights violations in Uganda and Central Africa. Less than

a week after its release, the video had been viewed more than 100 million times and had risen to a level of fame that is usually reserved for Hollywood blockbusters (Grossman, 2012). Put in more contemporary terms, it had thus become the most *viral* online video in history with more than 3.6 million pledges to donate to and support IC's campaign as the accompanying hashtag #StopKony flooded the internet (Kanczula, 2012).

To some, 'Kony2012' demonstrated the power of social media to facilitate public awareness in the Global North about distant suffering and mobilize people to act *vis-a-vis* human atrocities.[29] To others, however, 'Kony2012' was a reminder of the often unintended but nevertheless problematic implications of the representation of Global South others in humanitarian communication. For example, some criticized the video's portrayal of post-civil war Uganda as a neo-colonial framing that reduced Ugandans to passive subjects waiting to be rescued, and others argued that the video granted Kony himself iconic status (Kurasawa, 2019: 400). These critical observations are emphasized here because they foreground the crucial role of visibility—what is shown and seen—in establishing and maintaining global hierarchies between who should be saved and who must save them. Indeed, and as was also discussed in Chapter 1.3, how events, issues, groups, or individuals are shown and seen, and what inversely remains invisible, plays a crucial role in our social and political lives, both as a basic threshold for recognition and as a mechanism of power and repression (Brighenti 2010).

Yet, while pointing to issues that are fundamental to this thesis, what is currently not well understood is the role of the omnipresent algorithms that increasingly govern the online spaces in which humanitarian campaigns such as 'Kony2012' are shown and seen. While, at the most basic level, algorithms are nothing more than sets of computational instructions that process data in order to produce an output, algorithms are increasingly employed by social

[29] For example, as noted by foreign correspondent Lindsey Hilsum from Channel 4 in the aftermath of the campaign, 'none of the articles ... I or a hundred other journalists who have covered Uganda over 25 years [have published] has reached the people this video has reached. OK, it may not be accurate. It may use out-of-date figures. But it's struck a chord we have never managed to strike. What wouldn't we do for an audience of 30 million? The video has reached people who would never watch Channel 4 News, or read the Financial Times' (quoted in Beckett, 2012: 5).

media corporations to determine what content is most relevant or interesting to users based on their online and offline behaviour and deliver it to them. As a consequence of this, when you see a humanitarian appeal such as the Kony2012 video on online platforms such as Facebook, the appeal was most likely placed there by an algorithm that has analysed information about everything from your recent search queries, online purchases, to your media consumption habits, which led it to identify you as a potential donor.

What is at stake with the growing reliance on algorithmically-governed platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube in humanitarian communication is thus also the emergence of new forms of algorithmic authority that shape how humanitarian disasters are shown and seen. One way to understand this transformation is through Brighenti's (2010) concept of 'networked visibilities,' which describes how, like 'traditional mass media, "new" media, too, give rise to specific visibility regimes, which are different from the diagram of the broadcast.' While the 'networked visibilities' introduced by social media platforms have been claimed by some to introduce new opportunities for citizens and non-state actors to become visible on the global stage (see e.g. Papacharissi, 2014), they are increasingly accused of also introducing a 'participatory panopticon' (Whitaker, 1999) where, by showing ourselves and being seen, we become visible also to the 'data gaze' (Beer 2018) of governments, security agencies (Amoore and Raley, 2017), or transnational corporations (Srnicek, 2016; Zuboff, 2019) who gather, analyse, and interpret the data we generate when we are online. As Noble (2018) argues, the algorithms that filter the digital information that circulates online can even be accused of maintaining and disseminating racist structures of cultural and social oppression.[30] Not surprisingly, scholars have thus recently begun to call for a sustained critique of algorithms; for example, in order to better account for 'how algorithmic systems feed (into) specific forms of violence' (Bellanova *et al.*, 2021: 121). Compelled by these perspectives, this chapter critically examines the socio-technological conditions that shape how

[30] Similarly, O'Neil (2016) has demonstrated how algorithms employed by banks to evaluate potential loan-takers discriminate against individuals living in specific, low-income zip codes by categorizing them as 'risky loaners' and thus implicitly come to sustain the vicious cycle of deprivation.

humanitarian disasters become publically visible through processes of digital mediation, and considers the ethico-political implications of this. In doing so, the chapter contributes to the articulation of a critique of algorithmically-governed forms of digital mediation inasmuch as it demonstrates how—in addition to being generative of structural or physical forms of violence—algorithms also shape how humanitarian organizations generate and manage their public visibility, with sometimes problematic consequences.

But whereas critical scholarship on algorithms tends to focus on and scrutinize algorithms themselves, the postphenomenological perspective employed in this thesis also maintains that the impact of algorithms in this regard cannot only be understood in terms of their inherent technical properties. Equally important is how social media users *think* about and perceive algorithms, which is currently not well accounted for in the scholarly literature (but see Bucher, 2012, 2017, 2018). By bringing the human subject into the study of what is shown and seen, and what remains invisible on algorithmically-governed media platforms like Facebook, this chapter subsequently demonstrates how specific and collective ways of thinking about what algorithms are and what they want are generative of specific and sometimes problematic regimes of (in)visibility in humanitarian communication. To this end, the chapter examines the ideas, beliefs and perceptions that arise when humans and algorithms 'meet' in the everyday through an analysis of semi-structured interviews with six social media editors and data analysts from five aid agencies engaged in planning, producing, and publishing humanitarian messages on social media. Based on this, it shows how what Bucher (2017, 2018) refers to as 'algorithmic imaginaries'—ways of thinking about what algorithms are and what they do—play a generative role in shaping the visibility of humanitarian issues online.

The chapter begins by defining what I term the 'productive power of algorithmic imaginaries' as constitutive of specific regimes of visibility, which are recursively modelled back into the algorithms themselves. Next, it identifies and analyses the algorithmic imaginaries that are shaping contemporary forms of humanitarian communication on social media, focusing on the interviewees' thoughts about: 1) what algorithms are, what they do, and what they want; 2) how to understand or 'know' the rules enforced by algorithms; and 3) how to 'play by the rules' that social media

algorithms are believed to enforce. Building on this, the chapter ends with a call for sustained attention to algorithmic imaginaries as constitutive of sometimes problematic regimes of (in)visibility in humanitarian communication as a way to potentially mitigate the unintended but occasionally harmful consequences of algorithmic imaginaries.

4.2 The productive power of algorithmic imaginaries

It has only been a little more than two decades since the perhaps most well-known of the many algorithms that increasingly govern our social and political lives were conceived in an otherwise inauspicious garage in Menlo Park, California. For it was here—in 1998 to be more precise—that Larry Page and Sergey Brin developed the now infamous PageRank algorithm that manages Google's search results. Since then, algorithms have multiplied and proliferated and, today, we live in a world where algorithms have become crucial to the management of everything from the internet to border security and global financial markets. As Steiner (2012) noted in a not-so-distant past, but where algorithms were nevertheless much less ubiquitous than they are today,

> algorithms already have control of your money market funds, your stocks, and your retirement accounts. They'll soon decide who you talk to on phone calls; they will control the music that reaches your radio; they will decide your chances of getting lifesaving organ transplant; and for millions of people, algorithms will make perhaps the largest decision in their life: choosing a spouse.

Yet, despite, or perhaps because of, the ubiquity of algorithms in almost all aspects of life in digitalized societies in the Global North, the social and political power they wield is not currently well understood. As Diakopoulos (2013) argues, while a growing number of scholars argue that we are living in an era of widespread algorithmic governance (see e.g. Aradau and Blanke, 2015; Amoore and Piotukh, 2016; Beer, 2017), what is missing from the prevalent literature on algorithmic power is 'clarity about how algorithms exercise their power'

(Diakopoulus 2013: 2). Such clarity has proven difficult to obtain, not least because social media algorithms are crucial to the market value of social media companies and thus walled off to the general public, but also because, with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine-learning technology, social media algorithms also increasingly operate in ways that cannot be foreseen and controlled by humans. Hence, 'although algorithms are imbued with the power to act upon data and make consequential decisions … they are largely black boxed and beyond query or question' (Kitchin 2017: 15).

Yet, as already noted, rather than opening up the 'black box' of algorithms, as others have tried to do, this chapter focuses on everyday encounters with, and user perceptions of, algorithms. It does not do so because, as argued by Winner (1993), that we risk finding the black box empty if we open it but rather because, as Latour (1999) reminds us, the concept of black boxes tends to imply an essentialist understanding of technologies that conceal their networked and emergent nature. While the metaphor of the black box is often invoked to criticize the lack of transparency associated with algorithmic authority, Latour's socio-technological perspective draws attention instead to the ways in which algorithmic authority is perceived and enacted, compelling us to ask how algorithms *become* rather than what they are (see also Bucher 2018: 41-65). The analytical value of this approach is further illustrated by recent inquiries into what is referred to as 'algorithmic culture' (Striphas, 2015) 'algorithmic life' (Amoore & Piotukh 2016) and 'algorithmic power' (Beer 2017) which, each in their own way, provide us with a glimpse into how algorithms shape knowledge, push products, and facilitate social relations, thus making obvious the fact that algorithms are not just computational processes but also shape and are shaped by human society (see also Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Together, these authors thus make obvious that, 'algorithms are lived with', that is, 'they are woven into practices' which are, recursively, 'modelled back into algorithmic design' (Beer 2017: 4).

While, so far, little attention has been paid to the question of how people live with, experience, and enact algorithmic authority in the everyday (but see Bucher 2017, 2018: 93-117), researchers have examined the extent to which people are aware that 'our daily digital life is full of algorithmically selected content' (Eslami *et al.*, 2015). For example, in a study of 40 Facebook users, Eslami *et al.* (ibid) concluded that 62.5% were not aware that their news feed

was curated by algorithms. This 'ignorance of the algorithm,' they subsequently argued, is worrisome because it led participants to wrongly associate 'the composition of their feeds [with] the habits or intent of their friends and family' rather than the calculations of algorithms (ibid: 9). In contrast, a survey conducted by Rader and Gray (2015: 7) found that 75% of their respondents did not believe that they were seeing everything posted by their friends on Facebook. Most even demonstrated 'a fairly sophisticated understanding of the system' (ibid). While the findings of these studies might initially appear contradictory, they are in fact both testament to the fact that most people feel or perceive the presence of algorithms in their everyday life in some form or fashion and thus raise questions about how different ways of thinking about what algorithms are and what they do affect how the suffering of distant others is framed and sold on social media.

Whereas the literature summarized above is concerned with the broader question of algorithmic awareness—namely the extent to which users are aware that algorithms manage and organize the content they see on social media—this chapter considers the more specific question of how communication officers and social media editors across humanitarian NGOs in Denmark, the UNCHR, and the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs think about algorithms and their authority. Concretely, it analyses how communication professionals in humanitarian organizations perceive algorithms and how such perceptions shape humanitarian communication. Such a perspective implies that communication professionals and social media editors do not necessarily need access to the often complex protocols, lines of code, and computational instructions, which the algorithms that distribute content on social media are composed of, in order to 'know' what an algorithm is and what it does. Rather, what communication officers and social media editors see when they perceive an algorithm are the reactions, such as a 'like' on Facebook or a one-click donation, which are performed in response to the humanitarian messages they publish on social media. Indeed, it is these indirect forms of feedback that inform, establish, and sustain collective imaginaries about what social media algorithms are and what they do.

Taken together, this encapsulates what I refer to as the 'productive power of algorithmic imaginaries'. As discussed also in Chapter 2.3, productive power is the capacity of social actors to shape individual and collective

perceptions of the world. As Barnett and Duvall (2005: 43) define it, 'productive power' is usually understood as the 'socially diffuse production of subjectivity in systems of meaning and signification,' which 'concerns discourse, the social processes, and the system of knowledge through which meaning is produced, fixed, lived, experienced, and transformed' (55). Similarly, as Bucher (2017) argues, we need to think about algorithmic imaginaries as productive of specific ways of thinking and acting:

> How people think about algorithms … affects how they are using these systems and how they are oriented towards them. It does not matter as much whether these imaginaries are true or not, because when enacted they become part of the truth.

Hence, far from naming an illusory relation, the algorithmic imaginaries of communication officers in humanitarian organizations must be regarded as generative of specific ways of making humanitarian disasters and global helping visible to the public.

This resonates with the work of other scholars who have pointed out that the question of visibility is central to the study of the productive power of algorithms. For example, Doyle (2011) has pointed out that new media technologies, such as social media platforms, redistribute visibility by affording new possibilities for political participation through which ordinary citizens and NGOs can contest existing, or produce alternative, visibilities. 'Concurrently,' as Brighenti (2010: 97) notes, because both ordinary citizens and elite political actors 'struggle to achieve visibility' on these platforms, algorithms have become 'authorities that bestow visibility.' This, combined with our inability to know how algorithms make decisions, has informed the emergence of a perceived 'threat of invisibility' whereby the behaviour of social media users is governed not by a panoptic, all-seeing vision machine 'but by the constant possibility of disappearing and becoming obsolete' (Bucher 2012).[31] The introduction of generative algorithms (often referred

[31] The repercussions of this are evident for example in the context of digital diplomacy where a perceived 'threat of invisibility' has led to the emergence of new visibility management techniques, ranging from automated retweet software application to micro-targeted content and search engine manipulation, which all seek to influence the

to as machine-learning algorithms) has only further intensified this perceived threat. For whereas previous algorithms such as Edgerank—which was used by Facebook to rank content until around 2013—make decisions according to fairly transparent logics and rules, the algorithms employed today to sort and filter content on most social media platforms operate according to millions of intertwined and dynamic variables with a complexity far beyond the sensual and intellectual grasp of human beings.[32]

But algorithmic imaginaries are not just productive of specific ways of showing and being seen online. They also play a generative role in moulding the algorithms themselves. As Bucher (2017: 42) reminds us, while 'algorithms certainly do things to people, people also do things to algorithms.' For example, when users publish specific forms of content or interact with other users, such practices are not just shaped by imaginaries about what algorithms are and what they do; such practices also affect the calculations performed by algorithms. If, say, a communication officer believes that the Facebook algorithm favours images of kittens, she would most likely post a lot of pictures of cute kittens. Hence, even if the algorithm was originally programmed to favour puppies, this communication officer's continuous and consistent publication of images of kittens would eventually lead the algorithm to adapt to her behaviour and thus favour content containing kittens. It does so as a consequence of being driven by machine-learning technologies that allow social media algorithms to change and evolve according to the ever increasing amount of data traces left behind by users as they navigate the internet (Introna, 2016). Through this feedback-loop, user beliefs about algorithms, and the forms of behaviour these beliefs give way

'networked' online visibility of certain political actors while simultaneously contesting that of others (Tsinovoi, 2020).

[32] For example, in an interview from 2013, then-Engineering Manager for News Feed Ranking at Facebook, Lars Backstrom, estimated that, today, there are now more than '100,000 individual weights in the model that produces News Feed' (McGee, 2013). This transformation of the algorithmic architecture of Facebook reflects a wider transition from *rules-based* to *generative* algorithms that, in addition to the management of online platforms, is crucial to the automation of everything from security and risk management (Amoore & Raley 2017) to decision-making in warfare (Holmqvist, 2013; Wilcox, 2017) because of their ability to learn and apply new rules without the interference of human programmers.

to, become an important component in shaping the overall system (Rader & Gray 2015).

In sum, examining the algorithmic imaginaries of humanitarian communication professionals thus not only generates valuable knowledge about how algorithmic authority is experienced and enacted through the online visibility management of humanitarian organizations, but also compels us to reflect critically on how, and with what consequences, these regimes of visibility are recursively modelled back into algorithmically-governed media platforms.

4.3 Selling the distant other on Facebook

In recent years, social media platforms have become increasingly important to the public communication efforts of everyone from states to individuals, corporations and non-governmental organizations. To humanitarian organizations, which often do not have the communicative capacities of states, nor the financial means of corporations, social media platforms have proven particularly valuable since, contrary to traditional forms of mass media and marketing, they allow aid organizations to control and define the content of the messages and images they publish as well as when and to whom they become available. Moreover, contrary to billboards, newspapers, and television channels, social media platforms readily provide humanitarian organizations with data and metrics that are claimed to measure the public impact of aid appeals and online messages, all at a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing.

The turn to social media in the aid industry finds additional support in the writings of influential humanitarian communication scholars, who claim that the internet allows aid organizations to forge stronger bonds between donors and beneficiaries (see e.g. McPherson 2007, Watson 2009, Meijer 2012). Even if a growing number of researchers are sceptical of such claims (see e.g. Morozov, 2013; Zuckerman, 2013; Pettman, 2015), there is plenty of evidence that suggests that the internet and social media platforms play a crucial role in mobilizing, funding, and coordinating transnational humanitarian action today (see e.g. Meier, 2015; Mortensen, 2015; Papacharissi, 2015). For whereas pre-digital media outlets such as television,

radio, and newspapers have been accused of pacifying their audiences, leading to a general moral apathy among Western audiences (see e.g. Moeller 1999, Sontag 2003), social media platforms are regarded by many as networked, interactive, and thus participatory communication technologies that engage their users and allow them to act in new ways (see e.g. Jenkins, Ford and Green, 2013).

As a consequence of this, today, most major humanitarian NGOs employ social media editors and data analysts that create and refine humanitarian content published online, which was not the case only a few years ago. The social media platform Facebook has been particularly central in this regard. First, all of the social media editors and analysts interviewed for this chapter explained that Facebook was their organization's primary platform for public communication. This is hardly surprising when considering Facebook's status as a global communication platform with close to three billion users from all around the world who, on average, spend close to 20 hours on the platform each month. Being visible on Facebook thus allows humanitarian organizations to tap into and reach this unprecedented global network of users. However, as already noted, in addition to providing new communicative possibilities for humanitarian organizations, social media platforms also introduce new forms of authority and control. Specifically, the content and messages published by humanitarian organizations on social media platforms such as Facebook are managed by algorithmic systems that sort and filter both what can be shown online and who sees it. For humanitarian organizations, becoming and remaining visible on Facebook thus necessitates communication strategies and visibility management techniques that take into account what algorithms are and how they decide which content will be made available and to whom.

As will be demonstrated on the following pages, figuring out what Facebook's algorithms are and what they do is by no means an easy task since humanitarian organizations and the social media editors they employ cannot see the algorithms themselves nor the calculations, logics, or rationales behind the decisions they make. Instead, they perceive algorithms and try to understand the decisions based on the ways in which the public responds to and interacts with the content they publish on Facebook. Moreover, as we shall also see below, the knowledge and insights generated by this feedback

informs specific ways of making humanitarian disasters visible to the public that are, at times, ethico-politically problematic.

Figuring out what the Facebook algorithm wants

To repeat a crucial point, humanitarian organizations generally perceive Facebook as an important public communication tool. At the heart of the turn to social media platforms such as Facebook is a belief that the algorithms that sort and filter the content published on such platforms is, essentially, a reflection of what their audience want formulated in code. In this sense, figuring out what the algorithm wants is the same as figuring out what your audience wants. Hence, knowing what algorithm wants is seen as crucial to the public reach and the impact of the messages published by humanitarian organizations online and, consequently, efforts to figure out what social media algorithms want have moved to the centre of humanitarian communication.

But while respondents generally believe that knowing what algorithms want is valuable, they also expressed shared concerns about their self-perceived inability to *fully* understand how social media algorithms make decisions and distribute content online. This is hardly surprising and nor is it unique to the humanitarian sector since algorithms, like most forms of digital software, are continuously updated and modulated (see also Chun, 2016). While some of these updates reflect strategic decisions made by social media corporations and are announced publically,[33] many changes in how algorithms evaluate and distribute content occur without the knowledge of the general public. In the context of humanitarian communication, this perceived unpredictability of algorithms has given way to a shared experience of what one respondent described as 'groping in the dark' when communicating with the public on social media. As she noted, '[t]here's very little that you can actually explain, like, why can I see that this video has a higher "reach" when it has less

[33] To name one recent example: in 2018, Facebook changed its algorithm(s) to reflect the corporation's desire to prioritize the activities of private individuals on Facebook rather than those of organizations, corporations, or governments. Most respondents seemed to be aware of this particular update and some even explained that it had made their job more difficult by limiting the amount of people their messages could reach 'organically' –that is, without having to pay for it.

"interactions" than this video … is it because "shares" matter more?' (Interview 2, person 1). Further illustrating the frustrations related to 'groping in the dark', this respondent offered an example of the powerlessness of humanitarian organizations in the face of Facebook and its immense global network:

> I remember my former boss always asked: But can we not write, can we not get a hold of Facebook and ask? And you're sitting there thinking: Well, we could do that, we'll probably be the last in line in a queue with three billion people and would never receive an answer. So you're, well, you're groping in the dark and sometimes you strike gold and think: Okay, this is exactly what we need to do (Interview 2, person 1).

If we momentarily disregard discussions about the ability of social media corporations to control the algorithms they employ, the claim that the decisions made by Facebook's algorithm is unpredictable is particularly noteworthy because it was echoed and enacted by respondents across multiple organizations. As another argued:

> You can never really know what works and that's one of the difficult things about being a [social media] manager, right? [Your] colleagues have the impression that you know everything about Facebook and you know the algorithm inside out, right? But, well, who does? [There's] also people at Facebook that don't. I assume that there's a little core of like 10 people that actually know what this thing [the algorithm] can do. And the rest of us are just at their mercy and have to do our best, right? (Interview 4).

Another respondent went even further by noting that algorithmic logics and decisions on social media are essentially beyond the realm of human intelligibility. Any attempt to decipher the algorithm, he seemed to imply, would be based on superstition and amount to nothing but unsubstantiated prophecies:

> To be responsible for Facebook and social media ... it's like being a mystic priest in antiquity, right? That is, I'm the only one who understands God and I have to interpret his message to you … But there is no one besides from Facebook, not even Facebook I suspect, that understands the algorithm 100

> per cent. They say it has a tendency towards something [but] no one can really provide anything concrete and that's why you have to take into account what you read about what is going on in there [on Facebook] and what you observe yourself (Interview 1).

Together, such perceptions and experiences make it obvious that communications officers encounter the algorithmic architecture of Facebook as a 'black box.' Generally, as Burrell (2016) observes, we can distinguish between three ways in which algorithms are black-boxed: (1) because of intentional corporate or state secrecy, (2) because of technical illiteracy, and (3) because of the technical characteristics of algorithms and the scale of the networks in which they are applied. This last form of opacity—the technical complexity of algorithms—is particularly noteworthy in the context of humanitarian communication on Facebook. For whereas algorithmic systems, such as Facebook's EdgeRank algorithm that governed the newsfeeds of users until the early 2010s, were governed by fairly transparent rules and guidelines, such algorithms have now been replaced with much more technologically sophisticated machine-learning algorithms with a complexity far beyond the grasp of human beings. Case in point: in 2013, then-Engineering Manager for News Feed Ranking at Facebook, Lars Backstrom, estimated that whereas EdgeRank made its decisions based on three input variables, in 2013, there were already more than '100,000 individual weights in the model that produces News Feed' (McGee 2013). Indeed, Facebook's turn to machine-learning reflects a wider transition from 'rule-based' to 'generative' algorithms that do not just enforce a pre-given logic but continuously adapt to the feedback fed to it by users. As Amoore & Raley (2016) explain, 'where rules-based [algorithms] conduct actions on all of the data patterns within the rules, deep machine learning-based systems will find, learn and apply new rules.'

It should be no surprise, then, that many of the respondents spend time trying to figure out what Facebook's algorithm wants since, not only is this task central to their organization's public visibility, but it is also an exceedingly difficult task. The degree to which respondents can actually come to know the algorithm does not matter much in this context. What matters is that the respondents' shared belief in their inability to fully understand the decisions of algorithms and the logic behind them informed a shared perception that,

in order to know the algorithms, your only option is to continuously examine and test what the Facebook algorithms do. Yet, despite generally agreeing on the need to examine what algorithms do—as a way to figure out what they want—the ways in which humanitarian organizations conducted these examinations and translated them into knowledge differed greatly. Some relied predominantly on the *ad hoc* collection of knowledge composed of pieces of information provided by both Facebook itself, blogs, and colleagues. For example, one respondent explained that

> I am part of different groups on Facebook, and then you see a headline here or there [but] then, for example, the one where 'now your videos must be this long, then they have better reach' that's a message you receive in Facebook's system, and that's obvious because then you think, uuh, Facebook has provided me with some knowledge, now I have to make all my videos long […] So some of it is information they [Facebook] provide and some of it is completely, well, kept in the dark, so to speak (Interview 2, person 1).

Another respondent, mirroring the approach described above, similarly explained that figuring out what the algorithm wants requires both ingenuity and initiative since you often have to rely on information supplied by others. This is because Facebook was generally not perceived as a reliable source of knowledge:

> Well, besides from the fact that Facebook is notoriously bad at advising changes [you] pick it up from third parties. And they have downgraded pages [for corporations and organizations] and brands for a while [and] then we have to try to prioritize differently and say: Okay, instead of producing a new piece of content and publish a lot of messages perhaps we could spend more energy on debates and dialogues [or] make more [Facebook] groups because groups are prioritized by the algorithm (Interview 1).

Other organizations had a slightly more organized approach to this issue than the ones explained above. While still based on sporadic knowledge collected from third parties, these organizations, at least occasionally, gathered and turned these pieces of information into more concrete, written recommendations. As one explained:

> We have a network [with] a lot of people like me all over the world, so we discuss it quite extensively ... [Our] international secretariat then try to collect some recommendations, [for example], now we tested this [and] then we try it out (Interview 3).

Other respondents explained that their organizations had even started to formulate their own parameters and tools with which to evaluate the public visibility of their online communication as a consequence of the believed unpredictability and inaccuracy of the data supplied by Facebook. As one noted:

> Well, I'll say that [we] rely less and less on the numbers we get from Facebook [because] of the cases that have been brought to the public [where] things didn't seem to add up [in] relation to the number of views of a particular video. And that has had a great impact on us because we're trying to emphasize videos more in our communication and we have reported and evaluated based on those numbers and then, as it turns out, well, perhaps they're not entirely accurate (Interview 5).

In sum, what should be obvious from this is that social media editors across a number of humanitarian organizations all perceive Facebook's filtering and sorting algorithms as unpredictable. As we shall explore further on the coming pages, this algorithmic imaginary, combined with the perceived value of knowing what the Facebook algorithm wants—however diffuse that knowledge might be—generates a need for continuous experimentation with both the quantity, content, and aesthetic style of humanitarian messages on social media to figure out what works in regard to what the Facebook algorithm (supposedly) wants.

Turning to data analytics

The algorithmic imaginary identified above—namely that algorithms are dynamic, unstable, and unpredictable—thus encapsulates a distinct dimension of the productive power of collective ideas and perceptions in generating specific techniques of online visibility management. Specifically, as will be shown below, humanitarian messages online are no longer only

evaluated in terms of the meaning they convey but also as pieces of information in a continuous effort to test, analyse, and predict audience reactions through experimental processes of trial and error, in which every humanitarian message published on social media carries with it the potential for generating new insights into what algorithms are and what they want.[34]

Since we shall return to the social and political implications of this in Chapter 4.4, what is noteworthy here is that the emergence of an experimental attitude in humanitarian communication has generated new forms of visibility management. Aside from the information provided by Facebook, other websites, and colleagues from other humanitarian organizations, the experimental attitude of social media editors towards humanitarian communication online is also made possible by the availability, as well as the humanitarian sectors' increasing reliance on, data and metrics to manage their online visibility. As one respondent explains:

> We try to [use] the data we have at our disposal because when you communicate digitally you have a relatively large amount of data and we want to use that as wisely as possible. And we use that for figuring out how we can be better, we use it to evaluate our communication. [For example], did anything not have the impact we had hoped for? (Interview 5).

Another respondent, speaking perhaps as much about his own success as a social media editors as about that of his organization, similarly mentioned the benefits associated with the large amount of data supplied on media platforms such as Facebook: 'It's great when you are successful and you have the numbers to show for it' (Interview 4). A third respondent, speaking more concretely about the value of metrics such as 'reach', shared a similar sentiment:

[34] Interestingly, this also resonates with the emergence of an 'experimental attitude' in the humanitarian sector more broadly. For example, Fejerskov (2020) has demonstrated how, enabled by private foundation and tech-philanthropists, aid organizations increasingly articulate and approach the Global South as a 'laboratory' for technological experimentation.

> We constantly notice these little details, like, if you publish a 3D image [on Facebook] then you get a bigger reach because that's something Facebook wants to promote [and if] we share a video from our homepage, then the reach is bigger than if we share a link from [say] The Danish Broadcast Corporation's webpage. And that's the kind of things that you don't learn from Facebook [which is why] we sit around and watch these things all the time (Interview 2, person 2).

A third respondent also spoke of a similar, albeit slightly more organized, approach to the use of data analytics when explaining that her organization had established its own 'measuring sticks' for determining how successful a message published on social media is:

> If it's going okay [a Facebook post] needs to have more than 10,000 in organic reach [and] if it's videos then they should have more than 15,000 … And if we then have some posts where we can see, well, this one only reached 6,000, then we go back and look at it and ask what went wrong here or what should we change. Should we try to publish it again and try to write it differently and see if the result is different? (Interview 3).

Taken together, these examples all showcase how experimentation, data analytics, and metrics are increasingly viewed by communication professionals and humanitarian organizations as a valuable resource for improving the visibility of the messages they publish online. Hence, efforts to measure the public reach and impact of the messages they publish online through data analytics have moved to the centre of humanitarian communication.

Such visions are commensurate with a growing interest in data analytics across the political, governmental, and commercial sectors (see also Beer 2018) which all increasingly employ algorithmic technologies to understand (and predict) our behaviour as citizens, voters, protesters, criminals, or similar through data analytics.[35] It should be no surprise then that, today, most major

[35] For example, in 2015—following the violent arrest and ultimate death of Freddie Gray at the hands of the Baltimore Police Department—machine-learning algorithms supplied by the tech company Geofeedia, which had been trained and refined based on data extracted from Twitter and Facebook, were employed in cooperation with the US Department of Homeland Security to monitor public protest actions and pre-

NGO's (both in the humanitarian sector and beyond) have employees or external partners whose responsibility it is to extract and analyse the data supplied by the organization's communication on Facebook and other social media platforms. What is particularly noteworthy in this regard is the broad array of tools humanitarian organizations rely on in this regard. As one respondent explained, their data analytics efforts relied:

> both [on] data we get from social media. So that's 'interactions', that's 'reach' [and] then we have some media surveillance tools that can provide us with an indication of [whether] this or that mention is positive. So a kind of sentiment analysis (Interview 5).

By 'sentiment analysis', this interviewee is likely referring to an emerging method of data analytics based on natural language processing techniques, text analysis, computational linguistics, and sometimes also biometrics to identify, extract, and quantify the affective and emotional states of social media users, applied for example to analyse the emotional 'tone' of sentiments expressed by users in writing. While contested, algorithmic forms of sentiment analysis are claimed to generate knowledge about not only on what users say or do online but also about how they feel (McStay 2018).

In addition to the use of sentiment analysis, the respondent quoted above also described how, in recent years, his organization had added more variables and diversified their data sources in order to get a fuller picture of the reach and public visibility of the messages they publish online, and which does not rely solely on the data and metrics provided by Facebook. As he noted, in addition to Facebook, his organization also has

> some other tools that can extract numbers for us that we then use to validate but also test where we get the most value for our money. Because Facebook might show a 'reach' of 100,000 but in reality [only] 10% [have] actually reflected on that [so] 'reach' cannot say anything about that and [hence] you try to find some other numbers. [On] Facebook we look a lot at what is called 'people engaged' [because] it says something about whether people have

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emptively arrest individuals who were deemed potential threats to public order based on the calculations performed by these algorithms.

> actually interacted in some way, whether that is by 'liking' or 'commenting' (Interview 5).

Indeed, this respondent's organization was not alone in seeking to diversify the data and metrics they employ to perceive the visibility of messages published on social media. Several interviewees noted that they were assisted by external content management programs and other software solutions in this regard. For example, one noted that:

> We have something called 'engagement level' [which] is really [a] number made on the basis of some Facebook numbers [so] that's a measure that our content management system uses which is, well, where you measure, out of a thousand people, how much do they interact with our content within a given period. [That includes] all actions times 'reach' or something [where] we can monitor, like, we might not get our content out that broadly, but on the other hand it has had interactions with however many per cent in relation to how many it reaches. And that's an interesting number for us (Interview 3).

Later in the interview, this respondent returned to and developed the possibilities and challenges associated with the use of sentiment analysis:

> Some of those content management systems we use they have begun to sort of weigh how positive or negative an attitude people have towards you [and] we've had quite a lot of discussion with our content management [team] because they keep saying 'but this has a good effect', and then we say 'but it just doesn't to us because to us a crying face [emoji] could just as well be a positive feeling [and] an angry face [emoji] can be an indication that they agree with us' (Interview 3).

Taken together, these quotes are all testament to an increasing interest in, and awareness of, the possibilities associated with the massive amounts of data generated through humanitarian communication on social media; data which humanitarian organizations generally believe allows them to 'measure' and evaluate both the reach and impact of humanitarian messages by telling them something valuable about what the algorithm wants that can help them maintain or improve their online visibility.

This resonates with the rise of what Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty (2020) refer to as 'data craving' in the humanitarian sector to describe the increasingly 'intense desire for the extraction, storage and processing of different forms of data' (2). In broad terms, the data-craving of humanitarian organizations can be seen as symptomatic of the emergence of a commercial logic akin to what Zuboff (2019) has referred to as 'surveillance capitalism' inasmuch as the data supplied by citizen-consumers is increasingly instrumentalized as raw materials that can be exploited through practices of extraction, analysis, prediction, and targeted marketing. But the knowledge about data-craving generated by this chapter also addresses dynamics beyond capitalist production and consumption. More specifically, it illustrates how the *modus operandi* of Big Tech companies such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook has moved from board rooms and corporate headquarters in Silicon Valley and into the offices of aid organizations in recent years (see also Latonero, 2019).

Together, as will be demonstrated below, the trend towards using social media and data analytics, as described above, has had obvious and problematic consequences not only in terms of how humanitarian organizations operate but also in relation to *how* humanitarian issues are made visible to Western publics. Specifically, as the next section elaborates, the use of algorithmic media and data analytics in humanitarian communication has informed the emergence of new visibility management techniques that are reshaping what is shown, and what inversely remains unseen, when selling the suffering of distant others online.

Obeying the Facebook algorithm

At the heart of the respondents' efforts to figure out what algorithms want through experimentation and data analytics is the belief that, only by giving algorithms what they want—however diffuse, dynamic and unpredictable this might be—can humanitarian organizations maintain and improve the public visibility of the messages they publish online. Providing an illustrative example of this logic, one respondent explained how the messages they publish online are often tailored to meet whatever criteria the Facebook algorithm is believed to favour, even to the extent that if 'it turns out that the algorithm favours video, then we switch to video. If it doesn't, then we switch

back' (Interview 1). He was not alone in this regard. Another respondent similarly noted that

> the thing about becoming more reliant on videos in our communication, well, that's, if I were to be a bit crude, [it's] also because we're a victim of the algorithm, basically, because video-based communication is favoured across … all social media platforms … [We] can see that on our own channels but that is also what is reported back to us [from colleagues abroad]. And I would even dare to say that if the numbers told us that it was better to communicate with graphs for example, or pure text for that matter, then that's what we would do. But we can just see that video content is what performs [well]. I can see that in the numbers (Interview 5).

A third respondent also spoke about the changes imposed by algorithms, but did so in relation to public donation campaigns more generally rather than video-based content specifically:

> Whereas, three years ago, we had greater success when publishing an image that said: Donate 20 Danish kroner, then we'll buy a chicken in Cambodia – we called it a 'coin offer' – [today] Facebook might not be as effective as a donation channel as it once was … [My] best guess is that it's the algorithms that have made it more difficult … [And] I think we can confidently say [that], measured according to Facebook's parameters, the content that is made to comply with Facebook performs much better (Interview 2, person 1).

These quotes are all illustrative of how algorithmic imaginaries—informed by the knowledge generated by continuous experimentation and data analytics—have a profound effect not only in terms of how communication professionals work but also on the frames through which they make humanitarian issues visible to the public.

Crudely put, communication officers in humanitarian organizations seek to show humanitarian issues through the kind of frames that they think the algorithm prefers. But algorithmic imaginaries also shape the public visibility of distant suffering in more concrete ways. For example, the Facebook algorithm was believed by several respondents to reflect the perception that online audiences have short attention spans. Providing an illustrative example of the effect of this particular imaginary on the visibility of humanitarian issues online,

one respondents explained that his organization would usually only publish one message on Facebook per day since 'that's [what we] have discovered makes sense through experimentation, [when taking] into account what [Facebook] has changed [with regards to] the algorithms' (Interview 1). Another responded echoed this sentiment while speaking about the many parameters that she had to pay attention to when formulating and publishing appeals on social media. According to her, the public visibility of online messages

> has something to do with the time of the day [they are published], how many messages have we published in a day, [and how] we frame the formulations, [because] we have a lot of campaigns where we ask people to sign [and] in those cases [the] majority don't actually read what [the appeal] says, maybe only the first lines, and then they either click on the link and sign or they write 'I don't understand this' in the comments section (Interview 3).

Other respondents similarly expressed a belief in the need to be brief and precise when publishing humanitarian messages on social media. As one argued, the primary challenges related to public communication online is that 'people's attention span is ridiculously short so [if] we have a message, we need to unpack it within the first five seconds [or] the first ten [depending] on what the message is' (Interview 5). Indeed, this shared belief in the inability of online audiences to pay attention for longer periods of time resonates with Katherine N. Hayles' observation that digital media technologies usher in a transition from a culture of *deep attention*, 'characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods' and towards a social condition of *hyper attention*, 'characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom' (Hayles, 2007: 187). In light of these collective beliefs, the perceived challenge for communication officers and humanitarian organizations was thus how to enhance the visibility of humanitarian causes in an algorithmically-governed 'attention economy' in which everyone from governments, corporations, and other NGOs all vie for the attention of the public. Hence, as will be elaborated below, what is generated by these imaginaries are messages and images that conform to a culture of hyper attention, where messages promoting careful interpretation, meant to educate and enlighten people about the human consequences of

distant disasters, are substituted by visually pleasing images or bite-sized pieces of information intended to make the most of the few seconds in which humanitarian organizations believe they are able to capture the attention of online audiences.

Another concrete and closely related way in which algorithmic imaginaries shape the visibility of humanitarian issues on Facebook relates to the phenomenon of 'infotainment.' This generally describes a category of news or communication in which information about serious issues, such as humanitarian assistance, is conveyed in a way that is more pleasing, positive, or even entertaining. The concept is emblematic of a wider concern with the emergence of communication genres such as 'soft news' or 'constructive news.' For example, a respondent explained how he had to juggle between more activism-oriented messages, aimed at criticizing decision-makers and political elites on the one hand, and 'constructive' or hope-inducing forms of public communication on the other:

> we know it works when we're loud, our old supporters and our current supporters, well, they are all 'fists in the air' and, like, 'we're coming for you politicians!' [But] then there's also the other way, and that's the really positive, like: 'Well done, let's move forward, we have a vision for how to change this and we have to do it together' (Interview 4).

Asked about who his organization wanted to reach with these 'constructive' messages, the respondent noted that, in his experience, hope-inducing and visionary messages have a broader appeal than activist content: 'It's my experience that a good spirit and the positive has a little more potential for circulation' (Interview 4). Another respondent similarly noted that messages with humour and positivity generally perform well on social media:

> Today we posted a video with Bodil Jørgensen [Danish actress/comedian] where she is cooking a dish with leftovers from the fridge and it has performed really well, it has had something like 500 shares and a whole lot of 'likes' and a lot of comments [and] I think, generally when something is a little humorous [when] there's a little 'gamification' [that's] certainly what I remember that I have seen perform really well in here [on Facebook] (Interview 2, person 2).

This was echoed by his colleague who argued that positivity and humour had even become a premise for communicating successfully to the public on Facebook:

> It's completely naive to think Facebook is our medium and that those that subscribe to us want to consume our content. [We] have to adapt to the premise of the medium [and] we have to give people what they want on Facebook and that's both in the context of day-to-day communication but also in our campaigns. And that's perhaps also why some think to themselves: Don't they [her organization] provide aid to developing countries? What the hell are they doing over here with those tasting-videos? But that's our way of saying this format can attract peoples' attention and then we can tell them something wrapped in deliciousness and entertainment (Interview 2, person 1).

It is worth noting in this context, however, that several respondents *did* seem to have an awareness of the pitfalls associated with infotainment as a genre of public communication. But, equally crucial, this was not in and of itself enough to compel them to abandon such forms of messaging. As one respondent testified, even if infotainment is not always accommodating to fact-based public communication, that did not prevent him from trying to reconcile the two in his daily work. According to him, social media editors in humanitarian organizations should thus, on the one hand, be

> conscious of the fact that we need to [do] some things that are not popular. But of course we also try to say: Okay, here are some boring facts. Could we format them in a way so there's at least a few more people that will consume these facts as opposed to everything being about emotion only? Because Facebook is a medium focused on emotions [so] when you try to sell a message [then] it will be sold with emotions first [and] that might sometimes be hard to reconcile with facts (Interview 1).

As a consequence of these beliefs and perceptions, what is made visible by humanitarian organizations on social media are, increasingly, images and videos that present humanitarian disasters and aid appeals in entertaining frames. Notably, these online visibility management techniques are informed by the belief what the Facebook algorithm 'wants' are stories and images wrapped in 'deliciousness and entertainment,' as one formulated it, that

appeal to our emotional impulses rather than to rational, reflexive, and deliberative thought.

In addition to an emerging emphasis on entertainment, humour, and emotional gratification in humanitarian communication on Facebook, the algorithmic imaginaries of respondents also seem to have informed an increased interest in forging partnerships with public figures and celebrities in humanitarian campaigns. As one respondent explained:

> We generally try to use more partnerships in our communication [which] is also in recognition that the rules on Facebook have changed after [they] adjusted the algorithm, which meant that we saw a huge decrease in our organic reach [and] the circulation of our content (Interview 5).

While one way to improve the reach of their content would be to inject a larger amount of money into them—something which humanitarian organizations are generally not opposed to but which their limited budgets often prevent them from doing—another way, as proposed by this particular respondent, is to use partnerships with either organizations or individuals: 'One could argue that we could make up for the lack of organic reach but [we] believe more strongly in and have good experiences with using the money for advertising on partnerships instead' (Interview 5).

While, for various reasons, not all of the social media editors interviewed for this chapter work for organizations that pursue partnerships with celebrities, quite a few did. This is representative of a wider trend in global humanitarianism in recent years, in which celebrities and public figures have become increasingly central to aid organizations' efforts to raise public awareness and mobilize donations to humanitarian causes (see e.g. Bergman Rosamond, 2019). Since a lot has already been said about this, the increased visibility of celebrities in humanitarian communication online is grasped in this chapter as part of a broader move towards a communitarian ethics in humanitarian communication, where the faces or frames used to make visible the suffering of distant others are increasingly Western-centric. Crucially, algorithmic imaginaries seem to be central to the consolidation of these ways of framing or making humanitarian issues visible online. As one respondent explained when justifying his organization's growing emphasis on Western figures, faces, and voices in the messages they publish on Facebook:

> if, for example, I publish an image with, I had one yesterday, [I] think she was from Zambia, I don't really remember [but] it was something about female empowerment, strong woman, nice story, I think it got like 50 interactions [which] is extremely low. Then you run a story with Gretha Thunberg afterwards, also a strong, young woman, that's the climate agenda, that's something which [is] trending and to which people can relate [and] then we exceed 1,000 interactions (Interview 4).

Asked about what he thought it would take to make non-Western content appealing to publics in the Global North, the respondent admitted that he had no idea, aside from using a lot of money to advertise the content. He had even talked to some of his colleagues from other organizations about this problem, all of which shared his impression that content that only portrays beneficiaries in the Global South 'is not working' (Interview 4).

Providing an equally illustrative example of how algorithmic imaginaries generate or sustain a communitarian sentiment in humanitarian communication, another respondent pointed to a video published by the Danish singer and comedian Annika Aakjær. According to him, the message of the video, which was about the female menstrual cycle, had a broad appeal, went *viral,* and had thus flooded the social media feeds of many Danes in the preceding week. Incidentally, it also aligned with an ongoing project in Uganda that his organization was responsible for. For this reason, they had thus chosen to share the video, accompanied by a caption that read something like: 'we have noticed that a lot of people have talked about the female cycle during the last week and [we're] very thrilled about that because in many cultures there are myths and stigma [which] is completely unacceptable' (Interview 2, person 2). The caption additionally contained a link to his organization's webpage where one could read more about the project in Uganda that his organization had funded, which educated boys on how to sew sanitary pads for women in order to gain a better understanding of the female cycle. Asked about the broader reasoning behind the choice to use the Annika Aakjær video as the public storefront for this particular project, the respondent argued that the video had 'gone viral, that's what's been trending

[which is] similar to what we did when Frank Hvam[36] did something funny during the EU election [about] climate change' (Interview 2, person 2).

What is noteworthy here is that, in all of the cases discussed above, a white European figure (of Danish origin) is employed to raise awareness about the injustices and suffering experienced by people in the Global South because of the believed ability of these figures to generate online visibility. In addition to enacting a communitarian sentiment that enforces the assumption that people cannot or should not be expected to feel morally responsible for distant strangers that are not somehow similar or related to them, it is a communitarian sentiment informed and enforced by a set of collective ideas and beliefs about what the Facebook algorithm 'wants'. More importantly, what is shown online based on these algorithmic imaginaries are the faces of European or Western individuals, as well as their benevolent acts, whereas the faces and voices of Global South others are nowhere to be seen. To develop these points further, the focus of the next section is thus the social and political implications of what is shown in humanitarian appeals on Facebook and what, inversely, remains invisible.

4.4 Algorithms & the technopolitics of (in)visibility

This chapter has demonstrated that algorithmic imaginaries have a profound effect on the words and images with which humanitarian disasters are made visible to caring publics in the Global North on social media platforms such as Facebook. In summary, the social media editors interviewed for this chapter generally assume that figuring out what Facebook's content moderating algorithm 'wants' is crucial to the ability of humanitarian organizations to sell distant suffering and humanitarian disasters as an object of public concern. At the same time, communication professionals across multiple humanitarian organizations also acknowledge that what algorithms want is both dynamic and contingent, which makes figuring out what they want a complex task. Together, this has resulted in a growing reliance on experimental methods

[36] A well-known Danish comedian

and data analytics, which are used to generate knowledge about what algorithms want in order to maintain or improve the public visibility of humanitarian messages on Facebook. As we have also seen, the knowledge generated hereby has come to inform a collective belief that online audiences have short attention spans, which has led to a perceived need for humanitarian messages that are entertaining and easily digestible. Moreover, we have seen that algorithmic imaginaries also inform a communitarian sentiment based on the assumption that Western audiences are more likely to engage with, and respond to, humanitarian messages that are recognizable to them, which is concurrent with a growing reliance on Western faces and voices to make the suffering of distant Global South others visible to online audiences in the Global North.

Together, these observations demonstrate how an analytical attention to algorithmic imaginaries generates insights into what we can preliminarily term the 'technopolitics of visibility' on algorithmically-governed media platforms such as Facebook. Several authors have already pointed out that 'visibility' is inherently political by drawing on recent work in social theory that demonstrates that who or what is seen or remains unseen is essential for establishing and sustaining hierarchies, both local and global (Brighenti 2010). What is currently not accounted for, however, is the crucial role of algorithmic imaginaries in establishing and maintaining specific regimes of online visibility. This is unfortunate since, as this chapter demonstrates, specific ways of thinking about algorithms clearly informs the emergence of specific forms of visibility management that are intended to help humanitarian organizations to figure out what algorithms want, however diffuse that might be. Specifically, what we observe in this chapter is a profound shift in how the visibility of humanitarian disasters and aid appeals is generated, organized, and managed, generated by collective ideas about what algorithms are, what they do, and what they want.

Based on this, the technopolitics of visibility on Facebook can be described as evolving around the constitution of particular regimes of visibility in the form of a new regularity or order of the technologies, institutions, discourses, and so on, through which what, who, and how we see is organized. What decides what is seen and what is shown online in this regard are not simply the algorithms that filter and sort information on social media, nor the

humanitarian organizations that publish content on these platforms. Rather, the technopolitics of visibility is co-produced by the specific ideas, beliefs, and perceptions about what algorithms want, the communicative practices such imaginaries enable and inform, and the algorithmic systems such ideas and practices are recursively modelled back into. Crucially, the significance of these technopolitical dynamics extends well beyond the day-to-day interactions between social media editors and algorithmic systems examined in this chapter. For example, as argued by Zuboff (2019) and others, the mass collection of personal data and the use of data analytics, algorithmic prediction models, and targeted marketing by corporations such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter pose a threat to our personal privacy and autonomy (see also Klein 2020). By relying on the data and metrics provided by corporations, humanitarian organizations thus not only submit to but also potentially extend the reach of this 'participatory panopticon' (Brighenti 2010: 93, see also Beer 2018).

Equally importantly—and this is a crucial point—the technopolitics of visibility identified in this chapter is also constitutive of specific regimes of *in*visibility. For example, the use of infotainment as a way to sell humanitarian messages on social media not only emphasizes entertaining forms of content. It does so at the expense of fact-based, careful analyses of the economic, political, and social contexts of humanitarian disasters and their consequences. As a result of this shift, humanitarian messages on social media are not evaluated in terms of how well they inform and educate the public about humanitarian disasters and distant suffering but rather in terms of the pleasure and gratification that they generate. In this sense, algorithmic imaginaries can thus also be accused of enforcing what Chouliaraki (2010) refers to as a 'post-humanitarian' style of humanitarian communication that 'draws on the resources of the media market in which humanitarian organizations operate today' and 'tend[s] to privilege low-intensity emotions and short-term forms of agency' (108). By no means are such concerns new, however. Already, in the 1980s, Postman (1985) argued that our media-saturated present was better reflected by Aldous Huxley's dystopic novel *Brave New World* in which the public was oppressed by its addiction to amusement rather than by George Orwell's *1984* in which it is oppressed through state surveillance. But digital media nevertheless seems to have intensified, or at least rearticulated, such

concerns, as evident, for example, in widespread accusations about the growing prevalence of 'fake news' online as well as in the dominant perception that the digital revolution marks a turn to a 'post-truth' era. While algorithms themselves are often pegged as the villain in this story (see also Beer 2017), this chapter demonstrates how what we think about algorithms and how we perceive them plays a generative role in reproducing and maintaining such dynamics.

Another noteworthy implication of the technopolitics of invisibility as it plays out on Facebook is the emergence of a communitarian sentiment among social media editors. Indeed, several social media editors interviewed for this chapter assume that what the algorithm 'wants' is images and stories that relate to the sociocultural context of Western publics. But this familiarity, achieved for example through the increased visibility of Western individuals as the store-front of global relief efforts on social media, also ultimately conceals the voices, thoughts, and actions of those living in the distant elsewheres of humanitarian disasters. Rather than providing insights into the human consequences of humanitarian disasters, such (in)visibilities can thus be accused of enforcing a 'digital saviour complex' (Shringarpure, 2018), thus maintaining a colonial division between what can be seen (benevolent Westerners) and that which remains invisible (i.e. Global South others). This neatly aligns with what Chouliaraki (2013) has called a 'turning point' in the communication of humanitarianism, beginning at the time of the Biafran war when the expansion of the humanitarian field during the Cold War and the explosion of transnational media 'came together and ushered a paradigmatic change in the ways in which we are invited to perceive ourselves as moral actors' (ibid: 2). Today, with the rise of social media and when humanitarian organizations so often seem to aim the gaze of caring publics back at themselves rather than out towards vulnerable others, this turning point seems to have reached its preliminary culmination. But while, according to Shringarpure (2018), much 'of this investment into the self as the protagonist of a digital media narrative' can be traced to how digital media broadly, and social media in particular, 'encourages individualism, narcissism and agency,' this chapter demonstrates how this particular regime of (in)visibility is sustained by algorithmic imaginaries.

Together, these observations make obvious the need for a sustained critical attention to the crucial role of algorithmic imaginaries in shaping humanitarian (in)visibilities online. But intervening into what might sometimes be deeply held beliefs about algorithms is also an exceedingly difficult task due to the omnipresence of algorithms in more and more aspects of our digitalized societies. But it also an increasingly important task for critical scholarship on algorithms since what is at stake in this regard is not only what communication professionals *think* algorithms do. Indeed, and as already noted, the collective beliefs identified in this chapter matter beyond the communication practices of the humanitarian organizations because these beliefs and perceptions—as well as the forms of visibility they generate—are recursively modelled back into algorithmic systems which in turn come to enforce or even exacerbate the social and political significance of specific and sometimes problematic regimes of (in)visibility. Only by generating knowledge about, and awareness of, the productive power of algorithmic imaginaries in this regard can the humanitarian sector begin to question and move beyond the problematic forms of (in)visibility that haunt the sector and craft alternative humanitarian imaginaries.

In this sense, the insights produced in this chapter resonate with broader concerns about the authority so often associated with algorithms. The algorithmic imaginaries identified on the preceding pages at times make it seem as if algorithms have become the divine rulers of our digitalized and data-driven world. For much like the forms of authority that have historically been associated with deities, algorithms are seen by interviewees as opaque and mystical forces that can never be fully comprehended by humans but which are nevertheless both omnipresent and immensely powerful. Algorithms are even believed to make decisions on our behalf. And those that claim to know or understand them are celebrated as disciples with divine insights. The problem with this way of thinking about algorithms is that it prevents us from acknowledging their complexity as well as the multiple interests, actors, and systems involved in the constitution of what we perceive as 'algorithmic authority.' The collective perception of algorithms as omnipresent and authoritative thus ultimately conceals the inherently political and value-laden choices behind what is seen or made visible as pre-determined and inevitable outcomes of algorithmic decisions. The deification

of algorithms thus masks the fact that algorithms are, essentially, nothing more than abstractions or caricatures of the world expressed in code, operating as one form of decision-making among many. We are reminded here by the media theorist Ian Bogost that algorithms are not gods and that their decisions are not scripture:

> We need not believe that they rule the world in order to admit that they influence it, sometimes profoundly. Let's bring algorithms down to earth again. Let's keep the computer around without fetishizing it, without bowing down to it or shrugging away its inevitable power over us (Bogost, 2015).

It is my hope that the knowledge produced by this chapter will contribute to this enormously important task. More concretely, by compelling us to recognize the problematic consequences of algorithmic imaginaries in relation to how humanitarian issues are made visible and what remains unseen, I hope that it will compel the aid sector to think about other ways in which they can make the suffering of Global South others visible to caring publics in the Global North on algorithmically-governed media platforms such as Facebook. Indeed, as will be repeatedly demonstrated on the remaining pages of this thesis, the ability to think about and use digital media differently is a crucial feature of both the technopolitics of (in)visibility discussed in this chapter and the technopolitics of compassion more generally.

Chapter 5

Feeling displaced: How the refugee crisis is mediated in the virtual reality experience Sense of Home

The second issue that will be analysed through the theoretical and methodological approach outlined in Chapter 2 and 3 is the question of how Western publics are invited to care for, and become emotionally engaged in, the suffering of distant others. As noted earlier, the proliferation of digital media forces us to reconsider *how* audiences are invited to become engaged—in both emotional and moral terms—via new media technologies such as virtual reality (VR), which are claimed to provide new ways of experiencing, embodying, and feeling compassionate towards the suffering of distant others. Hence, based on an analysis of the virtual video Sense of Home, this chapter critically considers how the technical configuration and mediating capacities of this particular VR experience and the imaginaries that are invested into it shape how Western audiences are invited to care for the suffering of distant others.

5.1 Setting the stage

According to the Red Cross in Denmark (RDC), the virtual reality (VR) experience Sense of Home offers a 'unique' view of the refugee crisis. During the three minutes or so that the virtual experience lasts, potential donors, supporters, and volunteers are seated on a red bench, equipped with an Oculus Go headset, and transported, first, to war-torn Aleppo and then to a refugee camp in Lebanon, both of which are viewed through spherical, 360-degree videos composed of both still and moving images. Based on this, or so

the RCD claims, viewers are allowed to experience and *feel* a refugee crisis most often presented to them in all-too-familiar two-dimensional frames in mainstream media by exploring the refugee camp as a three-dimensional space of suffering and listening to the testimonies of refugees virtually seated next to them, as fellow human beings.

The mediation of the refugee crisis performed in Sense of Home is examined in this chapter as a paradigmatic example of how, rather than presenting war and catastrophes to publics in the Global North on screens, humanitarian organizations are increasingly turning to VR technology[37] to provide immersive experiences of humanitarian disasters and engender compassion with the suffering of Global South others.[38] A notable claim often made about VR in this regard is that it constitutes 'the ultimate empathy machine,' which encapsulates the media technology's perceived value to a humanitarian sector that relies, if not entirely, then at least substantially on the emotional engagement of audiences (see also Kang, 2017). Indeed, in addition to commercial interests, many claim that it is this shared belief in VR's ability to 'put oneself in the shoes of another' that is currently driving much of the production of humanitarian VR content by both media institutions and aid organizations (Gregory, 2016).

Speaking through Chouliaraki (2008), we might consequently say that VR technology is broadly perceived as enabling news ways of eliciting and structuring audiences' emotions *vis-à-vis* vulnerable others in the Global South. For this reason, my interest in humanitarian VR is necessarily framed

[37] While, in this chapter, the concept of virtual reality (VR) refers predominantly to so-called 360-degree videos where one or several cameras capture images that provides the user with a spherical, albeit static, point of view, VR is, in fact, an umbrella term for a diverse array of devices and techniques, from the spherical 360-degree videos—which is the most accessible and widely used format—to computer-generated imagery and 3D capture.

[38] In addition to Sense of Home, notable examples of humanitarian VR experiences that have emerged in recent years include Project Syria, Waves of Grace, and The Displaced, which have all been published and disseminated by prestigious media institutions such as *The New York Times* or by international organizations such as the United Nations, and made available to both citizens and political decision-makers at public events and high-level, international conferences in the Global North.

by a broader scholarly interest in the crucial albeit understudied role of emotions in global affairs. I am particularly indebted in this regard to a growing field of scholars that have demonstrated that we should not merely approach 'feelings' as individual, psychological states but as social and cultural forces with obvious political implications (see *inter alia* Ahmed, 2004; Ross, 2014; Solomon, 2015; Åhäll and Gregory, 2017; Koschut, 2020). According to this group of scholars, emotions must be analysed as 'emergent properties' that are 'constituted over time through socially and culturally conditioned forms of perception and experience' rather than 'latent' entities emerging from individual bodies (Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014: 496). What matters in this perspective is not what someone might feel but, rather, how feelings become collective by shaping social and political relations beyond the confines of the individual. Similarly, it is the question of how virtual experiences—such as the one provided in Sense of Home—constitute the suffering of Global South others as worthy of the emotional engagement and moral concern of caring publics in the Global North that is the focus of this chapter. This is a valuable addition to the study of emotions and world politics because, while the extant literature provides insights into social and cultural dynamics of emotions, it does not consider how feelings—understood as emergent properties—are technologically and digitally mediated (but see Ross, 2020a).

In addition to an interest in the politics of emotions, my examination of the use of VR for humanitarian purposes is also framed by a growing scholarly scepticism towards the experiential and moral possibilities often associated with immersive media. For example, while many have claimed that VR provides the humanitarian sector with the 'ultimate empathy machine', the psychologist Paul Bloom has conversely argued that understanding what life as a refugee is like—which is also the topic of Sense of Home—is not only about the sights and sounds of the refugee camp, which can easily be simulated in VR, but also involves feelings of fear and anxiety related to escaping war or disaster and being relocated to a foreign country; feelings that are more easily 'lost in translation' (Bloom, 2017). According to Bloom, VR is thus not sufficient for generating a 'deep empathy' with the suffering of distant others. In addition to this, the claim that VR technology provides the humanitarian sector with the ultimate empathy machine has been accused of concealing the specific and sometimes problematic ways in which the distant elsewheres of humanitarian disasters are

framed in VR. Writing about the United Nation's influential VR film Clouds Over Sidra, Crawford-Holland (2017: 27) argues that:

> Empathy, defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the ability to understand and share the feelings of another,' does not inherently issue from the immersion afforded by VR. This new medium may offer a glimpse into Sidra's daily reality, but its perceptual realism does little to advance our understanding of who Sidra is or how she might feel, let alone our understanding of the structures of power and violence that result in global injustice, or our own positions within these structures.

What is evident from this is that, while the use of VR in humanitarian communication might initially appear as unproblematic or even morally beneficial, the virtual mediation of humanitarian disasters is far from inconsequential (see also Zucconi, 2018). So far, however, scholars have done little to unpack these consequences in concrete terms (but see Crawford-Holland, 2017; Nash, 2017; Irom, 2018; Zucconi, 2018; Gillespie, 2020; Gruenewald and Witteborn, 2020). Hence, this chapter examines the kinds of experiences and emotional engagement that are promoted in the virtual experience Sense of Home and discusses the ethico-political implications of this. To this end, it focuses on the interplay between the technical and aesthetic capacities of VR and the collective ideas—or imaginaries—that circumscribe their use for humanitarian purposes. It does so by combining an embodied reading of how the refugee crisis is mediated in Sense of Home with an analysis of interviews with two key participants in the production and public dissemination of this in Sense of Home. These are: 1) a representative for the production company VRPro that not only produced the virtual video but also provided the technical solutions necessary to disseminate it at public events, and 2) a representative from the Red Cross in Denmark (RCD) who was responsible for the development of Sense of Home from the early idea stage to its publication and public dissemination.

Based on this, the chapter generates insights into the 'imagined moral affordances' of humanitarian VR; namely the kinds of experiences and moral sentiments that VR technology is believed to cultivate among caring publics. In doing so, the chapter ultimately demonstrates how, in mediating the plight of refugees as an object of public and moral concern, humanitarian VR

experiences such as Sense of Home also displace both European audiences and the distant elsewheres of humanitarian disasters, with 'displacement' denoting the interchangeable forms of mediated distance and proximity to refugee others that this particular VR experience enables. Building on this, the chapter finally identifies and discusses 'the technopolitics of emotions' that plays out in, and through, the use of VR for humanitarian purposes as conducive of problematic ways of mediating the suffering of distant others.

5.2 The imagined moral affordances of VR

Contrary to what many might believe, VR technology is not a recent invention. In fact, the first immersive media technology—known as the Sensorama—was invented in 1956 and the head-mounted displays most often associated with contemporary forms of VR technology were already invented in 1968 by the computer scientists Ivan Sutherland and Bob Sproull (see also Hillis, 1999). What *has* changed in recent years, however, is that VR technology has become increasingly accessible, at least to those living in affluent countries in the Global North. This development has been made possible, in part, by technological innovations that have made VR devices—often referred to as VR 2.0—smaller, more mobile, and easier to operate. This development is illustrated perhaps best by the transition from PC-connected devices such as the Oculus Rift prototype in 2010 to untethered headsets such as Oculus Go in 2018. In addition to this, the proliferation of VR 2.0 has been driven by a growing commercial interest, which has both decreased the price of VR headsets and put them in the hands of a growing number of consumers, albeit mostly in the Western hemisphere. Case in point, Goldman Sachs recently estimated that the size of the VR and Augmented Reality market would be around $80 billion by 2025, citing its potential to cause disruption everywhere from its current base in the entertainment industry, to real estate, and even health care.[39]

[39] Facebook's recent billion-dollar investment in developing its so-called Metaverse, as well as changing the name of the parent company to Meta, is the latest and perhaps most

But VR has not only received interest from multinational corporations in recent years. As already noted, VR technology has also become increasingly popular in the aid industry where it is perceived by many as a potentially revolutionary communication tool. Speaking about the United Nations' Clouds Over Sidra—a now iconic VR film about a Syrian girl, Sidra, who lives in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan—renowned VR filmmaker Chris Milk describes the virtual experience offered herein in the following terms: 'You're not watching through a screen, you're sitting there with her. You're sitting on the same ground she is sitting on, and because of that you feel her humanity in a deeper way; you empathise with her in a deeper way' (Milk, 2015). Countless journalists, experts, and industry officials have used similar terms to describe the humanitarian promise of VR technology in recent years. As a case in point, Nonny De La Penna, an academic, VR producer, and proclaimed godmother of VR, predicts that: 'Journalists will realize really fast that VR has a unique power to place viewers on the scene of an event—instead of watching it from outside—and that that's a really powerful way to engage them emotionally' (Garling, 2015). Similarly, Gabo Arora, special adviser to the UN Sustainable Development Goals Action Campaign, claims that we 'come out of [VR] feeling enlightened and often moved, and often ready to take action' (UN 2016).[40] In sum, such claims are all illustrative of the collective beliefs, ideas, and visions that drive the humanitarian sector's recent interest in and use of VR technology.

Rather than affirm, question, or disprove these claims about the experiential and moral possibilities of VR—as has already been done by others—this chapter analyses them as collectively-held and institutionally-

obvious example of the immense interest of multinational corporations in VR technology.

[40] Such claims are commensurate with the observation that humanitarian communication is, and has perhaps always been, an emotional industry that seeks to fuel anger in the face of injustices, generate compassion towards suffering, or inspire hope in the face of seemingly insurmountable disasters (Steensen, Ferrer-Conill and Peters, 2020: 8). Indeed, the aim of 'bringing the audience in' through mediated accounts of distant suffering is usually what is implied by such efforts, with emotions being thought of in this context as the perhaps most intense and visible manifestation of the engagement of the public.

stabilized beliefs that not only inform the growing use of VR technology for humanitarian purposes but also shape the ways in which humanitarian disasters are mediated virtually. In this regard, it is framed by an emerging scholarly literature on 'technology-in-use', which approaches the social and political effects of technology as unpredictable inasmuch as individuals, states, or institutions oftentimes use technologies in ways that their designers never intended. Exemplary of this approach is the work of Adler-Nissen & Driecheva (2019) who analyse the use of word-processing software and emails in the drafting of diplomatic documents. Specifically, they focus on the 'affordances' of these communication technologies—namely shareability, visualization, and immediacy—as inherent 'action potentials' that inform and (re)shape international diplomatic practices by introducing new possibilities for negotiating at a distance while, at the same time, leading to a loss of the authorial control for individual diplomats. Based on this, they ultimately argue that while the effects of such media technologies in diplomacy emerge partly from their material properties, how these technologies are used in practice both enables and constrains this emergence (Adler-Nissen & Driescheva 2019: 543). In extending these insights to the study of humanitarian VR, I approach the mediating capacities of this particular media technology as both relational and contingent: r*elational* in the sense that they arise from interactions *between* users and technologies rather from the properties of humans or machines alone; and *contingent* because the affordances of specific media technologies depend on the interplay between objects' material features and their contextual uses.

In more concrete terms, I suggest that claims about, and collective beliefs in, the emotional capacities of VR should be grasped as 'imagined moral affordances.' According to Paul Frosh, 'moral affordances' denote the kind of moral responses to mediated content that 'arise from the embodied, technically and culturally shaped relations between people and communication technologies' (Frosh, 2018: 354). As a case in point, Frosh analyses the emergence of online, interactive platforms that allow users to not only watch but also manipulate, save, and share mediated representations of suffering 'through a simple and almost cost-free movement' (ibid: 365). This development, as Frosh further argues, has removed the 'default limitations' of pre-digital media technologies that 'kept me and my will at a screened

distance' from distant others (ibid). Hence, Frosh subsequently notes, we currently 'find ourselves in a historically novel situation' in which 'the burden of moral response to distant suffering is now shared by our smallest habitual and volitional gestures,' resulting in 'an ethics of kinaesthetics' that is predicated on continuity 'between responsiveness to the interface, engagement with depicted content and immediate action' (ibid). According to Frosh, the very capacity to attend to and interpret mediated representations of distant suffering thus depends on a 'media a priori' (a term he borrows from Friedrich Kittler) in the sense that moral forms of witnessing and action towards the suffering of distant others are made possible and fundamentally shaped by the technical configuration and inherent action potentials of specific media technologies.

Framed by these insights, this chapter similarly studies the moral responses and possibilities that arise from the embodied, technically- and culturally-shaped relations between people and VR technology. But what is not well accounted for in the extant literature on technology-in-use and moral affordances is the crucial role of user beliefs and experiences in regard to how media technologies shape how they are used to shape moral responsibilities among users in practice. Viewed through the postphenomenological lens offered in this thesis, the problem with this omission is that the social and political effects of media technologies cannot be reduced to the material properties of such devices (as argued by Frosh), nor to the practices or habits that one adopts in and through everyday use (as proposed by Adler-Nissen and Driescheva). Equally important in this regard are the emotions and expectations associated therewith, which may in turn impact when, where, how, and for what purposes we use our media devices. Indeed, as Nagy and Neff (2015: 5) note:

> Users may have certain expectations about their communication technologies, data, and media that, in effect and practice, shape how they approach them and what actions they think are suggested. These expectations may not be encoded hard and fast into such tools by design, but they nevertheless become part of the users' perceptions of what actions are available to them.

In extending these insights to the study of the VR experience Sense of Home, the chapter analyses the opportunities for emotional and moral engagement

that humanitarian organizations *believe* to arise from the use of VR, and how such expectations shape the development and dissemination of virtual experiences. My addition of the prefix 'imagined' to Frosh's concept of 'moral affordances' is thus meant to emphasize that the moral affordances of VR technology do not only arise from the material configuration and technical capacities of this immersive media devices but also from the expectations, collective beliefs, and emotions that are invested into them.

In summary, by focusing on the moral affordances associated with VR technology by those responsible for developing and disseminating virtual content in practice, the chapter analyses specific ways of thinking about VR as generative of particular ways of appealing to and managing the emotional engagement of caring publics in the context of immersive experiences of the refugee crisis. What matters in this regard is not whether or not humanitarian VR experiences *actually* engender empathy and compassion with distant others since, in both cases, there is analytical value in examining the pragmatics of such perceptions in relation to how humanitarian disasters are mediated in VR. Specifically, as will be elaborated below, the chapter analyses and discusses the knowledge generated by interviews with developers of the VR film Sense of Home in relation to the insights produced by an embodied reading of this particular virtual experience. It begins by discussing the imagined ability of Sense of Home to generate emotional engagement and then demonstrates how this particular way of thinking about VR shapes how the refugee crisis is mediated therein. Building on this, the chapter then zooms in on the perspectives of the refugee crisis offered in Sense of Home. These are: 1) an exploration of the refugee camp as a three-dimensional space of suffering by looking around, and 2) a number of virtual encounters with refugees. In analysing these distinct perspectives, the chapter then discusses the specific forms of moral responsibility that they are believed to generate as well as the kinds of mediated proximity and distance they constitute. Finally, it brings these observations together to point to the use of immersive media for humanitarian purposes as resulting in a 'technopolitics of emotions' that is conducive of problematic ways of inviting Global North publics to care for the plight of Global South others.

5.3 Feeling displaced in Sense of Home

Published in 2018, Sense of Home is a virtual reality (VR) experience filmed and produced by the production company VRPro for the Red Cross in Denmark (RCD). Bolstered by social media activities and a coordinated marketing effort, it has been showcased across 10 European countries at both public events and high-level seminars. Moreover, it was awarded with the prestigious Digital Communications Award for best Event & Experiential Marketing in 2018. Hence, Sense of Home can, by most measures, be described as a successful and influential humanitarian communication campaign which has both received immense praise from media professionals and been disseminated broadly.

But Sense of Home is also a paradigmatic example of the growing interest in VR technology among large, international funding bodies. The development and public dissemination of Sense of Home was financed through the EU's MADAD fund which—in addition to supporting Syria's neighbouring countries in coping with the pressure caused by the influx of more than six million Syrian refugees—finances efforts to communicate the moral and political urgency of the Syrian refugee crisis in engaging, interactive, and innovative ways. Indeed, as noted by the interviewee from the RCD, who was involved in everything from the funding application to the development and dissemination of Sense of Home:

> We were in competition with others to get [the] European Trust Fund for Syria [i.e. Madad] and we had to convince [them] that our application was the best and then we thought: We have to do something different … out of the box. And there weren't that many that had used VR [back then].

It is also worth noting at the outset that, as a case study of humanitarian VR, Sense of Home does not help generate insights into the cutting-edge of VR technology, which, in addition to mobile VR headsets, involves sensors that allow people to navigate a virtual environment by moving around physically or 3d capture technologies that allow users to see and use their hands in a virtual environment. Instead, Sense of Home is a paradigmatic example of how immersive media has predominantly been employed by humanitarian organizations in recent years. Like most humanitarian VR experiences, Sense of

Home consists of a relatively rudimentary 360 video (at least compared to the cutting-edge or VR technology) exhibited at public events via Oculus Go, a relatively inexpensive VR headset. Whereas three-dimensional, computer-generated VR experiences might enable viewers to roam freely inside a virtual world by moving their body, 360-degree videos are composed of pre-rendered images, their timeline is fixed, and viewers' interaction with the virtual environment is limited to turning their head or spinning around their body while viewing a virtual environment from a fixed position (see also Willis, 2016: 153).

In addition to being a paradigmatic example of the forms of VR technology that have predominantly been employed by aid agencies, Sense of Home is also a paradigmatic example of the fact that most humanitarian VR experiences published in recent years have emerged in response to the refugee crisis following the Syrian war. Indeed, according to the RCD employee interviewed for this thesis, the thoughts and ideas that inform Sense of Home began to emerge in 2015, where the growing amount of refugees seeking to escape Syria came crashing into the view of affluent European publics via mainstream media. Speaking about the development of Sense of Home and the motivation behind using VR technology, the interviewee characterized the communicative challenge that VR technology was thought to solve in the following way:

> It was very obvious that one of the things that had to be put forward … was to communicate the situation [the refugee crisis] because there was an extremely emotional discourse or public debate about refugee flows [as] welfare tourism [so] what we wanted [with] VR was maybe to try to provide a more humane representation of it, where you meet a person one on one who tells their story from [the perspective of] the world they are currently in.

In sum, the views highlighted above provide insights into the funding structures, events, and visions that informed the development of Sense of Home. In doing so, they also illustrate how the moral affordances associated with humanitarian VR participated in shaping the virtual experience of the refugee crisis offered herein. Central among these, as will also be developed below, is the claimed ability of VR technology to engage audiences—affectively and emotionally—in the suffering of distant others by providing a more humane representation of the refugee crisis that allows Western

audiences to care from a distance in ways that have hitherto not been possible. Indeed, it is this believed ability of VR to offer a more intimate view of humanitarian disasters that frames my critical examination of the mediated experiences of humanitarian disasters made possible in Sense of Home. For what does this intimate view entail in technical and aesthetic terms? And what are the risks and consequences generated by mediating the refugee crisis virtually? These are the questions to which the chapter now turns.

Engagement

To provide a crude summary of Sense of Home from my perspective as a researcher and a Western spectator both, the virtual experience begins with me sitting on a red bench with an Oculus Go VR headset attached to it (Figure 3). Upon putting on the headset, an intro screen appears, requiring me to look at a large play button for a few seconds in order to start the virtual experience. Having done this, what follows during the next three minutes or so is, first, a montage consisting of still images of everyday life in Syria before the war accompanied by an omnipresent voice asking me to think about what it means to have a home and how I would feel if I suddenly lost it. Next, I watch a 360 video from Damascus in which I can visually explore the destruction caused by the Syrian war. Having set the stage, an omnipresent speaker voice then poses the question: 'Where would you go if your home was taken from you?' After this, a number of short 360-videos of what appears to be scenes from a refugee camp appear in rapid succession. For the remainder of the virtual experience, Sense of Home switches between two distinct perspectives. One consists of landscape shots of the refugee camp, where I am invited to look across the camp in its entirety and explore these vast spaces of suffering as well as more intimate views of everyday life in the camp (Figure 4). The other perspective employs close-up shots, where I am invited to attend to the stories told by refugees sitting next to me in the virtual experience and explore their faces, bodies and voices as embodied testimonies of the human suffering caused by the Syrian war (Figure 5).

Figure 3: Image of Sense of Home set-up (The Danish Red Cross)

Figure 4: Screenshots of virtual exploration of the refugee camp in Sense of Home (YouTube)

Figure 5: Screenshots of virtual encounter with refugees in Sense of Home (YouTube)

Several important points emerge from this written exposition of the virtual experience offered in Sense of Home. One is that the virtual video obviously attempts to facilitate an imaginative transportation of audiences to the distant elsewheres of the refugee camp. Indeed, to me and thus possibly also other viewers, the view offered in Sense of Home is radically different from other kinds of mediated accounts in the sense that, upon wearing the headset and headphones, I felt completely encapsulated from the outside world, which in turn created the illusion that I was indeed there, in the refugee camp. As the interviewee from the RCD explains, the benefit of the kinds of imaginative transportation facilitated by Sense of Home is that, while humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross:

> can't send all Europeans to a refugee camp in Turkey, [we can] try to somehow bring it *closer* so people understand who these people really are, that it's people sitting down there (my emphasis).

In this sense, Sense of Home can also be seen as a response to a fundamental challenge in humanitarian communication: namely the humanisation of vulnerable others via media. Speaking through Chouliaraki (2011: 374-5), the 'imaginative mobility' offered in Sense of Home is valuable in this regard because it involves 'the voice of vulnerable others' which tends to be ignored in representations of disaster in mainstream media. However, Sense of Home was also experienced, by me at least, as doing *more* than that by offering an embodied experience that goes beyond the framing power of other media technologies. Indeed, Sense of Home, to some extent, offers a 'frameless' experience inasmuch as it successfully conceals the process of mediation by masking the frames inherent in two-dimensional mediums such as photography and video. Unlike other representations of disaster in media—which are generally predicated on the televisual distance of viewers—the experience of Sense of Home thus arguably results in 'a hyper real representation … dramatically changing their perspective into one of affective geo-spatial *immersion'* (Gillespie 2020: 158, my emphasis). Indeed, it is this perceived ability of VR to immerse viewers in the distant elsewheres of disaster that is often pointed to as the reason why VR promises to reduce compassion fatigue and heighten emotional engagement.

While VR has only recently caught the attention of the aid industry, mediated proximity—the feeling of 'being there'—has long been an important, if sometimes implicit, concept in accounts of media witnessing, in which emotional engagement with events or people who are perceived as distant in both time and space is generally believed to be difficult to sustain. Hence, according to Peters (2001), 'being there' thus matters 'because it is precisely the experience of physical and temporal proximity to an event that both attests to its veracity and calls for active response rather than contemplation' (quoted in Nash 2017: 121-122). For this reason, humanitarian organizations increasingly employ media to establish 'intimacy at a distance' (Orgad and Seu, 2014b) and thereby reduce 'the cultural and moral distance between people who live far away from each other and [provide] a sense of involvement with distant events and lives' (Vestergaard 2011: 26). Not surprisingly, digital media is widely perceived as valuable in this regard because it affords new opportunities for involving users. To return to an example from earlier, Frosh (2018) has demonstrated how the graphical user interfaces of websites—which rely on the haptic movement of users to manipulate virtual objects through the hand-eye coordinated movement of a mouse cursor, typing on the keyboard or similar—results in 'new intensities of contact between physical and virtual bodies' (ibid: 362).

While VR technology is generally understood as having moral affordances that differ from the web interfaces described by Frosh, his arguments are nevertheless commensurate with my own experience of mediated presence in Sense of Home. As already noted, the 360 video certainly made me feel as if I was there at the scene of events in a way other audiovisual media technologies have not, by simulating a three-dimensional space, both visually and sonically. Similarly, there was little doubt among the interviewees that Sense of Home is in fact successful in making audiences feel as if they are there in the refugee camp, however brief that feeling of mediated presence might be. As the interviewee from VRPro explains:

> We have made a lot of observations of people who have tried it [i.e. Sense of Home] … and we can see … that when [refugees] approach them they withdraw because they get so close. So you can really see that they feel that a person is approaching them and talking to them.

The experienced as well as perceived ability to generate a feeling of 'being there' in Sense of Home is particularly significant because such forms of mediated presence are widely believed to be a prerequisite for generating feelings of empathy and compassion towards the suffering of distant others. Indeed, as the RCD representative argues:

> because we do it in VR, the brain is manipulated into thinking we are there. And it really only takes, even the most lousy cardboard glasses still provide that illusion [so VR] is a strong tool for creating empathy … which humanitarian communication should always strive to do.

This further resonates with the observation made by Andrejevic and Volcic (2020) that proponents of humanitarian VR tend to envision the form of empathy forged by virtual encounters as a function of the technology's ability to collapse the life and experiences of audiences into the figure of the other. While, as noted earlier, such claims have been the subject of extensive scholarly scrutiny in recent years, they are not, in fact, entirely unsubstantiated. On the contrary, they find support in neuroscience where a number of scholars claim to have proven that VR experiences enhance and promote audience empathy. For example, in an experimental study of virtual interactions between 60 Israelis and Jamil—an animated Palestinian character—in virtual reality, researchers measured 'increased empathy toward the Palestinians, irrespective of participants' feelings toward the Palestinians prior to the experiment' (Hasler *et al.*, 2014). In a different but equally noteworthy study, researchers similarly concluded that 'sensory-rich experiences of animals in IVEs [immersive virtual environments] led to greater feeling of embodiment' and that this '[h]eigthened interconnection with nature elicited greater perceptions of imminence of the environmental risk and involvement with nature' (Bailenson *et al.*, 2016). Whether or not such observations are objectively true or not does not matter in the context of this chapter. What matters is that this experimental evidence adds scientific weight to the dominant beliefs and expectations associated with the use of VR for humanitarian purposes and thus implicitly enforces particular ways of mediating humanitarian disasters.

One way of developing these points further is to look at the *specific* ways in which the refugee crisis is mediated in Sense of Home. Such an examination

can beneficially be developed through the theoretical lens provided by Roger Silverstone. In his book *Media and Morality*, Silverstone suggests an 'ethics of care' in mediated accounts of the suffering of distant others that begins by recognizing unfamiliar others as others with humanity (Silverstone 2007). To this end, he proposes 'proper distance' as a conceptual device with which to evaluate the ethico-political implications of the various positions of proximity or distance that mediated accounts place viewers in while witnessing the suffering of distant others. In general terms, as Vestergaard (2011: 31-32) writes, 'proper distance' is achieved when media audiences are neither brought *too close* to specific instances of suffering—as images of death and dismemberment which display human injuries in telescopic detail are claimed to do—or *too far* to appreciate what Judith Butler calls 'the precariousness of the other'—as images of the smiling, grateful faces of poor children have been accused of doing (see also Chouliaraki 2011). That is not to say that such ways of being brought close to, or far away from, humanitarian disasters through media are always and *necessarily* ethico-politically problematic. What Silverstone's work offers is rather a normative standpoint from which to evaluate mediated proximities and distances to vulnerable others in moral terms, which thus constitutes a position from which to discuss their ethico-political implications.

By enabling a normative discussion about how humanitarian disasters are mediated, Silverstone's concept of 'proper distance' thus also opens up this study of Sense of Home to critical questions about the many kinds of relations between viewers and victims of humanitarian disasters established on and through this virtual experience, as well as what the ethico-political consequences of these relations are in terms of the forms of public engagement they promote. Specifically, by employing the concept of 'proper distance' as a starting point for discussing and evaluating the ethico-political implications of the forms of mediated presence facilitated in Sense of Home, the next section discusses and evaluates the two perspectives through which Sense of Home mediates the refugee crisis: namely, by providing an opportunity for exploring the refugee camp as a space of suffering and by facilitating an embodied encounter with victims of war and displacement. It does so by examining how the interviewees and I—as an embodied viewer—perceive the kinds of proximity and distance Sense of Home enables.

Exploration

To repeat a crucial observation, Sense of Home juxtapositions two perspectives in order to forge a sense of 'being there' for viewers, thus constituting a view of the refugee crisis that is arguably unique to this VR experience, but which is also in some ways similar to the perspectives offered in other humanitarian VR films.

One perspective, which we shall return to later, focuses on the victim testimonies of refugees rather than on providing a representation of their suffering and utilizes techniques such as 'direct address' whereby the virtually-mediated refugee appears as if speaking to the viewer directly. Notably, in these particular sequences, viewers are both physically and virtually seated on a red bench where they are approached by three virtual subjects—a woman, a boy, and a man—who each tell the viewer their personal story and share their hopes and dreams for the future. Rather than establishing a de-contextualized and dyadic 'audience-victim' relationship, this perspective thus asks audiences to become 'intimates' with distant others by sitting next to them and listening to their stories (see also Orgad & Seu 2014b).

Whereas the perspective described above seeks to establish a sense of intimacy with distant others, the other perspective of the plight of refugees provided in Sense of Home enables viewers to explore the 360 videos presented to them by looking around. As noted earlier, as early as the opening scene of Sense of Home, users are encouraged to explore the ruins of Aleppo as a virtual reminder of the destruction caused by the Syrian War, which made a lasting impression on me as I was reminded of the material as well as human costs of war when it enters the intimate spaces of the everyday. For the remainder of the video, Sense of Home allows users to explore different physical spaces, both within the refugee camp and from the perspective of landscape shots that allow viewers to explore the vast expanse of the refugee camp from an elevated position.

In all of these instances, Sense of Home employs the illusion of spatial presence to frame these distant spaces of suffering as a concrete, lived reality. As Chouliaraki (2006a) has argued, there is a particular moral value in mediated accounts like these, which aims to represent scenes of disaster as it is experienced by those living there. However, in my experience, this was only partly true in the context of the mediated experience offered in Sense of

Home. For example, the scenes during which I was encouraged to gaze across the refugee camp from above interrupted the sense of embodied presence that I have described earlier since, in these specific sequences, I suddenly felt removed from the lived realities of the camp inasmuch as what I was offered was, essentially, a view from nowhere, where my gaze emanated from somewhere high above the intimate contexts of the camp.

In these particular sequences, Sense of Home can thus be said to mimic the tourist gaze, which provides support for the accusation that humanitarian VR experiences tend to, if oftentimes implicitly, offer 'exotic views' and 'pleasurable spectacles' to audiences who are able to visit a location that they would not be able to visit otherwise (Crawford-Holland 2018, Gruenewald & Witterborn 2020). Indeed, as argued by the interviewee from VRPro, humanitarian VR campaigns like Sense of Home are not only meant to be a 'serious' experience but are and should also be 'fun because you are in a place you haven't been before.' What is further implied by this is that the enjoyment generated by the forms of exploration afforded in VR experiences like Sense of Home are not unintended. Rather, the ability to generate a fun and memorable experience for viewers, for example by mimicking the tourist gaze, is seen as central to the ability of VR technology to generate audience engagement. In this sense, as argued also by Crawford-Holland (2018: 24), Sense of Home is thus perhaps best described as 'voyeuristic'—as opposed to 'documentarist'—in the sense that, rather than offering a detailed view of the refugee crisis, it enables the viewer to browse through 'exotic spaces' in order to produce 'a personally and morally satisfying experience' (Gruenewald and Witterborn, 2020).

In addition to mimicking the tourist gaze, the virtual explorations made possible in Sense of Home can also be grasped as part of a wider 'gamification' of global helping, whereby elements from game design and the entertainment industry are increasingly employed for humanitarian advocacy purposes. Like VR, digital games have long been hailed 'as a new form of technology, a new way to tell stories, often as something *more* than other mediums like print or film' (O'Brien and Berents, 2019). [41] Specifically, by allowing 'the player to

[41] That 'gamification' is indeed a trend in humanitarian communication is further evidenced by Red Cross Denmark's recent digital role-playing game Brothers across

make choices and then demonstrating the consequences of those choices,' computer games 'can be a powerful awareness-raising tool in some circumstances' (ibid). While Sense of Home does not have the material capacities and technical affordances associated with computer games,[42] many of the arguments for the use of VR in humanitarian communication are similar to those behind the emergence of 'serious games', inasmuch as both are claimed to engage people in an innovative and interactive way by allowing them to occupy a perspective or position that they might otherwise not be able to comprehend. The interviewee from RCD seems to explicitly acknowledge this when he explains that 'we [often] take these dogmas from experience economy, the authentic … gamified, as many senses as possible … that's the code word, also with respect to VR.'

It is worth noting here, however, that—as opposed to most digital games—Sense of Home does not offer a prolonged experience of immersion. Indeed, one version of the virtual experience was five minutes long and the version most often used at public events was only three minutes in duration. As an embodied viewer, I was certainly surprised by how brief the individual scenes and sequences were and how condensed the experience was. Consequently, the experience offered in Sense of Home felt rushed, giving me little time to explore the faces and environments I encountered therein. In addition to being 'voyeuristic', the experience of the refugee crisis offered in Sense of Home can thus also be described as a 'whistle-stop tour' of a number of more-or-less intimate vantage points from which to explore life in a refugee camp.[43]

According to the interviewees, the reason for imposing this felt sense of urgency on viewers was pragmatic. As the representative from VRPro reminds us, Sense of Home—like most humanitarian VR experiences—was designed

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Borders, in which the intended audience, school-age children, are faced with the challenge of locating the main character's brother who has fled Syria.

[42] For one, it does not allow users to make choices about where to go but confines them to pre-rendered, 360 images.

[43] I am inspired in this regard by Nash (2017: 122) who, based on her analysis of the VR films Waves of Grace and Clouds Over Sidra, similarly claims that 'the nature of VR as an invitation to visually explore a 360-degree environment has the effect of producing a sense of urgency to take it all in'.

to be 'distributed on the street and at events and there was often a queue to try it out which means that the experience had to be less than five minutes in duration, better yet, three.' Expanding this rationale, the same interviewee quoted above acknowledged that while

> it's much better to be able to really engage people emotionally in a story over a longer duration … on the other hand … everyone that wants to should also have the opportunity to try it and you shouldn't have to stand in line for an hour.

What is further implied by this is that the ability of viewers to explore the refugee camps depicted in Sense of Home was not only perceived by developers as a way to generate a pleasurable media spectacle. In addition to establishing a sense of 'being there,' Sense of Home is also designed to maximize publicity by attracting attention at public events and from the media. As the interviewee from RCD explains:

> When we make these communication campaigns, we do something that a lot of people start talking about and [that] provides us with press coverage [and] that could be a VR installation [or] that could be a partnership around [the production of] a movie.

The benefit of VR in this regard, as noted by the VRPro representative, relates not simply to the experiential possibilities the technology introduces but also to the public interest that surrounds the technology. As he formulated it: 'Because [VR] is a new medium and everybody doesn't have a headset and, well, it's widely regarded as an extraordinary experience [it] really draws attention to the Red Cross.'

Even though, as examined in the next section, VR experiences such as Sense of Home are generally perceived by respondents as a way to generate mediated presence and empathy, it must thus also be seen as symptomatic of a commercial and corporate logic that increasingly informs humanitarian agencies' reliance on media (Vestergaard, 2008). This is a form of marketing which focuses not primarily on representing the suffering of distant others as a moral demand but relies instead on the familiarity of citizen-consumers with technological consumer goods such as VR headsets and the imaginaries that

are used to sell or promote them. In more general terms, as Lilie Chouliaraki has shown, this logic can be grasped as a market-oriented response to a broader societal scepticism towards traditional humanitarian appeals that frame distant others as victims of injustices, and ask caring publics to 'pity' them as a way to motivate them to act collectively (Chouliaraki, 2013). Conversely, the mediation of the refugee crisis performed in Sense of Home seems to presuppose that the question of moral responsibility belongs to the realm of individual consumers and approaches the question of their engagement as a matter of emotional self-realization.

Hence, Sense of Home can be accused of implicitly privileging the Western viewer over the distant other by offering an 'introspective' view of the refugee crisis that 'enable[s] experiences in which the feeling self finds yet another playground for self-referential experiences [while the] victimized Other remains in its received role of a tool to morally enhance the viewer and motivate the viewer to act' (Gruenwald & Wittborn 2020: 5). What **is** potentially lost by this incessant focus on the gratification of viewers is that, rather than being moved by humanitarian disasters, Western audiences risk being caught up instead in the pleasure and entertainment generated by this virtual spectacle. As the interviewee from VRPro noted, while Sense of Home enjoyed a considerable degree of public interest, evidenced, for example, by a lengthy, 10 minute feature on the news segment of the Danish national broadcast station TV2, the journalistic angle applied therein focused exclusively on the public excitement and technological novelty associated with VR technology and completely ignored the humanitarian emergency that Sense of Home was designed to draw attention to.

While much has been said about the moral value of the mediated presence generated in virtual experiences of humanitarian disasters, it should thus be obvious from this that it is 'also necessary to draw attention to the potential for a loss of perspective [through which] the experience of '"being in" VR, a narcissistic reflection on one's own experience, becomes the foundation for moral response' (Nash 2017: 129, my emphasis). Viewed through Silverstone's conceptual lens, we might thus describe the forms of virtual exploration encouraged in Sense of Home as bringing viewers *too far* away from the refugee crisis to recognize the precariousness and humanity of refugee others, thus constituting an 'improper distance' from the plight of refugees.

Encounters

If the virtual forms of exploration made possible in Sense of Home can be said to constitute an 'improper distance' to vulnerable others, are there other aspects of the virtual experience, then, that might bring viewers closer to the plight of refugees? Indeed, given the persistent critique of 'compassion fatigue' and audience passivity in literature on media and global humanitarianism, it seems insufficient to base a critical analysis of humanitarian VR solely on the claim that it privileges the emotional and experiential engagement of viewers. To develop this point, the chapter now turns to the other view of the refugee crisis offered in Sense of Home.

As already noted, in addition to providing a whistle-stop tour of the refugee camp, Sense of Home also facilitates encounters with three refugees who live in the camp—a man, a woman, and a boy—who all share with viewers what it was like for them to lose their home, what their life in the refugee camp is like, and where they see themselves in the future. What is emphasized in these virtual encounters are the testimonies of distant others—their voices, bodies, and faces—rather than the three-dimensional space of the camp as a site of suffering. In these sequences, Sense of Home thus offers an embodied and highly individualized perspective of the refugee crisis that emphasizes hope rather than despair. As the RDC employee noted in regard to the ambitions behind Sense of Home, the virtual experience was meant to be 'a lifting rod for … talking about [the refugee crisis] in a … positive, emotional as opposed to a negative way.'

According to the interviewees, another important reason for framing the refugee crisis in this particular way was that the primary donor, the EU, wanted to display how much was being done to help refugees living in camps in countries neighbouring Syria and thus demonstrate that the EU is an important actor in the refugee crisis. As the interviewee from VRPro notes when talking about the thoughts that informed the narrative and visual framing of the refugee crisis performed in Sense of Home:

> It's easy to take the perspective that we have to show how awful it is. That would have a tremendous impression on people. But we also had to tell a positive story about how much is done, so that was the balance we had to find, between how terrible it was and how much good was done.

A third reason for emphasizing hope rather than despair in Sense of Home was that a positive narrative was perceived by respondents as the most effective way of moving Western audiences and transforming the political response to the refugee crisis from one dominated by fear and suspicion to one of compassion, by allowing politicians, decision-makers, and Western publics to see the refugee crisis from the perspective of the refugees themselves. Indeed, as the RCD interviewee notes, doing so is 'one of the primary purposes of our communication … to make the other place themselves in the shoes [of] beneficiaries to create empathy.'

But how are vulnerable others mediated in Sense of Home in order to move audiences and generate compassion towards the refugees they encounter herein, then? Using a scene from the VR film Clouds Over Sidra as an illustrative example, Irom (2018) describes one of the techniques employed in VR to reduce the perceived distance between victims and audiences in virtual experiences as an 'induced form of movement' specific to VR. Specifically, Irom writes, 'as we hear Sidra's [the main character] voice-over about her teacher's habit of calling on students, the viewer must turn his or her head to scan the whole length of the classroom to make sense of the action' (4279). In this way, as Irom argues, 'the technology is able to elicit a physical response from the viewer' that establishes 'a sense of co-presence and experiential immediacy (if not total identification) as Sidra's gaze and the voice-over work together to make the viewer see what she sees' (ibid).

Sense of Home similarly relies on eliciting the physical responses of viewers in order to establish empathetic engagement with the refugees encountered therein. But the way this is achieved is different from how it is done in Clouds Over Sidra. For one, in Sense of Home, experiential proximity is not established primarily by making the viewer see what the vulnerable others pictured herein see but rather through 'direct address' techniques whereby virtual subjects appear as if they see and talk directly to the viewer. This gesture is supposed to bring viewers into the virtual space, positioning the virtual subjects as people with whom the user is engaging. Specifically, the gestural address of the refugees encountered in Sense of Home coincides with their oral articulation of their hopes for the future, resulting in a hopeful narrative which I myself certainly felt compelled to attend and respond to (see also Nash 2017: 127). In this sense, the use of 'direct address' in Sense of

Home can be understood as adopting a central framing technique in humanitarian communication whereby distant others are positioned as 'worthy victims' and whereby viewers thus become benefactors (see also Dogra, 2011).

Another key technique for establishing a feeling of proximity to vulnerable others in Sense of Home is the use of scenes in which refugees and viewers are positioned as if seated next to each other. The ideal of sitting together as 'intimates' is already a dominant way in which humanitarian organizations think about the mediated encounters they want to stage between potential donors and victims (Orgad & Seu 2014b) and clearly also informs how the refugee crisis is mediated in Sense of Home. According to the VRPro representative, the fact that:

> there's someone sitting next to you who is telling their story [is] more powerful than watching it on a screen. Of course you are watching it on a screen but you experience the illusion that you're sitting next to this person, which means you feel a different kind of empathy for this person talking to you.

One object—namely the red bench on which one is seated both virtually and physically when experiencing Sense of Home—appears as particularly central in this regard. As the interviewee from VRPro similarly explains, the purpose of the red bench is to provide the viewer with an experiential connection or 'bridge' between the physical- and the virtual world:

> there's this thing about the red bench, this thing about making a bridge between the physical world where you're sitting on this red bench, and then in VR you're sitting on the same bench ... it's just placed in a refugee camp in Lebanon [which creates] the feeling that this bench might as well have been placed in a refugee camp and now you're sitting on this bench that you're actually sitting on [and] now a refugee approaches you and talks to you about what their life is like.

Rather than allowing viewers to inhabit the embodied perspective of distant others, as in Clouds Over Sidra, Sense of Home can thus be said simulate a *social* encounter. Certainly, to me, the presence of the red bench in Sense of Home facilitated a somewhat authentic experience of talking to someone sitting next to me. The inherent division in both space and time between

viewers and vulnerable others is bridged here, not by simulating a sameness of perspective through which viewers embody the positionality of distant others but, rather, through 'direct address,' intimacy and co-presence. While humanitarian VR experiences have been accused of obliterating the difference between the viewer and the distant other, thus absorbing another's body and experience into one's own when it should be theirs'(Bollmer, 2017: 71), the virtual encounters facilitated in Sense of Home are thus predicated instead on seeing vulnerable others as just that: namely as 'Others' with voices and stories of their own. This is noteworthy, as Orgad notes (2012: 310), because the recognition of the 'Other' does not simply rest 'on the basis of a shared identity with 'us', but, fundamentally, on the basis of the other's radically different life conditions, beliefs, fears and desires'.

Facilitating a virtual encounter with refugee others is not as straightforward as it might immediately appear, however. For example, I found it exceedingly difficult to pay attention to the refugees I encountered in Sense of Home in a sustained and focused manner, mainly because I had the ability to explore the virtual space I was in by looking around during these virtual encounters, and because the encounters were juxtapositioned with scenes where I was even encouraged to do so. The challenges I experienced in this regard find support from recent research on the digital mediation of victim testimonies, which has been sceptical about the ability of new media technologies to direct and sustain the attention of viewers. For example, analysing an online exhibition of Holocaust survivor testimonies, Frosh (2018) worries that the complex hand-eye coordination involved in the use of computers via a mouse and keyboard 'threatens the ability to create encounters which stimulate focused, empathetic engagement with the witness' personal trauma in the present.' In this sense as Frosh (ibid: 365) further argues, the

> operative characteristics of digital interfaces and their embodiment in new regimens of eye–hand–screen integration do present distinct challenges to traditional forms of prolonged, empathetic encounter with the linear narratives of survivors, constantly threatening to distract addressees whose primary sensory commitment is to the interactive aesthetics of the device rather than to any particular content, however narratively or morally compelling.

While VR can be said to require very little operative attention compared to a PC or a smartphone, by allowing users to navigate a virtual environment simply by looking in a specific direction or by moving around physically, the spherical vision provided to audiences in VR might also lead to a fragmentation or dispersal of the attentive gaze of audiences, as evidenced by my own embodied experience. This finds support in the words of Nash (2017: 128), who reminds us that, in 'moments of simulated face-to-face encounter, the user is also being invited to explore a new space' which risk creating an 'inherent tension between attention to the other and the experience of transportation' where the viewers' attention becomes divided between the possibility for visual exploration and the moral demand of the virtual face-to-face encounter.'

In sum, we might say that while VR is widely celebrated for the 'see for yourself' style of experiences that the technology makes possible, this moral affordance could thus also be accused of being conducive of a condition of 'hyper-attention' (Hayles 2007) that makes it difficult for audiences to focus on the victim testimonies presented to them in a sustained and focused manner. For this reason perhaps, Sense of Home was intended to be as user friendly as possible in order to offer a smooth experience with little to no interruptions that might distract viewers. As the representative from VRPro explains, this was partly achieved by making sure that

> from when you put on the goggles then you are in a place where you can begin the movie … you can change the language, the user doesn't but the staff does … but other than that what you see is a big "play" button and I would almost say that you can start the movie no matter if you know it or nor … because that play button is so big.

In addition to making the experience easy to navigate graphically, audience attention is also cinematically managed in Sense of Home by making sure that, when entering the virtual environment, places or persons deemed important by developers are placed directly in front of the viewer in order to make it easy for the audience to locate and attend to the refugees and the testimonies presented to them. These attention management techniques were further bolstered by the use of directional sound. According to the VRPro interviewee, who is an expert on this, directional sound is 'a really powerful

tool to direct people' in VR since it ensures that the audience can locate the place from which an individual is speaking to them in virtual reality. In technical terms, this is achieved through algorithmic software that observes, measures and tweaks the sound in relation to where the viewer is looking, ensuring that no matter in which direction one is looking, one can always locate the spatial positioning of particular sounds and voices as well as the bodies or objects from which they originate. It was regarded as an advantage in this context that the cinematic and sonic techniques employed in Sense of Home are less intrusive than other ways of manipulating user attention in VR are. According to the VRPro interviewee,

> you often see … animated guides like an arrow … and actually I think that the fact that you have the freedom to look around is more than enough, but it's also annoying to break your neck to look behind you [so] the way you have to produce VR is to allow people to have it delivered to them … instead of having to turn around just because you can.

Rather than offering a see-for-yourself experience, these observations illustrate how Sense of Home—like most forms of technological mediation—is intensely narrated through the use of cinematic and graphical techniques that seek to manage and sustain audience attention to the refugees they encounter virtually.

Yet, while this can be claimed to facilitate audience recognition of refugees as distinct, human others with voices, feelings, and desires of their own, what is potentially lost by this incessant emphasis on individual victims is the recognition of the historical, structural, and geopolitical conditions that generate and sustain their suffering (Orgad & Seu 2014b: 918). Invoking Silverstone's concept of 'proper distance' once again, Sense of Home can thus also be accused of bringing audiences *too close* to the refugee crisis by constituting an 'improper proximity' that zooms in on its consequences for individual victims and conceals the wider 'structures of power that result in global injustice as well as the positions of viewers within these structures' (Crawford-Holland, 2017: 27). For this reason, the chapter now shifts from an analysis of how the refugee crisis is mediated in Sense of Home to a broader evaluation and discussion of the ethico-political implications of the forms of mediated distance and proximity enabled therein.

5.4 Humanitarian VR & the technopolitics of emotions

This chapter has examined how specific ways of thinking about VR technology and its moral affordances shape how humanitarian disasters are mediated in the virtual video Sense of Home. It has also briefly proposed how we can think critically about the forms of mediated proximity and distance that this virtual experience enables. To develop this discussion, this section locates Sense of Home in the context of what I term 'the technopolitics of emotions'. In doing so, it problematizes the tendency among both the respondents interviewed for this chapter and humanitarian organizations more generally to uncritically perceive VR as a morally-beneficial media technology by demonstrating that such beliefs tend to ignore the risks and unintended consequences generated by virtually-mediated forms of proximity and distance. Together, these observations demonstrate the need for a comprehensive critique of what I term the 'unfortunate irony of humanitarian VR', which not does not denigrate the use of immersive media all together but instead points forward by opening up the possibility of employing humanitarian VR differently.

As demonstrated earlier, one of the moral affordances often emphasized in relation to the use of VR for humanitarian purposes is the belief that immersive experiences make audiences feel as if they are really there, in the distant elsewheres of humanitarian disasters. As also noted, such claims find further support in the work of neuroscientists who claim to prove that immersive experiences generate greater levels of empathy with the environments or subjects depicted therein. Such arguments tend to rely on what neuroscientists refer to as 'simulation theory,' where complex, intersubjective emotions such as empathy are primarily analysed as automatic, somatic responses to external stimulations (Freedberg and Gallese, 2007: 202). This neuroscientific understanding of empathy is implicit also in arguments about VR as 'the ultimate empathy machine' inasmuch as the media technology is claimed to provide the technological basis for embodied forms of simulation. It does so by enrolling the haptic and audiovisual senses of viewers through spatial location tracking and 360-degree vision, thus

providing an *embodied* experience of the suffering of distant others that other media technologies cannot offer.

Yet, despite widespread claims about the empathy and compassion generated by the immersion of audiences in virtual environments, this chapter has demonstrated that the use of VR for humanitarian purposes is not necessarily morally beneficial. The politics inherent in both the traditional and virtual imagery deployed by humanitarian organizations has already been well documented. For while these 'visualizers of solidarity,' as Orgad (2013) describes them, 'offer spectators visual frames through which to imagine and create bonds with the other' they can also reinforce economic, racial, and gender inequalities, to name just a few examples. For this reason, critical scholars such as Gillespie (2020: 145) have pointed to the need to consider the 'broader politics of empathy and authorial control' arising from the use of VR devices. Indeed, as Gillespie further argues, 'the engagement of an audience's empathy is far from a neutral act [because] depending on the context empathy can be both the ultimate act of resistance and can also promote normalisation or acceptance of hegemonic power' (ibid: 147). From this perspective, rather than being a moral game changer, humanitarian VR is thus perhaps nothing more than a symptom of a political and cultural obsession with compassion and empathy, which has drawn intense criticism in recent years (see e.g. Pedwell, 2014; Head, 2016).

Based on this, I suggest that we should grasp the virtual experiences of the refugee crisis made possible in Sense of Home as part of a wider 'technopolitics of emotions' that is in many ways unique to immersive media but which also resonates with the technopolitical dynamics of the other forms of digital mediation analysed in this thesis. For one, my analysis of Sense of Home compels us to consider the latent political implications of the belief that VR can elicit and catalyse the emotional and empathetic engagement of Western audiences, since the adoption of such neuroscientific conceptualizations of empathy and emotional allow humanitarian organizations to gloss over the complex relation between aesthetics, emotions, and politics as well as significant discussions on the inherently intersubjective nature of socially significant emotions such as empathy in the work of scholars such as Clark (2008) and Zahavi (2014) in favour of a reductionist and highly individualized account of empathy as nothing more than the experience of

being in someone else's shoes.[44] In this sense, humanitarian VR must thus be grasped as part of what Bollmer (2017) refers to as a 'problematic historical trajectory' whereby empathy—which in its original conception was actually based on preserving the other in their alterity—has become synonymous with the obliteration of the experience of otherness. As a consequence of this development, today, it is 'difficult to imagine empathy as being anything other than a troublesome absorption of the other into the mind and body of the user of digital media' (ibid: 74). While VR is widely perceived as a morally beneficial communication tool by humanitarian organizations to bring Western audiences closer to the life and experiences of Global South others, virtual experiences of humanitarian disaster might thus also conversely be accused of 'cocooning' caring publics in the Global North by limiting their acknowledgement (or appreciation) of difference.

Together, such observations are indicative of the need for sustained critical attention to the many ways in which humanitarian disasters are mediated in VR. I thus want to conclude the chapter by scrutinizing the forms of mediated proximity and distance made possible in Sense of Home as conducive of a 'technopolitics of emotions' that is arguably unique to humanitarian VR. As this chapter has demonstrated, Sense of Home can be accused of constituting an 'improper distance' that reinforces the privileged position of viewers *vis-a-vis* victims of humanitarian disasters. Even if VR experiences such as Sense of Home are designed to simulate an encounter with the suffering of distant others, what is emphasized in these encounters and experiences are often the emotional responses of audiences as they embark on a see-for-yourself style experience of the refugee crisis. In virtual experiences such as Sense of Home, as Nash (2017: 129) has also demonstrated, 'individual feeling' can thus be said to have become 'the focus for intervention rather than structural inequalities and political exclusions'. This is problematic, as Chouliaraki

[44] In addition to this, neuroscientific arguments about VR can also be seen as conducive of a wider pathologization of humanitarian communication whereby global helping—like marketing—comes to be understood as a basic stimuli-response system, and where political subjects are increasingly perceived as neurobiological bodies governed by motor-action schemes and neuron circuits located in our brains rather than social norms and cultural values outside of the confines of the human body (Altermark and Nyberg, 2018).

(2011: 368) similarly argues in her analysis of mass media, because by subordinating the voice of Global South others to that of caring publics in the Global North, humanitarian VR experiences also risk 'marginalising their cause in favour of our narcissistic self-communications'. Moreover, by focusing on the audience rather than on vulnerable others, humanitarian VR experiences risk implicitly concealing 'the structures of injustice which underlie humanitarian calls to action' (ibid: 374). A latent implication of this, as Hutchison (2014) has demonstrated elsewhere, is that such virtual encounters might ultimately conceal the complicity of the Global North in repressive structures by enacting what we—paraphrasing Shringarpure (2018)—might refer to as a 'virtual saviour complex'.

In addition to constituting an 'improper distance' in virtual experiences of humanitarian disasters, Sense of Home can also be accused of displacing audiences by bringing them *too close* to distant suffering by emphasizing encounters with individual victims. A latent implication of this particular way of mediating the refugee crisis in VR is that it implicitly contributes to obliterating the difference between the viewing self and the distant other by forging a sense of 'sameness'. While this might help bridge cultural divides and limit the potential prejudice of viewers, it is also problematic in the context of humanitarian communication, as Orgad (2012: 310) has noted elsewhere, because the recognition of difference—which is essential for the humanisation of the other—cannot solely rest 'on the basis of a shared identity with "us"' but must be formed 'on the basis of the other's radically different life conditions, beliefs, fears and desires.' Rather than facilitating what Paul Blooms calls 'deep empathy,' which is based on the recognition of difference, the emotional forms of engagement cultivated in Sense of Home are thus perhaps more adequately described as perpetuating a 'spurious' or 'toxic' empathy that enables Western viewers to *feel* as if they have experienced authentic empathy for distant others (Nakamura, 2020). Indeed, as demonstrated above, the incessant focus on the gratification of viewers in Sense of Home, as well as the enactment of this particular aspect of humanitarian VR in the mainstream media's coverage of the virtual experience, seems to provide support for this argument.

Another latent implication of this is that the 'improper proximity' to the plight of refugees forged in Sense of Home can be said to perpetuate what

Orgad & Seu (2014b) refer to as 'intimacy at a distance'. While, in general terms, 'intimacy at a distance' denotes the strategy through which humanitarian organizations attempt to forge an emotional and compassionate bond between Western spectators and Global South others by 'asking viewers to become symbolic intimates of distant sufferers' (Silverstone 2007: 47), such forms of mediated intimacy also carry with them unintended risks. For one, mediated forms of intimacy risk turning audience attention firmly towards the individuals they encounter in Sense of Home and away from the wider socio-economic structures and conditions which cause their suffering. In doing so, humanitarian VR experiences like Sense of Home ultimately fail to contextualize humanitarian disasters and distant suffering as historical events. This argument finds additional support in the work of notable media scholars such as Dahlgren (1981) who recognize the ability of mediated intimacy to foster identification but simultaneously warn that this may detract attention from broader societal structures by transmuting the political into individualized psychological categories that diffuse the responsibility of national and transnational institutions (see also Orgad & Seu 2014b: 918).

Together, these observations are illustrative of what we might term 'the unfortunate irony of humanitarian VR' to encapsulate how, in mediating displacement, Sense of Home (and other VR experiences like it) also displaces viewers from the suffering they witness by positioning viewers both too close to, and too far away from, the human consequences of the refugee crisis. While VR is widely celebrated for the abundant opportunities it offers to humanitarian organizations for engaging Western publics emotionally in the suffering of distant others, my analysis of Sense of Home thus conversely demonstrates how such imaginaries can backfire by leading to problematic outcomes. Only by grasping these consequences—as this chapter tries to do—can we begin to consider if and how VR technology might, if differently conceptualized, provide what Sanyal (2017: 6) calls 'small acts of repair' in relation to the virtual mediation of the suffering of Global South others.

Chapter 6

Swiping to end hunger: How everyday practices of humanitarianism are modulated on the donation app ShareTheMeal

The third and final issue that will be examined through the theoretical and methodological approach outlined in Chapter 2 and 3 is the question of how Western publics are invited to respond to the suffering of distant others on and through digital media. As already noted, the emergence and proliferation of digital media technologies such as smart phones have been accompanied by new, everyday forms of humanitarian action which are currently not well accounted for in the extant literature on media and humanitarianism. Therefore, this chapter considers how the technical configuration and capacities of a particular donation app—namely the World Food Programme's app ShareTheMeal—as well as the user imaginaries that circumscribe it, shape how Western audiences respond to the suffering of distant others via apps, and discusses the ethico-political implications of this.

6.1 Setting the stage

In 2015, the World Food Programme (WFP) launched its donation app ShareTheMeal (STM), claiming to enables users to 'change the world' by making small donations to the organization's self-declared fight to end hunger with their smartphones. Accompanying the launch of the app was considerable media attention and public hype. As cases in point, the British

newspaper *The Guardian* reported in a headline that 'Optimism surrounds roll-out of STM smartphone app after summer trial provides 1.7m meals for school children in Lesotho' (Jones, 2015) and the popular media platform BuzzFeed claimed that 'New App Lets You Feed A Syrian Refugee Child With One Click' (Melville-Smith, 2015). Today, the app is widely recognized as exemplary of how to employ the affordances of mobile media and apps for humanitarian purposes, evidenced, for example, by the many prestigious awards it has won in both the technology and entertainment industry[45] and by the fact that—according to numbers provided by the WFP at the time of writing—more than 138 million meals have been donated to people in need by the donation app's more than seven million users.

The donation app STM is analysed in this chapter as a paradigmatic example of how, today, doing good increasingly intersects with the technical affordances and affective energies of mobile media devices and apps. For just as the most intimate contexts of our everyday—from taking out a loan (Ash *et al.* 2018) to monitoring our health (Lupton, 2014)—have moved onto mobile media apps, so too has what Richey & Chouliaraki (2018) refer to as 'everyday humanitarianism'; that is, the emotions and practices employed by citizens engaged in humanitarian action outside of the institutional settings of humanitarian organizations. Indeed, by allowing users to donate as little as $1 directly from their smartphone anywhere, anytime, donation apps such as ShareTheMeal have radically changed the way people support humanitarian causes by making it more convenient for people to donate by providing new opportunities for engaging with, sharing, and responding to humanitarian appeals in innovative and interactive ways that are seamlessly integrated with

[45] To name just a few examples: in November 2015, STM won the Lead Academy's Lead Award for Startup of the Year; in December 2015, STM was named as one of Google's Best Apps of 2015; In March 2016 STM won the Innovation Interactive Award at SxSW; in April 2016, STM won the People's Voice award at the 20th Annual Webby Awards in the Mobile Sites & Apps Best Practices category; in October 2016, STM won the 2016 Lovie Awards in the Mobile & Applications Best Practices category; in November 2016, STM was awarded three Shorty Social Good Awards, including "NGO of the Year"; in December 2016, STM was selected by Google as one of the Best Apps of 2016; and at Google I/O in May 2017, STM won the Google Play Award for Best Social Impact.

the everyday. Moreover, by providing the public with a tool that allows it to instantly translate compassion for distant others into action, donation apps enable humanitarian organizations to more easily raise potentially life-saving funds in the critical hours and days immediately after disaster strikes.[46]

Yet, as Richey and Chouliaraki (2018) caution, as 'the rhetoric and practice of humanitarian good-doing becomes increasingly widespread in our public life' we must be careful to consider 'the implications of such practices for the ethics and politics of contemporary benevolence'. While donation apps are widely celebrated for their ability to make the act of giving both accessible and convenient to publics in digitalized societies, this chapter thus instead examines the risks and consequences generated by the 'appification' of everyday humanitarianism. To this end, it engages with critical literature on digitally-mediated forms of humanitarianism, which has scrutinized the sometimes-problematic forms of action and agency constituted thereby. This includes the work of scholars such as Hawkins (2018) and Schwittay (2019), who have argued that, because digital-political initiatives such as online petitions involve minimal costs and efforts from participants, they are conducive of 'clicktivist' or even 'slacktivist' forms of action, which are generally considered to be more effective for making participants feel good about themselves than for achieving specific ends. Another relevant reference here is Madianou (2019), who has claimed that the forms of humanitarian forms of action facilitated by new digital media technologies are 'technocolonialist' inasmuch as they reconsolidate an unequal relationship of dependency between the West and the Global South (see also Shringarpure 2018).

By engaging with, and extending, these perspectives to the study of donation apps—which have not yet been the subject of sustained scholarly scrutiny—this chapter examines the everyday forms of humanitarianism enabled by STM. To this end, as elaborated in Chapter 3.3, it combines a walkthrough of the app's functions and features with an analysis of 10 open-ended questionnaires—that I call media logs—submitted by a small sample of potential app users. Whereas the walkthrough method 'is a way of engaging

[46] An event that is often emphasized as an early indicator of the value of mobile media and apps in this regard is the 2010 earthquake in Haiti when more than $30 million in donations was pledged through SMS.

directly with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences' (Light et. al. 2018: 882), the media logs provide a glimpse into the many ways in which users perceive, navigate, appropriate, or resist apps in and through everyday life. As noted earlier, the advantage of the media log as a method of data collection is that, whereas qualitative methods such as interviews or observations, where the research setting is more formal and where the researcher is both visible and active, may disrupt the sense of intimacy and mundanity associated with the everyday use of mobile media devices, the media log allows respondents to document their experiences and reflections using the STM app in relative privacy.[47]

Based on this, the chapter generates insights into everyday forms of benevolence in the digital age. ' Specifically, it demonstrates that what people do to alleviate the suffering of distant others in their digitalized everyday is shaped in the interplay between the material configuration and technical affordances of apps and the user imaginaries that circumscribe their use in practice. More specifically, the chapter shows how the STM app is designed to manage user behaviour in specific ways and how users adopt, appropriate, or resist these technically-imposed behavioural structures, resulting in a relationship of power that is described as 'modulatory' as opposed to 'repressive,' 'disciplinary' or 'productive.' Based on this, the chapter finally discusses the 'technopolitics of action' that plays out in and through the use of donation apps for humanitarian purposes and discusses the ethico-political implications of this. Hence, the chapter not only performs a detailed examination of a particular humanitarian donation app but also contributes to the articulation of a critique of digital humanitarianism by showing how the rise of humanitarian donation apps constitutes and perpetuates ethico-politically problematic forms of everyday humanitarianism.

[47] It is worth noting in this regard that, of course, the issue of 'privacy' in the digital sphere is contested. While respondents might experience privacy in the sense that they are using these devices at home or a similar place, at the same time, most apps collect and 'leak' data that document how they are used to corporations such as Google and Facebook whose source codes are part of most commercially available apps today and who use these data sets to analyse the behavioural patterns of users in intimate detail (see also Aradau, Blanke and Greenway, 2019; Blanke and Pybus, 2020)

6.2 How apps modulate users

The starting point for this chapter is that donation apps such as STM can tell us something about global humanitarianism in the context of a digital media landscape where tablets and smartphones have become an ubiquitous and crucial part of everyday life in recent years, and replaced stationary PCs and laptops as the technological devices people are most reliant on for -work, leisure, and everything in between (Greenfield, 2017: 9-18).

Considering this, it is unfortunate to note that the social and political implications of humanitarian donation apps have thus far not been the subject of sustained scholarly scrutiny. In lieu of existing knowledge, this chapter instead turn to literature on non app-based forms of online humanitarianism in order to gauge the analytical upshot of a critical analysis of donation apps such as STM. As a case in point—by analysing the online donation platform Join My Village, which claims to 'break down barriers of culture and geography' through the 'power of online communities'—Hawkins (2018) has drawn attention to 'how distant others become entangled in social media users' everyday lives' (727). While admitting that online platforms offer 'possibilities for caring-at-a-distance,' Hawkins ultimately concludes that 'the contradictory messaging and the corporate aspects of the campaign need more critical analysis' (ibid). Similarly, analysing Kiva.org—a US-based online micro-lending platform that invites everyday humanitarians to make US $25 loans to Kiva entrepreneurs in the Global South—Schwittay (2019: 1921) has examined how this platform 'cultivates supporters [through] the design of an affective architecture' and concludes that while Kiva.org may both 'result in microloans and attendant sentiments of affinity,' the online platform also ultimately 'obscures the asymmetries and riskscapes resulting from Kiva's microlending work.' Together, these authors demonstrate how the rise of digital media in the context of global helping shapes and rearticulates how people respond to humanitarian disasters in sometimes-problematic ways. As should be obvious from this, studying the social and political dynamics of humanitarian donation apps is thus an important scholarly task.

But doing so is not as straightforward as it might seem. There are crucial differences between donation apps such as STM and the web-based platforms analysed by Hawkins, Schwittay, and others. Compared to PCs and stationary

computers, mobile media devices such as smartphones are relatively small. In addition to this, they are handheld and available to users anytime, anywhere, from the moment they wake up until they go to sleep. Hence, mobile media devices are 'touched, felt, held, worn, caressed, pressed, thumbed, dropped, scratched, protected, stolen, remembered and forgotten within the affective economy of pervasive and ubiquitous computing' (Garde-Hansen and Gorton, 2013: 42) and have consequently become an engrained and uniquely intimate part of users' everyday lives in ways that PCs and stationary computers cannot (Miller et. al. 2021). Examining the social and political effects of apps thus requires researchers to pay attention to the subtle, mundane, and sometimes even hidden ways in which apps are used in and throughout the everyday.

Yet, simply examining apps as self-contained units with which users 'do things' ignores their necessary entanglement with a larger field of hardware devices and data infrastructures that make their operations possible and conceal the involvement of apps in a digital-capitalist economy, which has been the object of intense criticism in recent years (see *inter alia* Srnicek 2016, Zuboff 2019). With global app revenue reaching $50 billion in the first half of 2020—up 23% compared to the year before—and the total number of smartphone users in the world now exceeding 3.8 billion, it is impossible to deny the importance of apps and mobile media devices as commercial platforms. While some claim that the appification of humanitarianism is democratizing aid by making it more accessible, and convenient to contribute money and initiate fundraisers, the emergence of donation apps must thus also be grasped as indicative of a wider 'platformisation' and corporatization of the digital media sphere. From this perspective, the appification of aid is perhaps nothing more than the storefront of a new form of computing that is moving away from generative and open platforms (such as the PC and the internet) to a more closed and tethered relationship between the corporate and the digital sphere (Zittrain, 2008). Indeed, today, most apps are controlled by major mobile media corporations such as Google, Facebook, and Apple, resulting in what Blanke & Pybus (2020) refer to as 'monopolization through decentralisation' whereby the source code of these corporations' apps have become integrated into the source code of almost all apps.

Rather than self-contained software units, donation apps are thus perhaps more adequately grasped as what Hui (2016) refers to as 'new industrial objects' that are at once shaping and are shaped by a wider digital-commercial environment consisting also of corporations, interface designers, data merchants, calculative algorithms, databases, and network protocols. Hence, as Bratton (2015) puts it, apps must be studied as 'a thin membrane on top of a vast machine [that] allows its *User* to pilot and be piloted by that machine with the slightest gesture.' What is implied by this is that apps, understood as both individual units and nodes in larger technical-commercial infrastructures, function as 'interfaces' that allow users to operate or manipulate the wider network but, in doing so, they also submit the user to the operational and procedural logics of that system.

Understood as the point of interaction between users and machine, digital interfaces such as apps have long been regarded as central to the dynamics of power in digitalized societies. For example, in his sociological study of human–computer interactions, Woolgar (1990) was early to point out that shaping the behaviour of users is a central concern of interface design. Another pioneer in the study of digital media, Lev Manovich, later noted that the digital interface 'provides its own model of the world, its own logical system or ideology' and that 'far from being a transparent window into the data inside a computer, the interface [thus] brings with it strong messages of its own' (Manovich, 2001: 76). Galloway (2012: 75) has similarly proposed that ideology is inherent to interfaces since, understood as logical systems, they are inevitably guided by specific assumptions about the world we live in and they thus also implicitly participate in organizing our social and political lives. But while these authors provide important insights into how app interfaces impose their coded logics on users, they also tend to either dissolve the power of interfaces into the networked relations (such as databases, algorithms, or protocols) that enable interfaces to operate, or locate it in the hands of those that control or design them (see also Ash *et. al*, 2018: 1140). In doing so, prevailing accounts of interface power implicitly equate the infrastructural logic and intended effects of interfaces with how power operates on and through interfaces *in practice* and thus ignore the messiness and contingency of the everyday that digital interfaces operate in.

Distinguishing itself from such idealised accounts of interface power, this chapter instead examines what we might term the 'micropolitics' of humanitarian donation apps, focusing not only on how app interfaces manage users but equally on how users experience, adopt, appropriate, or resist these technologically-imposed forms of management. By 'micropolitics,' I am referring to something akin to Deleuze's (1992) notion of 'modulation' as a way to describe the dynamic and contingent forms of control imbued in the everyday use of apps. Yet—as discussed also in Chapter 3.2—whereas Deleuze (1992) defined 'modulation' as an all-encompassing and dynamic form of control characteristic of digital societies, operating 'like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other' (ibid: 3) I understand modulatory power, as Ash *et. al* (2018: 1140) also do, 'as a double movement or management [that] is fragile, continual and ongoing.' To this end, the chapter employs a conceptual vocabulary of 'frictions', 'transitions', and 'thresholds'. *Thresholds*, in this regard, are the tasks users have to complete on ShareTheMeal in order to achieve specific ends such as donating money to a humanitarian cause, while *frictions* are technical or cultural obstacles that cause hesitancy or even prevent users from completing specific tasks, and *transitions* describe instances in which frictions or obstacles are resolved, which in turn enables users to cross a threshold by completing specific tasks (Ash *et. al,* 2018: 1149-1150).

Adopting this theoretical perspective, the chapter analyses how app interfaces operate, not by controlling the user like a self-deforming cast, but through a dynamic form of management characterized by shifting modifications or modulations of relations with users that are negotiable and thus open to change, appropriation, and resistance. In addition to generating valuable knowledge about the everyday dynamics of how apps govern users in practice, such an understanding of interface power also more adequately reflects the fact that apps are continuously modified and updated (see also Chun 2016). For example, as Ash *et. al* (2018: 1150) have shown, app programmers and designers continuously optimize and customize apps according to what users do with them, and so what apps do thus emerges from a 'negotiation between designers and users of these products through processes of experimentation that are ongoing and subject to change'.

To examine how apps such as STM modulate everyday practices of humanitarianism, I draw inspiration from the walkthrough method developed by Light *et al.* (2018). As detailed in Chapter 3.3, the walkthrough is a qualitative method with which researchers can perform a critical analysis of a given app by systematically stepping through the various stages of everyday use to identify its 'mediator characteristics'.[48] Based on this, the chapter generates knowledge about how apps modulate users since, as Ash *et al.* (2017: 167) have demonstrated, interfaces do not seek to manage users 'exclusively on a linguistic-representational register but involve other modulations and modifications, such as the placement of buttons and menus, the layout of checkout pages, the colour of backgrounds and the design of sound effects and haptic feedback'. Indeed, as will be demonstrated, it is by 'organizing these elements' that 'designers seek to direct how users respond to, interact with and experience these services' (ibid). By mapping the individual elements of the STM interface and how they are organized through a walkthrough, the chapter ultimately tells us something about how this particular app is designed to manage users.

But the analytical approach employed in this chapter also adds to the walkthrough method developed by Light *et al*. For one, it departs from the walkthrough method's examination of app interfaces as enacting different forms of governance and instead pays attention to 'modulation' as a specific form of interface power that is contingent and dynamic and thus open to both resistance and change. While such an approach may miss some of the 'strong' or 'apparent' ways in which technologies govern their users—as discussed in Chapter 2.2—it generates valuable insights into how STM modulates users

[48] As noted also in Chapter 3.3., these 'mediator characteristics' may, for example, include the user interface arrangement—how 'the app guides users through activities via the placement of buttons and menus'—function and features—'arrangements that mandate or enable an activity, including pop-up windows, compulsory fields and requests made by the app to link with other user accounts'—textual content and tone—including 'text embedded in user interfaces, such as the order of drop-down menu options or the categories available (e.g. sexual identity categories on dating apps) and their discursive power to shape use—and symbolic representation—namely, 'examining the look and feel of the app and its likely connotations and cultural associations with respect to the imagined user and ideal scenarios of use' (ibid: 891-892).

in subtle or 'hidden' ways; as already demonstrated, this is a crucial, albeit understudied, power dynamic in the scholarly literature on apps. Specifically, the use of a vocabulary of frictions, transitions, and thresholds to structure the app walkthrough performed in this chapter elucidates how apps operate by managing the many kinds of friction—technical, social or other obstacles—inherent to the use of digital devices.

Moreover, as Light *et al.* (2018: 896) also note, while 'walking through an app can provide a sense of user engagement, the walkthrough does not focus on user activity or attitudes', and must thus be supplemented by methods that allow researchers to collect knowledge about how apps are used in practice. Indeed, the purpose of the media logs collected and analysed for this chapter is exactly to supplement an understanding of how apps are designed to relate to users in specific ways—as analysed through the walkthrough—with knowledge about the role of the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of users when they use the app in the context of their digitalized everyday. In sum, whereas the walkthrough method uncovers how the STM app is 'actively designed to modulate user action with the aim, hope and promise of producing desirable outcomes for those that own and operate [it]' (Ash *et al.*, 2017: 167), the media logs document how users perceive these forms of modulation in practice. We might thus say that, by bringing the experiences and perceptions of app users into dialogue with the knowledge generated through the walkthrough, the chapter describes how users adopt, appropriate, or resist the kind of relations that the app is designed or intended to forge. Based on this, as will also be demonstrated below, the chapter ultimately teaches us something about the social and political implications of digitally-mediated forms of everyday humanitarianism.

6.3 Swiping to end hunger on ShareTheMeal

While the act of giving to those in need is perhaps as old as humankind itself, donation apps are a relatively new phenomenon, which arguably did not emerge until the start of the previous decade with the launch Apple's App Store—the first commercial app platform—in 2008 and GoFundMe—the perhaps most successful online fundraising platform—in 2010. In spite of

their recent emergence, however, donation apps like ShareTheMeal (STM) have already become a popular way for donors—especially younger ones—to give to humanitarian causes. Indeed, in a recent survey, 48% of European and 50% of North American and Canadian donors answered that, out of five predetermined options, they were most likely to donate via 'a mobile app that allows two-tap giving that earns badges and redeemable points' in the future (Global Trends in Giving Report 2020: 18, 22). Considering this, it is thus hardly surprising to note that the number of private donor transactions completed through mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets increased by 50% in 2020 while the number of donations completed through desktop browsers decreased by 10% during the same time span (Nonprofit Fundraising Statistics 2021).

Together, these observations tell the story of a changing media-aid field, where potential donors increasingly turn to mobile media apps for an interactive and convenient donation experience. But they also frame the critical questions asked in this chapter. First, considering this rather rapid rise of donation apps, how can we understand the kind of charitable actions made possible by apps? And what are the ethico-political implications of this emerging form of humanitarian giving? To examine this, the chapter performs a detailed examination of how one such app—ShareTheMeal (STM)—relates to users by asking *what* the app allows users to do and how it is designed to facilitate specific forms of action. It then describes how users relate to STM by examining how users adopt, resist, or appropriate the technical configuration and structure of the app in the context of everyday forms of media use. Finally, it brings these perspectives together to describe how potential donors are modulated by the STM app by pointing to the contingent, dynamic, and open-ended forms of user management that play out in the interplay between the technical configuration of the app and the user imaginaries that circumscribe it.

How ShareTheMeal relates to users

To understand how STM modulates users, it is helpful to begin by examining what the app can actually do in the first place.

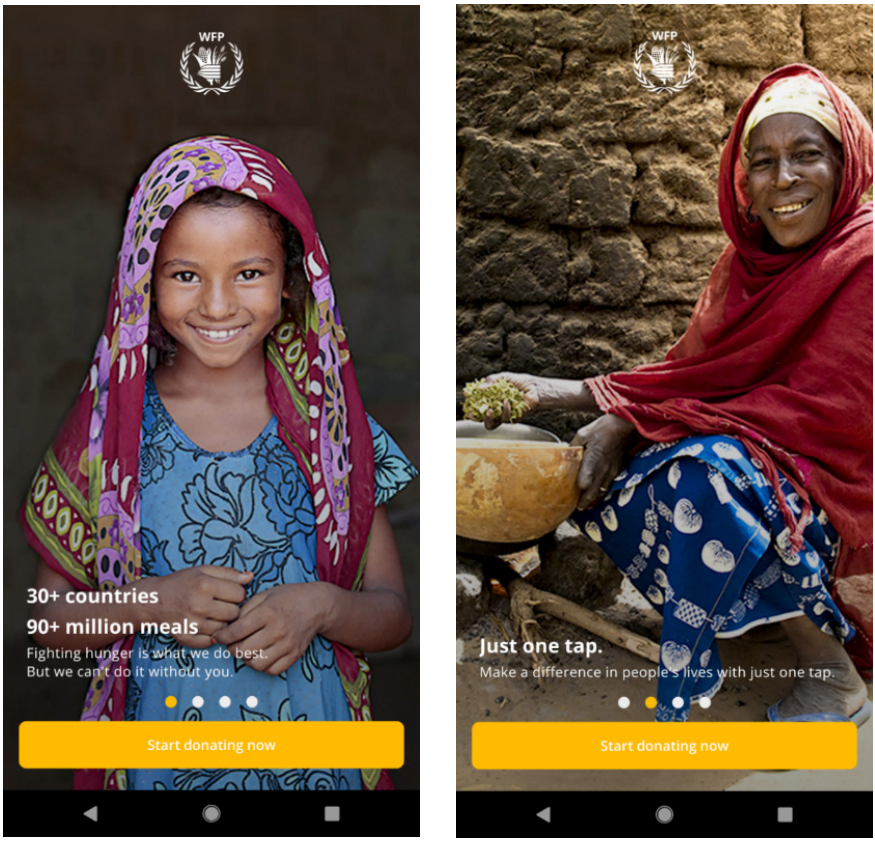

Figure 6: Screenshots of load screen (World Food Programme)

Opening the STM app for the first time, one initially encounters a load screen that allows the user to swipe through four high-resolution, colour-saturated images, each supplemented by a short text about what the purpose of the app is, and what has been achieved so far (Figure 6). A small WFP logo is placed at the top of the images and at the bottom is a rectangular, yellow button with the caption 'Start donating now' that the user must press to access the app properly. Upon accessing the app, a navigation menu appears where, by swiping left or right, users can explore the features of the app via a number of full screen menu items, each containing a short video without sound (Figure 7). These videos predominantly portray beneficiaries in mundane contexts

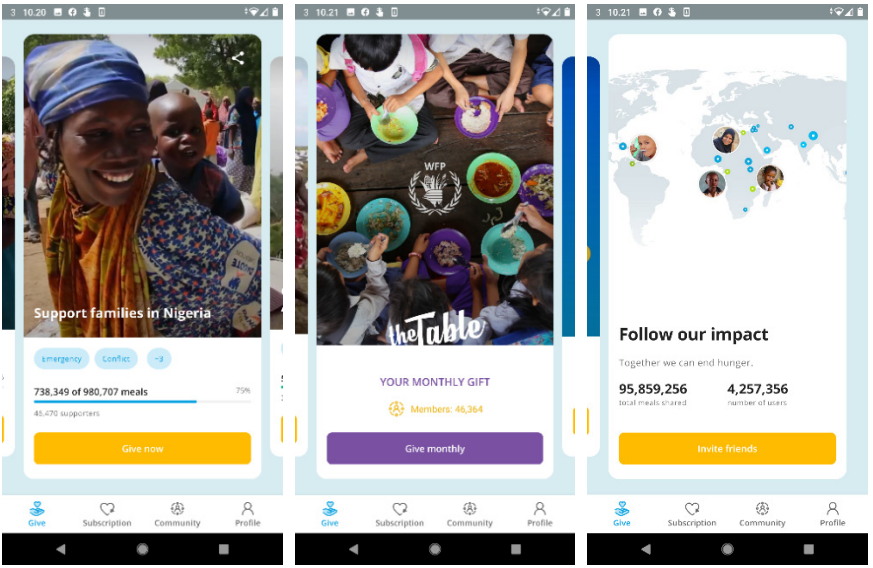

Figure 7: Screenshots of navigation menu (World Food Programme)

such as going to school, eating, handing out food, laughing, and so on. Each menu item additionally consists of a brief mission statement such as 'Empower girls in Guinea' or 'Support families in Nigeria', which frames the purpose of each of the donation appeals presented to users as well as tags such as 'emergency' or 'Covid-19', which place the appeal in a broader context. There is also a progress bar that shows users how many meals have already been donated and a yellow call-to-action (CTA) button that urges users to 'Give now'.

STM has four primary functions that are all accessible via icons at the bottom of the interface. Pressing 'Give now', one accesses the first of these features: the direct donation function. Here, by manipulating a slider positioned underneath an interactive animation of a bowl of food, users can donate anything between $1 (which the app tells us is equal to one meal) and $1,000 (which equals 1,000 meals) to a chosen cause.[49] A particularly

[49] Custom amounts are also available if one presses the small "edit" icon.

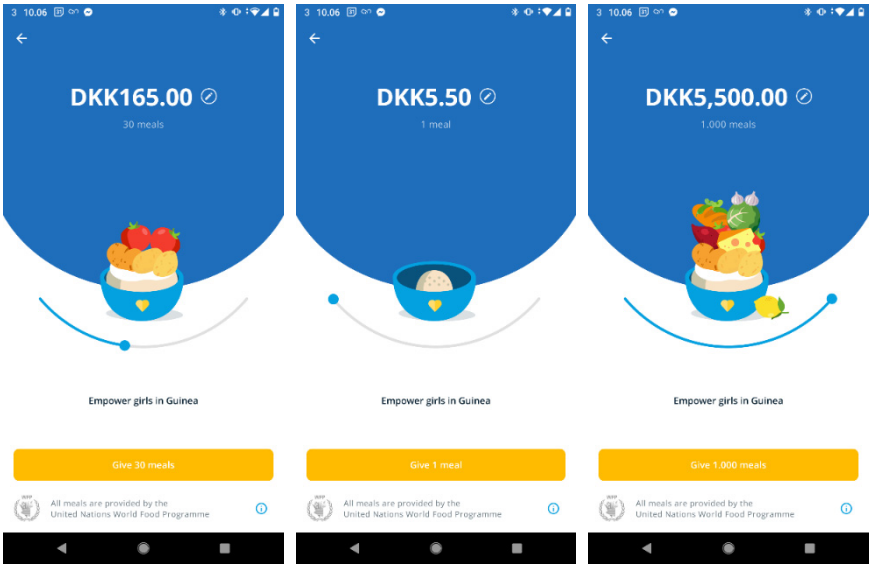

Figure 8: Screenshots of 'Give now' function (World Food Programme)

noteworthy design feature of the donation function—one to which we shall return later—is that, starting at around $5 (though this varies slightly), the content of the bowl increases or shrinks incrementally according to the size of the donation, from a miniscule pile of rice at $1 to a tower of bread, cheese, fruit, and vegetables at $1,000 (Figure 8).

Swiping left through the navigation menu, one can access the second component of STM, which is a subscription feature called 'The Table'. Here, rather than giving once, users can choose to donate a set and recurring monthly amount (Figure 9). Exploring the subscription feature, users are informed that, as a monthly donor, they receive exclusive updates on the amount of food that families are able to purchase with one's donations. Users can also access information about how many have already subscribed, how many families they support, and how many food items have been purchased. Upon pressing the yellow 'Give monthly' button at the bottom of these images, one encounters a donation menu that is markedly different from the 'Give now' donation feature. Here, by swiping left or right, one can choose between donating a custom or set monthly amount. The donation menu also

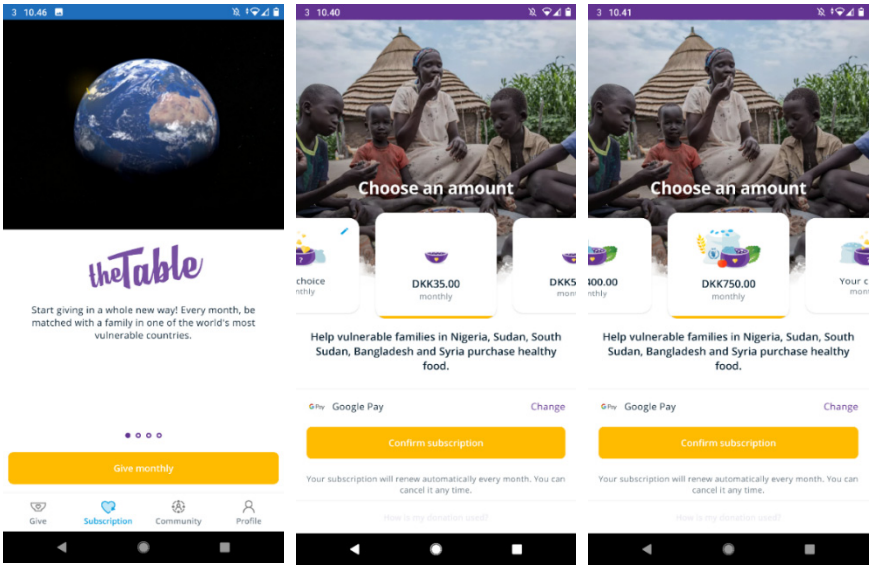

Figure 9: Screenshots of the subscription feature 'The Table' (World Food Programme)

contains a few lines of text that explains that the money will 'Help vulnerable families in Nigeria, Sudan, South Sudan, Bangladesh and Syria purchase healthy foods' and a yellow 'Confirm subscription' button.

The third and final feature of STM analysed in this chapter is also the only one that is not directly related to the act of giving: the profile function.[50] When accessing the profile function, the user has the choice of connecting their STM app to their Facebook (FB) profile. Having done this, the user's FB profile picture appears as their STM profile picture and the user can subsequently invite their Facebook friends to download the app or see which of them already has the app. There is also a light blue bar showing the amount of meals the user has shared (which is not interactive) and a button that allows users to see their 'Achievements' which are presented as badges that users can receive by completing specific tasks (Figure 10).

[50] It should be noted, however, that there is also an additional component—the 'Community' feature—which is *not* analysed in this chapter because an update to the STM app removed this particular feature after I had collected the media logs but before I had conducted a proper walkthrough.

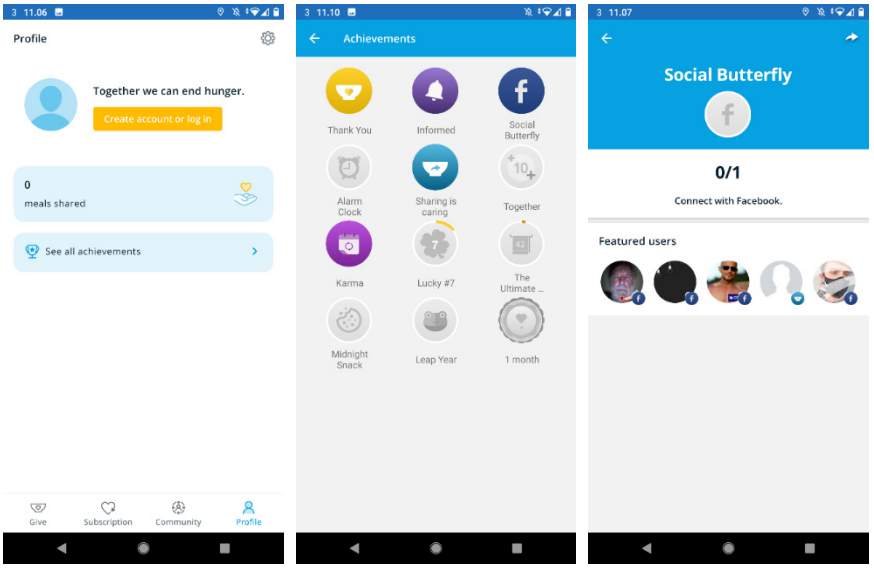

Figure 10: Screenshot of 'profile' function (World Food Programme)

Several important points emerge from this walkthrough of the STM app. One is that, when accessing the app, the navigation menu is clearly designed to provide users with an overview and to encourage further exploration. As a case in point, when looking at a menu item, the user can easily see that there is another menu item next to it but they cannot see the content of that menu item unless they swipe, thus encouraging a style of movement very similar to that of shuffling through a deck of cards, and that is both smooth and effortless. It is worth noting in this regard that swiping is generally perceived to be a primitive albeit effective gesture for engaging users. Indeed, infants as young as 17 days have been observed making swiping motions at objects they find interesting (Harris and Butterworth, 2012: 115). In interface design, swiping is thus often employed as a way of harnessing users' primitive impulses in order to keep them engaged when navigating an app (App Partner 2018).

Moreover, compared to other ways of manipulating digital interfaces like pressing a button or a hyperlink, swiping is a much faster motion that quickly

becomes subconscious and addictive.[51] For apps such as STM, which require users to process a lot of information, swiping is thus generally seen as helpful for retaining users' attention. For this reason, swiping is also additionally claimed to mitigate issues associated with so-called 'choice paralysis'—the inability of users to make a decision in the face of too many options and too much information—by presenting digital objects such as videos or text in a way that allows users to examine these items carefully, one at a time (ibid). Based on this, the STM app interface can be said to encourage user interactions that are low in frequency. This is further underlined by how the videos that dominate the navigation menu visually at first appear as static images until the viewer stops swiping, after which the image turns into a video. Since moving images and the dynamic narratives they contain arguably retain the attention of viewers for longer than the time it takes to decipher a still image, this stilted form of viewing seems to further encourage users to examine each donation appeal in greater detail.

In terms of aesthetics, it is also interesting to note that most of the videos and images presented on the app feature individuals who, even if they are presented as victims of hunger and famine, look happy. This is noteworthy, not least because throughout history, famine, and malnutrition have usually been depicted in less joyful frames. Indeed, a simple image search on Google for 'famine' almost exclusively yields images of children on the brink of starvation with bloated bellies and empty stares. This is the case because representing famine through images of starving children has a long cultural history that dates back, at least, to the 1969 photographs of 'Albino Boy' that renowned photographer Don McCullin captured during the Biafra famine. By breaking with this tradition, STM challenges traditional depictions of humanitarian

[51] It is worth noting in this regard that, not surprisingly perhaps, the use of swiping as a navigational device was spearheaded by the dating app Tinder which employs a so-called variable reward schedule where, much like a slot machine at a casino, each rejected card (or dating profile) in the stack builds anticipation in the user who expects that, eventually, something good—like a prospective date—will come along. This process is intended to harness the brain's reward pathway by releasing dopamine which is known as a key factor in forming addiction and which is thus also often accused of being responsible for the addictive nature of some digital media (Henderson, 2018).

victims as helpless sufferers but also, arguably, stimulates the emotional resonance of users, encouraging them to feel good when doing good.

Another object that demands the attention of users when they explore the navigation menu is the 'Give now' button at the bottom of each appeal. This is partly achieved by indicating, with text, that an action can be completed by interacting with this object (i.e. give now), by foregrounding the component graphically with the colour yellow, and by making the button big enough that the user can push it with their thumb or index finger but small enough to not take attention away from the video above it. It is also worth noting that, as opposed to the navigation menu as a whole, there is nothing stilted about the way in which one is invited to interact with the 'Give now' button. Instead, the design of the button promotes a smooth form of interaction, providing little to no reason for users to pause and reflect before pressing it. As shown also by others, one of the key aspects of the 'Give now' button in this regard, apart from its size, font, text, and position, is its colour (Ash *et al.*, 2018). Certainly, by colouring the button yellow, designers clearly wanted to emphasize it visually since yellow is often claimed to make signs or objects stand out from their environment and attract the attention of the human eye. The choice of the colour yellow can thus most likely be explained with reference to the 'Von Restorff effect' in interface design, which describes that, when multiple objects are present, the ones that stand out visually and graphically are the ones that users will interact with and remember.

In addition to the 'Give now' button, another noteworthy component in the navigation menu is the progress bars that accompany each menu item. The purpose of the progress bar is to visually demonstrate to users how many meals have already been donated relative to the total number of meals that the WFP estimate is needed to feed the hungry. Indeed, progress bars have long been a recognized and widely used method for 'onboarding' and motivating users to complete specific tasks in digital environments. Already in 1985, Myers (1985) claimed that people tend to favour applications with progress bars. Today, many interface and game designers similarly refer to 'the goal gradient effect', which stipulates that the closer a person gets to a certain goal, the higher their motivation is to reach it (Kivetz, Urminsky and Zheng, 2006). Based on this, it is obvious that the purpose of the progress bars in the STM interface is to motivate users to donate

by showing them how close to, or how far away from, the WFP is from achieving its goal to end hunger in an easily-graspable way, which rewards users for donating by making their impact immediately visible.

A similar point can be made in regard to the donation feature, which one accesses by pressing the 'Give now' button. But whereas the progress bar is static (meaning that users cannot directly manipulate it via the interface) the slider bar, with which users can determine the amount of money they want to donate, is interactive. Specifically, by moving the slider bar left or right, the user not only decreases or increases the amount of meals they want to donate but they also decrease or increase the amount of food in the bowl pictured above the slider. When accessing the donation feature, the standard donation amount is anywhere between $5 and $30 but the user can decrease this to as little as $1 and increase it to as much as $1,000 (or even more if one uses the 'edit amount' function). If the user chooses to decrease the donation amount to the minimum, the amount of food also shrinks from a plentiful bowl of vegetables and fruit to a minuscule pile of rice. Conversely, if the user increases their donation, the content of the bowl increases and becomes a veritable pile that, in addition to vegetables and fruit, also contains bread and cheese.

It is obvious from this that the slider feature is designed as an invitation to users to interact and experiment with the amount of money they wish to donate. Interactive sliders are a widely-used technique in interface design for creating a fun and effortless experience for users. For example, other digital interfaces, such as the so-called High Cost Short Term Credit (HCSTC) services investigated by Ash *et al.* (2018), employ sliders to create a sense of playfulness 'that encourages the user to easily explore different amounts of money that they can borrow, beyond their original intention' (1140). As one interface designer puts it:

> people will automatically play with [the slider]; they will go left and right just to see the numbers move. It's an interaction, and … that's when people can go 'okay … maybe I can go a little higher, or maybe I don't actually need to do that much' … it's the site interacting back with them (ibid: 1144-5).

In addition to adding a design element to STM that encourages users to explore and play around with the amount of money that they want to donate, the slider feature also minimizes the effort needed to indicate this,

pragmatically speaking. As another interface designer interviewed by Ash *et al.* (ibid: 1143) noted with respect to HCSTC apps, 'from a pure interface perspective' using sliders is 'easier than typing in a number [so if] I'm typing in £1,000 on my phone for example, that's five taps but if I'm just dragging a slider, that's one touch and drag which is a much lower interaction cost.' Similarly, the slider feature employed on STM decreases the number of tasks that users must complete in order to select the amount of money they want to donate to WFP, thus substituting a stilted interaction such as typing a number on a keyboard or a touchscreen with a playful, smooth, and indivisible quality of movement that becomes equal to the act of donating itself. This also resonates with the widely recognized 'Hick's law' in interface design, which urges interface designers to decrease the complexity of the central features of their digital applications as much as possible so as to increase the likelihood that users complete specific tasks.

It is thus also interesting to note then that, when moving to the TheTable — which is the name of the subscription feature of STM—the design of the app interface changes from one that is playful, dynamic, and interactive to one that is more text-based and static (see Figure 6.4). The animated bowls of food that dominate the 'Give now' function are replaced by still images and text set against a white background. A similar point can be made about the donation feature in TheTable where, instead of an interactive sliding scale, users are invited to swipe left or right in order to choose a number of pre-set donation amounts, each presented in their own individual squares. Overall, the experience offered in the subscription feature of STM can thus be described as more similar to e-commerce, in an effort perhaps to align humanitarian donations with other subscription-based e-services and e-commerce platforms by allowing users to swipe between donations much like they swipe through a rack of clothes. Moreover, subscriptions are easily confirmed using GooglePay (whose logo is visible and only requires one click to confirm) or with a credit card or PayPal (which are less visible options that require multiple clicks). For these reasons, the subscription feature of STM thus seems to appeal to a different kind of donor than the 'Give now' feature does. Specifically, by offering a less playful and interactive experience it removes user attention from the interactive and playful features of the app, thus making room for users to reflect on their decision to donate.

Another feature of the TheTable, which further separates it from the 'Give now' function, is a button at the bottom of the subscription page which redirects users to information about how their donations are being used by the WFP, including the percentage of the money that is delivered directly to beneficiaries (62%), how much is used to cover payment expenses (4%), or administration costs (6%), and how much is used on marketing and fundraising (28%).[52] In addition to being placed at the very bottom of the page, well below the yellow 'Confirm subscription' button, it is also worth noting that the font chosen for the button is light grey against a white background which makes it close to invisible unless one looks carefully, thus raising questions about why and with what consequences the app conceals, or at least makes, this information less accessible to donors.

Last but not least, some important observations can be made about the profile feature of STM. While not directly enabling users to donate, one noteworthy feature of the profile feature is that it allows users to 'See all achievements,' with achievements visually represented as various badges that are either grey (marking a non-completed achievement) or appear in colour, thus marking a completed achievement. If the user has partially unlocked an achievement, a circular progress bar with an orange progress indicator appears around the edges of the badge. Pressing a badge, the user is redirected to a page with more information about how an achievement can be, or has been, unlocked and, in some cases, a list of other users who have already unlocked the achievement also appears. For example, donating money around midnight awards users with the badge 'Midnight Snack' and if one joins the subscription service TheTable one receives the 'Karma' badge. Like the use of progress bars, the badges represent another component of STM that clearly borrows from game-design where, like progress bars, badges are believed to motivate people because of the supposedly inherent desire of users to achieve a specific goal. Hence, badge reward systems are usually employed to create positive reinforcement when a user completes a goal by rewarding them for

[52] It is worth noting that this is considerably higher than WFP's stated ambition of using a maximum of 22% of donations on marketing and fundraising and is explicitly presented as something that will decrease with time. There is no explanation, however, for why it has not happened as of yet. At the time of writing, it has been six years since the app was launched.

it. Moreover, by making visible other users who have already achieved a particular badge, the component can be said to encourage peer-to-peer recognition, which further enhances user engagement.

How users relate to ShareTheMeal

Having described how STM is designed to manage users, the next analytical task is to examine how users perceive, adopt, appropriate or resist these coded patterns of behaviour. To this end, the coming section describes how the STM app is used, experienced, appropriated and resisted by users.

Overall, respondents seem to perceive the app as easy to use. Some even describe it as 'handy' in the sense that it provides a smooth donation experience. As one noted:

> In terms of design and functionality, the app is very handy. The designed images are colourful and well designed. When choosing the amount to donate there is literally a 'sliding scale'—one can drag a button along on a scale.

Others similarly noted that STM 'looks very clean and it is easy to navigate' and that the app 'feels professional and finished, which make it seem trustworthy and safe.' One even noted that the app 'seems like a very sophisticated effort to make something interactive for something as simple as a funnel of money from donors.'

Equally central to respondents' perception of the donation experience as 'smooth' was the accessibility of the different functions and features of the app. As one noted: 'I think the app seems manageable and that it would be easy to donate [should] you want to.' Another similarly noted that the app was easy to use because you 'don't have to spend time finding the tab or get acquainted with the procedure' which means that 'you don't lose courage during the process [of donating].' One respondent summarized this in the following way:

> I think the app was designed well. It is clear how everything works and there isnt [sic] too much jumping at you. The simple design makes it easy to navigate through the app and for me to find what I want.

In addition to allowing respondents to navigate the app's functions and features smoothly, the experience of using STM was generally also perceived as 'effortless', particularly in relation to the use of the donation function. As one noted: 'Donating was easy and not a hassle at all!' Another user similarly emphasized the subscription feature TheTable because it allowed her to donate with little to no effort:

> I also like the monthly donation feature because you have the opportunity to help others without it taking up a lot of time in your everyday. Here you can just choose to donate a specific amount every month and then you don't have to think about keeping an eye on which [causes] you want to support.

The fact that donations, which are the perhaps most central feature of the app, are experienced as effortless is particularly noteworthy since it allows STM to capitalize on even the most fragmented or short-lived emotions which might compel users to donate. As one respondent noted, to her, the feeling of wanting to donate 'lasted for just about a second or two but that's enough!! Given that you can donate with just three taps on the screen, those two seconds are enough.' In this sense, as she further argues:

> Even though there are things that were annoying to me, the app does give off a feeling that it's easy and fun. Fun might be a terrible word to use given that we're trying to fight world hunger but for the users of the app, it is important. The world is a mess and you are aware of that mess when you're on the app but then the app gives off a vibe 'but this is a fun and easy way to help that mess' and of course you're hooked.

The 'Give now' donation feature seems particularly noteworthy in this regard. Several respondents noted that they felt a sense of enjoyment when donating because of the fact that, when the donation size increases, the amount of food in the bowl also grows. As one noted:

> The function where you can just swipe to increase the amount of your donation is fun. You can see the little plate above it fill with food and that is really cute. I think that they did a really smart job with this because it can distract you and you can be like 'aww cute' and then donate more.

According to another respondent, the design of the donation feature on STM even resulted in him making a larger donation than he had first anticipated:

> To be honest, at first I was thinking of donating a little [but] then I scrolled through to donation amount and I saw how the meal numbers increased if I donate more money. It attracted me and I guess it was the aimed feature of the app.

What should be obvious from this is that the STM interface forges affective or *felt* connections with respondents that shape how they approach and use the app. A number of affective connections are particularly prominent in this regard. One is that of 'feeling good' as a result of using STM. As one respondent noted, the fact that the app counts the size of donations in meals (as opposed to money) was something that provided him with a sense of satisfaction when donating:

> To me, the best feature of the app is that it gives you a corresponding meal number to the amount of money you are donating. It makes it more human, I think [because] when you precisely know that you are donation [sic] 5-10-20 meals for people, you exactly know you are feeding that many of people [and] it gives you more satisfaction and makes you feel better.

The ability of STM to make users feel good while doing good was also emphasized by several respondents in relation to the images and text used to illustrate or explain the causes one can support on the app. As one noted:

> The app definitely plays on the 'feel good factor'. The videos and images show smiling and laughing children, eating food happily, content mothers cooking food for their families etc. It uses key phrases, such as 'make a difference', 'make an impact', 'fight hunger'. It really tries to make the donor feel good about themselves when they are donating.

In addition to feeling good, other app users felt that the STM interface also provided them with a sense of agency. As one respondent noted when speaking about the targeted nature of the donations made via STM:

> I particularly like the targeted donations [because] you have a better sense of where your money ends up and what good they do. Without this more specific knowledge you can quickly lose track of what you are actually trying to remedy, and by having the opportunity to choose for yourself which action you want to support I at least experience a greater motivation to donate because you become an actor yourself and not just a passive supporter.

Such experiences resonate with claims made by scholars that the rise of digital media has led to a broader distribution of political, social, and cultural agency by allowing ordinary individuals to both speak out about, and act on, social and political issues. For example, Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit (2015: 3) argue that digital media 'can be a mediating and mobilising force that has the capacity to stir social action' thus constituting 'a potential channel for political agency.' The Arab Spring—when smartphones and social media platforms arguably played a crucial role in mobilizing protesters and circulating demands for social and political change—is often emphasized as a paradigmatic example of this (see e.g. Papacharissi, 2015; Solomon, 2018).

In addition to the experience of feeling capable of affecting change, a number of respondents emphasized a feeling of 'being part of something bigger' as central to their experience of using the app. As one noted: 'it feels good to be the donor—you can "make an impact" and be part of a collective effort to "fight hunger."' Another respondent similarly noted that it was 'cool that you can find out more about the cause and also see the goal number of meals as well as how many meals have been donated – it makes you think you're a part of something big.' In an effort perhaps to further promote this shared sense of being a part of something bigger when donating, STM also features buttons with which users can share their benevolent acts with others while using the app. As one respondent remarked: 'The function that allows you to share on social media is good too. I mean, it's standard but important in my opinion. Simply because it gets the word out.'[53]

[53] It is worth noting, however, that apart from this example, no respondents reflected on the 'share' function and no one described actually using this function. One reason for this, as indicated by the respondent quoted above, could be that sharing on social media has become an ubiquitous, mundane, and habitual part of our everyday lives and, for this reason, respondents simply did not regard this function as significant. Another

Such reflections resonate with claims about the networked nature of digital technologies and their capacity for bringing people together. 'Central to such claims is not only the observation that digital technologies connect people across social and geographical boundaries,' as Pedwell (2017: 158) argues, 'but also that the technological capacities of online visual media may have the power to *move us* in novel and salient ways' (emphasis in original). Further emphasizing their mobilizing potential, such processes are even sometimes referred to as a form of 'emotional contagion' to describe how affective sentiments are transmitted digitally between users to create emotional synchronicity (Coviello *et al.*, 2014; Kramer, Guillory and Hancock, 2014) or dissonance (Pettman 2015) across social and geographical boundaries.

Yet, while many users praised the possibilities for doing good afforded by STM, some also expressed a feeling of discomfort when using the app. To one respondent, rather than making him feel good, STM raised questions about the inadequacy of the instant gratification associated with the 'Give now' feature as the basis of humanitarian action. To him, the subscription feature, TheTable, thus provided:

> a much more meaningful interaction than the other options, where you just click a button and you are finished, having done something that makes you feel good. To me, it is very important when giving aid that it does not become something to feel good about yourself, that you are giving to "the poor Africans" or some twisted attitude like that.

Another respondent even argued that, to her, STM represented 'a Tinderfied understanding of donations' which she regarded as 'repulsive.' A third respondent, reflecting on the use of badges to reward users, similarly noted that 'those achievement badges [seem] a little like [self-promotion] and as if it's a game you can win, which I find a little distasteful.'

To these respondents, rather than a feeling of agency or of being part of something bigger, STM thus forged an affective connection characterized by scepticism and even disgust. In a more general sense, we might thus say that the experiential connections forged by the app also, at times, made users

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reason could be that respondents did not want to share their benevolence with others, perhaps because they thought it would be inappropriate.

pause, reflect on, or even question the app. Some of these experiences were associated explicitly with the design of the app. In addition to the arguments mentioned above, one respondent noted that she 'missed a place with information about how much of one's donation goes to the organization and how much goes directly to the people in need' while another respondent, who did manage to find this information, noted that he felt that too little of the money donated—namely 62%—went directly to beneficiaries.[54] Others were dissatisfied with the prevalence of images portraying beneficiaries as smiling, happy individuals, which they felt promoted a donor-centric form of everyday benevolence. As one noted, rather 'than painting a realistic picture of a very dire situation it seems as if the imagery used is supposed to first and foremost make the donor feel good about themselves.'

The features of STM that were experienced by respondents as questionable or problematic were not exclusively related to the technical capacities- and design of the app, however. For some respondents, their scepticism was caused by their preconceived notions about both apps and international aid organizations. As one noted when evaluating the value of the app as a donation tool: 'I'm not sure if an app is the perfect medium for it. It's an app I'll use once and then forget.' Another respondent, invoking her scepticism towards aid more generally, noted that:

> In my opinion, the app is way too cheery and sugar-coats the severity of the issue, but as a student of global political studies, having studied i.e. the impact of aid and developmental assistance, I might just be a bit cynical.

While, in some cases, such scepticism made respondents pause and reflect, in others, they prevented them from donating altogether. As one respondent explains:

> I did not donate. This has nothing to do with the app itself but I am very sceptical when it comes to big humanitarian organizations (especially since I've worked in one) and I always prefer to donate to smaller organisations.

[54] As noted earlier, this information was not easily accessible, which probably explains why some respondents concluded that it was not available at all.

In sum, these reflections demonstrate that, while STM was successful in compelling some users to donate, others actively resisted using the app. They also demonstrate that what compelled these particular users to resist the app's programmed intentions was both the configuration of STM itself and their personal opinions and preconceived notions about both technology and international aid, which the app did not manage to mitigate.

How users are modulated on ShareTheMeal

Having described how the app relates to users and how users relate to the app, we can now identify a number of 'thresholds' or tasks that users have to complete in order to donate via STM. Each of these tasks confronts users with a number of obstacles that must be overcome through a process of 'transitions' in order to donate. For example, in order to select a case to donate to (constituting a threshold) users must swipe left or right (as part of a process of transitions) and compelling them to do so is thus a central challenge for interface designers.

Drawing on the insights generated by this chapter so far, three components of the STM interface seem particularly central in this regard. One is the Call-to-Action (CTA) buttons that the user must press in order to access the donation function of the app. A noteworthy detail in this regard is that, while the app is dominated by light blue and white colour tones, the bright yellow colour of these CTA buttons makes them stand out and easy for users to identify. The CTA buttons thus represent a clear invitation to users to overcome the most central threshold of the STM app, which is to move from exploring the app to donating money. As already noted, this is further evidenced by the phrasing of the CTA buttons, which appears as almost authoritative commands, urging users to 'Send gift,' 'Give monthly' or 'Give now' and by the use of the colour yellow. The second component is the images and videos of smiling, seemingly happy beneficiaries that dominate the navigation menu and which frame victims of famine and malnutrition not as helpless victims but as human beings that experience joy, hope, and despair. The prevalence of images signalling joy and happiness not only challenges traditional depictions of humanitarian victims as sufferers but also showcases how STM is designed to modulate users by making them feel good when

doing good in order to overcome the threshold of donating. The third object that is worth emphasizing is the sliders that users must use in order to select the amount they wish to donate in the 'Give now' feature of the app. The use of sliders, as already noted, clearly represents an attempt to create an interactive and playful form of interaction, encouraging users to explore the donation function and perhaps even move beyond the amount they had originally decided to donate or encourage them to donate again. The slider is thus another example of how the app facilitates a donation experience that is playful rather than serious, encapsulating the unique form of user modulation enacted by STM.

We are moving here from a discussion about 'thresholds' to one about 'transitions.' By attending to user experiences, in addition to how the app is designed, we can say something about how successful STM is in modulating users in practice, for example by compelling them to overcome specific thresholds and complete specific tasks. The use of sliders seems particularly central in this regard. For example, as noted earlier, one user argued that this feature was 'fun' and another even described how this particular feature made him donate more than he had originally planned to. The slider is thus a clear example of how STM successfully modulates users by providing an effortless, smooth, and playful donation experience. But this also raises questions about the ethico-political implications of such a donation experience. For one, by offering a 'fun' donation experience, STM also implicitly enforces the assumption that humanitarian helping should be an entertaining and gratifying experience for donors and thus—as also discussed in Chapter 5—implicitly conceals the hopes, desires, and wishes of beneficiaries. Moreover, the relation established between donors and beneficiaries by the STM app can be accused of being 'technocolonialist' (Madianou, 2019) inasmuch as it implicitly positions the Global South as dependent on benevolent donors in the Global North.

In addition to the user gratification generated by the 'Give now' feature in general and the use of sliders in particular, other users associated their experience using the STM app with a feeling of being *agentic*, capable of affecting change. For one, the freedom of choice offered by the app by supplying users with a host of causes to select from was emphasized as central in this regard. As one user noted, 'by having the opportunity to choose for

yourself which action you want to support, I, at least, experience a greater motivation to donate because you become an actor yourself and not just a passive supporter.' The swiping feature is equally noteworthy in this regard since, by allowing users to explore the many causes presented on the app at their own convenience and speed, it puts users in control which, to both the user quoted above as well as others, was perceived as central to the ability of the app to compel them to donate. But the freedom of choice and the slider feature of STM also perpetuates a post-humanitarian sentiment, which is currently moving global humanitarianism away from an ethics of collective action based on the idea of a 'common humanity' and towards an understanding of the desires of 'the self' as the main motivation for humanitarian action (Chouliaraki, 2013). The problem with this logic, as Chouliaraki (ibid) also demonstrates, is that it conceals questions related to social and structural inequalities by claiming to offer individuals an opportunity to 'change the world' by swiping on an app.

In addition to feeling agentic—capable of affecting change—other users noted that they felt that they were part of something bigger when using the STM app. The use of progress bars was emphasized by some as central in this regard since, as one user noted, the ability to see the 'the goal number of meals as well as how many meals had already been donated' made him realize that he was part of a larger, app-based donor community, which made him feel good about using the app. In this sense, the use of progress bars contributes to the ability of the app to appeal successfully to users' desire for a sense of community and togetherness when doing good. But such arguments also fail to take into account that, oftentimes, agency is not distributed equally on and through digital networks and that the 'networks' that are produced through processes of digital mediation are oftentimes vertical rather than horizontal. Indeed, as Humphery and Jordan (ibid: 523-524) argue, even digital media platforms defined by 'openness' also 'engage in decisions about how someone is to be identified as a peer and, in the process, such networks become open or closed to different kinds of actors who can contribute and authorise the information that underpins and makes the network.' The experience of 'being part of something bigger' thus also raises questions about *who* apps such as STM are designed to appeal to and what the ethico-political implications of this are.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the critical observations resonated with the experiences of a number of respondents who expressed scepticism about the STM app. For example, as described earlier, some users felt that the use of 'achievements,' represented with badges, reduced the act of giving to a form of entertainment, which they found 'repulsive' and 'distasteful.' Others similarly noted that the prevalence of images of happy, smiling beneficiaries concealed the human suffering associated with famine and hunger, which ultimately discouraged them from using the app. Others again referred to their preconceived ideas and beliefs about both apps and aid as important for how they experienced the app. For example, one respondents explained that he was not sure that apps were a good tool for humanitarian donations because he doubted he would ever use it again, one cited her scepticism towards large aid organizations such as the WFP as the reason for her reluctance to donate through the app, and another similarly noted that the app did nothing to resolve her pre-existing scepticism towards aid in general.

We are moving here from a discussion about 'thresholds' and 'transitions' to one about 'frictions'. Crudely put, 'frictions' are any features, objects or processes that might make app users reconsider, doubt or refrain from doing the tasks that the app is designed to make them complete (Ash *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, the examples highlighted above all provide insights into how, in addition to the processes of transition facilitated by STM, the use of the donation app is shaped equally by 'frictions' such as those caused by images of smiling children, progress bars, or badges, which prompted some users to pause, reconsider, or even refrain from completing specific tasks or from using the app altogether. In addition to this, they demonstrate that these 'frictions' are not only established by the features and functions of STM itself, which can easily be analysed and mitigated by interface designers, but also by the preconceived ideas and beliefs of users, which are more difficult, if not impossible, to mitigate.

Based on this, we might thus say that—understood as a technology of power—apps such as STM are open to appropriation and resistance. That is, they do not impose themselves by forcing or coercing users to do specific things but by employing modulatory management techniques that motivate them to, and reward them for, using the app in particular ways and completing particular tasks. As will be discussed below, this modulatory

dimension of interface power is fundamental to what I term the technopolitics of action that plays out through the use of STM for humanitarian purposes and thus opens up a wider discussion about the ethico-political implications of this digitally-mediated form of everyday humanitarianism.

6.4 Donation apps & the technopolitics of action

Building on the analysis of STM outlined above, the final task of this chapter is to evaluate and discuss the impact of donation apps on practices and ethics of everyday forms of humanitarianism.

First and foremost, the chapter has demonstrated that we should be careful not to overestimate the extent to which apps control and shape the behaviour of users. Specifically, it enables an understanding of how users simultaneously and continuously adopt, appropriate, or resist the kinds of everyday humanitarianism facilitated by humanitarian donation apps, in and through their everyday, as central to the impact of donation apps in the context of global humanitarianism. But, on the other hand, the chapter has also suggested, conversely, that we should also be careful not to underestimate the impact of donation apps such as STM since they nevertheless promote a problematic ethics of everyday humanitarianism. Specifically, the chapter has discussed the problematic forms of good-doing that emerge in the interplay between the technological configuration of donation apps and the user imaginaries that circumscribe them, with a particular focus on the hidden, soft, or 'modulatory' forms of power that shape digitally-mediated forms of everyday humanitarianism. This, as will now be developed, compels us to discuss apps such as STM as part of a wider technopolitics of action that plays out in and through the use of digital media technologies for humanitarian purposes.

A central dimension of the technopolitics of action is that apps such as STM are clearly designed to facilitate an easy, accessible, and fun way of donating money to humanitarian causes, which makes users feel both 'powerful' and part of a wider digital community of donors. Viewed as technopolitical, such features and perceptions are more than neutral descriptions of what the app can do and how it is used, however. They also invoke notions about the kinds of power that emerge from the supposedly

horizontal or open networks between users that the app is believed to facilitate. Specifically, the forms of power and community described by users when using STM can be said to invoke a notion of distributed agency in a networked digital infrastructure 'that does not operate top to bottom (i.e. vertically) but across the network' (Humphery and Jordan, 2018: 523). Yet, as Humphery and Jordan remind us, it is important to note in this context that networked forms of digital media 'vary in the degree to which they enable the horizontal and/or open.' (ibid). Indeed, as demonstrated repeatedly throughout this thesis, while digital media has been celebrated for its democratizing potential, digital media technologies are also sometimes complicit in the maintenance of structures of inequality and domination. Echoing Hector Postigo's argument that digital societies and cultures will become 'increasingly alienated from a citizenry unless that citizenry can participate in its production' (Postigo, 2012: 9), a key political question to ask in this context is to what extent STM participates in producing political subjects that can actively participate in processes of social and political change. Asking this question in relation to the rise of donation apps is particularly important because STM facilitates highly individualized forms of humanitarian action but does so in order to facilitate large-scale socio-economic transformations—ending hunger globally—through the collective support of caring publics.

By asking how STM involves users in the WFP's fight against hunger and what kind of political subjects it produces, it becomes obvious that the app does little to engage users beyond singular, everyday acts of humanitarianism. In more specific terms, this chapter demonstrates that STM is designed primarily with one principal purpose in mind; namely to convince users to donate money—whether once or repeatedly—by providing an accessible, aesthetically appealing, and gratifying donation experience that requires little effort on the part of its users. Because of this, there is little effort to engage users as 'ethical political subjects', at least in the sense proposed by Postigo (2012). From this perspective, the experience of power, agency, and community described by users does not actually involve their active participation in global processes of change but can more adequately be grasped as part of an ongoing transfer of moral responsibility to individuals, who are more and more often positioned as those who can, and must, make

the choice of when, where, and if to support humanitarian causes. Speaking through Chouliaraki (2013), STM can thus be said to enact a commercial logic that focuses on the gratification of donors rather than the humanitarian issue they are asked to support, which is based on the belief that caring publics must feel good in order to do good. Specifically, the app promotes 'a short-term and low-intensity form of agency, which […] momentarily engages us in practices of playful consumerism' (ibid: 107) rather than sustained processes of change whose aims are global and structural inequalities.

While this thesis maintains that processes of digital mediation are ambiguous in relation to how and to what extent they allow human subjects to come together and affect social and political change, the technopolitics of action identified in this chapter is thus first and foremost a technopolitics of inequality. Indeed, by reducing the fight against global hunger to individual consumer choices, STM ultimately reproduces, rather than challenges, the power relations between the West and the Global South. In this sense, the STM app can be accused of perpetuating a 'digital saviour complex' (Shringarpure, 2018) that frames individual donors in the Global North as 'benevolent saviours' capable of rescuing 'helpless victims' in the Global South but which also implicitly conceals the structural conditions and global power structures that lead to, and sustain, the suffering these donors are asked to alleviate in the process. Indeed, instead of facilitating a horizontal network, STM reinforces a vertical division between benefactors and beneficiaries and can thus be described as a 'technocolonial' form of global helping that reinvigorates 'colonial relationships of dependency' (Madianou, 2019: 10) through the convergence of digital-technological media and everyday acts of humanitarianism. To be sure, the STM app is not solely responsible for this. But donation apps such as STM can nevertheless be said to play a noteworthy role in sustaining such colonial power dynamics by enabling caring publics to translate their compassion for the suffering of distant others into alleviatory action through a rewarding and empowering donation experience.

But these arguments are not meant to denigrate the use of apps for humanitarian purposes altogether, however. Instead, this chapter reveals something about specific forms of humanitarian action in the digitalized everyday. As my analysis of STM clearly demonstrates, there are clearly socio-

technological configurations in which digitally-enabled practices of everyday humanitarianism become generative of the kinds of social inequality, economic dependence, and cultural narcissism that they are meant to mitigate. But while the chapter scrutinizes these ethico-politically problematic aspects of digitally-mediated humanitarian action, it also challenges the assumption that digital media necessarily promotes a specific kind of politics. Contrarily, the chapter demonstrates how the technopolitics of action identified herein emerge in the interplay between what particular apps can do and what users think about them.

It is thus also noteworthy that several users expressed concerns about, or even criticized, the forms of global helping facilitated by the app since such sentiments are central to the development of alternative forms of everyday benevolence in the digital age. Indeed, as Shringarpure (2018) has also demonstrated, simply unmasking problematic aspects of digitally-mediated forms of humanitarianism can help enable an epistemic and discursive shift in how we think about everyday forms of global helping and inform the emergence of decolonized approaches to helping vulnerable others. The challenge, then, is to ensure that these imaginaries find an outlet through which they can be translated into action.

Conclusions

I began this thesis by asking: How are digital media technologies used for humanitarian purposes and what are the ethico-political consequences of this? In order to respond to this question, the thesis has identified a need to supplement scholarly work on media and humanitarianism with knowledge about how the technological materialities of digital media, and the beliefs, ideas, and imaginaries that are invested into them, act as conditions of possibility that structure how global humanitarianism is mediated in practice. Specifically, it has proposed a postphenomenological approach that facilitates a material turn in the study of the mediation of global humanitarianism by emphasizing the need to examine the technical configuration and material capacities of media technologies, but which also brings the subject back in by paying attention to the constitutive effects of how human actors think or feel about their digital devices and platforms in relation to how they are used and what they can do in practice.

Applying this approach, the thesis has then analysed and discussed the use of three digital media for humanitarian purposes: the algorithmically-governed social media platform Facebook, the virtual reality experience Sense of Home, and the donation app ShareTheMeal. In each case, it has shown that the way humanitarian organizations use digital media technologies is shaped in the interplay between what these platforms and devices can do, in technical and material terms, and the visions, beliefs, and expectations that are invested into them. Based on this, the thesis has discussed the ethico-political consequences of the specific ways of mediating global humanitarianism that emerge from this interplay between technological materialities and imaginaries. Specifically, it has demonstrated how particular ways of making humanitarian issues visible, inviting audiences to care for the suffering of distant others, and enabling them to act on and through digital media perpetuate global inequalities and constitute Global South others as subalterns.

In this concluding chapter, I discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these findings in relation to two overarching ambitions. These are: 1) the formulation

of a critical theory of digital mediation, and 2) the articulation of a critique of digital humanitarianism. Whereas the former ambition has relevance for the social and political sciences, broadly conceived, the latter is primarily a contribution to humanitarian studies. I end the thesis by thinking ahead and going beyond the thesis' findings to consider their implications in relation to the important task of imagining alternative ways of using digital media.

Towards a critical theory of digital mediation

The first contribution that this concluding chapter discusses is what this thesis has to offer in relation to the formulation of a critical theory of digital mediation. To this end, the thesis has offered a postphenomenological alternative to the mediation theory that is developed in the humanitarian literature as well to the analytics of power that is proposed herein. Specifically, the postphenomenological theory that is advanced in this thesis promotes a dual attention to the material configuration and technical capacities of specific digital media technologies and to the many ways in which human users experience, perceive, enact, appropriate, or resist these media technologies in practice. Based on this, it has demonstrated the co-constitutive effects of materialities and imaginaries of digital media in the context of mediation of global humanitarianism.

Thus, Chapter 4 evinces how particular ways of thinking about what algorithms are and what they do are constitutive of specific regimes of (in)visibility and asks us to critically consider how these regimes are recursively modelled back into algorithmically-governed media infrastructures. Based on this, the chapter enables an understanding of 'algorithmic imaginaries' and the algorithms themselves as co-productive of how humanitarian issues are shown and seen on social media platforms such as Facebook. Likewise, Chapter 5 shows how certain ways of thinking about the moral affordances of virtual reality (VR) are generative of specific ways of using immersive media for humanitarian purposes. Consequently, the chapter enables an understanding of the 'imagined moral affordances' of VR and the experiential possibilities that are introduced by this particular media technology as co-constitutive of specific forms of (mediated) proximity and distance to the

suffering of distant others. Third and finally, Chapter 6 demonstrates how app interfaces are designed to manage the behaviour of users and how users adopt, appropriate, or resist these digitally-coded forms of modulation in practice. By doing so, the chapter allows us to consider the interplay between the design of app interfaces and the experiences and beliefs of users as conducive of forms of agency and action that favour sporadic and short-lived responses to humanitarian issues.

Taken together, these findings supplement extant knowledge about mediation as sociocultural processes of production, reception, and interpretation with a nuanced theoretical understanding of the constitutive interplay between imaginaries and materialities of digital media in relation to how these media technologies are used in practice. In doing so, it showcases that visibility, emotions, and agency are not only *socially-* but also *technologically-*constituted dimensions of global humanitarianism. Taken together, these findings constitute one of the crucial contributions that this thesis makes to the formulation of a critical theory of digital mediation. Specifically, by opening up the study of mediation to questions about power at the intersection of technological materialities and imaginaries, it carves out a conceptual middle ground between social constructivists, who study media as social and discursive processes of meaning-making, and technological realists (or determinists), who study how technological materialities determine social and political realities. In doing so, it contributes to related fields such as science and technology studies and new materialism, which similarly study the material and the social as co-constitutive, by enabling scholars to study dynamics of power in the context of quotidian, micro-level processes of digital mediation.

In addition to this, by opening up the study of digital mediation to questions about power relations between the Global North and the Global South, the thesis also contributes important new perspectives that have so far not been accounted for in the extant postphenomenological literature, which has primarily examined the power of digital technologies *within* Western democracies (see e.g. Verbeek, 2011; Ihde 2021; Ash *et al.,* 2017). Rather than focusing on the implications of the power dynamics of digital processes of mediation in terms of their impact on liberal-democratic societies, the thesis demonstrates how socio-technological processes of digital mediation constitute Global South others as subalterns. In this way, the thesis highlights

how productive, modulatory, or other, seemingly 'soft', forms of digital power come to intersect with colonial hierarchies and global inequalities. It thus also demonstrates how a postphenomenological theory of digital mediation—as conceived in this thesis—can enable scholars to better grasp how global political divides are constituted, enacted, or sustained not only by the rhetoric and practices of state militaries, multinational corporations, or government agencies but also through quotidian processes of digital mediation. Indeed, enabling scholars to grasp—both conceptually and analytically—how specific ways of thinking about and using digital media intersect with discourses and practices of repression, domination, and control represents another crucial contribution that this thesis makes to the articulation of a critical theory of digital mediation.

But while these points are important contributions to the formulation of a critical theory of digital mediation, the thesis also has some unresolved issues and omissions that are worth briefly mentioning here. For one, a critical reader might reasonably claim that the thesis pays more analytical attention to imaginaries of digital media than to their technological configuration and material capacities. Indeed, striking an analytical balance between studying the imaginaries and materialities of digital media has been a central challenge in this thesis and one might certainly argue that, at times, it seems to focus more on the former than the latter. Even if there are important theoretical and methodological reasons for why this thesis sometimes seem to pay *more* attention to imaginaries of digital media than their technological materialities (as elaborated in Chapter 2 and 3), more work is thus arguably needed in order to scrutinize the digital media technologies that are studied in this thesis 'all the way through.' To this end, it is worth mentioning a few ways in which this might be done in future research. Theoretically, one idea could be to engage more thoroughly with the work of postphenomenologists such as James Ash, who provide a more detailed account of how non-human objects and technologies come together and relate to each other independent of the interference of humans (see e.g. Ash, 2015, 2018; see also Ash *et al.*, 2017, 2018).[55] Methodologically, it might additionally be fruitful to dig deeper into

[55] Another suggestion could be to engage more thoroughly with recent work on 'affordance theory,' which generally starts from the question of what technologies can do in

the specificities of digital media by interviewing and observing programmers and designers who are somehow involved in the process of designing and manufacturing digital media devices and platforms. Together, these theoretical and empirical insights might enable a more materially-oriented starting point for studying the digital mediation of global humanitarianism.

In addition to this, the thesis is obviously haunted by, but arguably never quite manages to bring out, the spectre of Marxism. Even though the thesis recognizes the crucial impact of neoliberalism and capitalism in the contemporary aid industry, more work is needed to describe and discuss the crucial role of digital capitalism and tech corporations—as conceived by scholars such as Morozov (2013), Srnicek (2016), Beer (2018), Latonero (2019), Zuboff, (2019)—in relation to the technopolitics of compassion. Moreover, because the thesis offers a postphenomenological understanding of digital mediation, it also arguably limits itself to a conceptualisation of resistance to digitally-mediated forms of power as a *reactive* rather than a revolutionary force (see e.g. Bantwal Rao *et al.*, 2015). This is problematic from a Marxist perspective because, by doing so, the thesis can be said to legitimize a response to the digitally-mediated forms of repression that it identifies, which merely seeks to point out and alter these hierarchies from *within* a digital-capitalist order. Since we shall return to the question of resistance in the final section of this chapter, it suffices for now to say that this unresolved tension between postphenomenological thought and Marxist theory offers another fruitful future avenue of inquiry for critical studies of digital mediation.

Articulating a critique of digital humanitarianism

That brings us to the second contribution that this chapter discusses, which relates to what the thesis can teach us about the digital mediation of global humanitarianism. In general terms, the thesis has demonstrated how specific

technical terms as a starting point for studying the social dynamics of how they are used in practice (see e.g., Nagy and Neff, 2015; Bucher and Helmond, 2017; Adler-Nissen and Drieschova, 2019).

ways of thinking about and using digital media generate and sustain ways of mediating humanitarian disasters that make invisible the voices and faces of Global South others, emphasize the emotional gratification of Western viewers, and encourage short-term, sporadic forms of engagement and action. In doing so, it generates insights into how the digital mediation of global humanitarianism enacts and sustains global power asymmetries by (re)producing relations of domination and exploitation. Based on this, it articulates a critique of the technopolitics of compassion that emphasizes the ethico-political consequences of the use of digital media for benevolent purposes.

In more specific terms, the thesis has thus showcased how the use of digital media come to intersect with and take on the characteristics of 'technocolonial' forms of global helping, as conceived by authors such as Shringarpure (2018) and Madianou (2019). For example, while we have already discussed the insights that are generated by this thesis into how algorithmic imaginaries partake in shaping what is shown and what is seen online, it is equally crucial to note that Chapter 4 additionally demonstrates that this 'technopolitics of visibility' is also constitutive of specific regimes of *in*visibility. Concretely, the shared belief that what the Facebook algorithm 'wants' are images and stories that relate directly to the sociocultural context of Western publics informs a 'techno-communitarian' sentiment among humanitarian organizations. As a consequence of this, humanitarian organizations tend to employ Western individuals as the store-front of global relief efforts on social media. But the thesis also shows how, by doing so, humanitarian organizations also implicitly conceal the voices, thoughts, and actions of those living in the 'distant elsewheres' of humanitarian disasters. Rather than providing insights into the human consequences of humanitarian disasters, this techno-communitarian sentiment can be accused of enacting what Shringarpure (2019) calls a 'digital savior complex' by visually reinforcing the privileged position of benevolent Westerners at the expense of Global South others who are rendered invisible.

The thesis makes a similar but distinct point in regard to the virtual experience of the refugee crisis offered in Sense of Home. First, the thesis has demonstrated how Sense of Home perpetuates 'improper' forms of mediated distance by facilitating a 'see for yourself' experience that mimics the tourist gaze. Indeed, the focus of this virtual experience is the feelings of spectators,

which come to function as the locus of its visual appeal. In addition to this, Sense of Home at times also brings audiences *too close* to distant suffering by emphasizing encounters with individual victims of war and disaster. While this is intended to forge 'intimacy at a distance,' it can also be argued to implicitly diffuse the responsibility of governments and transnational institutions *vis-à-vis* the refugee crisis (see also Orgad & Seu 2014b: 918). Based on this, the thesis ultimately criticizes Sense of Home for enacting a narcissistic form of humanitarian communication that conceals the global-structural inequalities and injustices that the virtual experience seeks to address.

Last, but certainly not least, the thesis has critically analysed the forms of agency and action that are enabled by humanitarian donation apps such as ShareTheMeal (STM) as privileging what Chouliaraki refers to as 'a short-term and low-intensity form of agency' that 'momentarily engages us in practices of playful consumerism' (2013: 107) rather than sustained processes of social and global change. Specifically, as Chapter 6 demonstrates, STM makes little effort to engage users as 'ethical political subjects' beyond isolated acts of donating money to the World Food Programme. Indeed, the experience of 'power' and 'agency' described by some app users does not, in fact, denote their active participation in global processes of change but is more adequately grasped as part of an ongoing transfer of moral responsibility to individuals, who are increasingly positioned as those who can, and must, make the choice of when, where, and if to support humanitarian causes. In this sense, STM also implicitly enacts a technocolonial asymmetry by positioning Global South others as passive recipients who are dependent on the compassionate impulses of caring publics in the Global North to give when faced by humanitarian disasters far away.

Bringing together these insights, the thesis provides a multi-sited and multimodal account of the many ways in which processes of digital mediation might reproduce, accentuate, and perpetuate unequal subject positions between beneficiaries and benefactors that, as already noted, are fundamental to the global humanitarian project (see also Fassin, 2012: 3). It thus demonstrates

how, 'like ice cream, techno-colonialism comes in many flavours'.[56] More specifically, by discussing the technopolitics of compassion as 'technocolonialist,' the thesis adds to extant knowledge about the many points of convergence between digital technologies, humanitarian structures, and market forces and how these reshape colonial relationships of dependency (see also Madianou, 2019). It thus not only recognizes that 'phenomena like displacement, migration, refugee camps, humanitarianism' are 'steeped in colonial relations of inequality' (ibid: 4) but shifts the attention to the constitutive role of digital media technologies to show how the aid sector's use of digital platforms and devices actualize the cultural and material 'debris' of colonialism in the present. Even if the contemporary aid sector is far removed from the historical dynamics of colonialism, the thesis argues that it must still actively grapple with its colonial legacy and the question of subalternity, as these re-emerge through the digital mediation of global humanitarianism.

This is a valuable contribution to critical humanitarian studies inasmuch as it generates insights into the many and varied forms of harm that the use of digital technologies for humanitarian purposes can, often unintentionally, cause (see also Jakobsen, 2015). So far, critical studies of digital humanitarianism have primarily been concerned with issues such as 'the withdrawal from face-to-face engagement on the ground in favour of techniques of distant sensing and remote management' (Duffield, 2016: 147), the refugee camp as a digitalized space of governmental experimentation and control (Rothe, Fröhlich and Rodriguez Lopez, 2021) or 'the travel of biometric data of Syrian refugees in Jordan through a hastily evolving political economy characterized by a pervasive craving for the extraction, storage and brokering of displacement data' (Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty, 2020: 607; for an overview see also Sandvik *et al.*, 2014). While these are important insights, the thesis adds to them by providing a detailed account of the risks and consequences that are associated with the use of digital media in the field of humanitarian communication, which has so far not received sufficient critical attention.

[56] As argued by principal scientist at Internet Initiative Japan and Honorary Scholar at Rhodes University Randy Bush in one of the earliest uses of the term 'technocolonialism' (RAMCPU, 2020).

More work is obviously needed to relate my findings to the literature cited above. It would be necessary, for example, to examine the synergies and dissonances between these varied perspectives in order to bring them together in a multi-sited critique of digital humanitarianism moving forward. But the thesis should nevertheless be read as providing a precursor to this important task.

From technocolonialism to cosmotechnics

So far, I have demonstrated that the insights generated by this thesis are both a valuable contribution to the articulation of a critical theory of digital mediation *and* the articulation of critique of digital humanitarianism. Based on these insights, this final section asks: If current ways of thinking about and using digital media for humanitarian purposes have problematic consequences, how might we then move towards a more solidaristic and less technocolonial form of digitally-mediated humanitarianism? In response, it discusses the prospects of a decidedly *postcolonial* ethics of mediation that addresses and mitigates the ethico-politically problematic aspects of the humanitarian sector's use of digital media.

I am particularly inspired in this regard by the writings of Yuk Hui. In his recent work on 'technology' and 'cosmopolitics,' Hui engages with the writings of Kant in order to reconsider cosmopolitanism by attending to its relationship to technology. Specifically, Hui does so in light of what he refers to as the 'ontological turn' in anthropology, which accepts the existence of multiple realities and modernities and thus goes against Kant's teleological view of the world (Hui, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). The shortcoming of Kant's thought made obvious by the ontological turn, Hui argues, is that even if Kant seemed to be aware of the importance of technology when he asserted that communication is the condition of the realization of a cosmopolitan world, he did not consider *technological difference* since what was at stake for Kant was the question of the whole that absorbs all differences. Conversely, Hui begins by proposing that it would be more productive to think about the relationship between technology and cosmopolitics in terms of 'cosmotechnics' which starts from the assumption that there 'hasn't been one or two technics, but many cosmotechnics' since the 'kind of morality, which

and whose cosmos, and how to unite them vary from one culture to another according to different dynamics' (Hui, 2017a). That is to say that there cannot be *one* universal and unifying cosmopolitan vision for how to employ digital media for benevolent purposes since a cosmopolitical ethics of digital mediation must navigate multiple social and global realities. What I draw from Hui is thus the recognition that it is possible and, indeed, valuable to open up the question of technology in the study of media and humanitarianism by conceiving of alternative 'cosmotechnics' that are *not* rooted in technocolonial forms of digital mediation, but which instead draw on a vast repertoire of technological visions, devices, and practices from multiple locales around the world, including non-Western ones. Doing so, as Hui similarly argues, is a valuable supplement to postcolonial critiques of Western hegemony and the notion of Europe as the historical axis of modernity—as provided by scholars such as Spivak (1988), Mbembé (2003) and Chakrabarty (2007)—which have so far not tackled the question of technology (Hui, 2016: §28).

But if Hui provides us with a useful theoretical starting point from which to think about a postcolonial ethics of digital mediation as consisting of multiple 'cosmotechnics,' where can we look for inspiration in order to conceive such an approach in more concrete terms? Based on the findings of the thesis, I suggest that we can begin this task by examining alternative accounts of the technopolitics of algorithms. For example, providing a radically different perspective than the one offered in Chapter 4, Yu, Treré, and Bonini (2022) have studied the emergence of 'algorithmic solidarity' by unveiling mutual aid practices and resistance among Chinese delivery workers. Specifically, they show how precariously employed Chinese delivery workers 'game' algorithmically-governed food delivery platforms, how they mobilize digital communication platforms such as WeChat to build solidarity, and help each other in coping with the platform economy through everyday practices of resistance and resilience. Their perspective thus resonates with an emerging scholarly literature on the broader question of 'algorithmic resistance' (see e.g. Velkova and Kaun, 2021), which focuses on the forms of user agency that emerge from alternative uses of platforms and 'complicit forms of resistance that work through "repair" politics oriented towards correcting the work of algorithms' (523). Of interest to these scholars are thus

not only the harms caused by algorithms but the many ways in which users might mitigate these harms by appropriating, manipulating, or otherwise intervening into algorithmic systems, even from positions of supposed inferiority. From this perspective, by pointing to the problematic effects of algorithmic imaginaries in relation to how humanitarian disasters are shown and seen online, the knowledge generated by this thesis might thus be seen as a starting point for strategies or practices that can mitigate and reverse the forms of subalternity that are constituted by the techno-communitarian regimes of (in)visibility that are identified in Chapter 4.

In addition to the question of algorithmic resistance, another relevant issue is the existence of alternative ways of imagining and using virtual reality (VR) for benevolent purposes. For example, Levitt (2018) has argued that we should perceive the technopolitical promise of VR not in terms of an 'empathy machine' but in terms of the 'world-making practices and potentials' of immersive media. The crucial difference between these two conceptions of VR is that, whereas the former perceives the moral value of VR as emerging from its ability to simulate intimacy and familiarity with distant others, the latter emphasizes VR's ability to enable us to relate in novel ways to otherness by producing new social fields and new forms of sociality. For example, rather than trying to remove the perceived difference between affluent publics in the Global North and Global South others through mediated proximity, as Sense of Home aims to do, VR might also be used to accentuate or crystallize the more amorphous and diffuse social problematics that arise from structural inequalities and global injustices. For example, rather than providing a positive message about life in the refugee camp, as Sense of Home does, might we imagine a virtual experience where the spectator is made to feel uncomfortable as a result of, say, being criticized by the virtual others they meet therein for participating in what is, essentially, a virtual whistle-stop tour of life as a refugee? Or, rather than seeking to simulate a perceived reality, might we immerse ourselves in a virtual experience through which alternative worlds may be opened, and where the experience of these worlds allows us to imagine different realities than the one we are currently in as a conduit for new forms of sociality? Based on these preliminary imaginaries and questions, we also see how we might arrive at a radically different conceptualization of the moral affordances of VR than the ones analysed in this thesis, where

immersive media is used to facilitate technopolitical processes of *becoming* rather than as empathy machines.

Last but not least, the thesis enables us to imagine the possibilities of 'hacking' as a technopolitical form of resistance. While acknowledging the political potential of the kinds of user 'connectivity' that are forged by donation apps such as ShareTheMeal, this thesis ultimately criticizes these apps for failing to enable user 'participation' (see also Postigo, 2012).[57] From this perspective, 'hacking' emerges as a valuable conceptual resource for imagining how app users might become more active participants in digitally-enabled processes of social change. I am inspired in this regard by a growing number of scholars who have turned to hacking as a creative and collective form of digital 'making' in recent years. For example, compelled by the so-called 'dark patterns' programmed into more and more apps—which are designed to take advantage of the cognitive biases of users and which can have detrimental effects on people's lives—Kollnig, Datta and Van Kleek (2021) have introduced GreaseDroid, which is a community-driven app modification framework enabling non-expert users to disable dark patterns in apps selectively. In this way, the authors argue, software tools such as Greasedroid allow users to 'hack' and thus reclaim sovereignty over their digital devices and platforms. Providing a similar perspective, Aradau, Blanke, and Greenway (2019) employ hacking as a collective act of 'digital parasitism' in order to make visible the problematic implication of humanitarian apps that allow refugees to reconnect with lost family members in a corporately-driven app-infrastructure through which the data generated by the use of these apps is collected and used for commercial purposes. In both cases, we see how hacking can be utilized as a methodological device for interfering with, and transforming, digital technologies through open-ended forms of (re)coding by collectives and non-experts. While more work is needed in order to relate this to the domain of donation apps, they nevertheless signal concrete ways in

[57] Indeed, rather than assuming a causal nexus between 'being connected online' and the efficacy of moral action, which donation apps such as ShareTheMeal seem to be founded on, critical voices have increasingly highlighted in recent years that 'connectivity' and 'interactivity' do not necessarily lead to social change (see e.g. Cristiano, 2019).

which more and more app users may become active participants in processes of digital mediation.

Bringing together these varied perspectives, we begin to see the contours of a postcolonial ethics of digital mediation, which conceives algorithmic media platforms as technopolitical opportunities for constituting solidarity across borders, approaches virtual experiences as processes of becoming, and employs hacking as a form of technopolitical resistance. While these examples are in no way exhaustive of the many postcolonial 'cosmotechnics' already in existence, they are nevertheless illustrative of the kinds of practices, beliefs, and visions that might be employed to construct a technopolitical alternative to technocolonial forms of digital mediation from below, by users and designers. In sum, they thus provide a starting point for a different technopolitics than the one identified in this thesis, which we can tentatively refer to as a 'cosmotechnics of compassion.' Moving forward, it is my hope that the knowledge generated by this thesis will help further these technopolitical visions.

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