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What is This?
‘Doing denial’: audience reaction to human rights appeals

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Abstract
Whilst many hypotheses have been formulated on why audiences remain passive in response to distant suffering, very little empirical research has been carried out to verify these hypotheses. This article discusses audience denial in response to information about human rights abuses, paying attention to both content and strategies used in accounts of denial, i.e. what these accounts say and by which means they effectively neutralize appeals for action. Three repertoires are identified as specific targets for neutralization: (1) The message itself (‘the medium is the message’); (2) Campaigners and, in particular, Amnesty International (AI) (‘shoot the messenger’); (3) The action recommended in the appeal (‘babies and bathwater’). These repertoires are analysed in terms of the discursive techniques – e.g. argumentation, rhetorical and semantic moves and speech acts – used to neutralize the moral claims made by Amnesty International’s appeals. The article suggests that audience denial is an operation of power and production of knowledge in so far as it plays a role in sustaining and colluding with more systemic and official operations of passivity and denial. The normative implication of audiences’ justifications for their passivity is illustrated in their banal, everyday contribution to a morality of unresponsiveness. The discussion aims to contribute to current debates on the ‘Politics of Pity’, social responsibility and distant suffering. It also contributes to psychological work on pro-social behaviour and, in particular, to research on audiences’ responses to humanitarian appeals and mediation in general.

Keywords
altruism, Critical Discourse Analysis, denial, discourse, discursive analysis, human rights, moral apathy, Politics of Pity, pro-social behaviour, rhetoric

Many authors concerned with the ‘Politics of Pity’ and, more specifically, with failure to intervene when aware of others’ suffering (e.g. Boltanski, 1999; Geras, 1999; Cohen, 2001), have often stressed the need to know more about what happens in the ‘gap between

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knowledge and action’. Whilst agreeing with this need, I believe that the conceptualization of the ‘gap’ in the singular is unhelpful. It oversimplifies a complex set of interrelated phenomena taking place in three connected but distinct gaps in the continuum from the actual distant suffering, through its representation and then reception, to action. I suggest it is useful to think of gap one, which looks at what happens between the distant suffering and its representations; gap two, between the representations of distant suffering and their reception by audiences; and gap three, between audiences’ reception and action. Three distinct areas of intellectual inquiry have addressed, to some extent and with some overlap, the three gaps.

The gap between distant suffering and its representation has been the focus of study for sociology, media and communications and of humanitarian debate. The gap between the reception of the message and audience action has greatly preoccupied social psychologists interested in helping and pro-social behaviour. Very little empirical research has been carried out into the middle gap, on how audiences respond to communication about distant suffering, even though many assumptions have been made about what happens in this space.

The first strand of debate relates to the so-called ‘Politics of Pity’, in particular Boltanski’s (1999) formulation which, drawing on Arendt (1990), characterizes the ‘Politics of Pity’ as politics inherently based on spectacle. It is essentially about creating a relationship between the self and a distant stranger.

These debates are concerned with the gap between the social reality of suffering and its representation in media and appeals. Studies focusing on the production of representations have tried to explain audiences’ unresponsiveness by drawing on textual and visual analyses of communication materials which can include news reports, campaign advertisements and appeals. Studies of media coverage of suffering focus on ‘compassion fatigue’ – overload in the media of information on suffering (Moeller, 1998; Tester, 2001; Höijer, 2004) – while William (1986), Benthall (1993), Boltanski (1999), Tester (2001) and Cartwright (2008) explain that audiences’ lack of response and engagement is due to patterns of media coverage, such as de-humanization of sufferers (Chouliaraki, 2006), repetition, routinization, naturalization (Moeller, 1998), and ‘Western favouritism’ (Gaddy and Tanjong, 1986) that guide the coverage, resulting in emphasis on certain emergencies and under-representation of others.

More recent work has recognized the growing awareness of humanitarian campaigners towards audiences’ denial and their renewed attempts to break through it. These studies’ compelling and nuanced analyses of humanitarian agencies’ relationship with audiences introduce a problematic of institutional (Cottle and Nolan, 2007) and textual reflexivity (Chouliaraki, 2008; Vestergaard, 2008).

Academic studies of humanitarian organizations’ campaigns and appeals have highlighted the need to challenge depictions of sufferers as passive, hopeless victims (Lissner, 1981; Arnold, 1988; Benthall, 1993; Lidchi, 1993; Malkki, 1996; Rajaram, 2002; Smith and Yanacopulos, 2004; Dogra, 2006) and the commodification and fetishization of their suffering (Lidchi, 1993; Rajaram, 2002; Clark, 2004; Wright, 2004; Vestergaard, 2008; Chouliaraki, forthcoming). These studies primarily relied on textual and visual analyses of campaigns and appeals as with the research on media coverage. In addition, implicit in studies of representation is the suggestion of a crucial link between audiences’ knowledge and action.
At the other end of the spectrum and addressing the third gap (between audience response and action), a different body of literature focuses on the psychological factors that might facilitate or interfere with audiences’ pro-social responses in general and, more specifically, with charity and humanitarian appeals. Different explanations have been given for the moral apathy that characterizes audiences’ responses to news of genocide or mass atrocities, charity and humanitarian appeals. Some have suggested that differences in responses are due to donors’ decision-making styles (Supphellen and Nelson, 2001), whilst others have argued that humanitarian appeals provoke ‘psychophysical numbing’ where the human ability to appreciate losses of life reduces as the losses become greater (Slovic, 2007).

Others have focused on ‘identifiable victim effect’ theory. This is where there is a higher likelihood of response when the appeal identifies an individual victim (Kogut and Ritov, 2005) or specific family (Warren and Walker, 1991; Small and Loewenstein, 2003), whether this could be attributed to smaller numbers evoking more compassion (Kogut and Ritov, 2005) or because it enabled the respondents to feel more competent (Warren and Walker, 1991).

Mixed results have come from the application of the ‘theory of planned behaviour’ (Smith and McSweeney, 2007) or the ‘dual processing theory’ (Epstein, 1994) to audience apathy. Slovic (2007) and Epstein (1994) have blamed the failure of System 2 (rational, normative analysis) to inform and direct System 1 processing of information (experimental, intuitive and affect-based response). Loewenstein and Small (2007) have focused on the interaction between ‘sympathy’ and ‘deliberation’ and how the two are affected by proximity, similarity, vividness and one’s past and vicarious experiences.

Others have criticized attempts to isolate individual or similar sets of emotions empirically or theoretically, and argued that audiences’ multiple emotional reactions to altruistic requests should be studied more holistically (Bartolini, 2005). Others have drawn attention to audiences as active agents who might be motivated to actively avoid feelings of empathy for those in need, lest they be motivated to help them (Shaw et al., 1994).

Some psychologists have explored audiences’ (un)responsiveness in terms of immediacy of or identification with the victim. Contrary to generally held beliefs, Eckel et al. (2007) found that those who were nearer to areas worst hit by Hurricane Katarina were less responsive to related appeals due to ‘Katarina overload’. Levine and Thompson (2004) found that social category relations, rather than geographical proximity or emotional reactions, were the most important factors in increasing responsiveness to humanitarian appeals.

This robust body of research answers some of the questions about audience passivity, thus appearing to address the same issues as the ‘Politics of Pity’ debate, but I would argue that the two are, in fact, addressing very different questions. The mis-match is not due simply to disciplinary differences, but also to disparities in epistemology and methodology. Studies of representations are based on textual and visual analyses of communication and do not tend to involve audiences. On the other hand, the vast majority of psychological studies on audiences are based on surveys and laboratory experiments that use media representations as neutral stimuli.

These psychological studies are often deductive rather than inductive and exploratory, and confined to predetermined questionnaire questions. They assume a realist stance, whereby what people say is taken at face value to represent what they would actually do,
thus neglecting the contradictory, complex and often ambivalent nature of people’s attitudes. Additionally, such studies neglect the complex and dilemmatic nature of the moral decision. Finally, mainstream, scientifically inspired psychological studies, crucially, actively avoid engaging with the culturally specific, situated and ideologically charged meaning of participants’ stated attitudes.

Sociology and media studies have, on the other hand, engaged with the political, ideological and cultural meanings underpinning the processes through which distant suffering is ‘mediated’. Very little is known, however, about what happens in what Cohen (2001: 6) calls the ‘black hole of the mind’ – a blind zone of blocked attention and self-deception. This ‘black hole’ describes the unexplored space between reception and (re)action, the least theorized and empirically explored of the three gaps.

Stan Cohen’s work on denial (Cohen, 1995, 2001; Cohen and Seu, 2002) is the single strand of intellectual enquiry most influential on the work described in this article and crucial to the issue of audiences’ responses to human rights appeals. By straddling the fields of sociology and psychology, it bypasses disciplinary boundaries and brings together fundamental insights from both.

Before Cohen, Van Dijk (1992) provided a detailed study of the power of denial in sustaining racism. He identified types of denial analogous to those discussed in this article (e.g. disclaimers, face-keeping and positive self-presentation) and, similarly to Cohen, he has argued that denial comes in many forms, each with its own cognitive, emotional, social, political and cultural functions. Crucially, he claimed that denials are part of a strategy of defence, presupposing implicit or explicit accusations, or they may be preemptive (1992: 91). Similarly, Cohen (2001) draws attention to the culturally available accounts of justifications and excuses that form the vocabulary of moral passivity within our society. The vocabulary of denial is the focus of this article.

In his groundbreaking work on denial, Stan Cohen grapples with the cultural, political and psychological factors involved in the complex variety of modes of avoidance we all use to protect ourselves from unpalatable realities and our responsibility towards the suffering of others. Cohen claims that, differently from ‘not knowing’, simply lying or deliberately choosing not to expose ourselves to certain unpalatable information, we are, sometimes, not entirely aware of switching off or blocking out that information. Denial, therefore, is ‘neither a matter of telling the truth nor intentionally telling a lie. [. . .] There seem to be states of mind, or even whole cultures, in which we know and don’t know at the same time’ (2001: 4–5).

According to Cohen, there are three distinct, although at times overlapping, types of psychosocial denial: literal, interpretive and implicatory. In the first, literal, factual denial, the fact or knowledge of the fact is denied, e.g. ‘my husband could not have done that to our daughter’; ‘there was no massacre’. In interpretive denial, the raw facts are not denied but given a different meaning to that which seems apparent to others (p. 7), e.g. ‘I am a social drinker, not an alcoholic’; ‘this was population exchange, not ethnic cleansing’; ‘this was not torture, but robust and legitimate interrogation’. The observer disputes the cognitive meaning given to an event and re-allocates it to another class of events by changing words, using euphemisms or adopting technical jargon (2001: 8). Van Dijk calls this form of denial mitigation, which involves downtoning, minimizing or using euphemisms when describing one’s negative actions. ‘Mitigation strategies are particularly important in social situations where the relevant norms are rather strong’ (Van Dijk, 1992: 92).
Finally, implicatory denial refers to those explanations that do not deny the reality of
the event, or their conventional interpretation, but deny the ‘psychological, political or
moral implications that conventionally follows’. Cohen refers here to ‘the multitude of
vocabularies – justifications, rationalizations, evasions – that we use to deal with our
awareness of so many images of unmitigated suffering’ (2001: 8). He argues that these
vocabularies are increasing and becoming more convoluted as they are used to attempt
to bridge the moral and psychic gap between ‘what you know and what you do’.

Crucial to my argument, Cohen states that the techniques of evasion, avoidance,
deflection and rationalization should draw on good – that is, believable – stories. He
draws on Wright Mills’ work (1940), according to which accounts of denial are not
mysterious internal states, but typical vocabularies with clear functions in particular
social situations. ‘Accounts are learnt by ordinary cultural transmission, and are drawn
from a well established, collectively available pool. An account is adopted because of its
public acceptability. Socialisation teaches us which motives are acceptable for which
action’ (Cohen, 2001: 59). Hence, a denial account does not simply give a plausible,
acceptable story about an action (e.g. ‘this is what I do’), but also crucially provides
moral accountability for the speaker (‘this is why what I do is alright’). Such moral
accounting takes a variety of forms in denial: from the psychological techniques of ratio-
nalization, defence mechanisms and disavowal, to the sociological forms of apologies,
normalization and neutralization (Van Dijk, 1992).

A discursive analysis of denial

To provide a nuanced analysis of accounts of denial, it is important to pay attention to
both content and strategies of denial, i.e. what these accounts say and through which
means they operate effectively.

In terms of content, ‘Interpretative Repertoires’ (Wetherell and Potter, 1988: 172;
Potter and Wetherell, 1995: 89) describe the building blocks speakers use for construct-
ing factual versions of reality, making evaluations and performing particular actions.
They are social resources available to all who share a language and culture and are used
by the speaker to justify particular versions of events, to excuse or validate their own
behaviour, to fend off criticism or otherwise allow them to maintain a credible stance in
an interaction (Wetherell and Potter, 1992).

Repertoires can be drawn upon by virtually anyone in order to bring about a particu-
lar, desired representation of an event (Edley, 2001). Because interpretative repertoires
are part and parcel of any community’s common sense, providing a sense of shared
understanding, they convey a sense of familiarity and everyday recognition. In the sense
that they are banal, they are extremely powerful as ‘ideology in action’ because they
appear so obvious, not the personal opinion of a particular individual but what ‘every-
body knows’ (Edley, 2001: 202).

Each repertoire contains ‘argumentative topoi’ of denial. A topos is a system of public
knowledge, a discursive resource in which one may find arguments for sustaining a con-
clusion (Van Der Valk, 2003: 319). Topoi refer to socially shared beliefs and, crucially,
function as content-related warrants which connect the argument with the claim. As such,
they justify the transition from the argument to the conclusion (Wodak and Meyer, 2001).
The analysis identifies three interpretive repertoires, defined on the basis of their focus. The first, ‘the medium is the message’, focuses on the attributed manipulative function of the appeal. The second, ‘shoot the messenger’, attacks the sender of the appeal, primarily Amnesty International (AI), but also humanitarian organizations and charities in general. The third, ‘babies and bathwater’, questions in various ways the validity of the action recommended in the appeal.

If we accept that denials are part of a strategy of defence, presupposing implicit or explicit accusations, or that they may be pre-emptive (Van Dijk, 1992: 91), the topoi are the explanatory links to the unspoken question ‘Why don’t you actively respond to these appeals?’. Hence, each one can be paraphrased, in turn, as ‘... because there is a problem with the message’; ‘... because there is a problem with the messenger’; ‘... because there is a problem with the recommended action’.

In terms of strategies of denial, by looking at repertoires in terms of addressivity – which focuses on the speaker as agent using particular discursive strategies – the analysis makes visible the (more or less intentional) practices adopted to achieve a particular social aim. In line with Van Dijk (1993a, b, c), Wodak and Meyer (2001) and Wodak (2004), it focuses primarily on the persuasive dimension of text, that is, argumentation strategies, style and rhetoric. Specifically, the discursive analysis identifies and discusses strategies of:

1. Perspectivation, nomination and predication (e.g. the use of particular characterizations of the other – in this case AI and other charities) to achieve a particular rhetorical effect.
2. Argumentation which identifies the arguments, either explicit or implied, the goals of the speaker in using them, and the strategies used to provide backing to the arguments.

These strategies are, to different extents, all aimed at positive self-presentation and negative-other presentation and are intended to warrant the participants’ moral stance and undermine Amnesty’s appeals.

Additionally, the analysis further explores the performative function of accounts of denial, through the concept of ‘speech act’ (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) which views what people say as having a function within an interaction and achieving an effect for them. In short, accounts of denial as speech acts ‘do’ things: warrant the speaker’s position, undermine the other’s action, convince, justify, etc.

The study involved a series of nine focus group discussions in response to the presentation of mediated messages about human rights abuses. There were 48 participants in total in the focus groups, of whom 35 were female and 13 male. The groups were specifically designed to be heterogeneous, in order to sample views across a variety of perspectives. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 66, and there was a wide variety of self-defined ethnic and social class backgrounds.

Participants were recruited through advertisements asking for volunteers to take part in an informal discussion about human rights abuses. They were given three visual prompts: an appeal from an Amnesty International campaign for Afghanistan, describing how a woman had left her children at home while she went in search of food, had been raped by soldiers, held for days and then found her children dead of hypothermia on her
return; another appeal from an Amnesty International campaign against torture (picturing a steam iron and asking the reader to imagine it next to their face); and an article from the liberal British newspaper, The Guardian, on human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia depicting a man lying on the ground being flogged, while the West ‘turns a blind eye’.

As the group leader, I chose to follow an interview schedule loosely designed around the principle research questions. Participants were asked: to describe their emotional and cognitive reactions to appeals about human rights abuses; if and where they had seen human rights appeals; if they felt responsible for and/or able to actively respond; what they did in response to human rights appeals; and what models of human rights they used.3

These questions were introduced at different and opportune times in each group to respect the ‘natural’ flow of the discussion. The discussions were transcribed and made anonymous. This article focuses on one of the unexpected themes that emerged spontaneously and recurrently in all groups. It broadly relates to participants’ reactions to being addressed through an appeal by a charity.

The medium is the message

I start from the assumption that Amnesty International’s mandate is twofold: as a campaigner for human rights (striving to inform the public and to raise awareness of human rights abuses) and as a maker of appeals (aiming to raise funds by focusing attention on the specific current issues they are working on). In both instances, they address audiences as moral agents.

The first repertoire began to evidence a striking mis-match between campaigners’ intentions and audiences’ reception of appeals, in that participants positioned themselves as critical and discerning consumers rather than as moral agents. The ‘medium is the message’ repertoire appeared in all interviews and was the most agreed upon, suggesting that it is a much used ‘ready-made’ story, already current in the wider social context (Fairclough, 1995), particularly when participants position themselves as ‘savvy’ consumers. Participants used this repertoire to disregard the function of the message as a plea for emphatic, moral responsiveness to the information and focused instead on the message itself which is scrutinized closely for its style and function.

(95) Trudy: It’s a very clever campaign; I mean it does actually do what it’s supposed to do [. . . ] And when you read that, the first thing you want to do is put your hand in your pocket and send them a cheque. That’s what it’s supposed to do and it will. It does do that because you get so moved by it, you think, well I’ll do anything to help and then it’s got this thing about donations at the bottom of it and after reading that you would . . .

Trudy introduces a theme, echoed by other participants in various ways, that the message is ‘doing some kind of work’, well beyond informing the reader about suffering in a distant place, which hardly gets mentioned. Thus, according to Trudy, this is a ‘clever’ and successful piece of text: it operates by giving a moving story which gets the reader to feel s/he ‘would do anything to help’; then the reader finds a strategically located box asking for a donation. The emotionally aroused reader is offered a release through the action of giving a donation.
The extract contains several important semantic moves. There is, first of all, the use of referential ambiguity (‘when you read that, the first thing you want to do is put your hand in your pocket’). By giving agency to a generalized ‘you’, the speaker invites consent and warrants status of general knowledge to her statement. The use of the figure of speech ‘put your hand in your pocket’, with its implication of immediate unthinking response, intensifies the power of the statement by conveying the strong impression of a mechanistic, automatic exchange (stimulus–response). This is immediately followed by an apparent agreement ‘That’s what it’s supposed to do’, followed by a deprecatory qualifier ‘then it’s got this thing about donations’, which reveals the discursive intentions of the speaker. The semantic move of showing understanding functions as a disclaimer as it positions the speaker as even-handed and sympathetic. In the final sentence, through a referential move, Trudy constructs a generalized ‘us’ as emotionally responsive (‘you get so moved by it’) and profoundly altruistic (‘we’ll do anything to help’) in opposition to, although this is only alluded to, manipulative campaigners who take advantage of ‘our’ noble response.

I decided to start with this quote, even though it comes from the last focus group, because it contains several elements which appeared throughout the groups and gives a flavour of the types of argumentation used by the participants. For example, it contains the oppositional stance of ‘us and them’, public and campaigners, which runs throughout the data, even in statements ostensibly sympathetic. Also, and equally omnipresent, there is the persistent and intractable connection between Amnesty’s campaigns and money. As a strategy of argumentation, this connection firmly places the debate within a materialistic and consumeristic discourse as opposed to a moral one. From within this discourse, the participants position themselves as reflexive, neutral assessors and critical consumers, who use sophisticated analytical skills to evaluate and judge the effectiveness of the campaign as demonstrated by (6) Neil:

Again even even with this article, even with this article from Amnesty International. It is a rhetoric in a way, because when Amnesty give us this they give it to us in this formula. We always read that we’re about to give you a horror story, we give you the horror story, now give us your money. It’s always every single time you read anything from a charity it comes with that formula. And that in a way is a rhetoric. I think in a way you feel responsible but then you start questioning then you don’t have time and then you stop. Your responsibility fades.

Neil describes a similar chain of events to that in Trudy’s account, but the reaction here is less appreciative and the appeal is presented as openly cynical, mechanistic and manipulative: ‘We give you the horror story; now give us your money’. The fact that there is a horror story in the first place is obscured by the function it serves. The quote is bursting with discursive moves and peppered with intensifications through repetition (e.g. ‘even’ is repeated three times in the first line) and extreme case formulations (‘We always read that . . . ’; ‘It’s always, every single time’). Neil also uses pars pro toto to back his central argument that what Amnesty communicates is nothing but rhetoric, and to bundle Amnesty together with all other charities. This discursive move obfuscates their specific mandate and dismisses Amnesty’s communications by intimating that they are formulaic. This suggests that NGOs’ attempts to focus on branding seem doomed to
fail. Crucially, as a speech act, these discursive moves invite the listener to (a) focus on Amnesty’s technique, rather than its mandate; and (b) accept the argumentative thrust that it is because of this that ‘your responsibility fades’.

There is a sense of antagonism with Amnesty International, as if Neil felt that he had cleverly avoided a trap. The strategic use of referential ambiguity through the impersonal ‘you’ generalizes the effect of the phenomenon beyond himself, thus normalizing it.

(6) Lorna: Once they sort of start talking about, you know, you are their only last hope. I think that’s when you see a clear sort of twist in the tone of the reading and, yeah, it’s very irritating and, I think there’s definitely a sort of overkill there you know. It’s, they’re sort of forcing you to give money that you’re not entirely comfortable with . . .

Lorna’s statement describes a very different kind of emotional response from the expected sympathy, empathy and pity. Lorna feels ‘irritated’ and that she is being ‘forced’ to do something against her will. The lexical style is revealing here; through exaggeration and the use of strong words like ‘twist’, ‘overkill’ and ‘forcing you’, Lorna intensifies her statement and warrants her ‘irritation’. It is striking that the emotional response to the communication is directed at how the message is put together or at Amnesty, rather than the horrendous details of the appeal.

In summary, in the ‘medium is the message’ repertoire, audiences construct the appeal as a cleverly devised marketing campaign which is, nevertheless, manipulative and formulaic. Participants position themselves as being resentful of manipulation and cleverly seeing through such attempts. There is a further twist in this tale, in that participants simultaneously position themselves as discerning consumers and yet express resentment at being addressed as consumers. The attribution of negative actions (e.g. ‘twist’, ‘force’, ‘extract money’, etc.) convey considerable anger and justify the self-righteous response of self-defensive shutdown. Non-responsiveness is justified by presenting it as resistance to manipulation.

Shoot the messenger

In the ‘Shoot the Messenger’ repertoire, audiences position themselves in relation to the ‘messenger’ – Amnesty International in this instance. It marks a shift in the moral gaze from the audiences to the agencies as participants question the integrity and trustworthiness of the campaigners and charities in general.

This repertoire conveys a lot of emotional force and contains two distinct topos – ‘Is this a true story?’ and ‘Should we trust them?’ – each providing a specific warrant to the unresponsiveness. They can be paraphrased as making the claim: ‘We don’t actively respond to this message because there is a problem with the messenger’.

The most deleterious ideological impact of this repertoire is that, by undermining the messenger, it potentially weakens the impact of the appeal.

‘Is this a true story?’

In this topos, participants are at their most explicit in using a mixture of literal and interpretive denial. The speakers fluctuate between openly doubting the truthfulness of the
events reported in the Amnesty appeals (literal denial), and a more subtle intimation of
distortion of the truth on the part of Amnesty (interpretative denial). Both have the effect
of undermining the force of the appeal.

(6) Mandy: As I was going through some of it I was thinking oh, I know somebody who actually
works in Afghanistan and I’ll check with him. You know what it’s like. I know somebody who
lives in the Middle East and was married to a Middle Eastern man, I’ll check with them. And
then I began to think, I wonder how many of these are actually true. I know it probably sounds
terrible to say it because Amnesty wouldn’t pick a story up, wouldn’t create a story, but there is
such a thing as marketing, and you sort of wonder . . .

Mandy gives a remarkably elaborate denial account of her action and the moral justification
for it. Mandy starts by expressing doubts about the truthfulness of Amnesty’s story to the
extent that, while reading it, she goes through a list of the possible people she knows with
whom she can check the details. She uses several semantic moves to warrant her credentials
and insinuate doubt about Amnesty. For example, by referring to her source as someone
who ‘actually’ works in Afghanistan, she implicitly introduces a difference between those
who ‘actually’ know (her source) and those who only claim to know (Amnesty). As a
speech act, this invites the listener to question the truthfulness of Amnesty’s statements. She
continues with this discursive strategy through a statement that implies common knowledge
and invites recognition and complicity from the listener: ‘you know what it’s like’. This
informal type of argumentation is designed to get the adherence of the audience to a thesis
(Carranza, 1999). The narrative style illustrates how, as one thought led to another in her
head and her suspicion grew to all the stories reported by Amnesty (‘I wonder how many of
these are actually true’), Mandy is a reasonable person and warrants her good faith by
showing how the suspicion comes from the text and not from her. However, having openly
introduced distrust, she shows reflexive awareness that what she says about Amnesty might
sound bad and contextually unacceptable (‘I know it probably sounds terrible to say it’). In
a spectacular attempt to hold on to two mutually exclusive claims – that Amnesty is simul-
taneously making up and not making up the story – she offers hope of moral expiation for
all through the semantic move of showing apparent support (‘Amnesty would not pick a
story up, wouldn’t create a story’), followed by a ‘but’, which reveals that these statements
are simply disclaimers. The parallelism, in the form of repeated negation, backs her state-
ment and intensifies its effect. Amnesty campaigners are lying, not because they are dishon-
est, but because they are forced to by marketing – ‘there is such a thing as marketing’. She
thus positions herself as someone who appreciates the complexities and moral dilemmas of
the world we live in and is not a bad person for thinking in this way.

The theme that Amnesty is somehow tweaking the truth proved extremely popular and
appeared consistently, even though only a few examples can be discussed here. For example:

(7) Tina: I was partly thinking are they putting several stories together but then I thought well
it doesn’t really matter, you use any kind of trick you can [. . . ] There might be some manipu-
lation, there might be. There’s certainly some leaving out of details. It’s, as someone was say-
ing, we don’t know exactly we don’t know who the men were, we don’t know . . .

(8) Alf: They are presenting the truth and they are dressing it up.
The statements varied in details, but they all openly made use of discursive moves such as disclaimers (for example, ‘I think they are true but . . . ’) or lexical choices (e.g. ‘they know how to play with the information’), just to mention a couple. These statements are important, not just in terms of their content – the fact that the same topoi appear in most of the groups shows that this is a ready-made story, recognized and consensual – but also in terms of the ‘interpersonal’ work of the text. That the speakers use argumentation strategies suggests they are not just expressing their opinion, they want to convince their audience. This in turn implies awareness of a normative moral imperative – they ought to be responding to Amnesty’s messages differently – thus confirming that denial statements are part of a defence strategy, presupposing implicit or explicit accusations (Van Dijk, 1992).

Whilst a few statements verged on literal denial (Abi: ‘did it actually happen?’), most were striking examples of interpretive denial; what Amnesty is reporting happened but it is not quite as they describe it. Crucially, this is attributed to Amnesty intentionally making things look worse ‘for a specific effect’. This effective technique of neutralization has the essential function of undermining Amnesty’s credibility.

**Should we trust them?**

Scepticism and cynicism appear to be the overarching moral imperatives which are normalized by the overwhelmingly consumerist, rather than moral, discourse taken up by the participants. As consumers, participants justify being sceptical, questioning and discerning to avoid being taken advantage of.

(4) Joel: A lot of these charities the money, just, just goes in people’s pockets unfortunately, so many cases with, people start up a charity, ‘cause you can do that easily. You don’t have to have a permit by law and the money can go straight into some guy’s pocket. And I, I’d dread to say that happens with Amnesty. I would think probably they’re, like, bona-fide, I don’t know. Makes you cynical that you see all these different cases and things.

There is no trace of hesitation or ambivalence in Joel’s construction of charities as legalized fraud. He backs this negative perspectivation by claiming that, due to lack of regulation, anybody can start a charity easily and pocket supporters’ money. The expression of regret (‘unfortunately’) warrants the speaker’s moral position, and by stating that there are ‘so many cases’ he backs his (vague) claim that this is not his bias but a well-known, widespread phenomenon. Lexical indirectness (‘these charities’, ‘people start up a charity’, ‘you don’t have to have a permit’) is used to amplify his claim. This is followed by the powerful semantic move of showing apparent support of Amnesty by singling them out: ‘I would think probably they’re, like, bona-fide’. But the tentativeness in ‘probably they’re, like, bona-fide, I don’t know’ reveals that, in fact, he is insinuating exactly the opposite, without having to appear attacking of Amnesty. The return to vagueness – ‘you see all these different cases and things’ – in the warranting of his cynical approach gives a sense that these events are pervasive and well known to everybody and positions him as a streetwise individual who knows ‘the ways of the world’.
Agencies are positioned as liars, manipulative and self-serving through the use of this repertoire. Conversely, audiences are the victims and in need of protection. Once more, the storyline is not one of social responsibility and empathy, but one of assessment of the trustworthiness of campaigners. The moral imperative resulting from this repertoire is the legitimacy and normalization of suspicion and scepticism.

**Babies and bathwater**

The final target and the focus of the third repertoire is the action recommended by the appeal. Its *topoi* justify the transition from the argument to the conclusion by implicitly claiming that audiences don’t actively respond to these appeals because there is a problem with the recommended action. Money still figures in this repertoire, but the focus is no longer on the function of the message or the trustworthiness of the agency. Instead, audiences position themselves as ‘savvy’ assessors of the success or failure of the appeal’s strategy. This allows participants to avoid moral criticism for not engaging with the recommended action because the action itself is deemed to be failing: ‘It addresses the symptom not the cause’; ‘Money won’t help’; ‘will go in the wrong pockets’; ‘will be wasted by the agency’. By defining the action in this way, the ‘baby’ of socially responsible action is thrown out with the ‘bathwater’ of the partial truth contained in all of these statements. As speech acts, these *topoi* exonerate and warrant the moral stance of the speaker.

> (5) Mary: We have to like address the people who are really responsible and like do something more direct, rather than just say ‘let’s give money here, money there’ [. . .] giving money, to me, it feels like trying to attack, trying to take care of the symptom instead of attacking the real root of the problem. It’s like putting a little bandage on some wound and it’s like OK, it’ll be OK, and then, that has an effect. If we all give a bit of money the situation’s going to get better, but we haven’t really tackled the root of the problem and that’s, I think that’s the only way to change things, is go to the root.

> (9) Karen: The work has to get to the root of the problem.

In these quotes, Amnesty’s operations are positioned as superficial solutions that do not address the problem and discursively construct Amnesty’s mandate to be the ‘chicken soup’ of human rights. Whilst Amnesty is portrayed as inadequate and ineffectual by ‘putting a little bandage on some wound’, the participants indirectly position themselves as better engaged with the problem because they believe in ‘getting to the root of the problem’ (Mary and Karen), and ‘getting to the real reason behind it’ (Mary). Through a ‘realist’ discourse, participants contrast real, deep-reaching action with ineffectual, idealistic, vague solutions. This powerful rhetoric allows participants who do not respond to Amnesty’s campaigns not only to avoid blame, but also to claim the moral high ground. At the same time, small details in the participants’ talk convey an attitude of dismissiveness. For example, the way in which Mary says ‘let’s give money here, money there’ communicates carelessness and a lack of proper reflection and reinforces the sense that asking for and giving money is the wrong thing to do, thus further undermining Amnesty’s authority.
This sentiment was expressed in many guises. For example, (8) Alf, who makes ample use of hyperbole and *reductio ad absurdum*, said:

I am opposed to just say give us money and we’ll stop torture. How do you plan on doing that exactly? [. . . ] I can see my money going towards helping someone who is starving. I can’t see my money going towards toppling the Saudi Arabian government which is one of the richest governments in the entire world. You know my ten dollars is just not going to do a thing. [. . . ] so let’s say someone who doesn’t know anything about Saudi Arabia picks this up and goes ‘wow Saudi Arabia’s a really awful government. I’ll donate my pay check this week to (. . .) what exactly?’ Bombing them out of existence? How, what, what, what can you do with this?

Alf is an active Amnesty supporter, with a long history of humanitarian action and his claim is therefore likely to derive from a commitment to more successful campaigning. This is hinted at in the use of ‘just’ in his opening sentence: ‘I am opposed to just say give us money’, thus indicating his knowledge that Amnesty does not stop at asking for money, but does much more.

Nevertheless, Alf’s comments are disingenuous despite his likely good intentions. As someone well informed about Amnesty’s mandate, he seems to wilfully misrepresent them as is revealed by a closer discursive analysis of his words. His repeated use of hyperbole, extreme case formulations and false comparisons – his pay check with the riches of Saudi Arabia, ten dollars to Amnesty with bombing Saudi Arabia ‘out of existence’ – has the effect of ridiculing Amnesty’s appeal. The well-known and powerful rhetorical device of repeating things three times – ‘what, what, what’ – forcefully draws attention to and questions the action proposed by Amnesty and amplifies further the power of the statement. He also uses parallelism: he initially seems to be in apparent agreement with giving money – ‘I can see my money going towards helping someone who is starving’ – which is followed by a qualifier – ‘I can’t see my money going towards toppling the Saudi Arabian government’. This semantic move has several effects. By working as a disclaimer, it warrants the speaker’s altruism and generosity, but also sets the scene for the ridiculing that follows. The hyperbole insinuates that donating for the protection of human rights is a profoundly stupid thing to do.

(3) Stacey: If you could guarantee that the money was going to those people, you could see every single penny is going to those people then it would make you do something about it, but knowing, you know, just gut feeling, knowing that it doesn’t go to those people not even half of it, most probably doesn’t even go to those people it just makes you think, well, sorry, but no.

(7) Leila: But having worked for a few charities it kind of put me off donating to other charities. [. . . ] one of the charities I worked, I worked in, there was corruption going on with the chief executive, well alleged corruption. I just thought, it just put me off, and having worked at another charity where you just see how much money’s wasted while you’re working there. And you speak to people in finance who say ‘god I’d never donate to this charity if you saw how much money was wasted’ and stuff like that it put me off.
Here, participants seem preoccupied with charities’ alleged waste or mismanagement of resources. Again, participants don’t seem to differentiate between individual agencies.

Stacey wonders where the money goes. She demands guarantees that ‘every single penny’ is going to the victims in order to motivate her to give. The use of hyperbole shows that this statement is for rhetorical purposes, rather than being a realistic expectation. The referential ambiguity ‘if you could guarantee’ instead of ‘if Amnesty could guarantee’ implicitly insinuates that Amnesty could not provide that guarantee, but without having to openly state that. Her warranting shows uncertainty as she lacks conviction in her own claims: ‘just gut feeling [. . .] most probably’, yet she still claims that ‘not even half of’ the money goes to the victim. Even while uttering such a precise figure, she still uses referential ambiguity – ‘but knowing, you know . . . knowing that’, suggesting that this is common knowledge, rather than her own suspicion. Her alleged knowledge that her money would not go to the victims is nevertheless used to justify her decision not to donate to charities.

Leila uses a different tactic to undermine charities’ trustworthiness. She starts by warranting her credibility as a witness through personal experience. She uses perspectivation by reporting an alleged negative event related to charities. Even though her self-assurance waivers at one point – ‘there was corruption going on with the chief executive, well alleged corruption’ – she proceeds unperturbed to provide variations on the theme of charities’ corruption and mismanagement of funds. The use of pars pro toto is a powerful device inviting the listener to categorize all charities as corrupt.

The implicit message conveyed in this topos is that, as with the previous one, giving money is not a good idea. This is not because of doubts about the political and practical effectiveness of such action, but because, it is suggested, donors’ money is not spent on humanitarian causes at all. The claim that money will go in the wrong pockets was taken to its most extreme with pernicious implications by some participants. (4) Joel delivers the killer line:

No, it (the donation) goes to the leaders more often than not, people like Mobutu who was the third richest man in the world at some point with the money that was being given to them by ordinary people in the street mostly. And just to make this ghastly er he got richer and richer stuffing his way in, in vaults in Switzerland, it’s ludicrous; if anything we should decide not to give. ‘Cause if you know what’s going to happen it’s not, it’s not going to go to the person that deserves it.

Joel is effectively arguing that the Zairean dictator Mobutu, infamously known as one of the worst perpetrators of human rights abuses, became the third richest man in the world by using ordinary people’s donations. On the back of the rhetorical power of the colourful image of donors’ money stuffing the dictator’s vaults in Switzerland, Joel can then claim the righteous high ground for not giving.

The topoi contained in this repertoire, of course, did not emerge in the linear formation they are presented here; participants jumped around, doing and undoing their own claims. However, the artificially linear way portrayed in this analysis highlights the cumulative effect of the statements. It illustrates how variations in the weight of the message, from slightly doubtful to openly accusatory, from questions about political efficacy of donations and administrative blunders to insinuations that donors might be inadvertently
supporting perpetrators of human rights abuses, contribute to a very negative picture of
Amnesty and donating. Amnesty campaigners are at best constructed as clueless dream-
ers and bad administrators; at worst, as indirect/unknowing supporters of perpetrators
and tyrants. Not giving is therefore justified as reasonable and moral, with the extreme
case of being potentially commendable.

Discussion

This article has illustrated how audiences ‘do denial’, both in terms of the content of the
denial accounts and of the discursive strategies that make them effective. The analysis of
audiences’ responses to information about human rights abuses has exemplified the cul-
turally acceptable justifications and excuses that form the vocabulary of denial and how
the moral claims made through Amnesty International’s appeals are successfully neutral-
ized, through discursive and rhetorical moves.

Speakers’ positions appeared self-evident, reasonable and moral. Participants
effectively justified their refusal to donate and their general passivity in response to
the appeal, whilst retaining a position of human rights supporter and warding off
potential doubting of their moral stance. This could be seen as a demonstration of the
dilemmatic nature of ‘lived ideology’ (Billig et al., 1988), but it also illustrates the
complexities of ‘doing denial’. The normative implication of audiences’ justifications
for their passivity is precisely in their banal, everyday contribution to a morality of
unresponsiveness.

Audiences’ denial, then, is an operation of power and production of knowledge – it
enables the replacement of the moral, compassionate subject by the ‘consumer-savvy
bystander’, equipped with sophisticated analytical tools to assess and critique the style,
function and effects of the appeal, and the trustworthiness of the appeal maker, like a
consumer debating whether to ‘buy’ the product. This is a power operation in so far as it
plays a role in sustaining and colluding with more systemic and official operations of
passivity and denial, such as those described by Cohen (2001) and Van Dijk (1992).

This is not denial in the common sense of the term; it is sophisticated and reflexive. Its
eyeveryday usage resonates with and supports concerns expressed in recent work on the
dangers of increased commercialization of non-profit organizations’ practices (Vestergaard,
2008) and their ‘rebranding’ in order to counteract the current ‘crisis of pity’ (Chouliaraki,
2008). Audiences’ skill and rhetorical cleverness can be seen in the participants’ ability to
use similar repertoires for different ideological effects. For example, the appeal for dona-
tions is rejected both on consumerist and moral grounds. Participants are able to position
themselves simultaneously as the victim of a marketing ploy and at the same time declaim
a lack of moral consideration on Amnesty’s part. If, as Vestergaard (2008) and Chouliaraki
(2008) suggest, humanitarian agencies are being driven by fundraising pressures into
moving away from a compassion-based type of campaigning towards a marketized ethical
discourse, their efforts may be counterproductive. Such a move might actually increase
audiences’ moral detachment and, as Chouliaraki (2008) calls it, their ‘narcissistic sensi-
bility’, by further strengthening the resistance of the ‘savvy-consumer’ bystander.

Whilst my study corroborates these arguments, it crucially fills in the gap in the
empirical, by bringing into the debate audiences’ accounts and responses. There is clear
agreement on the self-reflexivity of campaigns in the context of post-humanitarianism and the ‘crisis of pity’ (Boltanski, 1999; Cottle and Nolan, 2007; Chouliaraki, 2008; Vestergaard, 2008). However, it is not enough to know that audiences resist and ‘do denial’ – it is crucial to know how they do it in order to turn denial into acknowledgement.

The micro-analysis of denial offered in this article has implications for wider debates about humanitarianism, helping behaviour, representation studies and everyday morality. In order to reflect on the significance of the findings, I discuss them in relation to the ‘gap’ they are relevant to, as delineated at the beginning of this article, and the body of literature that has addressed that particular gap.

In terms of the gap between distant suffering and its representation, the first striking finding is the absence of the distant sufferer in audiences’ accounts. Indeed, one is left wondering who the sufferer/victim is, as in all the repertoires, but particularly noticeably in the ‘shoot the messenger’, participants repeatedly position themselves as the sufferer and as potential victims of manipulation and exploitation. This echoes Chouliaraki’s concern (2008) about the danger of Western audiences becoming increasingly preoccupied with their own mediated self-pity rather than the suffering of distant people.

This finding has important implications for current debates on humanitarianism and media and communications’ preoccupation with how distant suffering is mediated for the general public and how the sufferer is constructed and represented, e.g. whether agency is attributed to the sufferer, how proximal or distant the sufferer is from audiences, how similar or different the sufferer is from us as Westerners (e.g. Gaddy and Tanjong, 1986), etc.

The data discussed here do not support the argument that these factors play an important part in audiences’ responses. On the contrary, audiences’ relationships with those who appeal to them through humanitarian communication seem to be crucial, not their relationships with the ‘distant sufferer’. By using denial, audiences disengage from the humanitarian appeal at a very early stage in the reception. To undermine the truthfulness of the communication, regardless of whether the victim is attributed agency or characteristics that audiences can identify with, cuts to the core of the connection to the distant sufferer.

Another finding, also related to the ‘suffering–representation’ gap suggests that, even though audiences refer primarily to agencies, they are actually operating within a broader media context, permeated by wider discourses of media as intrinsic manipulators of truth, both in terms of content (an ideological bias) and techniques (e.g. in the use of Photoshop). In terms of humanitarianism, this implies that the climate of distrust of the media does deeply affect the reception of humanitarian communication and appeals and suggests that more attention should be paid to how audiences’ responses to distant suffering are influenced by audiences’ relations to the media in general. This is in direct contrast to current thinking in humanitarian discourse where humanitarianism is seen as separate from media. Yet some authors have begun to argue on similar lines to mine. Cottle and Nolan (2007), for example, claim that as humanitarian agencies’ communication strategies have increasingly assimilated to ‘media logic’, they have become embroiled in the practices and predilections of the global media. As a result, they reflexively expend time and resources in warding off increased risks of mediated scandals and are compromising their organizational integrity. This suggests that more attention should be paid to the growing alignment of humanitarian appeal practices with the operation and style of the media.
Calhoun (2007) also argues that, even though in the media the power of visual images and immediacy are key to what makes human suffering ethically compelling to strangers, the role of the media in relation to humanitarianism has not been systematically and seriously considered. Similarly, Sliwinski (2009) claims that it is not the legal discourse of human rights (which constructs human dignity and freedom as being inalienable), but the visual discourse (which mediates suffering and asks individuals to exercise their faculty of judgement) that has the power to make audiences respond to distant suffering as deserving pity and moral action. Yet audiences’ responses have not been studied in this way so far.

Moving to the gap between audiences’ reception and action, the findings are of relevance to psychological debates on altruism and pro-social behaviour. Because of its theoretical orientation, this discursive study of everyday morality in relation to human rights appeals represents an innovative departure from mainstream experimental studies of helping behaviour and challenges current thinking in many ways.

Having illustrated how bystanders’ passivity becomes operational in everyday life through the discursive machinery of denial, this research suggests that it would be unproductive to look for an explanation of audiences’ passivity simply in terms of an individual’s own psychological or emotional predisposition, or in their stated attitudes towards human rights. Instead, attention should be paid to what is socially and culturally available to the public to counteract the moral imperative contained within the appeals. It is also important to learn how wider cultural discourses (e.g. a widespread distrust of politicians and media) are employed to liken campaigners to both corrupt politicians and manipulative media to undermine their message. These factors, as this article has demonstrated, are crucial to understanding audiences’ moral apathy and how members of the public may, in principle, be supportive of the overall principles of human rights, but decide not to act in response to appeals.

When social psychologists have focused on the distance or closeness of the victim, or on whether audiences engage with the appeals primarily on an emotional or rational level as factors which foster or prevent pro-social behaviour, the appeal itself is considered as a neutral stimulus. However, judging from the data discussed in this article, the appeal itself is very significant, in terms of how it is put together, who the appeal makers are and what action is being requested. These findings are important not just in themselves (i.e. for the light they throw on the strategic and rhetorical use of these factors) but, crucially, because they re-contextualize audiences’ responses and re-position participants in the cultural and ideological contexts to which they belong.

Finally, I would like to end with a commentary on the worrying implications of these findings for humanitarianism. The silence around the distant sufferer is deafening in these extracts. The horror stories are obfuscated, thus effectively silenced, by a close analysis of the function they serve. There is no evidence in my data that audiences respond to the assumptions made both by humanitarianism and social psychology in terms of altruistic emotional responses such as empathy, compassion and pity. Most of the emotional force seems directed at campaigners and warranted as self-protection. This, I find, is the most important and worrying finding; we have evidence of a primacy of self-oriented, rather than other-oriented emotional responses which are, in turn, through ideologically laden discursive manoeuvres, justified and successfully made acceptable and reasonable.
Notes
1. I am very grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for its financial support of this project through one of its research project grants.
2. This included their definition of human rights abuses, both in the UK and abroad, and who they thought was responsible for the upholding of human rights.
3. The number in brackets preceding the speaker’s name refers to the group to which they belonged.

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References


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