HUMANITARIAN CAMPAIGNS IN SOCIAL MEDIA
Network architectures and polymedia events

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Social media and social networking sites (SNS) in particular have become popular in current humanitarian campaigns. This article assesses the optimism surrounding the opportunities that SNS communication offers for humanitarian action and for the cultivation of cosmopolitan sensibilities. In order to evaluate the mediation of suffering and humanitarian causes through social media I argue that we need to understand the architectures of social media and social networking sites in addition to analysing the content of the campaigns drawing on the literature on humanitarian communication. Focusing on the analysis of two humanitarian campaigns through social media, the phenomenally popular and controversial Kony 2012 campaign and WaterForward, the article observes that the architectures of SNS orientate action at a communitarian level which heightens their post-humanitarian style (Chouliaraki, 2010). However, an emerging new genre of reporting and commenting which is termed 'polymedia events' can potentially extend beyond the limitations of SNS communication by opening up the space for reflexivity and dialogical imagination.

Keywords: action at a distance, cosmopolitanism, humanitarian campaigns, social media, social networking sites, media events, Kony2012.

In early March 2012, a 30-minute video featuring a campaign against a Ugandan warlord, Joseph Kony, took the world by storm. Kony 2012 as it was branded and became known, spread through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Within hours from its release Kony 2012 went 'viral': in less than a week over 70 million people had watched the film on YouTube alone. Was the Kony 2012 campaign proof of the power of social media to foster a cosmopolitan public sphere or was this a problematic piece of filmmaking as many of its critics argued? Even though the Kony 2012 video was uniquely successful in terms of its viewership (it attracted numbers usually only matched by comic home-made videos) it is part of a wider trend of employing social media for humanitarian purposes and has to be understood in that context.

Since the Haiti earthquake on January 12, 2010 – when within hours from the devastating 7.0 magnitude earthquake social media and crowdsourcing (1) software such as *Ushahidi* (2) were employed in order to provide information about missing people, casualties and medical needs – humanitarian campaigners and organisations

have started to exploit social media to reach potential donors and to raise awareness for their causes. It is not difficult to see why. Social media, and social networking sites (SNS) in particular are simply too big to ignore. Facebook alone, the dominant SNS, has 845 million members, of whom 483 million are daily active users (3) (Facebook, 2012) while the aggregate figure of users of social media is expected to surpass one billion in 2012 (The Economist, 2012). It is impossible for humanitarian organisations and charities to ignore the potential of SNS. This is the reason why numerous campaigns will now have a SNS component while some are entirely SNS-based.

There are additional strong reasons why campaigners have focused their attentions on social media and why there has been a general enthusiasm regarding social media as an opportunity for humanitarian campaigns and for cultivating cosmopolitan sensibilities. One of the attractions of SNS communication is the combination of increased audience reach together with a high degree of disintermediation. Campaigners can reach enormous 'networked publics' (boyd, 2010) without having to depend on powerful intermediaries such as media corporations and other traditional gatekeepers. This disintermediation can have implications for the visibility of social causes and campaigns – bringing to light situations that might have previously remained concealed in the economy and values of the traditional news media (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). In this sense, social media can potentially democratise 'the space of appearance' (Arendt, 1998; see also Silverstone, 2006). The architecture of peer-to-peer communication and the involvement of citizen journalists and even of the sufferers themselves can increase, it is said, the authenticity, veracity and legitimacy of the campaigns thus turning SNS into sites of witnessing (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009). For campaigners, perhaps the single most attractive dimension is the assumption that the mediation of suffering through social media favours action – users are perceived to be actively involved in 'doing' something in response to a situation or a cause. After all, SNS users are only a 'click' away from their all-important credit cards. More broadly, and less cynically, networked publics are popularly framed in terms of action and engagement as the term 'public' itself suggests (Livingstone, 2005; Madianou, 2005). In the popular imagination social media are deeply implicated in recent political events or movements such as the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009, the Arab Spring or the Occupy movements, all of which have been branded as the Twitter or Facebook revolutions and even though researchers are more sceptical (see Morozov, 2010; Sreberny and Khiabany, 2010) there is evidence to suggest that social media have a transformative role to play in the coordination of civic action (Papacharissi and de Fatima Olivera, 2012; Tufekci and Wilson, 2012). Ultimately, all the above points suggest a qualitative shift in the representation of suffering and the moral agency of the spectator-witness. The biggest promise of social media for humanitarian communication is the potential of fostering a cosmopolitan public.

This article is concerned with whether social media fulfil these promises: do they transform the mediation of suffering and crucially, do they represent an opportunity to bridge the fathomless distance between the sufferer and the spectator (Cohen, 2001: 169)? Do social media represent a qualitative improvement in the moral agency of the spectator and digital media ethics? In order to evaluate the mediation of suffering and humanitarian causes through social media I argue that we

need to understand the architectures of social media and social networking sites in addition to drawing on the literature on humanitarian communication. Writing about traditional mainstream media such as television, Chouliaraki (2006 and 2008) has argued that media content (*how* suffering is represented) determines the type of engagement and action on the part of the spectators. When suffering is represented through social media our understanding has to encompass not just content (for that still matters), but the wider network architectures which contribute to shaping users' engagement and potential action. Although popularly celebrated for their openness and democratic potential, communication in social networking sites is not a *tabula rasa*, a blank sheet: it is structured in specific ways, often determined by software which affords users certain kinds of interactions but not others (boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2009). Software, network design and the users' own appropriations create certain dynamics which determine the visibility of and publics' engagement with humanitarian campaigns. In the article I argue that SNS architectures give rise to certain dynamics that typically orientate action at a communitarian, rather than cosmopolitan level. Therefore, although social networking sites involve less intermediation than traditional media and they can – when successful – heighten the visibility of campaigns, they do not necessarily or inherently represent a qualitative improvement in the moral agency of the spectator and digital media ethics. Humanitarian campaigns in SNS often exemplify what Chouliaraki (2010b) has termed 'post-humanitarianism'. In this paper I will explain that this is not just evident in the content of these campaigns, but also accentuated by the sites' very architecture. However, the emergence of a new phenomenon, which I call 'polymedia events' represents an opportunity to extend beyond the communitarian confines of SNS and to, potentially, support a more cosmopolitan engagement with distant suffering.

To develop my argument I will draw on the analysis of two humanitarian campaigns conducted entirely through social media and selected here for that reason as well as their popularity. The first campaign is the website *WaterForward* which was launched in 2011 and which employs the architectural features of SNS in order to raise funds for clean water provision in poor countries. The second campaign is the already-mentioned and phenomenally successful *Kony 2012* video campaign which was launched on March 3rd by the US advocacy group 'Invisible Children'. In my analysis of *Kony 2012* I will show that although this was a deeply problematic campaign which exemplified many features of post-humanitarian communication (Chouliaraki, 2010), the intense debate across media platforms that accompanied its viral popularity is an example of what I call a 'polymedia event' (4). As a polymedia event, *Kony 2012* extends beyond the video campaign itself to include the digitally recorded and thus traceable reactions of its detractors, its fans and of the otherwise voiceless victims. Because of its notoriety, *Kony 2012* triggered an unprecedented public debate across media platforms, old and new, about the ethics of representing suffering, humanitarian communication and citizen engagement more broadly.

Although obviously not exhaustive, the analysis of these two very different examples of humanitarian communication in social media environments will provide illustrations for the argument developed here. The following sections deal with the literatures on humanitarian communication and social media respectively. I will then move on to discuss the two case studies, *WaterForward* and *Kony2012*. The analysis of the campaigns will focus on the following themes: disintermediation and the

democratization of visibility or 'the space of appearance' (Arendt, 1998); the question of action; and the elusive promise of cosmopolitanism. I will end by considering the emergence of polymedia events.

Humanitarian communication: communitarianism, cosmopolitanism and the question of engagement

Although it is generally accepted that the media, both old and new, have increased the representation and visibility of distant suffering there is less agreement regarding the consequences and the ethics of this 'new visibility' (Thompson, 1995). According to Chouliaraki (2006 and 2008), two broad ethical norms have traditionally informed the representations of distant suffering and humanitarian communication: cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. The cosmopolitan version of global connectivity is premised on the idea that the media, by making visible the suffering of others initiate a process of reflexivity and thus contribute to a 'democratisation of responsibility, in the sense that concern for others becomes an increasing part of the daily lives of more individuals' (Thompson, 1995: 263). Such emphasis on reflexivity and responsibility is absent from the communitarian version of global connectivity. Although a communitarian perspective emphasises 'a feeling in common' among spectators (Chouliaraki, 2008: 373) who are brought together through the simultaneity of broadcasting and the capacity of electronic media to transcend national boundaries, what is missing is 'an orientation to the distant other' (Chouliaraki, 2008: 373). As such communitarianism constitutes a pessimistic scenario of global connectivity.

Chouliaraki's important intervention in this debate has been to move beyond the optimistic and pessimistic assumptions of these approaches and to focus instead on the empirical conditions of mediation in order to establish whether they may potentially cultivate cosmopolitan sensibilities and action (Chouliaraki, 2006 and 2008). According to Chouliaraki, the way television tells the stories of distant suffering determines the spectator's ethical relationship to the sufferer (2008: 374). Drawing on the analysis of a cross-national sample of television news reports on distant suffering, Chouliaraki develops a typology of news and demonstrates that certain types of reports (what she calls 'adventure' and 'ecstatic' news) invoke a communitarian public (Chouliaraki, 2006: Chapters 5 and 7). By contrast, the in-between category of 'emergency' news, opens up a space of engagement which invites the spectator to feel and act leading to the possibility of 'social solidarity' and the realisation of a cosmopolitan public (Chouliaraki, 2008: 387). The metaphor of space and distance is revealing in Chouliaraki's analysis (2006). In adventure news the sufferer is invoked as too distant, almost irrelevant; in ecstatic news the distance between the sufferer and the spectator is almost collapsed, leading to identification without the necessary reflexivity which is critical for engagement and action. In emergency news, the sufferer is neither-too-distant-nor-too-close, and this form of 'proper distance' (Silverstone, 2007) appears to be crucial for catalysing the necessary space for action and solidarity (Chouliaraki, 2006) and for the reflexivity that is a necessary ingredient for a cosmopolitan consciousness (Beck, 2006).

Central to this discussion of the spectators' moral agency *vis a vis* distant suffering is the question of action. The paradox revealed by audience-centered

empirical studies on distant suffering is that although people express compassion towards sufferers, this is not always translated into action to help those who suffer (Kyriakidou, 2012; Ong, 2011). Social media are popularly seen as an opportunity to correct this as, because of their interactive nature, they afford more opportunities for immediate action, such as participating in petitions, donating funds, or simply reposting comments. Still, a systematic theorization of action is necessary in order to evaluate what constitutes action in the first place and what it reveals about the moral agency of the subject.

Action has to be understood in the context of engagement, normally consisting of three analytical dimensions: understanding/awareness; talk; and action. Scholars have at times favoured either talk or action, with the latter often considered as a superior type of engagement (Arendt, 1998) even though empirically it often remains elusive (see Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007). Boltanski (1999), on the other hand, echoing Dewey (1927) and Habermas (1989) argues that talk, 'public speech', is a significant form of engagement, a form of action in its own right (Boltanski, 1999: 20). Most would agree that talk and action are inseparable even though analytically they can be distinguished. Arendt, for whom action is the 'one miracle-working faculty of man' (1998: 246), recognizes the close interrelationship as 'with word and deed we insert ourselves into the world' (1998: 176) while action would lose its 'revelatory character' without the accompaniment of speech (1998: 178). Awareness and understanding, the necessary preconditions for both talk and action, often remain implicit in the literature. I argue that awareness and understanding need to be more systematically acknowledged as vital as it is those which give moral meaning to action. Action without understanding is hollow. As Arendt put it 'the validity and meaningfulness of action is destroyed the moment action and thought part company' (Arendt, 1998: 225). The tripartite model of engagement adopted here is one that gives equal weight to all three components which can only be distinguished for analytical purposes.

The problem of action is evident in a new genre of humanitarian appeals which Chouliaraki calls 'post-humanitarian' (2010b). Post-humanitarian appeals not only introduce new aesthetic conventions, but are also marked by new moral conventions which Chouliaraki terms the 'technologization of action' and the 'de-emotionalisation of the cause' (Chouliaraki, 2010: 117). The 'technologization of action' refers to the 'simplicity of proposals for action': the equation of action with the clicking of one's mouse (Chouliaraki, 2010: 118), what is popularly referred to as 'clicktivism'. The highly technologized and aestheticized campaigns de-emotionalise the representation of the cause and thus reduce the moral weight of any appeals for action (Chouliaraki, 2010: 118). Emotions (such as guilt, shame, pity or anger) have long been analysed as catalysts for action and as having moral content (see Barbalet, 1998; Nussbaum, 2000). Devoid of an emotional and moral grounding, post-humanitarian appeals become vulnerable - or choose to be too comfortably close - to a market logic which ultimately constitutes a 'perpetuation of a political culture of communitarian narcissism' (Chouliaraki, 2010: 119). In post-humanitarian campaigns the focus is not on the moral question of 'why' (the question which invites understanding), but rather on an introspection of the – usually Western – publics themselves. In so doing, action is decoupled from thought which, to return to our earlier discussion about engagement, is to render it meaningless.

To understand the ways social networking sites represent suffering and invite users to understand, talk and act in relation to the sufferers we need to not only comprehend the textual properties and aesthetics of their representations, but crucially their architectures: the kinds of actions they afford and the social dynamics that they engender.

Social Networking Sites: affordances, dynamics and architectures.

According to a widely cited definition by boyd and Ellison (2007) social networking sites (SNS) are web-based services that allow individuals to (1): construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Although there are differences among specific SNS (Papacharissi, 2009) this definition applies to almost all examples of SNS and certainly to Facebook which, due to its size, has become the dominant SNS in recent years. Second SNS in terms of popularity (at least as these lines are being written) is Twitter with 140 million users as of March 2012. Because Facebook and Twitter are the dominant players and because they were instrumental in the two case studies discussed here I will briefly consider their differences and similarities and the implications for the interactions they afford.

One difference between Twitter and Facebook concerns their degree of openness. Although Twitter can operate as a bounded system for those users who opt to 'protect' their tweets (effectively those who increase their privacy settings), the default position is that tweets are publicly available making Twitter a more open SNS compared to others (see also Marwick and boyd, 2011). A typical Twitter account is publicly available and searchable even by those who do not have a Twitter account. The opposite is true for Facebook profiles whose users typically choose different degrees of privacy and control. If Facebook is often described as a 'walled garden' within the web then the metaphor for Twitter could be that of a 'public park'. This difference has implications for the implied audience of Twitter and Facebook: while one's Facebook audience can potentially be limitless and unknown to the profile owner, this is much more likely in the case of Twitter. Even then Twitter users – just like those of Facebook and other SNS – are mainly communicating with other people whom they know or find interesting (Marwick and boyd, 2011). With the exception of celebrities or other organisations employing Twitter for public communication, Twitter, just like Facebook, is structured around networks of people who are drawn together because of their existing connections or their similarities. Communicating on SNS then, is largely a performance to already existing social contacts brought together and made visible through the SNS software. Even if the Facebook or Twitter audience is potentially limitless, users imagine their audience in more specific ways and act as if it were bounded (Marwick and boyd, 2011: 115). It is crucial to understand who the imagined audience of humanitarian campaigns via SNS is, as action is directed towards these imagined others. Given that SNS communication is often about maintaining social relationships and keeping in touch we can think of it as private content that is publicly (or semi-publicly) expressed.

Another difference concerns the nature of profiles on Facebook and Twitter. Profiles are important because they constitute the way users present and manage themselves in the social media environment. Profiles are also the loci of SNS interactions, recording interactions between the profile owner and their other publicly articulated contacts. These interactions – over which the profile owner does not have complete control – then contribute to the user's online self-presentation. Facebook profiles can be visually rich, while Twitter is primarily textual – although it is possible to upload photos and customise one's wallpaper. Still, the visual cues on Twitter pale in comparison with what is afforded on Facebook where users can 'craft' profiles which are often heavily customised. Apart from a short sentence that users can script to describe themselves, self-presentation on Twitter takes place through a sequence of tweets and conversations with others rather than through crafted profiles. Facebook profiles on the other hand, typically consist of photos, as well as selected tools for taste distinction (Bourdieu, 1980) and performance (Papacharissi, 2009: 213) as users 'type themselves into being' (Sunden, 2003: 3). For example, such an example is the application 'virtual bookshelf' to which users can 'drag' books they wish to show they have read (Paparcharissi, 2009: 213). This can be understood as an example of a virtual 'prop' that online users can use for their self-presentation (Goffman, 1961). Significantly, SNS interactions and self-presentation through users' profiles are recorded and thus traceable. Unlike fleeting face-to-face interactions, online interactions are persistent, retrievable and durable.

boyd (2010: 46) has identified a number of structural affordances that characterise SNS. These are: 'persistence' (the storage capacity of the medium and the permanence of its content); 'replicability' (the fact that content can be easily reproduced, copied and therefore disseminated); 'scalability' (the visibility of this content by other users which is not always controlled by the author of the original content); and finally, 'searchablity' (the fact that this content is accessed through search). According to boyd (2010: 46-49) these structural affordances lead to certain dynamics that shape communication in the SNS environment. A key dynamic that boyd observes relates to who participates in the communication through SNS which takes us back to the earlier point about the implied audience. Unlike face-to-face interaction, it is impossible for SNS users to exactly know their audience – a problem exacerbated because of content permanence as audiences can retrieve stored content historically. Given that knowledge of one's audience is essential for determining one's performance, users solve this problem by imagining a certain bounded audience to which they direct their action, which, however, may be different from their actual audience (boyd, 2010: 50). Additionally, users can enjoy varying degrees of privacy and control in SNS but on the whole, since the point of SNS is precisely the desire to participate in a network, keeping very tight privacy options is not the norm. This has implications for managing the different social contexts one belongs to as the boundaries between the different worlds one inhabits collapse. Even when one is addressing a close friend, that interaction will be tangible and traceable as well as visible to a much larger audience than the intended recipient. In fact most activities on SNS – unless specifically made private – will be made public and thus constitute part of their owner's self presentation.

To take an example: if a user subscribes to 'Causes', a popular Facebook-embedded application for supporting humanitarian causes, unless they choose to

conceal this information their membership will appear on their status update and their 'wall', essentially their profile page. Their status update can be commented upon or 'liked' by their friends. Moreover, if their privacy settings allow this, then this information – together with all the comments – can appear on the news feed of their friends' friends. So a post about donating or supporting a cause can potentially feature on hundreds or thousands of people's feeds – what is termed visibility and scalability. Because this information is digitally recorded it can be retrievable – and even commented upon - at a later date. Crucially, this action like any action in SNS reveals something about the profile owner. The visibility of one's online actions, interactions and memberships becomes part of the narrative of the self, the story that a user tells their SNS friends. Although we should not assume that the sole motivation for all actions is the desire to perform to this implied audience (for that requires a different project) it is reasonable to understand SNS activities and interactions as part of a continuous effort to manage one's self presentation. If users, as Marwick and boyd observe, imagine their audience as specific and act as if it were bounded (2011: 115) this has implications for understanding the moral content of action in SNS.

The case studies

WaterForward
WaterForward is a site launched by Charity: Water, a non-profit organization dedicated to clean water projects in poor countries, in 2011. WaterForward, which aims to raise money for clean water to the almost one billion people globally without it, uses the architectural features of social media and, as is common with many other humanitarian sites – it is also designed to be embedded within the two most popular SNS, Facebook and Twitter. The site is designed as a digital photo album where users can invite their friends (via existing accounts on Facebook or Twitter) but at a price. Users buy space for their friends' portraits at 10 USD each and these funds are then used for clean water projects. The idea is that these invited friends would then 'buy' portrait space for their own friends (they would 'forward the benefaction') creating chains of people until the goal of generating enough money to solve the clean water problem is achieved. The charity – who describe themselves on their website as 'a global movement'– are aiming 'to empower' the almost one billion people using social media 'to make a difference for the nearly one billion living without clean water' (WaterForward, http://www.waterforward.org/faq, last accessed April 2 2012). In fact, *WaterForward* can only be accessed through the established social media Facebook and Twitter chosen because of their popularity and size. A user can only be invited to join the *WaterForward* portrait book though Facebook, which has become the de facto online identity, or Twitter, which will then connect their existing profile page to *WaterForward*. Membership in *WaterForward* will also appear on one's Facebook status and profile thus making a statement about one's action. As this essay is written there are 30,984 users on the *WaterForward* book who have generated USD 309,840 for clean water. (6)
Once on the actual *WaterForward* book it is possible to see all the profile pictures of users who have been invited to the charity network by other users. Clicking on any given picture the following information is available:

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- The user's name – let's create a fictional user named Kate Smith.
- Paid for (ie, who invited and paid for Kate Smith) by: John Smith
- How many people Kate has paid it forward to: 4
- How many people will get clean water as a consequence: 2

Under the profile picture, under the heading 'Chain' are the profile pictures of all connected users – from the one who originally invited Kate Smith, to those invited by her (4) and, finally, the ones her friends' invited (5). At the end comes the summary: so for instance, our fictional user Kate Smith has helped 11 people join the book which equals 5 and half people with clean water.

The public articulation of this information – which, apart from one's profile on Facebook, it is accessible through the *WaterForward* site to all registered users, is about self-representation. Joining a humanitarian campaign and making a statement on one's profile becomes a tool in the presentation of the self, a virtual 'prop' that may confer distinction and other desirable characteristics. In that sense evidence of membership of one's giving to humanitarian causes becomes part of the presentation of the self (Goffman, 1960) just like the aforementioned example of the 'virtual shelf' application.

As interesting with what appears on the *WaterForward* website is what is missing. There is not even one single image of or story about those people who are being helped through the charity. There is no context of the specific projects funded or the different national contexts although there is a list of countries where the charity operates. The emphasis on the network of users and not the cause is typically posthumanitarian (Chouliaraki, 2010). The cause is de-emotionalised (if not annihilated) while action is technologized (Chouliaraki, 2010). There is no invitation to comprehend the scale of the problem or contemplate the plight of those affected. Instead of being engaged users are asked to think whom of their friends they can add to their profile. As such *WaterForward* is a celebration of western users.

Kony 2012
Kony 2012 is the name of a video-based campaign by the non-profit Christian organisation Invisible Children, based in San Diego, California. The 30 minute video was launched on March 5th and within a week it was viewed more than 100 million times on YouTube and other social media breaking all records for a video of this kind. *Kony 2012* is named after the Ugandan warlord, Joseph Kony, who headed the LRA army which operated in Northern Uganda and since 2006 in the wider region. Apart from the film itself the campaign consisted of the website through which users could view the video, pledge their support and purchase *Kony 2012* merchandise (such as t-shirts) including the 30 USD kit which contains two bracelets and a poster of Kony himself. Protesters are urged to put up posters on a particular night, April 20th 2012 in order to 'blanket the cities' over the world and raise awareness about Kony's crimes. The slogan of the campaign 'Make Kony Famous' is ironic and thus typically posthumanitarian (Chouliaraki, 2010). Irony, playfulness and pastiche mark the whole campaign: Kony's poster on which Hitler and Osama Bin Laden feature in the background is a pastiche of pop art. The bracelets of the campaign evoke those worn by concert-goers while the documentary score is high energy electronica.

A central feature of the Kony website was a link to key celebrities' twitter accounts with users urged to write to celebrities in order to generate momentum and political pressure on the issue of Kony. Celebrities included: Oprah, Mark Zuckerberg, Lady Gaga, Angelina Jolie, George Clooney, Bill Gates, Jay Z, Justin Bieber, Rihanna and Bono; while policy makers included ex-Presidents of the US, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, Republican party nominee Mitt Romney, and the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon.

The campaign and the documentary attracted a slew of criticisms relating, among others, to the obscure goals of the campaign (was this ultimately a campaign that aimed to 'make Kony famous' in order to gather support for a US military intervention?); the lack of historical context and the inaccuracies in the documentary; its emotional exploitation; and the patchy finances of its creators. The maelstrom of publicity that ensued the launch of the video campaign led to the apparent mental breakdown of the film's director and presenter and his public arrest. Invisible Children released a second follow up video on April 5th 2012 entitled "Kony: Beyond Famous" through which they tried to address some of the criticisms of the first film.

Having presented the two case studies I will now concentrate the analysis on the following themes: disintermediation and the democratisation of visibility; action and engagement and finally, the elusiveness of cosmopolitanism.

Disintermediation and the democratisation of visibility

A much-celebrated dimension of internet-based communication is its disintermediation (Coleman, 2005). Campaigners are no longer dependent on traditional gatekeepers in order to reach potentially large audiences. This can have consequences for the range of issues that acquire visibility in the public domain. A degree of disintermediation was certainly at play in both *WaterForward* and *Kony 2012* campaigns. However, a factor which contributed to the success of both campaigns was the support of celebrities. *Kony 2012* actively pursued celebrities and was successful in getting support from A-listers such as Oprah who tweeted in support of the campaign to her 10 million followers (for a critique of celebrity advocacy see Chouliaraki, 2012). Such interventions by celebrities may have been catalytic in explaining the phenomenal success of *Kony 2012* (Naughton, 2012). *WaterForward* also pursued the support of public figures although not as systematically. Some of the first people in the book were celebrities such as Richard Branson. However, the endorsement by celebrities was not as strong in the *WaterForward* case which may also partly explain why the campaign was less successful than *Kony 2012*. In any case, what emerges is that internet-based communication is neither unstructured, nor equal. Traditional gatekeepers may be bypassed, but new intermediaries emerge and can determine the varying degrees of success – or failure – of a campaign. Celebrities do not only confer legitimacy to a cause; they also signal to traditional media that a topic has momentum therefore further accentuating the attention to a cause. This certainly happened with *Kony 2012* which received much attention and further visibility via mainstream media following the online interest attesting to the synergy between new and old media for explaining the success of campaigns.

The varying degrees of disintermediation mean that events and humanitarian campaigns can now enter our mediated horizons when previously they might have been left out. Even though internet-based communication is asymmetrically structured and dependent on the power of new intermediaries the mediated public domain is broadened. Whether this broadening constitutes a democratisation of visibility or responsibility (Thompson, 1995), however, is a different matter. If, according to Silverstone, the media constitute the world's publicness (Silverstone, 2007: 29), then the nature of their representations has to be scrutinised before making any assumptions about the democratisation of visibility or the 'space of appearance' (Silverstone, 2007). We should not assume that an increase in quantity is an improvement in quality.

To start with, in neither *WaterForward* nor *Kony 2012* is suffering represented. Suffering is entirely absent from the *WaterForward* campaign which focuses on users profiles and social connections, a 'mirror of their own world' (Chouliaraki, 2010: 119). Even in the Kony film suffering is surprisingly underrepresented. For a 30 minute documentary there is virtually no historical contextualisation. We are not offered any context about the history of the conflict through which LRA emerged. Only in the second film is it actually revealed that Kony is no longer in Uganda – he left in 2006 although his army has been active in other neighbouring countries. Moreover, his victims are not given voice – only one young man, Jacob speaks. We are simply shown the faces of victims of the LRA – close ups in quick alternation and then a landscape photo of them as a group. The victims and the Ugandan people appear as completely disempowered and in need of Western intervention, a problematic representation which reproduces discredited discourses about dependency.

By contrast the film emphasises in all possible ways the agency of Western publics. The *Kony 2012* film begins with the line: 'right now there are more people on Facebook than there were on the planet 200 years ago'. Throughout the film we are reminded what the Facebook generation can achieve, while the film's final part is a celebration of internet-mediated action. The film is narrated through the interactions between the filmmaker, Jason Russell and his four year old son: apart from the simplification of events as these are explained to such a young child, we end up knowing far more about the blond Californian boy than any Ugandan victim. Even the second film, released on April 5th in order to provide more context and clarity, ends with images of a crowd under Brooklyn bridge in New York city holding the banner 'deliver your voice' and 'we are a generation of justice' (16:40). There is no doubt who is being addressed here. *Kony 2012* may be more complex than the *WaterForward* campaign, but it is as posthumanitarian (Chouliaraki, 2010).

Applying the metaphor of distance is revealing. In both *WaterForward* and *Kony 2012* the sufferers are too far. However, there is a difference between *WaterForward* and *Kony 2012*. *WaterForward* represents an emotionally sanitised version of humanitarian appeal. One gives because one is a member of a select group and that's it. *Kony 2012* is different in that emotions are invoked at two different levels: the first emanate from the simplistic framing of the crimes committed by the LRA – recall that we are told these crimes as they are narrated to a four year old. However, this is a relatively small part of the 30 minute film which is otherwise dominated by the positive emotions associated with the celebration of (Western)

publics' ability to change the world through social media. This celebration of citizen empowerment is 'ecstatic' (Chouliaraki, 2006) and narcissistic. In that sense the message in *Kony 2012* is not dissimilar to that of *Water Forward*: you must participate (and donate) because you are a one of these empowered people. Although *Kony 2012* invokes emotions of identification, the cause itself continues to be largely de-emotionalised (Chouliaraki, 2010). In that sense *Kony 2012* also exemplifies posthumanitarian communication and a communitarian logic (Chouliaraki, 2010). It is thus not possible to conclude that the 'appearance' of these campaigns in the relatively disintermediated yet asymmetrically structured public domain constitutes a 'democratisation of responsibility' (Thompson, 1995), or a bridging of the profound distance between the sufferer and the spectator (Cohen, 2001).

The promise of engagement and action

Both *WaterForward* and *Kony 2012* are action-oriented campaigns exploiting the interactive nature of SNS. *WaterForward* is driven by donations, by 'giving forward' your sponsor's generosity to initially place you in the 'online' book. Action is a one-off act which requires no further involvement. In the *Kony 2012* campaign action was envisaged at different levels: viewers were encouraged to 'forward the link of the video'; they were asked to buy the Kony kit retailing at 30 USD (this contained a poster of Kony and a bracelet) or to donate a larger sum to the campaign. Viewers were also asked to write – via Twitter links on the Kony website – to the celebrities and policymakers. Finally, viewers were urged to put the purchased posters up on a given night (April 20, 2012) which was planned as a moment of action and resistance named 'cover the night'. In the Kony campaign action ranges from one-off acts to a more persistent involvement. More broadly internet-mediated action is celebrated as throughout the film familiar imagery from current affairs, eg, the Arab Spring, is juxtaposed to close-up shots of someone clicking 'send' or 'share'.

But before celebrating, we must consider what this action is about and who is it directed towards? In the *WaterForward* example the answer is obvious – interactions are between the book members, the publicly articulated network of benefactors. The emphasis is on their connections and on the level of benefaction each has achieved. Although - one hopes - that, ultimately, the funds are channelled to improving provision of clean water there is a disconnect between the cause and action. This is not just the result of the posthumanitarian aesthetics of the campaign and the lack of its grounding on the 'moral question of why' (Chouliaraki, 2010) as indicated in the previous section, but also the result of the architecture of the site where action is oriented towards already existing social contacts. But even in *Kony 2012* actions – at least the reposting and forwarding which was most prolific amongst viewers– was largely oriented towards familiar contacts. Given that reposting takes place in SNS where users, as we discussed earlier, act with a bounded audience in mind, this action is orientated at a communitarian level.

In both campaigns action is subjected to the market logic. In both cases users are urged to click – and pay – in order to either buy a 'space on the charity book' or a kit. Even the apparently revolutionary zeal of posting posters in *Kony 2012* passes through one's bank account since the poster has to be bought together with a bracelet or a t-shirt - both sartorial props – which tell the world that one is engaged. Even

though a utilitarian or consequentialist perspective of ethics might not see any harm in revolution through consumption as long as the cause is being supported (for a discussion see Appiah, 2003: 206-13), in both case studies it is possible for one to be left wondering what is the cause in the first place when it hasn't been explained properly. In *WaterForward* we are not given the context or details of the funded projects, while in *Kony 2012,* as many critics pointed out, the goals of the campaign remain opaque or dubious: to effectively fund a military campaign to capture a war criminal.

Because of the disembedding of the suffering from the grand emotions of pity and guilt and the attendant moral frameworks, appeals to action in posthumanitarian campaigns lose their legitimacy and moral meaning (Chouliaraki, 2010). What we observe in these two campaigns is a fetishization of action which is decoupled from an understanding of the causes or contexts of suffering. This exemplifies what Chouliaraki terms the 'technologization of action' where action is commodified, reduced to a click (Chouliaraki, 2010: 117). Without an understanding of the causes of humanitarian appeals and without a moral framework of engagement with distant others action becomes almost meaningless at least when evaluated from a standpoint of cosmopolitan ethics. The posthumanitarian nature of the campaigns is accentuated by the architectures of SNS, which bring together networks of people who are known to one another or who are already similar and thus orientate action at a communitarian level.

The elusiveness of cosmopolitanism

A close look at the two campaigns reveals that they do not fulfil the criteria of a cosmopolitan project. For Beck, a 'cosmopolitan outlook and sensibility opens up space of *dialogical imagina*tion in everyday practice' which involves 'the capacity to see oneself from the perspective of cultural others and to give this practical effect in one's own experience through the exercise of boundary-transcending imagination' (Beck, 2006: 89, emphasis in the original). The content of the campaigns and the SNS architectures in which they were embedded did not evoke a dialogical imagination or the self-reflexivity that is a necessary ingredient for a 'boundary-transcending imagination' (Beck, 2006: 89). A fundamental limitation of the campaigns was that although they encouraged action, this was not embedded in an understanding of the suffering and a moral orientation towards distant others. Action without a reflexive understanding loses its moral meaning which proves a wider point that action in and by itself should not be assumed as a superior form of engagement; engagement can take different forms, but for these to be part of a cosmopolitan sensibility and democratisation of responsibility they need to be couched in a reflexive awareness of the self and its others. Note that this point concerns the analysis of the campaigns themselves as potential triggers for engagement and *not* an assumption about the audiences' actual engagement which is a different project.

Arguing that the campaigns did not cultivate cosmopolitan sensibilities and responsibilities is not to say that they were unethical but that they were oriented to a communitarian style of global connectivity. In that sense, they may be part of what Beck calls a process of 'cosmopolitanization' (Beck, 2006) which is a more

descriptive category of capturing global interconnections that doesn't carry the normative weight of the cosmopolitan vision.

The communitarian logic of the campaigns is not only due to their post-humanitarian content and aesthetics (Chouliaraki, 2010) but also the way SNS architectures structure interactions among users. However, rather than concluding that all SNS communication is inherently communitarian I want to turn my attention to a new genre of factual reporting and commenting which can potentially open up the space for reflexive cosmopolitanism. I call this genre 'polymedia events'.

Polymedia events

Dayan and Katz (1992) developed the theory of 'Media Events' to refer to the broadcasting of public, formal and usually planned events which constitute the 'high holidays' of mass communication and which foster a collective – usually national – identity. These were televised events, often reverential in character, such as royal weddings and state visits for which the audience had to, figuratively at least, 'dress up' rather than down (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 9). Polymedia events are not intended to replace media events for these may still exist (such an example may be the recent royal wedding of 2011) although their features may need to be rethought in the context of a converged and fragmented media environment. Rather, polymedia events refer to a different phenomenon altogether when an event triggered by the media generates a series of reactions or related events which are played out in different media platforms. In contrast to media events, polymedia events are unplanned, transnational and decentralised in the sense that there is no shared official or central narrative; polymedia events are marked by parallel or clashing narratives.

To develop my argument about polymedia events I draw on polymedia theory which I developed with Miller in the context of interpersonal communication (Madianou and Miller, 2012). By polymedia we referred to the integrated environment of converged communicative opportunities, comprising of technologies, media, platforms and applications as they intersect and hybridise. Rather than focusing on how users navigate this converged environment for managing their relationships (which is the original purpose of polymedia theory), polymedia events refers to those events and news stories which unfold across different media technologies and platforms which are part of the composite environment of polymedia.

Kony 2012 is a typical polymedia event: it started as YouTube documentary, but its controversial character generated a plethora of blogs, online discussions, newspaper articles, television and radio reports as well as webcasts. The subject of these different media ranged from an assessment of the *Kony 2012* campaign and a scrutiny of the record of its sponsors (Invisible Children), to a wider discussion of the ethics of humanitarian communication. The *Kony 2012* campaign, which as already discussed did not give a voice to the victims, triggered a project led by Al Jazeera using the open access software Frontline SMS for Ugandans to record their own experiences. (7) Al Jazeera dedicated a section of its website to 'the Kony Debate'. There were even blogs and campaigns which promoted a pastiche of the Kony 2012 poster in order to make a political point about other war crimes. One such example was the Tony2012 campaign referring to the ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair and his

involvement in the Iraq War (8). The *Kony 2012* campaign and its aftermath, which included the public arrest of its director, Jason Russell, following what was an apparent mental breakdown allegedly due to the pressure he faced following the film's publicity, featured in newspaper front pages and the major network news broadcasts globally. My argument is that the slew of content and programming that accompanied the video campaign exceeded the original film itself. *Kony 2012* started as a video campaign but became much more than the original documentary. Its aftermath was so large that our understanding needs to encompass the various platforms and channels where it was analysed, dissected and re-constituted in different forms that also included the voices which were annihilated in the original film.

Crucially, *Kony 2012*, from the original 30 minute web video to the broadcast of its director's public breakdown and arrest on the TMZ celebrity website, unfolded entirely *in* the media. All of its aspects were mediated, bringing together the multiple platforms, channels and media of the converged environment of polymedia. Unlike traditional 'media events' (Dayan and Katz, 1992) where, because of the centralised one-to-many architecture of television, there was one overarching narrative,(9) polymedia events are fundamentally decentralised. There are various parallel or contradictory narratives all of which share a concern with an original 'trigger' issue – in our case the *Kony 2012* campaign – but without consensus. Despite the polyphony in polymedia events, however, their narratives are hierarchically organised. For there may have been thousands of blogs written assessing the pitfalls of the *Kony 2012* campaign, but that number pales in comparison to the 100 million people who watched the original video. Polymedia events may be decentralised, but they are asymmetrically structured.

Although it is beyond of the scope of this article to fully develop a theory of polymedia events, for analytical purposes it is important to highlight what I see as the key features. Polymedia events are:

1) events which start and develop 'in' the media. Typically, the media which trigger the events are digital media as those potentially allow more readily the emergence of multiple narratives and stress the non-centralised nature of the events. However, this is not absolutely necessary. A well-known controversy which qualifies as a polymedia event is the publication of the infamous Mohammed cartoons by the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* in 2005. This event started in a traditional medium (a newspaper) with the publication of the controversial cartoons and continued through various media platforms, old and new, as well as offline.

2) Events which (following the initial mediated trigger) unfold in at least half a dozen types of different media platforms and channels (SNS, blogs, video-based social media, broadcast media (television and radio), newspapers) all of which are part of the polymedia environment (Madianou and Miller, 2012). The polymedia environment has no single architecture as it is effectively an integrated environment of affordances. In that sense the limitations of SNS architectures (which as we saw in the case studies analysed here orientate action to a known implied audience) can be balanced by those of other media which are part of polymedia environment.

3) Events about which there are multiple parallel or even contradictory narratives. This contrasts with traditional television or print news where traditionally there may be a couple perspectives which in turn may be challenged by a third.

Polymedia events have multiple strands which are triggered by an initial event, and these strands can even attract attention in their own right. These parallel or clashing strands can bring into contact diverse publics thus, potentially, broadening the implied audience of SNS.

4) Events which become large in scale and audience reach. In other words, events or campaigns which become 'viral'. *Kony 2012* was watched by over 100 million people while the Danish Cartoons controversy affected millions of people in several countries over a course of months between 2005 and 2006.

5) Events which are transnational consistent with the transnational nature of polymedia and new media more broadly.

Rather than being the norm, polymedia events are rare. Few events fulfil the above criteria, especially the multiplicity and decentralised criterion. As Fenton (2012) has argued, far from delivering on the promised potential, digital technologies are not inherently changing journalism for the better. News in the digital environment is often about 'more of the same' rather than plurality and diversity.

When they do occur, because of their decentralised nature, polymedia events can potentially play a role in moral education. Although the initial 'trigger' event may not fulfil cosmopolitan sensibilities, their fragmented and decentralised nature means that they invite people to connect the dots and to put the pieces of a wider jigsaw together. It is through their *form* that they ask the moral question 'why' which is the precondition for talk and action. SNS as part of the polymedia environment can become an inextricable part of polymedia events. While on their own SNS typically orientate action at a communitarian level, when they become part of the wider environment of communicative opportunities that is polymedia (Madianou and Miller, 2012), SNS can potentially contribute to the opening up of the 'space of appearance', inviting people to understand distant others and to share the responsibility of knowing. Note that the caveat – and it is a significant one – here is 'the people': the potential of polymedia events to transcend the limitations of SNS architectures depends on the users willingness to follow the decentralised narratives across a range of media. Polymedia events have an inherent openness but they can only fulfil the promise of cosmopolitanism if users accept the invitation to participate.

Conclusion

This article weighed the optimism regarding the potential of SNS communication for encouraging humanitarian action and for the cultivation of cosmopolitan sensibilities against the evidence from the analysis of two campaigns, *Kony 2012* and *WaterForward*. Apart from examining the content of the campaigns as has traditionally been the focus of humanitarian communication, the article investigated the architectures of SNS and observed that they structure interactions between people who already know one another. Although the analysis of the campaigns revealed that they encourage – even fetishise – action this is orientated at a communitarian level and not towards distant others. As a consequence network architectures heighten the campaigns' post-humanitarian aesthetics and style which is essentially communitarian (Chouliaraki, 2010). Thus the action encouraged by the *Kony2012* and *WaterForward* campaigns did not fulfil the cosmopolitan criteria of

reflexive dialogue and imagination. However, the article has observed an emerging new genre of reporting and commenting which is termed 'polymedia events', drawing on the theory of polymedia developed in the context of interpersonal communication (Madianou and Miller, 2012). Polymedia events are events which start in the media and unfold in at least half a dozen media platforms, are decentralised in their narratives and are transnational in nature and large in scale and audience reach. Such events can potentially extend beyond the limitations of SNS communication by opening up the space for cosmopolitan imagination. Although rare, when SNS become part of polymedia events they can potentially play a role in cultivating cosmopolitan sensibilities by inviting audiences to make sense of the decentralised narratives that unfold in the polymedia environment.

Notes

(1)   Crowdsourcing is a distributed problem-solving process that involves the outsourcing of tasks to an unknown network of people, ie, a crowd. Crowdsourcing software is usually open access software which facilitates distributed problem solving processes by networks of users.

(2)   Ushahidi, which means testimony in Swahili, is software initially developed to map reports of post-electoral violence in Kenya during 2008.
latest data for December 2011, see:
http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22 Page last consulted on April 1st 2012.

(3)   Drawing on the theory of polymedia (Madianou and Miller, 2012).

(4)   The 'like' bar of Facebook – which has come to define this particular SNS – can be clicked when users wish to express affirmation towards content or towards another user.

(5)   Between March and April 2012 (the period when this essay was written) the membership of Water: Forward increased by about 950 people.

(6)   http://ec2-46-51-135-144.eu-west-1.compute.amazonaws.com/ugandaspeaks/main

(7)   http://www.disinfo.com/2012/03/dont-be-fooled-by-kony-2012-its-tony-2012-we-need-to-get-our-own-war-criminal-blair/

(8)   Of course, even in media events this dominant narrative may be contested as Couldry has remarked (Couldry, 2002).

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