

Vandevoordt, R. (2018). Moral cosmopolitanism and the everyday life: how students encounter distant others. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(2), 195-210.

Abstract

While moral cosmopolitanism has been at the heart of many theoretical debates for decades if not centuries, empirically driven analyses have only comparably recently fed into a growing body of literature. Most of these recent studies have successfully mapped the discourses, dispositions and affects through which individual actors interpret and experience their encounters with distant others. This article seeks to contribute to this line of empirical research by exploring the everyday situations and spheres in which these discourses and dispositions are embedded. In doing so, this study draws on a qualitative analysis of 19 students' encounters with distant others, through both a 10-day diary on their media use and in-depth individualised interviews.

Manuscript

Every day again our screens are flooded with stories urging us to care, speak or act upon the problems of people from around the globe. Whether they tell us about hunger crises, earthquakes or sweatshops: at least in the backs of our minds, we are continuously aware that there are millions if not billions of far-away-others deserving our attention. Yet somehow, the appeals they express have become so self-evident to most of us that we hardly ever really reflect upon them anymore, let alone respond to them by undertaking any actions. At the heart of our moral condition we find a series of existential questions we hardly ever address: how do we deal with the continuous presence of these distant others in the margins of our consciousness? Under which conditions do we engage in relations of responsibility with these distant others? And how do we make sense of our encounters with them, and respond to them through affects, discourses and actions?

Over the last two decades more and more research has sought for answers to these questions. Whereas early contributions were almost exclusively theoretical (Beck 2006; Chouliaraki 2013; Cohen 2001; Moeller 1999; Tester 1997; Silverstone 2007) an empirical turn has recently emerged, both in sociology (Lamont & Aksartova 2002; Skrbis & Woodward 2007) and in media studies (Hojer 2004; Kyriakidou 2008; Robertson 2010; Seu 2003, 2011). Scholars have thereby begun to map the wide variety of discourses, dispositions and affects through which individuals experience their encounters with distant others – briefly defined as people we do not know and with whom we seem to have little in common. Yet only scant attention has been drawn to the *actual practices and contexts* in which these discourses, dispositions and affects are embedded. This lacuna is not that surprising, of course, if one takes into account the elusiveness of the topic these studies seek to address: rather than taking up the middle ground of our daily concerns, distant others' stories seem to hover remotely in the margins of our consciousness, much like ominous clouds on the far horizon. Their peripheral position in our lives makes them particularly hard to grasp within the precise contexts in which we encounter them. This article contributes to the literatures on cosmopolitanism, distant suffering and morality by systematically

thinking through the relevance of concrete practices for understanding why and how we (do not) engage with distant others. I do so by drawing on a tailored set of methods and, more crucially, by suggesting a spherological approach centred around the key processes that serve to open or close our life-worlds to distant others.

1. Researching moral cosmopolitanism

The nature and the scope of moral relations between distant others has become quite a trending topic, both in normative (Benhabib 2004; Appiah 2006; Habermas 2001) and in empirical debates (Vertovec & Cohen 2002; Scott 2014). In media studies, these relations have been conceptualised most often as instances of 'distant suffering', thereby focussing primarily on how these stories are represented in the media and interpreted by Western audiences (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2013; Ong 2012; Silverstone 2007). In normative debates and sociology these responsibilities for and among faraway others have been conceptualised through a wide range of cosmopolitanisms (Beck 2006; Delanty 2007; Fine 2007; Hannerz 1990; Lamont & Aksartova 2002; Vertovec & Cohen 2002). Even though entirely different terms may be perfectly suitable to designate the same content, in this article I use 'moral cosmopolitanism' to refer to *a sense of responsibility for or between distant others*. The main advantage of this notion, is that it helps us to examine under which conditions *social and cultural cosmopolitans* – people who, respectively, have regular contacts with individuals from across the globe, whether because of the neighbourhood they live in or because of travelling and, people who have an open disposition towards unknown beliefs and customs (Cohen & Vertovec 2002; Hannerz 1990; Skrbis & Woodward 2007) – also become *moral cosmopolitans* – people who experience a sense of responsibility towards distant others.

One of the more pertinent developments in empirical studies of cosmopolitanism and distant suffering, is that a shift has occurred from a top-down to a bottom-up perspective. In sociology, scholars thus moved from studying elite individuals and high-profile political institutions (Archibugi and Held 1998; Vertovec and Cohen 2002) to 'ordinary cosmopolitans' (Glick Schiller et al. 2011; Lamont and Aksartova 2002; Skrbis and Woodward 2007). Similarly, while early analyses of 'distant suffering' predominantly centred around the symbolic power of media representations (Moeller 1999; Tester 1997; Chouliaraki 2008) more recent work focuses on how audience members of all kinds of strata interpret and respond to such representations (Hojjer 2004; Robertson 2010; Seu 2003, 2011; Madianou 2005).

Most of these studies have primarily relied upon reflective questioning methods, so as to elicit a number of discourses from their respondents. Thus many conduct their research by either proposing general topics to which participants are asked to respond, or they confront them with particular news stories and NGO campaigns. In spite of the undisputable merits of these approaches in mapping the overall contours of peoples' ideas and experiences, their methodological design has only rarely enabled us to explore the *actual context* in which individuals encounter distant others (Ong 2012). Only a few scholars have taken some steps towards examining the everyday lives in which these encounters acquire their practical meaning – steps that were propagated theoretically by Thompson (1995), Tomlinson (1999) and Silverstone (2007). Skrbis and Woodward (2007) and Robertson (2010) for instance, did not simply examine 'ordinary cosmopolitanism' through general discussions of moral cosmopolitanism or globalisation, but tried to stimulate respondents to reflect more precisely on their everyday (cosmopolitan) practices. Similarly, Scott (2014) used diaries and focus groups to study how students encountered distant others, rather than providing them with pre-selected stories and images of distant others, which they were then asked to interpret (as in Hoijer 2004; Kyriakidou 2008; Seu 2003, 2011).

And lastly, Madianou (2005) devoted part of her ethnography on Greek media audiences to their encounters with foreign news as it entered their living rooms.

Notwithstanding these pioneering efforts, there is still a considerable task ahead of us in unpacking these practical contexts, in particular because they may well represent a missing link in *theories* of moral cosmopolitanism as well. The argument I want to make in this article is pretty straightforward, but I think it needs to be thought through much more systematically: one of the main reasons we have been theoretically under-equipped to think through the relevance of practical contexts for understanding how we encounter distant others and, in some cases, develop a sense of responsibility towards them, is that our moral relations with distant others have been implicitly theorised, both in concepts and in methods, by means of three types of oppositions. These are:

Cosmopolitan vs local identities. Traditionally, scholars have opposed cosmopolitan or global forms of identity to their local counterparts, such as neighbourhoods, nation-states, or ethnicity (Hannerz 1990; Merton 1968). While these dichotomies have been criticised by several scholars throughout the years, based on the argument that the global cannot but be local at the same time (Appadurai 1996; Beck 2006; Robertson 1992; Thompson 1994; Tomlinson 1999) this figure of thought is so straightforward, intuitively tangible and hermeneutically useful that it continues to resurface in all kinds of contexts and places. Whenever this pair turns up, scholars assume a divide between a sense of belonging that is more secluded within a narrow, limited group on the one hand, and its trans-local, trans-ethnic or trans-cosmic counterpart on the other (Hiebert 2002; Lamont & Aksartova 2002; Roudometof 2005).

Reflexivity vs 'thoughtlessness'. Several scholars have conceived of moral engagements with distant others in terms of individuals' ability to reflect upon global interdependence, that is, how their own actions may have indirect consequences for unknown others and vice versa (Beck 2006; Skrbis & Woodward 2007; Habermas 2001). By conceiving them in this manner, such moral engagements are logically opposed to either ignorance, a lack of political awareness (Beck 2006; Skrbis & Woodward 2007), a state of denial (Cohen 2001) or, more individually, the inability to reflect upon anything taking place beyond one's 'own little world' (Arendt 1977). From such a perspective, moral engagements with distant others, are examined best by exploring individuals' discourses and their ability to reflect upon global issues.

Affective involvement vs de-sensitization. Especially scholars in media and cultural studies have explored individuals' affective engagements with distant others, whether this emerges through the regimes of empathy, indignation or aesthetics (Boltanski 1999; Kyriakidou 2008; Hoijer 2004). Conceived of in this sense, moral engagements with distant others appear as affective effects of incoming stimuli, and are opposed to cold-hearted indifference (Tester 1997), de-sensitization (Seu 2003) or, most famously, 'compassion fatigue' (Moeller 1999).

These intuitively self-evident oppositions have also nested themselves in the methods researchers rely upon: scholars show sad or infuriating pictures so as to 'test' respondents' affective engagements, they suggest discussions on global issues to see how people reason and justify their opinions, or they present respondents with queries on ethnic identity to see under which circumstances they bridge or solidify these fault lines. From this perspective it makes sense to put forward the provocative claim that these thought categories have primarily helped us examine the 'forms' in which relations with distant others manifest themselves: as either affective involvement or fatigue, reflexivity or thoughtlessness, and identification and dis-identification.

In this article I want to break open the oppositional categories in which moral cosmopolitanism has been predominantly theorised, so as to excavate the practices through which these three 'forms' may or may not emerge in the first place. It may well be the case, for instance, that it is largely the *practical organisation of our social lives* which enables or disables us to encounter distant others in the first place, *even before* a sense of identity, rational reflection or affective engagement can emerge. What we need to explore in more detail then, are the practical mechanisms which both open and close our minds, our senses and our bodies to distant others and the moral appeals they express towards us. And although part of the argument stretches beyond this article's empirical reach, it could well be the case that, due to the ongoing globalisation of our life-worlds, we have become such virtuosos in filtering out stories on distant others, that we continuously do it half-consciously by organising our lives in particular ways.

These everyday practices may thus have a quite substantial impact upon *which* distant others we encounter, how we *interpret and experience* these encounters, and how we subsequently *respond* to them through actions, reflections and affects. A student, for instance, who does not watch television, read newspapers or websites, may nonetheless have intense social networks across the globe due to studying abroad. As a result, her encounters with distant others differ from those of her fellow students both in terms of *who* she encounters (which is dependent on the nature of her network rather than the selection criteria provided by the mass media), *under which conditions she does so* (by sharing personal experiences with friends rather than reading mediated stories as an audience member) and *how these are interpreted and responded to* (presumably leading to a more intense engagement compared to mediated encounters). By concentrating on the *forms* in which cosmopolitan stances appear – identity, reflexivity and affects - however, scholars have been theoretically under-equipped to examine these practical social arrangements systematically. The notable exception to that rule is the notion of 'mediation', which, together with the convergence of media studies and the anthropology of everyday life signifies a crucial step in that direction as it emphasises the context in which mediated messages are produced, received and circulated (Silverstone 2007; Madianou 2005, 2009; Ong 2012). Nevertheless, articulating the importance of context is still a far way from developing a theory on how these contexts work, and how they might function in enabling or disabling our encounters with distant others and the moral claims they express.

2. Situations, micro-spheres and mezzo-spheres

A useful way of approaching these practical contexts, I want to suggest here, is by first providing a detailed description of individuals' *actual encounters* with stories on distant others before, second, analysing the *situations*, *microspheres* and *mezzo-spheres* that are operative in these encounters. Consider the following example: on a Wednesday morning one of the students participating in this research was having breakfast with her father at home, as she began scrolling through the recent posts on Facebook. Because she was subscribed to a number of newsfeeds, headlines passed by on the Ebola crisis in West-Africa, the developments in the Syrian conflict and some other stories she could not really remember when we talked a few days later. Whilst sipping from her cup, she noted that a friend had sent her a personal message including little more than a link to a long-read on the working conditions in which young Indian women produced her favourite tea brand. She opened the story and read it with great interest. A few moments later she discussed it with her father, who mockingly asked whether she was shocked enough to read any further. Accepting the challenge, she began surfing the internet for similar stories, comparing the production circumstances of competing brands, only to find out that there was hardly any information available.

As a first step, we need to analyse in detail the *interactional situations* in which individuals do or do not encounter distant others. This means, most importantly, that we include all elements that may be relevant in such a situation, whether they are subjects, objects, affects, thoughts, actions, spaces or lapses of time (Knorr-Cetina 2003, 2006; Boltanski & Thévenot 2006; Tomlinson 1999) – again this comes very close to what the notion of 'mediation' incites us to do: include all relevant aspects of the 'context' in which mediated encounters take place (Madianou 2005, 2009; Ong 2012; Silverstone 2007). All the elements that were present in this situation had at least a potential impact on whether or not this student engaged with the story, and how she did so. The presence of her father, for instance, encouraged her to discuss and continue her interest in Indian women's labour conditions for example, whilst her morning ritual of flicking through Facebook posts and the message of her friend were needed to open up her life-world to a very particular type of story. More importantly for our purposes, furthermore, is that these elements' impacts cannot be reduced to a general disposition to reflect, a wider sense of identity, or an overall emotional availability.

Second, in the moments she decided to read the long-read sent to her by a friend, and to discuss it with her father, this student helped to create a *microsphere* in which particular interpretations, words, feelings and actions were selected out of the range of possibilities provided by the situation (Vandevoordt 2018). By creating such microspheres actors transform structurally ambivalent situations into experiential spaces where they find themselves at home in a familiar, even intimate configuration of all kinds of elements. At the same time, however, these microspheres function to protect or "immunise" such inner worlds from elements that might pose a threat to this ontological tranquillity (Sloterdijk 2014; Vandevoordt 2018). The ambivalent situation in which this student found herself, was one in which she received several stimuli to read stories on distant others, most of them produced by newsfeeds on her Facebook page. By clicking on her friend's message, she helped to create a microsphere around a web of personal relations involving subjects (her friend), objects (her favourite tea brand), affects (concern and indignation for Indian women's working conditions) and thoughts (on finding information on these structural interdependencies). At the same time, this microsphere functioned as a filter to protect her

life-world from more horrendous, potentially more disturbing news stories on the Ebola-crisis or the Syrian conflict. In sum, such microspheres fulfil a protective function by selecting and steering these encounters in a particular direction well before reflection, emotional engagement or political action take place.

Third, even though microspheres have to be created anew in every singular situation, there are mezzospheres or patterns of arrangements which recursively recur across different situations.¹ The friend who sent her the story for instance, found it on an alternative news website she had been obliged to follow for a module in communication sciences. From a more classical socio-structural perspective, the opening up of these students' life-worlds to that particular story had therefore been made possible by a situational arrangement produced by a specific institution: the university and the communication sciences department more particularly. This shows us that exploring the mezzo-spheres which are most dominant in individuals' life-worlds, might help us to understand *why* particular types of microspheres emerge from singular situations, in which encounters with distant others are pre-selected, pre-structured and pre-formed. And from a socio-structural perspective, analysing the interrelations between situations, microspheres and mezzospheres enables us to examine precisely *how* social structures ultimately have an impact upon individuals' encounters with distant others, and the sense of responsibility that may emerge from that.

3. On method and data

In October 2014, 19 university students were asked to fill in a 10-day diary on their media use. After these diaries were analysed a first time, they then served as a point of departure for in-depth interviews with each of the respondents. This two-step approach was based on two existing studies on students' everyday media practices (Coundry et al 2007; Scott 2014). In a first phase, these studies asked respondents to fill in diaries on their media practices, after which they were asked to discuss their entries in focus groups. The sole difference with my approach is that the focus groups these studies relied upon in the second round, were replaced with individual interviews. The main reason to do so, was to draw connections between individuals' (mediated) encounters with distant others, and the micro- and mezzo-spheres in which these individuals partake more regularly – as distinct from the discourses and repertoires that would emerge from focus group formats. In other words, the methods were designed to draw out more connections between the immediate context in which encounters with distant others took place, and the more 'extended' context in which they were nested.

3.1 The respondents

All respondents had previously spent some time of their education abroad, ranging from one month in the case of doing fieldwork for their master's thesis, to participating in different exchange programmes for more than a year. As I noted earlier, concentrating on this type of respondents obviously has its limits, as it reproduces a widespread bias towards elites in studies of cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, focussing on this group of social and cultural cosmopolitans does have the advantage of shedding some light on the particular conditions under which transnational interactions and practices feed into a sense of responsibility towards particular distant others (Beck 2006; Mau et al 2008; Robertson 1992). In addition, the centrality of university life in their accounts may even help to emphasise the point this article wants to make: that these specific social contexts are crucial for understanding why and how individuals encounter distant others.

To include a wider range of mezzo-spheres into this study, respondents were selected from 4 disciplines: biology, medicine, applied economics, and social sciences (including communication and political sciences). While the initial target was set on 5 students from each discipline, the diary phase began with on an additional student per discipline to compensate for possible fall-outs. Hence while 24 students began writing their diaries, only 19 students effectively handed them in, including 6 students in social sciences, 4 in applied economics, 4 in medicine and 5 in biology. Only those who handed in their diaries were subsequently interviewed. All respondents were between 19 and 23 years old, and out of the 19 participants there were 12 women and 7 men. As an indication of their socio-economic background, information was also taken into account of their parents educational level (10 respondents' parents had both obtained higher education, 5 respondents had one parent who had received higher education, and 4 respondents' parents did not receive higher education).

3.2 The diaries

Each diary contained three open questions for every day. First, respondents were asked to note down all the media they had used throughout the day, including the time and place they had done so. A typical

entry could thus be '*The Guardian*, 7.30 a.m., at home during breakfast'. Second, respondents were asked whether they had noticed any news, advertisements or campaigns for 'good causes', such as a national fundraising campaign for Syrian refugees or an Amnesty International call to write letters for gay rights activists in Russia. Third, students were asked which stories or images they were particularly struck by, and why they thought this was the case. This question cut right to the heart of the entire analysis, as it generated information on precisely how and under which conditions respondents actively engaged with stories on distant others, how they interpreted these stories and, in some cases, how they responded to them. In addition, this question helped to probe into the mezzo-spheres dominating their everyday life, as entries could include *any* story whatsoever (cf. Couldry et al. 2007).

3.3 The interviews

After the diary entries were analysed a first time, respondents were invited for a semi-structured interview at a place and time that suited them. These lasted between 43 and 101 minutes with an average of 62 minutes. The interviews generally followed the structure of the diaries, albeit that some additional questions were asked to probe deeper into respondents' everyday lives. Four topics were addressed. First, they were asked to reflect on their everyday media routines, e.g. why they read particular newspapers on certain times and places, whether they did this alone or in company, and what they liked about the media they frequently consulted. Second, they were stimulated to tell about the stories and the NGO activities that had struck them. So if respondents wrote down an entry on Doctors Without Borders' volunteers fighting Ebola in Guinea, they were asked what particularly attracted their attention to that story, what they thought about it, and whether and how they discussed it afterwards with someone else. As these questions were meant to probe into respondents' life-worlds, these topics were often discussed at length during the interview, thereby following their personal interests. Third, respondents were asked a number of biographical questions, on how their current interests and passions came to being (e.g. in fashion, or in biology), how they thought their travelling experiences had impacted their worldview, and what their parents' and peers' travelling and media routines were. These questions served to provide at least a minimal idea of how their current mezzo-spheres (practices, perspectives, values and institutions) were influenced by previous experiences and socialisation.

Fourth, based on Michèle Lamont's (1991) classical study in moral sociology, respondents were asked a number of questions to identify the most important values on which they implicitly or explicitly drew to evaluate other persons. More precisely, they were asked three types of questions: which people and/or organisations do you admire, and why do you do so; compared to whom do you sometimes feel proud or ashamed of yourself; and lastly, respondents were given a list of approximately 20 personal characteristics (e.g. success; loyalty; honesty; refined taste; being able to laugh with oneself), from which they were then asked to select and discuss the 5 characteristics they found most and the 5 found least important. Again, the specific goal of this last set of questions was to acquire a fuller grasp of the mezzo-spheres that were dominating respondents' everyday lives.

4. Encounters from three untypical students

On the following pages three students are presented so as to exemplify how social spheres structure, enable and constrain encounters with distant others. They were selected here *not* because they are representative for a particular social group, but because their cases provide particularly rich and dense instances of *how* these encounters may emerge and proceed. In other words, their main goal is not to construct ideal-types of cosmopolitans, but to phenomenologically describe how social cosmopolitans may or may not develop a sense of responsibility towards a distant other.

4.1 Ben: fitting the world into a sphere

Sat in a comfy couch on a lazy Saturday afternoon Ben, an applied-economics student, began reading the extended weekend edition of *De Standaard*, a Flemish broadsheet. One report particularly caught his interest, as it told of Bolivian president Evo Morales' re-election. According to Ben, Morales' re-election was largely due to him 'giving so much help to the poor', which he considered a 'mega easy choice': Bolivia possesses a great deal of natural resources such as gold and silver, of which the president collected easily gained state revenues, before 'distributing them to the poor'. Ben critically reflected on this state of affairs: 'is that good (policy) in the long term? I don't think so, it's probably not. But I can understand why he does that. It's the easy thing to do and it keeps him in power.' I singled out this interpretation because it contains a rhetorical pattern returning in nearly all of the stories that struck him: a misrecognised scientific (economic) truth is opposed to power-driven, populist politicians proclaiming leftist goals for their own benefit. This argument recurred again quite explicitly in, for example, discussions of the newly elected Brazilian and Indonesian presidents and, closer to home, a national debate on some of the austerity measures taken by the Federal Belgian government.

This strictly economic take on reality was further evidenced in how Ben conceived of social policies more generally: they were ultimately nothing more nor less than acts of charity. Hence his articulation of Morales' *giving* money or *distributing* state revenues to the poor rather than, say, *redistributing* income or *tackling* inequality as a more rights-based perspective would suggest. More tellingly perhaps, is that Ben categorised a number of non-economic policy measures within the category of 'good causes' provided in the diary. Thus, when the city of Ghent sought to reduce its energy use, and the U.S. government were planning measures against the Ebola outbreak, he conceived these measures not so much in terms of a normal policy, but in terms of an exceptional action for a good cause. And lastly, whereas most other students were at least aware of one of the three national NGO campaigns that were launched shortly prior or during the diary period, Ben claimed in the interview that my mentioning them did not ring a bell whatsoever.²

In other words, Ben transformed situations in which he encountered stories on the Bolivian and Indonesian presidents, energy policies and anti-epidemic measures into *microspheres* where only an economic logic held sway, and where all other policy interventions were relegated to marginal measures of charity. Besides serving as a selective mechanism opening and closing his life-world to particular topics and perspectives, this pervasive economic rationale also informed the *forms* his responses to these encounters with stories on distant others took. First, he showed very few *affective responses*, apart from a genuine astonishment about actions he could not understand. In this sense he could well

be considered 'de-sensitized' (Seu 2003): he did not even notice the shocking reports, images or stories most students had seen in this period – even though Ben regularly read *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*, the only two Flemish broadsheets, thereby paying attention to a comparatively wide range of topics.³

Second, matters of identity seemed out question: he did not mention anything related to ethnicity, for instance, neither in the diaries nor in the interview. When finally asked about it at the very end of our interview, he replied that he simply found it 'irrelevant', something 'only backward people' preoccupy themselves with – which, in itself, is of course quite an obvious way of both bridging ethnic boundaries and re-articulating an (elite) cultural one (Lamont 1991). Third, assessing the reflexive dimension of his cosmopolitanism looks a bit more complicated. He does not really reflect upon his own role in a global chain of interdependent citizens (Beck 2006), yet he does act like an intellectual cosmopolitan in the sense that he reads widely and with great interest on global affairs (Szerszynski and Urry 2002; Skrbis et al 2004). Ben also showed a genuine concern for what is happening and what should happen elsewhere, even though he limits what is 'good' and what is 'bad' to whatever serves the national and global economy. Again, his sense of responsibility, of showing an interest in the well-being of others across the globe, was heavily limited and formally structured by the economic *mezzo-sphere* dominating his life-world.

In turn this economic mezzo-sphere was nested in other ones as well. Ben's media routines, for instance, revolve around a large number of specialised economic online websites which he frequently consults throughout the week, mostly during breaks at work or at school. In addition, he regularly reads *The Economist* late at night on the settee or in bed – something he had begun to do during his exchange stay in the U.S., where an economics professor obliged his students to read that weekly in their spare time. As I noted however, he briefly reads *De Standaard* (DS) and *De Morgen* (DM) as well, because his parents are subscribed to both. In line with other students, he especially read the latter two's extensive weekend editions with great interest. Again, this variation helps to account for a considerable part of the *topical* variation in his line of interest, while the dominance of *The Economist* and specialised economic websites helps to account for the pervasiveness of the economic-scientific perspective which was ultimately incited, of course, by his university education.

Zooming out from these singular situations, however, Ben's economic take on reality seemed to have unexpected biographical roots. On the one hand, he happily elaborated on the year he lived in Ecuador with a guest family, as part of an AFS exchange programme for eighteen year-olds. Confronted with the relative poverty of his new environment, he decided afterwards not to study languages at university, as he had initially planned. Instead, he opted for applied economics, so as to be able to 'take care of himself' and prevent him and his future family from ever having to live in such poor conditions. While studying applied economics can be seen as a strategic response to pre-actively tackle the threat of poverty, the lesson 'to take care of himself' in difficult circumstances was one he said to be one of the most important his parents thought him. Toughened by more than 20 years of experience as professional lawyers, it seems that they had trained their son to think and act instrumentally to guard his future well-being. In a curious combination of self-interest and cosmopolitan experience, he thereby transformed questions of potential responsibilities for distant others, into a globalised sense of responsibility to take care of one's self.

4.2 Martin: moral heroes

On a Thursday morning around 7am, Martin engaged in his daily routine of attentively reading *De Morgen*, Flanders' only leftist broadsheet. That day he was particularly struck by a story on Congolese 'miracle doctor' Denis Mukwege, who had been awarded a prize by the European Union for his treatment of sexual assault victims in East-Congo, and his relentless efforts to raise international awareness on sexual violence in the region. While clearly admiring Mukwege's initiatives, the topic and perspective emerging from this story were also characteristic for many of the stories that caught his attention. The emphasis in Martin's diary entries was on individual (heroic) actions lead both to personal success and a socially (more) desirable outcome. This emerged as an explicit configuration in 5 out of the 12 stories he deemed memorable, whether they were pertaining to humanitarian aid workers such as doctor Mukwege or to young responsible IT entrepreneurs. In addition, all of the other stories concentrated on individuals, rather than structures or institutions. A good example are his critical reflections on virologist Marc Van Ranst, who publicly stated that there need be no fear at all that Ebola would break out in Belgium. After reading his words in the newspaper, Martin started questioning whether or not Van Ranst had been told by the government to calm down the public, instead of communicating objective, scientifically valid facts. The point I want to make here, is that his interest was woken by Van Ranst's integrity as an expert and his personal motivations for speaking out the way he did, rather than, for instance, musing on the problem itself (the Ebola crisis) or the interventions combatting them (e.g. precautionary measures commanded by national governments).

In other words, Martin transformed a wide variety of situations – comprising his early, solitary breakfast ritual, and a variety of stories read in *De Morgen* – into microspheres where the only reports that entered his life-world were those of exemplary individuals combining professional with moral success.⁴ This had an impact on the forms in which he engaged with these distant others. First, most often his affective response was a genuine admiration for these moral heroes, rather than a sense of indignation with respect to the injustices taking place (e.g. the conflict in East-Congo and its root causes) or a form of empathic concern for its victims (e.g. stories on victims of Ebola) (Boltanski 1999). Second, Martin showed considerable political or socio-structural reflexivity as he was both exceptionally well-informed on a wide range of topics and, more decisively, he related many of these stories to (the lack of) actions by the responsible governments (Beck 2006). And third, identity did not seem to take up a particularly notable place on his agenda, as he made little distinction between local and global issues. What mattered more was that the story told of an intelligent individual doing something good with his or her professional expertise, wherever (s)he may do so.

Besides his enrolment in a university course on applied economics – from which he took considerably different cues than Ben – the microspheres he co-created were nested in two mezzo-spheres. First, it seemed to be no coincidence that the bulk of these individualised stories emerged from *De Morgen*, rather than from any other newspaper or website – a newspaper he claimed to read because it stimulated him to read 'something else besides mere economics'. *De Morgen* can indeed be characterised by its broadly subjectivist approach to social problems, in which personal stories are introduced through a more affective register of empathy or indignation, before feeding into wider

discussions of the structural context of these problems, and the political action that may be taken against them.⁵ On the one hand, then, Martin's receptiveness to such subjective stories regularly fed into a wider reflexivity that thereby served to open up his life-world to social problems to which he rarely paid attention. On the other hand however, these stories' narrative structure simultaneously functioned as a filter, stimulating him to engage with structural contexts and politics only when they could be mediated by subjective, individual (success) stories, thus leaving out the less mediagenic problems and issues. Lastly, it also seems relevant that Martin read doctor Mukwege's story on a Thursday morning during breakfast: while some students had quite structured, regular news routines, Martin's routines were probably the most patterned of all the respondents involved. In his everyday life a crucial place was assigned to his breakfast ritual, during which he listened to a classical music broadcast, partly for the news, and partly for the easing nature of classical music, whilst reading chunks of *De Morgen* with great attention – something for which he claimed to get out of bed twenty minutes earlier. These 'moments of rest' before venturing out into the world were crucial to start his day properly: 'I can get really frustrated if I get up too late and don't have time for that moment on my own before I go out.' Although it may be a bit of a stretch, it does seem to make sense that at this particular point of the day, Martin's eye more easily caught the stories of individuals overcoming the toughest of conditions, precisely by putting their capacities to use in an ethically responsible way. It was through this morning ritual, that Martin found the inspiration he needed to make every day's efforts fit into a larger plan.

4.3 Sarah: personalised cosmopolitanism

In sharp contrast to the two previous students, Sarah rarely uses any news media at all. In total there were only 4 stories she deemed memorable, while the only regular use she made of news media was the radio news, if somebody switched it on in the university laboratory. Two of the stories she found memorable were directly related to two biologists working at her department, who went to Guinea to test samples on Ebola infection for a humanitarian project. The first time she encountered their story, it had reached her through a university newsletter, which she would normally not read at all. This time, however, the newsletter introduced precisely that particular project on which her two colleagues were working, leading her to muse upon how it must have been for them. It was only later on though, after meeting them in person one afternoon, that she reflected more extensively on their experiences, noting down in her diary that their actions struck her because 'they went to work disinterestedly in this risk area, 7 days a week, 12 hours a day'. What those two colleagues did in Guinea, she wrote, 'made me think about what I want to mean in this world, as a human being. It turns out that we have much more options than we sometimes realise. And that we can use these to help others.' While these reflections thus emerged from a highly personal encounter and fed into an aspiration to undertake practical action – something which was rare with other students - they did not lead her to reflect on the Ebola crisis itself (e.g. the situation in Guinea as such), nor did it awake her interest in Doctors Without Borders' Ebola campaign, even though it focussed particularly on 'the people behind the yellow masks'. Sarah claimed not to have read even a single story on these topics, apart from the short piece included in the university newsletter. Hence while her colleagues' encounters with distant others led her to muse upon what she

could actually *do* herself, it also prevented her from developing an interest in the wider problematic as such, as well as in the more structural and political conditions the crisis was rooted in (Beck 2006). Judging by the four stories that struck her, the only way she related to distant others was through personal, interaction-based links.

To sum up, Sarah transformed potential encounters with distant others into microspheres centred around strongly personalised engagements with people she already knows. First, in terms of affects, she expressed great empathy and admiration, especially for do-gooders rather than for distant others themselves (Chouliaraki 2013). Second, in her diary entries and in the interview she reflected very rarely upon political or socio-structural interdependencies, even though she was concerned with what she, as an individual, could contribute to a better world. Thus while she did not engage much with the rest of the world through a thorough intellectual reflexivity (Skrbis et al 2004; Szerszynski and Urry 2002), she was one of the only students to develop a sense of responsibility for doing something herself. And third, one could say that her sense of identity was extremely localist, but that seems harshly correct: it was more a matter of developing and nourishing personal ties, of 'producing locality' irrespective of their ethnic identity (Appadurai 1996).

And lastly, the mezzo-spheres dominating her life-world seemed to pre-select and pre-structure the situations where she encountered distant others, much more so than for most of the other students. First, her passion for biology filtered her encounters with distant others. And second, these encounters emerged from personal networks, which again were partly mediated by her social life at the biology department. Tellingly, when she was asked which people or organisations she admired, environmental justice movements like Greenpeace ruled the day – although she mentioned that perhaps, she admired her grandmother even more, because of her relentless care and concern for others.

5. Concluding remarks

This essay sought to tackle two problems in the scholarship on moral cosmopolitanism. Theoretically, moral cosmopolitanism has been conceived of in terms of critical-analytical antinomies, casting reflexive, affective and identity-based cosmopolitanism against ignorance, de-sensitization and localism. Empirically, scholars' efforts to explore more ordinary forms of cosmopolitanism seemed to be impeded by their methods and research designs, which were suited better for examining general discourses, dispositions and repertoires, and less for understanding the actually existing contexts in which these ordinary cosmopolitanisms emerged. In line with a small but developing current in the literature (Scott 2014; Madianou 2005), this article sought to address this lacuna by proposing a methodological and theoretical approach centred around the intimate, protective social spheres in which individuals live most of their daily lives.

Methodologically, I tried to tackle this issue by focussing on diaries and in-depth interviews, which were designed to analyse individuals' encounters with distant others as they happened, as well as the more structural context in which they regularly emerged. More importantly perhaps, on a theoretical level this article's key contribution consists of shifting the attention away from the formal appearances of moral cosmopolitanism (e.g. reflexive, affective, belonging) towards the social spheres protecting individuals from distant others in the first place. On a micro-spheric level, this implies unravelling the internal composition of encounters with distant others, including the interaction itself, the material objects it relied upon, the spatio-temporal context, and the interpretations and responses with which individuals responded to the situation. On a mezzo-spheric level, this entails examining the recursively recurring arrangements by which these everyday situations and contexts were structured. In sum, to explore how and why *social* cosmopolitans may or may not transform themselves into *moral* cosmopolitans, we need to draw more attention to how social spheres pre-actively immunise or protect individuals from moral claims encroaching upon their lives from across the globe.

References

- Appadurai A.** (1996) *Modernity at large. The cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Appiah KA** (2006) *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*, New York: W.W. Norton Press.
- Archibugi D, Held D and Köhler M** (1998) *Re-imagining political community: studies in cosmopolitan democracy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Arendt H** (1977) *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the banality of evil*, London: Penguin Books.
- Beck U** (2006) *The cosmopolitan vision*, translated by C. Cronin, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Benhabib S** (2004) *The rights of others: aliens, residents, and citizens*. Cambridge: University Press,
- Boltanski L** (1999) *Distant suffering. Morality, media and politics*, translated by G. Burchell, Cambridge: University Press.
- Boltanski L and Thévenot L** (2006) *On Justification. Economies of Worth*. Translated by C. Porter. Princeton: University Press.
- Chouliaraki L** (2008) The media as moral education: mediation and action. *Media Culture & Society* 30(6): 831-52.
- Chouliaraki L** (2013) *The ironic spectator. Solidarity in the age of post-humanitarianism*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cohen S.** (2001) *States of denial. Knowing about atrocities and suffering*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Couldry N, Livingstone S and Markham P** (2007) *Media consumption and public engagement. Beyond the presumption of attention*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Delanty G** (2006) The cosmopolitan imagination: critical cosmopolitanism and social theory. *British Journal of Sociology*, 57(1): 25-47.
- Fine R** (2007) *Cosmopolitanism*, London: Routledge.

Giddens A (1984) *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Glick-Schiller N, Darieva T and Gruner-Domic S (eds) (2011) Cosmopolitan sociability: locating transnational religious and diasporic networks. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34(3).

Habermas J (2001) *The post-national constellation, Political essays*. London: MIT Press.

Hannerz U. (1990) Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture. *Theory, culture and society*, 7(2): 237-250.

Hiebert D (2002) Cosmopolitanism at the local level: The development of transnational neighbourhoods. In: Vertovec S and Cohen R (eds.) *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, context and practice* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 209-233.

Hoijer B (2004) Discourses of global compassion: the audience and media reporting of human suffering. *Media Culture & Society* 26(4): 513-31.

Knorr-Cetina K (2003) Microglobalization. In: Rossi F (ed) *Frontiers of globalization research*. Berlin: Springer: 65-92.

Knorr-Cetina K (2006) The synthetic situation: interactionism for a global world. *Symbolic Interaction*, 32(1), 61-87.

Kyriakidou M (2008) Rethinking media events in the context of a global public sphere: exploring the audience of global disasters in Greece. *Communication: The European Journal of Communication Research*, 33(4): 273-291.

Lamont M (1991) *Money morals and manners. The culture of the French and the American upper-middle class*. Chicago: University Press.

Lamont M and Aksartova S (2002) 'Ordinary cosmopolitanisms: strategies for bridging racial boundaries among working-class men.' *Theory Culture & Society* 19(1): 1-25.

Luhmann N (1995) *Social systems*. Stanford University Press.

Madianou M (2005) *Mediating the nation*. London: Routledge.

Madianou M (2009) Audience reception and news in everyday life. In: Wahl-Jorgens K and Hanitzsch T (eds.) *Handbook of journalism studies*. 325-37. London: Routledge.

Mau S, Mewes J, and Zimmerman A (2008) Cosmopolitan attitudes through transnational social practices? *Global Networks*, 8(1): 1-24.

Merton R. K. (1968) *Social theory and social structure*. New York: Free Press.

Moeller S (1999) *Compassion fatigue: how the media sell disease, famine, war and death*. New York: Psychology Press.

Ong J. C. (2012) Witnessing or mediating distant suffering? Ethical questions across moments of text, production and reception. *Television & New Media*: 1-18.

Robertson A (2010) *Mediated cosmopolitanism. The world of television news*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Robertson R (1992) *Globalization. Social theory and culture*. London: Sage.

Roudometof V (2005) Transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and glocalization. *Current sociology*, 53(1), 113-35.

Scott M (2014) The mediation of distant suffering: an empirical contribution beyond television news texts. *Media Culture & Society*, 36(1): 3-19.

Seu IB (2003) 'Your stomach makes you feel that you don't want to know anything about it': desensitization, defense mechanisms and rhetoric in response to human rights abuses. *Journal of Human Rights*, 2(2): 183-96.

Seu IB (2011) Shoot the messenger: dynamics of positioning and denial in response to HR appeals. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 3(2): 139-161.

Sloterdijk P (2014) *Globes: Macrospherology Volume II*. Translated by Wieland Hoban. Boston: MIT press.

Silverstone R (2007) *Media and morality. On the rise of the mediapolis*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Skrbis Z, Kendall P and Woodward I (2004) Locating cosmopolitanism: between humanist ideal and grounded social category. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21(6): 115-36.

Skrbis Z and Woodward I (2007) The ambivalence of ordinary cosmopolitanism: investigating the limits of cosmopolitan openness. *Sociological Review*, 55(4): 730-47.

Szerszynski B and Urry J (2002) Cultures of cosmopolitanism. *Sociological Review*, 50(4): 462-81.

Thompson JB (1995) *Media and Modernity*, Stanford: University Press.

Tester K (1997) *Moral culture*, London: Sage.

Tomlinson J (1999) *Globalization and culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Vandevoordt R (2018) Judgement and ambivalence in migration work: On the (Dis) appearance of dilemmas in assisting voluntary return. *Sociology*, 52(2), 282-297.

Vertovec S and Cohen R (eds) (2002) *Conceiving cosmopolitanism. Theory, context and practice*, Oxford: University Press.

¹ This is of course related to how 'structuration' takes place in Giddens (1984), or how systems are reproduced in Luhmann (1984). The key point is that wider social structures are recursively instantiated on singular occasions, which necessarily require a certain degree of agency or decidability.

² These were: Oxfam's Flemish celebrities campaign titled 'you don't need to be a saint to buy fair trade'; Doctors Without Borders' campaign to tackle the Ebola-crisis; and 11.11.11's awareness raising campaign on food waste.

³ In fact, he noted down 14 'memorable stories', the second highest number of all participating students.

⁴ Interestingly, just like Ben, Martin was an applied economics student with a great interest in economic issues (7 out of the 12 stories he deemed memorable).

⁵ At least when compared to the more objectivist tone of the two competing Flemish broadsheets, *De Standaard* and *De Tijd*. In this sense, *De Morgen* holds a similar position in the Flemish media landscape as *De Volkskrant* in the Netherlands and *The Guardian* in the U.K.