

# Study: Why TV audiences often do not care about suffering in other countries

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(Phys.org) —Television audiences care less about suffering experienced by people in other countries when they watch the news than when they watch a range of different programmes, according to new research.

The study by Dr Martin Scott, from the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia, examined how audiences respond to UK television coverage of suffering, for example as the result of disasters and conflicts.

He found that the participants were in many cases indifferent to what they saw and relieved that it did not affect them, especially the younger and male viewers. However there were instances, mostly among older and female participants, of particularly emotional responses to suffering.

Dr Scott, a lecturer in media and development, said documentaries and current affairs programmes prompted more emotional responses than television news because they offered viewers a closer, more complex representation of suffering, and provided more opportunity to hear from those affected and to understand the issues involved.

"News coverage is important, but we have to realise that two minute news items are not necessarily going to make people care more," said Dr Scott. "That's not to say that the media can't achieve this in documentaries and other types of programming, such as drama, comedy and reality TV.

"If we wish to see the media playing a role in promoting solidarity between humans, then the appearance of people in other countries in programming outside of the news should be a priority. It is important to look beyond peak moments of [news coverage](#). Interestingly, though, the study also showed that advertisements from charities like Oxfam and Save the Children only accounted for three per cent of all occasions in which people encountered people from other countries on television."

Dr Scott highlighted the BBC's 'global purpose' to bring the world to the UK, which includes explicit reference not only to news programming, but also to documentaries and other genres, such as drama, comedy, sport and educational outputs. He said other broadcasters around the world should "strongly consider" doing the same.

The study, published in the January issue of the journal *Media, Culture & Society*, involved a series of focus group interviews over a three month period with more than 100 people. Half of the participants also kept online diaries about all media and non-media sources they encountered on a daily basis that had some connection to people in other countries. They recorded various details, such as the type of programme, what they thought about it and why they decided to watch or not watch it.

References to news items, for example about the conflict in Afghanistan and violence in Madagascar, prompted objective, descriptive responses rather than emotional reactions. There was also greater evidence of resistance to emotional appeals than there was evidence of emotional engagement in talk about news, with participants particularly critical of what they saw as attempts to make them feel a certain way.

Documentaries, for example about violence in Gaza and the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, drew more [emotional responses](#) and language to describe the suffering experienced by people

there.

Of the 290 diary entries made, just 5% (15) related to non-media references, such as conversations with family or work colleagues, while 67% were about television. The most common references to television content were documentaries and current affairs (94), news (88), reality TV programmes (9) and non-governmental organization (NGO) advertisements (6). The remaining 28% of references were spread between newspapers (8%), radio (7%), online (5%), films (3%) books (3%) and magazines (2%).

**More information:** Martin Scott. "The mediation of distant suffering: an empirical contribution beyond television news texts." *Media, Culture & Society*. January 2014 36: 3-19, [DOI: 10.1177/0163443713507811](https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443713507811)

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