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Caring at a Distance

JOHN SILK

ABSTRACT *The paper draws upon new conceptions of place, space, interaction and community in Geography and Media Studies to explore the possibilities of extending existing conceptions of care and caring from the context with which they are traditionally associated—face-to-face encounters within a shared physical locale. It proposes three structures of ‘caring at a distance’, all of which have a core element of mediated or distanced interaction, and concludes that mass media and electronic networks play a significant role in extending the scope of beneficence beyond our ‘nearest and dearest’ to embrace distant others.*

Introduction

A major revival of interest in Geography and Ethics (e.g. Sayer and Storper, 1987) is stimulating work on the spatial scope of human caring (Smith, 1998a,b). Smith's (1998a) query: ‘How far, literally, should we care?’ stems from his recognition that the ‘positive’ emotion of care forms the basis for an ethic of care in moral philosophy. Introduced as a distinctively female perspective by Gilligan (1982), it is now part of a wider critique of mainstream thinking (e.g. Clement, 1996; Hekman, 1995; Tronto, 1993) which ‘raises caring, nurturing and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships to the status of foundational moral importance’ (Friedman, 1993, p. 147). There is also renewed interest in ‘place’, involving some acknowledgement of humanistic concerns of the 1970s, but striking off in other directions to explore more open and relational conceptions in the context of time–space compression, globalization and notions of ‘stretched out’ spatial relations (Allen and Hamnett, 1995), a move echoed in recent work on community (e.g. Silk, 1998a). Some of the most striking examples of these new conceptions of place and space are to be found in work on the mass media, as researchers in Sociology and Media Studies are also finding that ‘geography matters’ or, more accurately, that the ways in which geography matters are becoming increasingly problematic (e.g. Giddens, 1991; Thompson, 1995; Tomlinson, 1994). In particular, Thompson's (1995) book on ‘media and modernity’ summarizes and further elaborates ideas which take as their starting point the ‘liberation’ of many forms of human action and interaction from overwhelming dependence upon face-to-face encounters within a shared physical locale.

Whereas David Smith's (1997, 1998b) chief concern has been a normative one, recommending reconciliation of an ethic of care with an egalitarian theory of justice, my main concerns, by contrast, are empirical, in the spirit of investigating the many varieties of morality, including the moral judgements and activities actually made by ‘everyday

peoples in everyday circumstances' (Social and Cultural Study Group Committee of the IBG, 1991, p. 15). This does not rule out many areas of overlap, but it does mean a far greater concern with thick—or at least thicker—description and theory.

In this paper I focus on ways in which mass media articulate with other kinds of interaction and action to produce new forms of care and caring 'at a distance'. Care and caring are activities that traditionally take the form of unmediated action and interaction, very much tied to place as conventionally defined, so this is not a trivial issue. Three questions structure my discussion:

- (1) Are there ways in which these strong elements of partiality that characterize human caring relationships are or could be extended to 'distant others', beyond the range of our 'nearest and dearest'?
- (2) What kinds of social institutions, relations, actions and interactions are involved, and have the mass media given rise to them in new forms?
- (3) Do care and caring provide yet further examples of action and interaction 'at a distance' which are attracting so much contemporary research interest?

To approach them I first consider at greater length relevant theoretical debates that have been animating the social sciences, including geography and cultural studies. Then I define care and caring and identify three distinctive structures of caring at a distance. Following this, I draw upon Thompson's (1995) analysis of different kinds of interaction, and upon complementary theories, to provide a framework for more detailed treatment of each of the three structures.

Geography, Place and Interaction

Dualist notions of place and space, of the local and the global and of the unmediated and the mediated, are being supplanted by others recognizing the meshing of different scales of contact—time—space compression (Harvey, 1989, 1990), globalization (Allen and Hamnett, 1995; Amin and Thrift, 1994), and a plethora of new conceptions of place (Amin, 1997; Amin and Graham, 1997; McDowell, 1997; Massey, 1991a) and community (Eade, 1997; Hall, 1992; Silk, 1998a) all of which are seen as symptomatic of modernity and postmodernity (Giddens, 1991; Tomlinson, 1994). Such theorists argue that the emphasis should shift from definitions in terms of fixed characteristics and fixed spatial boundaries to others in which place and community are seen as the intersection of more general flows, power structures, discourses and subjectivities.

A parallel debate has occurred in cultural studies, notably in television audience research. Corner (1991) objects to an increasing emphasis upon the micro-processes of viewing relations as detracting from engagement with the macro-structures of media and society. Against this, Morley (1992, pp. 18–19) argues that macro-structures can only be reproduced through micro-processes; otherwise, we are positing structure as reified and pre-given. Corner's argument also equates the macro with the 'real' and as something to be accounted for by theory proper. Objections to this are paralleled in Massey's (1991b) contention that the global, the abstract and the theoretical are often mistakenly elided on the one hand, and are falsely counterposed to the conflation of the local, the concrete, the empirical and, I must add, agency or 'doing something', on the other. Variations in geographical scale are erroneously confused with processes of abstraction in thought.

I wish neither to dismiss the unmediated interactions and relations between people 'in place' which are predominantly constituted by face-to-face interaction and are the traditional focus of work on community, nor to embrace uncritically the sometimes overenthusiastic accounts of the potential of technologies like the Internet for creating

'global villages' and communities of choice (Rheingold, 1994). Instead, I argue that the traditional reliance of activities of care and caring upon face-to-face interaction and associated action will continue—at some point they require co-presence in space and time between carer and cared-for, but that increasingly they will constitute only one link in complex sets of chains and circuits of actions and interactions. One of the aims of this paper is to demonstrate ways in which such 'hands-on care' is so embedded, drawing upon different conceptions of interaction which permit great flexibility in this respect.

This suggests that care and caring now depend upon development of new forms of social institutions, relations, actions and interactions which both create and result from geographical 'stretching'. I concentrate on the role that different forms of interaction play, drawing upon Thompson's (1995) analysis that distinguishes between mediated and unmediated interaction, and introduces the new concept of *mediated quasi-interaction*. Relations between these different forms of interaction are manifest in a wide range of modern social institutions, both formal and informal, which institutionalize 'distanciated' interaction between absent others, liberating time and space from the particularities of place, and constitute one of the prime instances of the potential for the reintegration of time and space (Tomlinson, 1994, p. 151). In particular, they give rise to new forms of 'action at a distance' such that individuals can act for others who are dispersed in time and space, and also enable them to act in response to actions and events occurring in distant locales.

The increasing preponderance of more remote forms of care also represents an exercise in impartiality, whereby the creation of caring institutions and bureaucracies has arisen, at least in part, to universalize the benefits of active caring previously dependent upon the inclination and ability of close people to do the caring.

Newer forms may be seen in terms of the superimposition of new practices upon old (Miller, 1988; Rogge and Jensen, 1988). A media event like 'Comic Relief' links new practices, as in the simultaneous viewing of a charity concert by millions of people, and provides a framework and focus for the 'old', like families or groups of schoolchildren collecting for charity, and articulates activities, institutions and events across a wide range of geographic and other scales.

Care and Caring

In this section I first give definitions of care and caring, and then distinguish three structures of 'caring at a distance'.

Smith (1998a) makes a useful distinction between benevolence, or caring *about* others, and beneficence, or caring *for* others.

In caring *about* others, we experience a genuine ethical and emotional engagement, being troubled or concerned about their situation; we wish to do good or entertain charitable feelings. The crucial step is to go beyond this to care *for* others, doing good or actively showing kindness, providing support for their emotional and physical needs and well-being. It is with beneficence that I am primarily concerned.

Benevolence traditionally takes the form of unmediated action and interaction, involving bodily contact and face-to-face interaction, is highly labour intensive and is primarily the responsibility of women. This remains broadly true, subject to certain qualifications. One is that mediated face-to-face interaction, as facilitated by letter-writing, telephone conversations and, increasingly, the Internet, provides forms of 'being there', giving affection, advice, information and general support—in other words, the exchange of symbolic forms and content via a new medium. Another is the role of beneficence in the form of money. It plays an essential part in making 'caring resources' available, as

through taxation which supports the 'caring services' of the welfare state, or donations to charity. Relatives also help each other out, as when parents give children financial support to buy their first car or house.

A further crucial factor is the proliferation of contexts and relations of care in so many societies—from the domestic household to the doctor's surgery, from the relationship with the caring relative to that which is 'strictly professional'. There are people in bureaucratic and medical caring roles, such as those employed in institutions like the British National Health Service, many of whom are men, and who operate at least at one remove from 'hands on' care, but 90% of the nurses who provide the lion's share of the latter are women (Senior and Viveash, 1998). Significant also is participation in voluntary work, in the United Kingdom showing a participation rate for women approximately double that for men (CSO, 1987, p. 175). Domestic care for children and other relatives is still overwhelmingly the preserve of women (General Household Survey, 1985; Graham, 1995).

Given the growth in so many forms of institutionalized care, we should bear in mind also that 'caring for' does not necessarily entail 'caring about'.

Three Structures of 'Caring at a Distance'

Each structure is characterized by two kinds of action at a distance (Figure 1). The first is *acting for distant others*, the second *responsive action in distant contexts*.

In the first two structures—Third Party Beneficence and Recipient Beneficence—the core element of acting for distant others is constituted by mass-mediated interaction linking producers and recipients (Figures 1(A) and (B)). The term 'producers' encompasses a wide variety of people who, knowingly or not, 'act for distant others' in a sense similar to performing or acting on a stage, where these 'others' are recipients who listen to the radio, watch television, read newspapers, and so on. Producers create symbolic content which may be sound alone, as in the case of radio, sound and pictures as in the case of television, or the written word and pictures as in the case of newspapers and magazines.

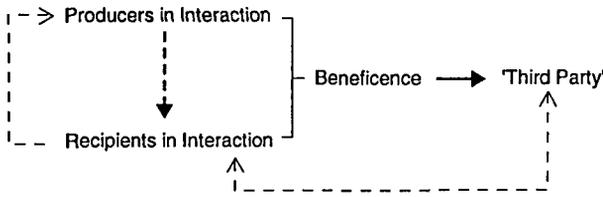
In the case of *Third Party Beneficence*, I consider ways in which the mass-mediated flow of symbolic content from producers to recipients in turn gives rise to responsive action in distant contexts, to interactions and actions which ultimately result in beneficence to a 'third party', e.g. charitable contributions from First World to Third World.

The second structure is *Recipient Beneficence*. In this case I focus on ways in which acting at a distance on the part of producers to produce a mass-mediated flow of symbolic content to recipients itself constitutes a form of beneficence. This in turn may give rise to responsive action at a distance in the form of self-help and mutual support groups.

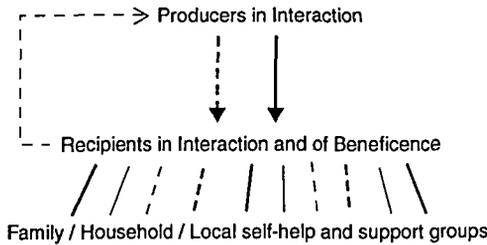
In both the above caring may also involve limited forms of reflexivity and reciprocity between producers and recipients in the interaction, both in association with and in addition to responsive actions in distant contexts.

The *New Community* is the third structure. It differs from the first two in that its core element is the mutual but mediated person-to-person interaction between individuals in a network, like those based on the Internet, whose topology resembles that of a traditional community. To the extent that any interaction can be regarded as incorporating a 'performance' (Goffman, 1969; Meyrowitz, 1985), the individuals involved also 'act for distant others', albeit in ways appropriate to the interactive framework afforded by this structure as compared with the first two. Typical modes of interaction are

A. Third Party Beneficence



B. Recipient Beneficence



C. 'New Communities'

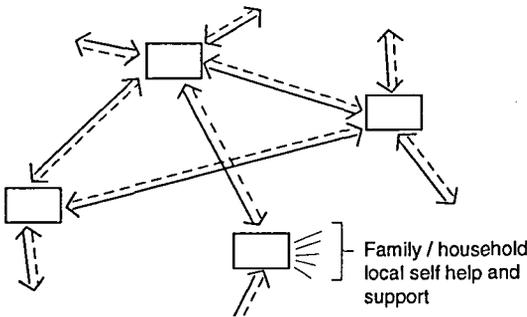


Figure 1. Three structures of beneficence

provided by the telephone and, increasingly, the Internet. Such mediated networks have the potential to stimulate responsive action in distant contexts such as the creation of collectivities like self-help and mutual support groups.

Common to these structures, therefore, is a core element of mediated or 'distanced' interaction. Also common is the linkage of the core element to other forms of interaction and action, whereby core interactions and actions give rise to responsive action in distant contexts (Figure 1). Conceiving matters in these terms means that it is possible to deal with a far greater variety of collectivities and actions than would be possible considering them in terms of physical distance alone, although this is not a factor I shall ignore. It means also that it is possible to deal with collectivities that are hybrid and compound, constituted by the articulation of a variety of forms of action and interaction, many of which produce actions and interactions 'at a distance' which in turn give rise to *new* institutions and *new* kinds of social relationships.

Table 1. Types of interaction

Interaction Characteristics	Face-to-face Interaction	Mediated Interaction	Mediated quasi-interaction
Space-time constitution	Context of co-presence; shared spatio-temporal reference system	Separation of contexts; extended availability in time and space	Separation of contexts; extended availability in time and space
Range of symbolic cues and stimuli	Multiplicity of symbolic cues	Narrowing of range of symbolic cues	Widening of range of symbolic cues and stimuli
Action orientation	Oriented towards specific others	Oriented towards specific others	Oriented towards an indefinite range of potential recipients
Dialogical/monological	Dialogical	Dialogical	Monological

Next, I describe key features of the different kinds of interaction involved, their articulation, and the implications for beneficence.

Forms of Interaction

A striking feature of many discussions of beneficence is not only their undue emphasis upon unmediated face-to-face interaction, but also their failure to consider its *articulation* with mediated person-to-person and mass-mediated interaction. It is this imbalance that I wish to redress.

Table 1 presents features of three forms of interaction (Thompson, 1995, chapter 3). The first is face-to-face *unmediated interaction*, characterized by co-presence and a shared spatio-temporal reference system, a multiplicity of symbolic cues utilized in reflexive monitoring of behaviour of others, and orientation toward specific, often known, and 'concrete' others. It is dialogical and, as stated earlier, the traditional mode of interaction in caring. There is a wide-ranging literature—on communitarianism (Etzioni, 1993; Putnam, 1996; see also Low, 1998), social capital (Hirschman, 1994; Putnam, 1993), feminism (Friedman, 1991; Jagger, 1995) and moral philosophy (Bauman, 1989, 1993; Jonas, 1974, 1984) which stresses that a sense of responsibility and, by implication, beneficence towards others, near or far, depends in the first instance upon such interaction: on relations with our 'nearest and dearest' (Smith, 1998a).

The second, *mediated interaction*, is also dialogical and oriented to specific others, but provides extended availability in time and space because of separation of contexts. It works on a narrower range of specific cues—in corresponding by letter or the Internet we are deprived of the sound of voices and facial or bodily reactions, by using the telephone we retain the former but lose the latter. Nevertheless, relatives and friends can 'be there' for others by virtue of such media.

The third is *mediated quasi-interaction*, and refers to social relations established by mass communications media like books, newspapers and magazines, radio and television. Like mediated interaction, it involves extended availability of information and symbolic content in space and/or time. It is quasi-interaction because it produces symbolic forms for an indefinite range of potential recipients and because it is monological rather than dialogical. It therefore makes sense to talk of 'producers' and

'recipients' of symbolic exchange and content. However, it is a form of interaction because it creates a kind of social situation linking individuals in a process of communication and symbolic exchange.

Mediated quasi-interaction lacks many of the forms of reciprocity and reflexivity of unmediated face-to-face and, to a lesser degree, mediated person-to-person, interaction. In both the latter situations, all participants in principle can intervene and contribute, even if they choose not to, whereas in the former they cannot. Neither producers nor recipients are under any mutual obligation to take account of the responses of the other.

Nevertheless, mass media like television have certain advantages as far as beneficence is concerned. They command attention by providing a far wider range of symbolic cues than in the unmediated and mediated cases, together with others that are impossible or rarely achievable in 'real life', including instant replays, cutting between widely separated locales, and 'privileged' vantage points at major 'events', including scenes of suffering and disaster, which in some respects are better than views available to those immediately on the scene (Stam, 1983, p. 24); they give a sense of 'being there', transmitting images of geographically remote events with little or no time lag; they attract vast audiences. All else being equal, mass media can increase the likelihood of contributions to good causes and generate very large aggregate donations, apart from the role they play in stimulating people to work for charitable causes.

Radio and television programmes may also work indirectly to bring into contact those who otherwise would never have met but who have similar caring experiences or needs—a feature on caring for an elderly relative or on dealing with a chronic personal illness can lead to the formation of self-help groups and networks.

In the next section I examine beneficence in the context of the articulation of all three forms of interaction by considering in detail each of the three structural situations outlined earlier.

Third Party Beneficence

Two forms of 'acting for distant others' are involved. The first is the actions of producers for the recipients in the interaction, where the latter are the 'distant others', geographically dispersed in various contexts. Here the term 'acting for' is used in a sense similar to performing or acting on a stage, except that the 'stage' may be anything ranging from a television studio to somewhere 'on location', so I call this *Performing for Distant Others*. The second is *Responsive Action in Distant Contexts* taken by the geographically dispersed recipients, like viewers of television news broadcasts in Britain, in order to provide beneficence for yet another group of distant others, in this case people in the Third World who are shown to be suffering from such things as poverty, famine, political oppression or natural disaster. I shall be particularly concerned with the role played by 'participatory' media events like 'Live Aid' or 'Comic Relief'.

Mass media producers perform for geographically dispersed members of a mass audience in a variety of ways. The most straightforward consist of the 'talking heads' of traditional news broadcasts and charitable appeals by a 'media personality' (see below). In more elaborate formats producers engage in face-to-face interaction amongst themselves, as in televised interviews, chat shows, and panel discussions, sometimes involving a studio audience. To increase impact, these may be enlivened by vivid film footage of famine, flood, destitution, and oppression, and these in turn can include breaks for a televised interview with an expert or politician, with charity workers 'in the field', and with the 'victims/sufferers' themselves.

Processes of *extended mediaization* may also be involved. Any major story in one medium is liable to be picked up in another—newspapers and magazines carry other pictures, reports which focus on ‘human interest’, produce more in-depth coverage, and so on. As we shall see below, they may also begin to circulate in ‘educational mass media’ if the topic is suited to curriculum requirements.

Such performances bring into the ordinary and private lives of millions of people situations and events which are extra-ordinary by virtue of their geographical and cultural remoteness, their scale and extremity, and their ability to shock and disturb (Chaney, 1983; Silverstone, 1988).

The key issue here is—how, and to what extent, do these performances become morally significant, engendering moral engagement to the extent that the distant others at whom they are directed come to exercise beneficence which makes some contribution to meeting needs and relieving suffering of people in the Third World? This I consider next.

Some commentators are pessimistic. Beck (1992) suggests that people ‘switch off’, both literally and metaphorically, when confronted by the extra-ordinary scale and extremity of Third World immiseration or disaster. He argues that the ‘long distance morality’ demanded of people with respect to these and other global problems of our times like environmental pollution is likely to engender a fatalistic response, of ‘not listening, simplifying, apathy’ (Beck, 1992, p. 137). Robins (1994) agrees, appealing to psychoanalytic defence mechanisms that people employ against such representations seen as instances of the ‘shock of modernity’ (Buck-Morss, 1992).

Other accounts suggest that moral engagement with, and the likelihood of exercising beneficence towards, distant others, is inversely related to the ‘cultural distance’ of media situations from our lived experience (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988; Thompson, 1995, chapter 7). As we see shortly, some of these ideas may be interpreted differently if considered in the light of articulations between different forms of action and interaction.

However, these characterizations fly in the face of evidence of major public interest in and moral engagement with such issues. For example, television news and documentary reports upon the famine in Ethiopia in late 1984 captured public attention and sympathy to such a degree that spectacular and international media events like ‘Band Aid’ and ‘Live Aid’ together raised over £110 million world-wide for famine relief in Africa by mid-1986, ‘Live Aid’ attracting an audience estimated at two billion (CSO, 1988, p. 169). There was also an impact, although relatively short-lived, on the distribution of charitable donations between domestic and international charities in the UK, the latter’s share increasing from 20 to 25% until 1987 (CSO, 1988, p. 168; CSO, 1989, p. 174).

I now examine ways in which relationships between such spectacular media events and people’s day-to-day lives have an impact on ‘long distance’ beneficence. There are also, I suggest, important differences between these and similar events, like ‘Comic Relief’, which have a more restricted national base.

Such events are carefully planned in advance and shown live, interrupting the normal flow of life. They resemble civic rituals like coronations and royal weddings, ‘diasporic ceremonies’ where, although attended by some people in person, the vast majority of ‘participants’ view them on television (Dayan and Katz, 1994). Such ‘a multiplicity of simultaneous, similarly programmed, home-bound, micro-events’ (Dayan and Katz, 1994, p. 195) provides opportunities for mass identification, for dramatizing the nation as symbolic community (Chaney, 1983, 1986; see also Anderson, 1991). At the international level events like the Football World Cup or the Olympics create even larger

collectivities of this kind, and it is with these that 'spectaculars' like 'Live Aid' have more in common.

They depend also upon media personalities, personae constructed at a distance by processes described as para-social by Horton and Wohl (1956). Such personalities take on an 'aura' which cannot be controverted by the kinds of dialogical processes characteristic of face-to-face interaction, a characteristic traded upon in order to attract mass public attention.

Such media events have a pivotal position in the relationship between performing for distant others and responsive action in distant contexts. On the one hand, they are performances for distant others sitting around their television sets; on the other, they constitute responsive action to the needs and sufferings of yet another group of distant others.

It might be objected that such spectaculars were relatively short-lived, rising and falling in the 1980s. There may be some truth in this, although the evidence requires further evaluation (Silk, 1998b), and it prompts me to examine the relationships involved more closely.

Theoretically, there are two approaches to mass media, both with television in mind, which seem particularly relevant. The first sees television audiences as active agents in a non-trivial sense, not only 'interacting' with the symbolic content produced on-screen, but among themselves (Hobson, 1982). There is overwhelming evidence that televisual representations become incorporated in 'micro-interactions' at the domestic level (Brunsdon *et al.* 1997; Morley, 1992). For example, the screening of Third World poverty and immiseration may give rise to more or less formal, and sometimes opportunistic, episodes for moral learning within the confines of the family or household. However, these are amplified by interactions and actions involving others to be found beyond the front door or the garden gate.

The second draws upon the notion of 'relevance structures' first formulated by phenomenologists like Schutz (1970) and more recently taken up by Thompson (1995) and Tomlinson (1997). Initially, these ideas seem unhelpful, for they suggest that the moral significance of mass-mediated events and situations is inversely related to their geographical and, more especially, cultural distance from a person's everyday concerns and from the ongoing construction of the self (Hoskins and Mirus, 1988). However, we can turn this around to argue that we need to look for ways in which such events and situations become tied into people's own lifeworlds—at the articulations between mediated quasi-interaction and unmediated interaction.

If we do so, it helps to explain the relatively short-lived 'shelf life' of international spectaculars like 'Band Aid' and 'Live Aid'. Opportunities to participate other than by watching television are limited to relatively small numbers of people. However, in the case of media events like 'Comic Relief', the event itself is restricted to one country—the United Kingdom—and a wide variety of fund-raising activities in local communities, often centred on schools, churches and youth organizations, in which people—especially children—can take part means that responsive action in distant contexts means just that (Brown, 1997). Large numbers of people can actively participate in what became an annual and, latterly, a biennial, set of events. The 'model' for such patterns of activity—without the charitable fund-raising—is provided by events like street parties, traditionally held throughout Britain on the day a monarch is crowned, and parades, parties and sporting occasions which occur regularly on 'Independence Days' in many countries. There are also many other ways in which people can do good, at the same time having fun and enjoying company—fun runs, charity walks, and so on. All these can be coordinated with and explicitly linked to mass media initiatives and events.

There are, therefore, a wide variety of events and activities, heavily dependent upon unmediated face-to-face interaction, which articulate with mediated quasi-interaction. In order to respond to the needs and sufferings of those far away, it is possible to draw upon institutions—particularly the family, local youth and religious organizations and schools—identified as rich sources of social capital (Putnam, 1995). In the case of children, for example, this takes the form of pressure from their peers and from significant adults like parents, teachers, and ministers (Portes, 1995). Charitable initiatives thus benefit from the ‘infrastructure’ which is particularly important in sustaining the consensual element of national ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991). As characterized here, these articulations of different forms of interaction and action qualify as sources of social capital, operating at scales not normally associated with the concept.

Apart from activities geared to monetary donations, there are many other forms of charity towards and solidarity with distant others in need or who are oppressed which may be crucially influenced by mass media, such as the decision to work for an aid organization, or ‘ethical consumption’ as in boycotting clothing produced by child labour or products from an oppressive regime (Corbridge, 1993).

These are all ways in which people may ‘act locally, think globally’ and even ‘act locally, (and simultaneously) act globally’, so engaging morally with people whom they never meet, who may be seen as significantly different from themselves, as ‘Other’ in ethnographic terms. Such actions may be informed by other considerations, like principled belief in beneficence towards any human beings in need or who are oppressed (Geras, 1995). Significant also may be normative notions of human ‘sameness’, in terms of basic rights and freedoms (e.g. Eagleton, 1996), and with respect to basic needs identified by a number of development theorists (e.g. Nussbaum, 1992), as bases for engaging with geographically and culturally remote others. Although such ‘universalisms’ are problematic, having fallen from favour in postmodern and poststructural circles, they can play an integral part in constructing discourses which characterize all human beings as of equal worth without being patronizing or unintentionally racist (Smith, 1998a).

There are many other factors to consider, and space permits only brief comments here. One is the role of major charities like Oxfam which extensively use advertising and marketing to ‘act at a distance’ and influence people’s discretionary expenditure. They make strenuous efforts to articulate their activities with those of local communities by producing a wide range of literature—‘educational mass media’—suitable for use in schools and youth organizations (e.g. Oxfam, 1997). Another encompasses related material factors, like the ability to substitute donations to one charity by those to another—consider the effect that the National Lottery in the UK has had upon wider other charitable donations, and the influence of broader economic conditions. As recession hit the UK in the early 1990s, donations in general and to international charities in particular, levelled out (Silk, 1998b). Despite the emphasis I have placed upon individual and small group agency, there is a whole host of factors which determine the agenda of things like news broadcasts and lie beyond audience control, such as ‘news values’ (Galtung and Ruge, 1981) which, in terms of dramatic impact, magnitude, exoticism and stereotyping of ‘Others’, and negativity—‘if it’s news, it’s bad news’, are well served by many Third World disaster stories.

There are dangers also in seeing the flows of interaction and material aid as all one way. It reinforces notions of Third World passivity and victimhood and helps to sustain new forms of imperial and neo-colonial relationships. There are many counter examples, ranging from anti-Apartheid campaigns that linked with ‘frontline’ struggles of distant others to self-help and self realization approaches. Oxfam now emphasizes the active and

positive in educational and publicity materials showing how people are even better able to help themselves with charitable support, rather than showing nothing but pictures of destitute adults and emaciated children.

Recipient Beneficence

The flow of symbolic content from producers to recipients may itself constitute a form of beneficence. Listening to the radio or watching television means that symbolic content produced can be 'consumed' as a form of someone 'being there' from the point of view of the recipient. Among the unintended consequences of mass media production are provision of company, comfort and 'something to do' for the isolated and housebound—housewives with young children, old age pensioners, the infirm, the unemployed. Through mass media like television people are met 'as if they were the circle of one's peers' in a 'seeming face-to-face relationship', a 'simulacrum of conversational give and take' (Horton and Wohl, 1956, p. 203). There is overlap with genres and topics which have been the dominant subject of feminist television criticism (Brunsdon *et al.*, 1997)—soaps, telenovelas, serials, sitcoms, housewives, 'new women', female audiences and domesticity together with a considerable volume of work on the activities of television audiences in general, particularly in domestic settings, inspired by Dorothy Hobson's (1982) pioneering study (see also Lull, 1990; Morley, 1986, 1992; Press, 1991; Seiter *et al.*, 1989).

How many isolated housewives have been prevented from 'going mad', thanks in part to such interactions? How many distracted mothers have used the television as a 'childminder' while working in another room? Consider the alleged reduction in suicide rates produced when round-the-clock radio and television first started up in the UK. I do not argue for these as in any way being adequate substitutes for someone literally 'being there'—although there may be occasions when people welcome company from others who cannot answer back!—and the monological character of mediated quasi-interaction means recipients have relatively little opportunity to contribute directly to the course of it. Nevertheless, they appear to be 'facts of life' which need to be taken into account, even if only as one means of identifying and assessing 'deficits' of care and caring with respect to traditional contexts of physical co-presence in home and community. I shall return to this issue, but first consider such beneficence in more positive terms, looking particularly at ways in which at least some level of mutual interaction between producers and recipients is incorporated in the mediated quasi-interaction, and at the possibilities for creation of mutual support and self-help organizations in association with it.

There are programmes focusing on personal relationships, including practical approaches to problems and dilemmas entailed which are directly and avowedly relevant to the experiences of recipients—heavy reliance on 'talking heads' is rare because the austere format hardly encourages a caring note. Flexible forms are more common—panel, and especially since the early 1980s, talk or chat and audience participation shows. The most successful of these is the internationally syndicated *Oprah Winfrey Show*, a common source of information about relationships, psychopathology and gender, mixing advice and catharsis with comedy and melodrama (Squire, 1997). It has many imitators in the United Kingdom, some, like 'Kilroy', 'The Time, The Place', and 'Vanessa', devoted to general advice and counselling, including the working through of personal problems, and sometimes entirely to specialist medical advice, while others, like 'Richard and Judy' and 'Espresso', dedicate segments to them. Issues and problems discussed in the studio include contributions by 'ordinary' people, normally acting as recipients in mediated quasi-interaction, who temporarily become performers—producers.

'Ordinary' recipients in the interaction may find it easier to identify with the temporary producers because their problems and circumstances are closer and more relevant to their own.

Mediated quasi-interaction is flexible enough to incorporate elements of the other two forms of interaction, albeit within certain limitations. There may be mediated interaction co-present in time but not in space, as in 'phone-in' formats, or 'time shifted' as when experts respond to letters. Help lines are common, although these may only be operative for limited periods after a specific care issue has been aired on-screen. Many of these hybrid forms of interaction represent borrowings from and refinements of formats common to women's magazines, especially the more sober ones like *Women and Home*, *Good Housekeeping* (both British), and *Ladies' Home Journal* (American).

These are examples of new kinds of responsive 'action at a distance' occurring in contexts far removed from those of production. They may be concerted but uncoordinated. To the extent, say, that (usually) women attempt to reduce the number of meat-based meals provided for their families, in response to features on problems of the high fat content or BSE-risk factors of meat, they are acting in a concerted but uncoordinated manner. These may be both concerted and coordinated where programmes put people who have 'caring problems'—with respect to others or themselves—in touch with appropriate organizations and agencies and, in some cases, stimulate and facilitate the formation of self-help/mutual support groups by acting as go-betweens for hitherto distanced others.

These are all examples of a trend, driven by the expansion of daytime television, interactive computer technologies, and pressures for cheaper broadcasting, which allows parts of the audience 'into' the media to a far greater extent than before (Ang, 1991). At present, it is not clear what the implications are for caring of programmes which hand over a significant degree of editorial control—as in the BBC's 'Open Slot' or Channel Four's 'Right to Reply'—to groups or individuals outside the broadcasting institutions. Apart from questioning old ideas of 'balance' between two sides, they might allow the voices of marginalized groups, like the disabled, to give a point of view which expresses as much what they can do for themselves as what society can do for them (Butler and Bowlby, 1997).

Whether by intention or not, therefore, mediated quasi-interaction may promote care and caring. Given the size of the recipient audiences in the interaction, the potential aggregate effect can be enormous, although hard to gauge exactly. These kinds of social relationships are perhaps too readily dismissed because they are 'ordinary' and 'everyday', and produced predominantly for and in conjunction with women.

Whatever role mediated quasi-interaction plays in caring at a distance, the vast majority of the producers will not be motivated primarily by considerations of care and caring, even if programmes are intentionally oriented to practical issues of care and caring. In 'selling audiences to advertisers' (Smythe, 1981), there is considerable 'entertainment value' in the airing and, especially, the personal parading of the dilemmas involved—terms like 'tabloid TV' and 'infotainment' are often appropriate. On Channel Four's 'Right to Reply' some viewers appeared as producers to make this point with respect to the programme 'Vanessa', and its producer defended it on the grounds that 'We really care ... it's not about the ratings' (!!).

There are ideological dangers in ignoring what are now less fashionable theories of the media, like the Frankfurt School's 'effects model' which stressed the power of capitalism, through the ownership and control of new media, to create a stupefying mass culture of overwhelming conformity. By extension, this becomes a cheap way of keeping people off the street, and of 'taking care of them' in a less charitable sense of that expression,

unintentionally reducing the costs, both direct and indirect, of providing for 'unproductive' members of society. The relatively upbeat characterization of human agency that I have given here could be used to justify forms of 'care in the community' that are totally cut adrift from any connections with public institutions and agencies which currently make a significant contribution to local social capital. For example, 'caring capacity' is significantly diminished if 'meals on wheels' and other forms of care from outside but provided at home are cut or reduced and, furthermore, the distributional impact of these is not neutral with respect to class, age, gender or ethnicity. This is not to decry agency and charity, but to recognize that such localized care in the traditional face-to-face form itself depends upon 'caring at a distance' because members of a national imagined community find it mutually advantageous to contribute to such provision through taxation.

Now I turn to examples where the core element is the 'virtual community' in cyberspace.

New Communities

I use the term 'new communities' rather than 'virtual communities' because, as in the examples discussed in the previous sections, I am concerned with the role that virtual communities play in the formation of simultaneous geographies that articulate local and global, problematizing scale issues, and which are constituted by long chains and complex hierarchies of interactions in which mediated interactions are crucial. It is partly a matter, as Meyrowitz (1985) and Rheingold (1994, p. 115) state, respectively, of community as 'liberated from spatial locality' and of 'communitarian places online', of not relying solely on absolute space to theorize scale (Smith and Katz, 1993). However, 'new communities' are not those existing in cyberspace alone, rather, they are hybrids in which interactions constituting such spaces articulate with a variety of 'grounded' communities. The latter include spatially concentrated communities of identity offering mutual support, as in the case of gay and ethno-racial communities, communities of choice which tend to be more spatially (but locally) dispersed, as on lines of gender (Friedman, 1989), and a variety of self-help and mutual support groups. This 'grounded' conception avoids the extravagant claims and counter claims made about cyberspace and virtual communities if considered in isolation (Robins, 1996).

In such communities the building block is not mediated quasi-interaction as in the case of 'Third Party Beneficence' and 'Recipient Beneficence', but instead mediated (person-to-person) interaction (Table 1) like that of telephone conversations. The caring function of such interactions in terms of support and comfort offered by friends and relatives is well known. Next in complexity is the 'one-to-everyone' network like that of the help line, whether offering all-purpose support as in the case of the Samaritans, or something specific like advice and information on AIDS and HIV (Brown, 1995), the latter being an example upon which I draw to illustrate many of my arguments in this section. Finally, there are 'everyone-to-everyone' networks whose connectivity resembles that of a traditional face-to-face community and which most commentators have in mind when talking of virtual communities in cyberspace, although one-to-one and one-to-many networks are also examples, too often overlooked because of their familiarity—'Cyberspace supplants physical space. We see this happening already in the familiar cyberspace of on-line communication—telephone, e-mail, newspapers etc' (Heim, 1992, p. 73).

These mediated forms facilitate extended availability in time and space, in many cases meaning, spatially, that those involved in the interactions can literally be anywhere.

Conventionally, the narrower range of symbolic cues is regarded as a disadvantage. However, apart from the undoubted benefit of being able, undetected, to pull a face at the person with whom you are interacting, there is the advantage this confers in terms of anonymity, as in the case of callers to Aids help lines where guilt and shame can be important motivating factors (Brown, 1995). In addition to facilitating contact, this cyberspace extends HIV education and prevention work because an empathetic and knowledgeable 'other' can discuss the particular situation and concerns of a specific other—the latter receives 'personal attention'. There may be an international dimension, either routinized via the public telephone system, and/or in association with a media event such as World Aids Day, organized by the World Health Organization, which 'allows [local] activists, as well as the "general population" to situate the local dimensions of the AIDS crisis in a more global perspective, while also helping to prevent the spread of HIV quite directly in other places' (Brown, 1995, pp. 261–262). More generally, this illustrates the point that caring may be more appropriately and effectively provided 'at a distance' by strangers, that 'local' caring based on unmediated interaction may also be rendered more effective by virtue of such links, and reinforces the point that interaction alone (mediated or not) plays a significant role in caring.

Anonymity may not be an issue. Rheingold (1994, chapter 4) gives examples of virtual communities based on 'everyone-to-everyone' configurations like those of the Internet where caring is a priority, including one for and about the handicapped, and another acting as a forum for paramedics—virtual 'communities of interest'.

Media personalities are less significant, in keeping with the theory that virtual communities offer unrestricted freedom of expression and personal contact, with less hierarchy and formality than is found in unmediated relations (Heim, 1992; see also Meyrowitz, 1985; Rheingold, 1994), and consistent with some empirical evidence, e.g. Brown (1995).

The 'causal arrow' may point in the opposite direction. As Rheingold (1994) suggests, caring issues and problems initially shared over the Internet may stimulate the development of widely separated and locally grounded support groups.

The examples considered here suggest a modification to McLuhan's (1967) concept of the 'global village'. It appears overblown if considered in terms of the multiplex relationships held to characterize village and local community life. Considered in terms of more selective relationships forged with specific aims in mind, or with respect to 'communities of choice', it looks less fanciful.

It is within the terms of my discussion here that I propose that 'virtual communities' should be characterized, instead of those set by a polarized debate which, on the one hand, sees 'virtual communities' as substituting or compensating for traditional forms of community and solidarity or, on the other, as somehow countering the increasing 'fragmentation within globalisation' of the contemporary world. There are dangers against which both Robins (1996) and Gray (1997) rightly caution—viewing such 'collectives' as cut off from a real world in which we must face up to conflict and disorder (see also Sennett, 1970), and deal with differences of class, gender, ethno-racial status, and sexuality. Furthermore, because 'virtual community is a community at zero cost' (Gray, 1997, p. 119), it cannot be expected to satisfy human needs for care, communication and belonging without imposing any of the constraints, duties and responsibilities that traditional communities demand. The new technologies involved are valuable if they make renewal of existing communities easier, and new ones easier to form (Gray, 1997; see also Meyrowitz, 1985).

Conclusions

The discussion in this paper strongly suggests that mass media and electronic networks play a significant part in extending the range of care and caring beyond the traditional context of shared spatio-temporal locale and our 'nearest and dearest' to embrace 'distant others'. I now consider the main conceptual implications of the arguments.

The Third Party Beneficence structure characterizes financial donations to charity. With few exceptions, donors and recipients of beneficence never meet, so there must be overwhelming reliance on mass media. The latter's ability to capture people's attention is critical because, thanks to the enormous flexibility and openness of the international financial system and to the 'conquest of distance' by modern technology, the range of good causes to which people can contribute is almost limitless, not least in the geographical sense of that term. There is a profusion of and intense competition between charitable causes which may have a numbing effect on potential donors leading to 'compassion confusion' (Barnett and Saxon-Harrold, 1992, p. 203). The situation is further complicated by the existence of caring institutions and bureaucracies which universalize the benefits of caring within specific national borders. It is significant that the enormous body of research on charitable donations, at least in the United Kingdom, tells us little about the geographical limits to our sense of human suffering and to our propensity to give (Barnett and Saxon-Harrold, 1992, p. 200), whether we are more likely to identify with or contribute to causes within or outside the country, whether and how we react to appeals at the regional or neighbourhood level, and the ways all of these interact with changing levels of state provision—for an exploratory study see Silk (1998b). Research is urgently needed on the role that mass media play in the processes that produce caring at different distances and at different geographical scales, together with the ways in which they articulate with 'imagined communities', and with face-to-face interactions ranging from the scale of the domestic to those of neighbourhood and community.

The other two structures of beneficence—*Recipient Beneficence* and *New Communities*—are primarily concerned with providing counselling and a sympathetic ear, on the one hand, and promoting self-help and mutual support, on the other. A crucial issue is the extent to which the exchange of symbolic content through mediated interaction and mediated quasi-interaction can substitute for or even have advantages over that associated with face-to-face unmediated interaction. There is the obvious advantage that networks of interaction may extend anywhere and everywhere subject to political and cultural barriers and transmission costs. Apart from this, what are the gains and losses involved in 'being there' while 'not being there', of being present but absent? Disadvantages include foregoing many of the multiplicity of cues involved in reflexive monitoring of and reacting to the behaviour of 'concrete' others, and the impossibility of the 'laying on of hands'. However, mediated interaction can have the advantages of anonymity, including avoidance of intrusion into one's private physical space, the ability to talk things over with someone who is not directly involved, access to those who have had experience of your own needs or suffering or to expert advice. Mediated quasi-interaction facilitated by newspapers and magazines, radio and television may be even more effective as a first step in the relief of suffering, avoiding the embarrassment of face-to-face interaction, allowing reflection and breaking down a person's sense of isolation as an article or broadcast by a fellow sufferer leads someone to realize that their situation is not unique. This may lead to involvement in geographically and socially extensive self-help and mutual support networks.

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