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# Proximal versus distant suffering in TV news discourses on COVID-19 pandemic

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**Abstract:** News is central to human communication and has an important signifying power as a particular subsystem within language. This study sets out to comprehensively examine how four major TV global news providers – CNN, BBC, DW and RT – have covered the COVID-19 pandemic from outbreak to mid-crisis. We apply a multi-level content analysis approach that rests on theories of proximization and representation of distant suffering, following a computer-assisted analysis that aids in identifying concepts occurrence and the semantic relationship among the highly frequent clusters. We explore the news representation during 2020 of COVID-19 as proximal versus distant discourses of suffering, safety and compassion conceptualized in light of theories on distant suffering. A total number of 12 dataset reports consisting of 2,017,875 words were analyzed. The results suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic news formulates a particular type of discourse on suffering that individualizes the sufferer, sets out the course of action and turns the fast-approaching pandemic into a global cause for action.

**Keywords:** coronavirus; discourse; distant; pandemic; proximization; suffering; TV news

## 1 Introduction

In December 2019, a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was first identified in the Chinese city of Wuhan and has since turned into a large scale pandemic that has affected over 256,480,022 people and has caused the death of over 5,145,002 people worldwide (World Health Organization Weekly Operational Report nr. 81/Nov 23, 2021). Previously, severe illnesses caused by a coronavirus were

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reported in 2003, when the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) caused the death of about 10% of the infected population, and in 2012, when the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) decimated 34% of those infected across 27 countries (World Health Organization 2020). Given the huge multiplication rate of the COVID-19 virus, worldwide mobilization has been taken to an unprecedented level since March 11, 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledged the COVID-19 pandemic and called for global action. Emptied store shelves and reduced food supplies have since remained emblematic of this ongoing pandemic as fear has continued to seize socially distant individuals, communities and populations as a result of medical equipment shortages, limited response capacity, protective travel restrictions, lockdown anxiety and massive emergency measures. Across nations worldwide, media attention and coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic have peaked at levels similar to or exceeding those during and after the 9/11 attacks. Such a high level of attention to the pandemic news cuts across nations and regions and meets a diversity of opinions ranging from a strong reliance on news to varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the media's underplay of serious risk threats.

With the growing expansion of discourse studies, linguistic research on news discourse as a form of mediated communication has increased significantly, borrowing analytical instruments available for the study of language at large. This study approaches the TV mediated news discourse of the global suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic through the *proximization* theory (Cap 2006, 2013, 2017; Chilton 2004) that foregrounds the speaker's (newscaster's) point of view. We consider discourse to be a mode of organization of knowledge and experience that is rooted in language, environments of use and contexts. In focusing on TV news discourse production and transmission, we are particularly concerned with distance-adjusting operations and strategies and their role in the process of bridging the present, the past and the future to create an 'ongoing present' as evidenced by four major TV global news companies – Cable News Network (CNN), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Deutsche Welle (DW) and Russia Today (RT) – and their COVID-19 news coverage from outbreak to pandemic mid-crisis.

The main research question that our article poses is: what *distance* and the proximizing strategies are used in the routines of TV news production when dire global suffering is at stake? We argue that collective compassion and action are distance-adjusted and carry an ideological potential that is emergent from various dynamic and identifiable spatial, temporal and emotional frames. The organization of the present study is as follows: the introduction (Section 1) presents the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and the purpose of the study while Section 2 is devoted to literature review. Section 3 describes the research methodology, Section 4 presents the computer-assisted results and the content analysis from the selected TV news

coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic whereas Section 5 offers the conclusions of the study and discusses the implications for further research.

## 2 Literature review

This section examines news values relating to *nearness/proximity* (2.1), distance and closeness of mediated suffering research (2.2), and provides an overview of proximization theories (2.3).

### 2.1 News values and proximity

News values, also known as news factors, are largely accepted as being operational outside the news story text, whether exclusively existing in journalists' minds (Harrison 2010), as ideological constructs (Herman and Chomsky 1994), aiding in the decision-making process on what counts as news (O'Neill and Harcup 2008), or simply approachable as content-based research (Harrison 2006). The first insight into news values was provided by Galtung and Ruge (1965), who established 12 news factors that can make a story newsworthy. Other studies have tried to consolidate lists of news values and to approach them in comprehensive ways (Caple and Bednarek 2013) while other approaches have distinguished more clearly between news values as reflecting reporters' judgments about news relevance and news factors as being features of news events which "might be the degree of damage reported, the status of people involved, the geographical distance between the event and the place where the recipients of the news stories live" (Kepplinger and Ehmig 2006: 27). Our approach uses the term news values to be inclusive of news factors and adopts Caple and Bednarek's (2013) view, which takes 'news values' to be the "properties or qualities of events" (p.4). According to them, news values are approachable on mainly three levels: 1) *the material level*, represented by the newsworthiness of an event; 2) the *cognitive level*, defined by how newscasters judge the news relevance of an event (or story) for any target audience; and 3) *the discursive level*, reflected by how news production discourses (such as press releases, TV news headlines, etc.) are capable of building an event's newsworthiness (Caple and Bednarek 2013: 5).

Among the news values that Van Dijk (1988) distinguishes is the value of *Proximity* which has "a cognitive representation" (Van Dijk 1988: 121) alongside other news values that include *Novelty*, *Relevance*, *Presupposition*, *Recency* and *Negativity*. He holds that such news values are critical in news production (selection and formulation alike) because events and text do influence each other

reciprocally. In more specific terms, an event attains news value precisely because it has a great potential for interpretation on the basis of a certain code. While Van Dijk (1988) conceptualizes the news value of *Proximity* as cognitive, acknowledging its social and discursive dimensions, Conley and Lamble (2006: 48–49) take a more fluid approach by considering the news value of *Proximity* as being embedded in the event itself: “the farther away something is, the more significance, drama, or human appeal it must display if it is to make a local news list”. Van Dijk’s (1988: 124) “local and ideological proximity of news events” is similar to the closeness of an event’s occurrence. By universal acceptance, “an item which originates locally is usually of more newsworthiness than one from a distance. People want to know about their own community first [...] but there are also historical, social, financial and cultural proximities which have little relationship to geographical distances” (Masterton 2005: 47).

Complementarily, the news value of *Recency* can also be discursively constructed and can enhance newsworthiness by referring to events in as recent a transmission time span as possible, the requirement being “that the events described be new themselves, that is recent, within a margin of between one and several days” (Van Dijk 1988: 121). Such temporal closeness works in conjunction with the news value of *Timeliness*, which concerns the *when* element of the event and that of *Currency* that indicates present relevance. Additionally, news timeliness requires, as Roshco (1999: 34) points out, “the conjunction of: (1) *recency* (recent disclosure); (2) *immediacy* (publication with minimal delay); (3) *currency* (relevance to present concerns)”. However, the temporal dimension of newsworthiness “is not its recency and immediacy (i.e. past orientation), or even currency (i.e. present orientation), but its relevance and consequences for the future” (Jaworski and Fitzgerald 2008: 7).

All these perspectives are critical in understanding news production as they regard proximity as a contingent condition to news value that includes, but is not limited to, the geographical closeness, psychological as well as cultural nearness that an event or story is apt to mobilize.

## 2.2 Distance and closeness of suffering mediated research

The upsurge of global suffering has sparked a growing scholarly interest from different disciplinary fields addressing the particular relationship existing between suffering and mediated news. Such a relationship, at the intersection of media and disasters, has been explored within a wide array of representations and discourses, including: distant suffering representation (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006, 2008; Joye 2009), witnessing experience (Höijer 2004), disaster recovery discourse

(Cox et al. 2008), racial framings of disaster coverage (Tierney et al. 2006), “us versus them” social-cultural discourse (Engelhardt and Jansz 2015), and audience reaction towards mediated global suffering (Huiberts and Joye 2017; Kyriakidou 2015).

Within the vast diversity of recent studies and approaches on disaster news coverage, several strands can be identified; however, of core interest to this study are only two strands of research that we will briefly present in what follows. Both strands help clarify distance-mediated strategies in TV disaster news. A first strand revolves around *distant suffering*, as representation of suffering in terms of “other” and distant zones of viewing. The other strand concerns *close suffering*, as a constructed space of “us” and proximal viewing. Both perspectives address proximity and distance extending beyond exclusively physical and/or geographical considerations and concern TV news discourse production and interpretation.

Whenever a disaster takes place in remote zones, the social, psychological and physical distances contribute to varying representations and perceptions of the event in a type of constructed reality that impacts public opinion and shapes audience perceptions. Suffering, perhaps more than happiness, embeds various dimensions of distance that are instrumental in rebuilding and representing a relevant constructed reality that engages the audience in varying degrees and forms. Critical discourse studies have shown that, rather than suggesting physical or geographical separation, distance is reflective of a social and political gap between people, groups and communities (of viewers), defined according to whether they are fortunate *spectators of suffering* and hence belong to *fortunate* or *unfortunate* categories of people (Boltanski 1999), *cosmopolitan* citizens (Chouliaraki 2008), part of *Us* and *Them* (Joye 2009), superiority-biased nations (Yan and Bissell 2015) or are *ethnic* and *poor* (Potts 2015). Distance in relation to suffering is hence reflective not solely of separation but can define itself relative to wealth, ethnicity, safety, danger or poverty, positioning individuals within categories of people who suffer and those who do not. Such a positioning is determined by distance-viewing, which, in news production and transmission, facilitates the concentration on *observation* rather than on *action* in a dialectical approach that allows the distant spectator to observe the victim of an unfortunate disaster from a safe distance.

Such a cognitive separation of news recipients from troubling disaster content affords a space of *proximal safety comfort*, which is highly individualized and operates within personal cognitive processing of emotions. In a dynamic perspective-taking process, the spectator can take as many distant safe stances as there are modes of disaster news coverage. The power of news to maximize cosmopolitan citizenry, compassion and sensibility is therefore distance-based, being enacted through a set of mediation strategies that Chouliaraki (2006) categorized into a

tripartite taxonomy of *adventure*, *emergency* and *ecstatic* news typology about distant suffering. Other studies (Chiang and Duann 2007; Matouschek et al. 1995) examining distance and distancing as “othering” (such as anti-Semitic, racist or xenophobic discourses) explore the construal of social actors in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Potts 2015) or the social representations theory in analyzing the meanings of the SARS epidemic (Washer 2004). Both studies examine threat as being “contained” through the mechanism of “othering”, which keeps the disaster at a safe distance because the sufferers are so different from “us” and hence so much like “others”.

Contrastively, close suffering in proximal viewing brings to the fore the shared feeling of “us” and of closeness to individuals who can be helped by the action of distant others. Vacillating between *collective compassion* (Höijer 2004) and *compassion fatigue* (Chouliarakis 2008) or *collective burnout* (Halbesleben and Leon 2014), the suffering of those who are proximate is identifiable in disaster TV mediated news with that of the spectators within a common ground of geographical, cultural and emotional proximity. Typically, news organizations are inclined to prioritize news that are relevant and most meaningful to national audiences in a process of disaster news *domestication* (Pantti 2015) that employs a domestic angle (focusing on national relief efforts, relating about casualties or victims like “us”, etc.) and facilitates regimes of pity.

The proximal space for sufferer-victim identification has been significantly explored in a critical strand of audience-based research (Engelhardt and Jansz 2015; Huiberts and Joye 2017) that investigates ways in which remote audiences can develop imaginative emotional connections with the victims in disaster-mediated news and messages. Whether in identifiable paradigms of *integrated crisis mapping* (Jin et al. 2016) or *media witnessing* (Kyriakidou 2015), audiences were found to interpret crises affectively and emotionally rather than cognitively or rationally.

The studies presented above examine disasters and suffering from a wide variety of methodological approaches and angles. Within this diversity, the main concern of our study lies with the news text that reaches the viewers’ living rooms, being peripheral to news production (the successive responses from the suffering field, newsroom or broadcast studio), and news interpretation (audience reactions to the news). The next sub-section presents the potential of proximization to address the function of news discourse with linguistic methods, instruments and interpretation.

## 2.3 Proximization

Proximization theory has evolved as a Critical Discourse Studies theoretical framework that was initially advanced by Chilton (2004) and was later developed

by Cap (Cap 2006, 2013, 2015, 2017), with extended applications in the study of political discourse (Cienki et al. 2010; Hart 2010), literature (Farsi 2018), news discourse (Kopytowska 2015), war rhetoric (Okulska and Cap 2010), international policy and values (Wang 2019) and many other areas and subfields. While Chilton's *Discourse Space Theory* (Chilton 2004, 2005) advances a modeling theory and tool that seek to understand the complexity of human communication by resting on the centrality of deictic engagement of self in experienced *space*, *time* and *modality*, Cap's proximization theory, through its fundamental capacity to explain various conditions of temporally extensive contexts, provides an important discourse analytical instrument for examining deictic (pointing, specifying) functions in and of public discourses.

As a concept, proximization indicates how proximity and distance to an event are realized at discourse level, whether being *close* or *remote* to the speaker. The cognitive architecture of the concept advanced by Cap (2013) rests on a three dimensional *Spatial-Temporal-Axiological model of proximization* (STA) that reflects the functions of the three proximization strategies of space, time and value which point to the specific discourse goals that any strategic validation of proximization is presupposed to achieve. Proximization thus is more an end than a means.

As a discursive strategy, proximization allows the speaker to position "the discourse addressee in the center of events narrated to him/her" (Cap 2006: 4) or as closely as possible to what represents the speaker's *origo* or 'deictic centre' (DC). The pragmatic and cognitive-linguistic mechanisms by means of which peripheral elements of the *discourse space* (DS) can be symbolically construed as central ones provide a large space for capturing a diversity of roles and engaging phenomena of social interaction. Distant spatial and temporal events, including ideologies and mindsets, are proximized as progressively intruding upon the speaker-audience territory (ideological and physical); however, the main discourse goal is to legitimize the speaker's own actions by legitimization of preventive measures and neutralization of external, foreign entities and threat. This is what makes proximization a critical strategic operation used by any speaker (in particular the political speaker) to achieve effective socio-political goals.

Within the ever-expanding grounding and applications of proximization, the present study sets out to examine distance and the proximizing strategies used in the routines of TV news production when global suffering (and crisis) is at stake. Within the framework of perspectives hereto presented, we seek to find whether, in enhancing newsworthiness of the COVID-19 pandemic, the TV global news providers under scrutiny employ proximizing mechanisms designed to bring the event closer and whether such proximizing dynamics do influence journalistic routines of covering events and are designed to arouse collective compassion.

### 3 Research methodology

This study focuses on the TV news between January 01 (taken to be the pandemic outbreak) and March 10, 2020 (considered to be the global mid-crisis). Our data selection was intended to strike a geographical and representational balance represented by two American and two European TV news companies, the latter of which being an Eastern, state-controlled international TV network (Russia Today). The large corpus datasets and information provided us with an environment of study that evinced a critical potential for a collective understanding of distant and close suffering. This potential was reflected by the algorithmic nature of particular routine social and cognitive processes inherent in news production (selection and formulation) and transmission alike and not least by the fluidity and complexity of the disaster-mediated news broadcast to shape distancing and/or proximizing audience perceptions. To this purpose, a computer-assisted content analysis was chosen on grounds that it can amplify objectivity and contribute research validity. The excellent results in media usage studies and strong benefits of the Catpac Pony software, a semantic network analysis tool, has made it an ideal and most powerful content analysis instrument that aids the classification and evaluation of core themes and key frames that ascertain both occurrences and meanings of TV mediated news.

The raw data corpus of our study included 30,347,282 words of which 2,017,875 were processed analyzed words. The four news sources – BBC, CNN, DW, and RT – covering three months each, January, February and March 2020, yielded 12 data sources. As part of the analytical procedure, each of these data files was run through the Catpac Pony version without filter (i.e. not deleting articles, prepositions, etc.) and generated frequency counts for each. These files informed our primary data on the frequency occurrence and news progression. A second operation consisted in running each of the 12 data files through Catpac Pony, this time excluding the standard set of articles, prepositions, adverbials, phrases, quantifiers and the like, and searching only for the top 75 words. Previous Catpac-based project experience showed that a greater number of words could make viewing Galileo plots very difficult, which is why a decision was made regarding the exclusive search for the top 75 words. Counts were then computed along with clusters (dendograms) and Galileo coordinates for each of the 12 data files. Each run produced four files: the cluster analysis, the labels file which just lists the top 75 words, the coordinate file which is the file of Galileo coordinates and which could be plotted with Big Galileo Viewer, and last but not least a set of synaptic weights among the top words. The final operation was to plot each of the Galileo coordinate files in the Big Galileo Viewer and produce plots for each data set.

For the first operation performed by Catpac concerning news progression, the analyzed CNN news datasets included 632,030 words, BBC 532,888 words, DW 502,709 words and RT 350,248 words, with a corpus total of 2,017,875 analyzed words.

For the second operation, the filtered results on the top 75 words were obtained on the basis of a Catpac analysis performed on the following datasets: CNN 94,574 words, BBC 85,262 words, DW 82,568 words and RT 49,809 words, with a corpus total of 312,213 analyzed words.

The above quantitative examination allowed us then to further provide a qualitative perspective that looked at mediated news discourses within a mixed approach that combines a pragmatic/stylistic approach (in terms of observations on genre, style and register), a practical approach (focusing on journalistic practices in news making and dissemination), a corpus-based linguistic approach (that draws on identified words and pattern frequencies of news discourse) and only marginally, from a critical discourse analytical approach that looks into the ideologies and distant versus close suffering relations underlying TV pandemic news discourses.

## 4 Results

The first operation pursued an analysis of paired proximal/distal deixis of space (here/there; this/that), of time (now/then), of person (we/they) examined per occurrence frequency (Table 1). This stage sought to get initial information exclusively on how frequency of indexicals may point to certain proximizing strategies without considering news anchors to the communicative event.

The above results indicate that there are significant shifts in the number of counts per indexical and per TV news station, particularly in what concerns the downward occurrence trend (in red) of “then” (BBC, CNN, DW, RT), of proximal

**Table 1:** Indexicals per frequency of occurrence.

		BBC			CNN			DW			RT		
		Jan.	Feb.	Mar.									
Distance	Here	76	72	77	49	46	56	86	75	73	65	87	42
	There	31	32	31	52	35	33	44	52	51	68	42	37
Time	Now	35	30	32	21	21	23	22	22	25	21	27	27
	Then	267	217	199	336	242	181	264	200	260	263	170	135
Us/Them	We	19	22	18	25	18	15	27	31	32	23	17	19
	They	29	25	29	26	23	27	43	38	42	63	31	36
Demonstr.	This	13	13	16	11	10	11	11	17	18	13	11	11
	That	9	12	10	10	9	9	9	9	9	8	7	8

and distal “here” and “there” (CNN, DW, RT) of personal deixis “we” (DW, RT) and the upward occurrence trend (in blue) of “here” (RT), “there” (DW), and “now” (RT). While the counts may not be particularly relevant in themselves at this stage (priority consideration was given to the first two months of the pandemic only, as the month of March – having only 1/3 of information – was mainly used at this stage to confirm, or alternatively refute, the identified trend) their significances do point to very subtle strategies concerning news formulation. Thus, while all TV news companies seem to proximize the time of the event (as the very reduction of “then” counts suggests), CNN and RT additionally proximize the distance (as space) associated with the pandemic (as per reduction of “there” counts). What is interesting is that the distance proximization performed by CNN and RT is effectively doubled by an increase in the number of occurrences for “here”, which confirms that there is some proximizing strategy at play. In the case of DW, the trend is surprisingly inverted; so, while counts of “there” increase, counts of “here” decrease, showing that a certain distancing from the event is desired. Moreover, with regard to the association-exclusion indicator of “us versus them”, our result indicates that all global TV news providers place less emphasis on “us” (“we”) and more on “them” across the three months examined.

These sets of initial observations called for more in-depth examination of discourse spaces, following Cap’s (2013) STA (Spatial, Temporal and Axiological) analytic proximization model which presumes that all the three procedures of proximization are conducive to the *constant reduction of the symbolic distance* existing in the discourse space (DS). Within the STA model, the “inside-the-deictic-center” (IDC) entities are represented by the news speaker and audience (people) whereas the “outside-the-deictic-center” (ODC) peripheral element is the Coronavirus pandemic in China. The center-periphery distinction entails a distance that can be not only a geographical but also an ideological distance particularly if the “Coronavirus—in China” proves to be a carrier of negative values or elements.

## 4.1 Spatial proximization (SP)

Within the spatial proximization (SP) approach, we have found that the three most used words by all TV news companies are “virus”, “coronavirus” and “people”, the first two being markers of DS-peripheral entities and the last one an IDC element. For the sake of accuracy, the ODC peripheral element is taken to be “the Coronavirus—in China” because it represents not only the threat but also its associated geographical location relative to which the DS is construed. Their presence as the most used words points not only to significant semantic weight of terms within the

DS but also reflects the degree to which their expression in the discourse parallels their effectiveness in proximizing processes.

Thus, the occurrence and distribution of these markers across the examined months, in particular regarding the occurrence of “people”, shows CNN and DW placing a strong scientific interest/concern in the virus and its origin at different discernible times (CNN at pandemic outbreak whereas DW at mid-pandemic crisis). The results obtained by calculating the distances between “coronavirus” and “people” and their distribution per TV global news networks (Table 2) show that IDCs (news speaker, audience and/or virus-affected people) are at greater physical distances from ODC (the Coronavirus—in China) in March as compared to January, showing a general physical *distance increase* for all TV news companies.

Such a distance increase may be reflective of a geographically remote perception of the COVID-19 outbreak and the associated distant suffering of China in the East Asian region. This is confirmed by the presence of words such as China and Wuhan that rank high in the top 75 most used words. These results apparently indicate that spatial distancing, not spatial proximizing, is at work here. However, within a perspective according to which the ODC acts as a direct instigator of the physical impact, the SP is achieved, in the case of our examined TV news providers, through a subtle mechanism that operates simultaneously: while the *physical distance* between ICDs and ODC increases, the symbolic distance between the people (IDCs) and the COVID-19 pandemic in China (ODC) gradually narrows, signifying a fast-approaching major threat. Such a construal of threat is symbolically enhanced by the usage of particular lexical forms, with the following being prevalent – “warning”, “protect”, “emergency”, “threat”, “deadly”. While the news speaker and the audience are represented by lexical forms and phrases such as “the British public”, “the British people”, “the United States”, “Germany”, “Russia”, “other countries”, “victims”, “our nation”, “us”, “other people”, “our country”, and “we”, the pandemic threat is lexicalized mostly as “danger”, “major threat”, “big fear” and “risk”. This pandemic threat is brought

**Table 2:** Distances between coronavirus and people per month across the news providers.

	Distance between coronavirus and people				Total
	BBC	CNN	DW	RT	
January	8.39	4.91	3.71	2.46	19.47
February	8.84	10.82	4.32	4.4	28.38
March	9.78	7.44	3.88	3.49	24.59
Total	27.01	23.17	11.91	10.35	72.44

in close viewing by verbal phrases (VPs) of directionality and motion such as “spread”, “infect”, “reach” and “approach” and by IDC drawing events such as “spreading like wildfire across Asia” (RT 26.01.2020), “new coronavirus reaches your friends” (DW 24.01.2020), “this virus is probably already with us” (CNN 14.02.2020), or “the virus may have been spreading undetected” (BBC 02.03.2020), etc. These noun phrases, together with the VPs of directionality and motion that are used to construe the movement of the Coronavirus towards the discourse space, enable a proximizing process of a fast-approaching threat.

Our corpus results indicate that distances are different and that the CNN, DW and RT show a greater distance existing between the Coronavirus and “us/we” while for the BBC, the distance is greater between the Coronavirus and “they/them”. This bespeaks, in the case of BBC, a certain detachment in news transmission that sees geographical distance as safe for the time being and shows at the same time that the symbolic construal of the Coronavirus as a threat can occur at a finest, highly particularized level, being enacted in successive and meaningful discursive chains.

Within SP, a particular attention was allotted to “here” and “there” and their positioning relative to ODC. In general, “here” has a twofold dimension (spatial and temporal) as it indicates both the studio (space) and the news program on air (time). In combination with news anchors, it enhances the speech act of face-to-face news sharing in an interactive discourse space triggered by such expressions as: “hello, here is the news”, “glad you can join us here”, “David is live here with the latest”, “Michelle has joined us here”, etc.

With regard to the positioning of “here” and “there” relative to the Coronavirus, the aggregated results show close distance values between the Coronavirus and “here” and “there” in the case of CNN and RT, greater distances to “here” for BBC and a vast distance to ‘here’ for DW. These distances point to how spatial positioning to the ODC may be reflected geopolitically in the news DS; thus, while for the CNN and RT the ODC threat is at a relatively equal distance, being neither quite “here” nor quite “there”, for BBC the ODC is at a relatively safe distance, being distantly viewed in terms of less “here” but more “there”. The COVID-19 pandemic as well as its associated distant suffering is therefore clearly adjusted by the “here” and “there” values that reduce – or alternatively augment – critical distances used for making the pandemic reality they represent more emotionally engaging for the audience.

## 4.2 Temporal proximization (TP)

Temporal proximization (TP) is achieved as a forced construal of the pandemic crisis that is envisaged as being imminent and momentous and which hence calls

for an immediate response and urgent preventive measures. Within the TP framework, counts of *BE* VPs show a predominance of present forms used across the global TV news providers that supports the construal of an ongoing, timeless present in the DS of the news discourse.

Additionally, a significant number of VPs make references to past severe illnesses caused by SARS in 2003 and by MERS in 2012 (BBC – 531 references; CNN – 181 references; DW – 323 references and RT – 133 references). Other VPs denoting inertia and/or passiveness of IDC are construed as a past-until-present amassed phenomenon that proximizes the Coronavirus pandemic as a threat and rallies nations to near future actions. From a static IDC (people, nation) position, defined as “a posture of containment” (CNN 08.03.2020) in which “we’re hearing helps” (CNN 09.03.2020), the current ODC threat is seen as one that is “gradually growing” (RT 23.02.2020) because “the new coronavirus is advancing” (DW 24.01.2020), “the deadly coronavirus continues to spread” (RT 28.01.2020), “the death toll is approaching” (DW 06.02.2020) and “the world is fast approaching a tipping point” (BBC 23.02.2020). Since ODC could materialize any time now, there is a dire need to “formulate a plan” (RT 12.01.2020), a “strategy to contain this fire” (RT 03.02.2020) as well as “a rapid response platform” (BBC 24.01.2020).

The semantic-pragmatic construal of “nows” is thus made as a present which extends beyond the *now* on the real time axis, being a symbolic accumulation of known past and near future events. On this proviso, TP is definable as a *symbolic reduction* of the temporal axis that rests on two simultaneous temporal shifts: on the one hand, it sustains a now on the basis of a past event (references to MERS and SARS) that develops a rationale for a future Coronavirus action, on the other, the now encompasses a present moment that spurs a near future Coronavirus action.

VPs inclusive of modal auxiliaries construe the Coronavirus impact as operating continuously between now and the past as in: “lessons learned from the SARS epidemic nearly 2 decades ago might help” (DW 28.01.2020), “[...] should have been approaching this with an abundance of caution” (RT 28.01.2020) and between now and the future as in: “COVID-19 could kill around 100,000 people in the UK” (BBC 07.03.2020), “this could be the first example of community spread” (CNN 27.02.2020), “the virus might actually spread this way” (DW 27.01.2020). In addition, VPs in the present progressive such as “spread”, “approach”, “advance”, “travel”, “die”, “kill”, etc. operate as key proximization triggers being enhanced at both ends (linking the past and the future respectively) by additional triggers such as “yet”, “just” and “still” in: “these people are *just* being quarantined” (BBC 30.01.2020), “you can *still* shed the virus from your body” (CNN 29.02.2020), etc.

Likewise, the news value of *Recency* is reflected in the perfective and progressive aspectual contrasts, being part of the ongoing, extended present. The ongoingness of the pandemic is construed by the temporal-aspectual properties of the unbounded

ongoing event emerging from the resultative and continuative features of the present perfect tense forms that point to a distant, yet still close depiction of suffering. The temporal dimension of the pandemic news is further endorsed not only by its *Recency* and *Immediacy* values but also by the *Currency* value of the pandemic news and the consequences it will have for the future. Put more simply, while the multiple construed ‘news’ presuppose a context common to the speaker and audience, the symbolic arrangement of the basic center-periphery DS representation changes gradually as it proximizes ODC from a temporal imminence (epistemic) to a more pro-active (deontic) perspective.

### 4.3 Axiological proximization (AP)

Following Cap’s (2013) theoretical framework which considers axiological proximization (AP) to be the construal of an increasing IDC (people) – ODC (Coronavirus) ideological clash, our aim was to see if there was any accumulating ideological conflict between the home IDC values and the alien-perceived ODC peripheral values. To that purpose, the datasets were carefully checked for lexical resources that might establish whether AP has a *high explicit impact* probability and thus makes up for the lack of construals empowered by SP and TP, or on the contrary, the AP has a *low implicit impact* probability that simply enacts SP and TP.

The results indicate the existence of an IDC-ODC conflict that not only intensifies the stance of imminent readiness to confront the external threat represented by ODC but which also leads to the physical materializing of the ODC ideological danger within the IDC space. Thus, besides the nominal markers of the IDC-ODC ideological standpoints opposing the IDCs that are seen as “victims”, “innocent nation”, “safe country” to the ODC threat seen as “danger”, “major threat”, “big fear” and “deadly risk”, the results show that in all cases there are sufficient indications of a materialized, gradually progressing presence of the Coronavirus within IDC territory across the three months examined. Prototypically, all TV news companies follow a gradual materializing – as well as development – of the Coronavirus ideological threat that begins as a physical threat but grows into a source of conflict. In the case of DW the progression in physical materialization is more explicit: “Germany has confirmed its 1st case of the virus” (DW 28.01.2020), “I’m told that there are 14 confirmed cases that are coronavirus in Germany right now” (DW 10.02.2020) and “Germany has the 3rd largest number of cases in Europe after Italy and France” (DW 03.03.2020). The indication of a threatening, yet apparently distant, ideology and its progression to a physically destructive ideology in the IDC territory is achieved by discourse segments that are not only capable of linking the external pandemic ODC values to the

imminent occurrence of such actions within the ICDs' home territory but are also capable of triggering concrete physical actions.

Ideology-wise, both the severity of the pandemic and the economic (and geographic) characteristics of the affected regions operate as news anchors and main determinants of the COVID-19 pandemic's newsworthiness: "Stocks tumbled on Monday as investors grew increasingly anxious about the economic impact of China's spreading virus outbreak." (BBC 27.01.2020); "My question is, COVID-19 is a serious threat to our health and the economy. If you were president, what would you be doing?" (CNN 27.02.2020). These threat-building developments rest mostly on negative characterizations of the ODC pandemic, the urgency, speed of, and preparedness (or lack thereof) for the ODC impact as well as the immediacy of the mostly economic devastating consequences of this impact.

## 5 Conclusions

This study approaches the TV mediated news discourses of the global suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic from outbreak to mid-crisis by four major TV global news companies – CNN, BBC, DW and RT. The methodological approach has rested on Cap's (year) proximization theory and has applied a multi-level content analysis of discourse representations, proximizing strategies and news values used in the routines of TV news broadcasting concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our results show that, in the case of the four TV news providers examined, all three proximization representations are conducive to the constant reduction of the symbolic distance existing in the DS, albeit to different degrees. Thus, concerning SP //use full form//, on the basis of the calculated distances between the coronavirus and "here", "there", "we", "they/them" and "people", we have identified a proximizing mechanism that operates for all TV news providers and which, despite increasing physical distances, shows a reduction of the symbolic distance between the people and the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Our results also show that Spatial Proximization forces the vision of an imminent and most destructive nature of the coronavirus impact and that a core entity of that view is an increasing threat that is being construed in symbolical relations. The general results obtained at the grammatical, lexical and discursive levels substantiate our claim that, in the case of all TV news providers, the representation of distant suffering in news transmission alternates close versus proximal pandemic discourses of a fast approaching, globally destructive threat and that the spectators of distant suffering are thus engaged in – although they are removed both geographically and psychologically from – the material reality of the disaster.

Temporal Proximization shows that all global TV news providers present the COVID-19 pandemic threat as imminent and hence call for an immediate response and preventive measures. The symbolic reduction of the temporal axis is construed as an extended, ongoing present emerging from a past event that develops a rationale for a future ODC action, and from a present moment that spurs a near future COVID-related action. In that sense, all TV news providers are found to have capitalized on analogies with past SARS and MERS events that endorse a series of future scenarios. The process of bridging the present, the past and the future is reflective of an urgent ongoing present that allows adjusting the temporal distance, and division alike, between safety and suffering.

Finally, an examination of the Axiological Proximization shows evidence of a people-Coronavirus conflict that works in conjunction with Spatial Proximization and Temporal Proximization. The strategies for AP were found to intensify, in the case of all TV news broadcasters examined, the stance of imminent readiness to confront the external threat represented by the coronavirus and its intrusion upon the DS. The negative values of the pandemic, among which is the size of the devastating economic impact, are found to legitimize the proximal discourses of suffering and safety as well as the proximizing mechanisms and dynamics that influence the “spectatorship of suffering” (Boltanski 1999).

By way of conclusion, the coverage during 2020 of the global COVID-19, as showcased by the four global TV news providers under scrutiny, illustrates the explanatory power of the Spatial, Temporal and Axiological (STA) model and proximization theory in understanding and assessing the news transmission of crisis and distant suffering. The pragmalinguistic variables identified per the STA axis and TV news provider sustain the existence of a discourse space that is both characterized by a convergence of newsmakers’ and audiences’ values and is being intruded upon by a global, fast approaching threat. In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic news formulates a particular type of discourse on suffering that individualizes the sufferer, sets out the course of action and turns the fast-approaching pandemic into a global cause for action. By proximizing selected aspects of reality, space, time and emotional distances, the newsmakers seek to achieve such positive social goals by maximizing resource mobilization, cosmopolitan citizenry and sensibility as well as by responding with immediate solutions and a sense of global commitment. Our results confirm the use of proximizing strategies (Cap 2006, 2013, 2015) and the crossing of symbolic distances (Cap 2017) in the discourse on suffering (Boltanski 1999; Chouliarakis 2006, 2008; Joye 2009), thus shedding light on how collective compassion and action are distance-adjusted and how proximization generally operates in TV news discourse. Future research on TV news discourse may benefit from a closer look into the role of the image size and viewing distance of TV news broadcasts that add to proximizing

symbolic distances or from inquiries into the proximizing degrees of various cultures of mediatization.

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