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Rethinking Media and Disasters in a Global Age: What's Changed and Why it Matters

In a global age both the nature of disasters and their interrelationship with media and communications are changing. The discussion that follows seeks to better understand the extension and intensification of media and communications in global context and how this shapes disasters from the *inside out*, and *outside in*. It addresses how disasters today are not only communicated but also *constituted* within these communication flows and forms, often in conflictual ways. To use a current albeit ungainly term, we need to know how they become *mediatized*. That is to say, we need to better understand how media and communications *enter into* disasters, shaping surrounding social relations, conditioning political power and projects for change, and infusing them with cultural meanings – and with what consequences. As signalled in the title, however, it is not only the world of media and communication that has changed in a global age. Ideas of mediatization too easily fixate on the shaping influence of contemporary media and communications *on* diverse social, political and cultural fields and thereby lose sight of other, no less profound, processes of change *within* these fields and more widely. Contemporary disasters are a case in point.

The nature of many disasters today is also transforming. Global crises and disasters such as climate change, virulent pandemics, financial melt-downs and world food, water and energy shortages, for example, are neither territorially confined nor often best conceived as discrete national events that erupt without warning to disrupt routines, established norms and social order. In their complex interpenetrations and fall out around the globe they can affect us all. When approached in global context these and other disasters are best reconceptualised and theorised as *endemic* to, complexly *enmeshed* within and, potentially, *encompassing* in today's world (dis)order (Cottle 2011a). They are also highly dependent on and conditioned by media and communications, whether in respect of processes of early signalling, social problem definition and recognition or the mobilization of strategic responses (Cottle 2009a).

It is these twin propositions about the *changing ontology of disasters* in a globalizing

world and their *epistemological constitution* through media and communications that forms the central argument presented below. This is developed across five interrelated themes, each drawing on recent research and theoretical positions. (1) First, a case is made for what is distinctive about the contemporary media and communications environment and why this should now be granted increased theoretical recognition and prominence (and notwithstanding earlier historical precedents of media and communication involvement in disasters). Second, we revisit the debate on “what is a disaster?” and elaborate exactly why “disasters” need to be reconceptualised when approached in contemporary global and media contexts. Third, the discussion turns to address how media and communications can constitute disasters politically and sometimes in conflictual ways. Here three theoretical takes on disasters and media approached, respectively, in terms of “disaster shocks” (Klein 2007), “focusing events” (Tierney et al. 2006) and “elite indexing” (Bennett et al. 2007), provide contrasting but productive views of media-state interactions and how mediated disasters become *shaped* politically. Fourth, the proliferation of new communication technologies in the field of disaster communications and civil society, including the powerful convergence of mobile telephony, the Internet and social media is addressed as well as how this is now impacting traditional communication hierarchies and disaster social relations. And finally, fifth, we revisit how cultural representations of disasters by mainstream media continue, notwithstanding the rise of social media, to play a leading and performative role in their public constitution, sometimes powerfully infusing them with cosmopolitan ideas of community (Beck 2009) and cultural values that resonate deep within the “civil sphere” (Alexander 2006).

Together these interrelated discussions help make the case for why scholars and students of disaster now need to rethink and reconceptualise disasters in a global age and why they should grant increased theoretical recognition to media and communications in their public unfolding. The discussion that follows aims to offer some conceptual and theoretical coordinates of use to this wider project.

Media and Disasters: What’s New?

Historically communication technologies have invariably been used to convey disaster events and their impacts across space and time. The involvement of media communications in disasters can hardly therefore be said to be new. The rise of printing

and news sheets in England in the middle of the 15th century and the development of public postal services in Europe in the 17th century, the construction of rail networks then telegraph systems in the United States in the 1840s followed by underwater telegraphic cables linking Britain and India in the 1860s, and Marconi's experiments with radio transmission in the late 1890s that led to radio broadcasting in the 1920s, *all*, for example, progressively extended the range and speed by which calamitous events could be communicated to others (Flichy 1995, Thompson 1995, Rifkin 2009, Briggs and Burke 2010). Daniel Defoe's *The Storm* (1704), based on eye-witness accounts of the devastating storm of 1703 that caused the loss of over 8000 lives in Britain also illustrates perfectly well how experiential-based journalistic accounts of survival and suffering long preceded today's news human interest stories. And before these 'modern' means of communication, foreign envoys, travelling merchants and seafarers would also have imparted by word of mouth accounts of disaster and catastrophe, rhetorically embellished no doubt to enthral listeners and draw a crowd. Available means of communications, then, have long performed a part in communicating disasters, progressively collapsing space and time as they have done so.

Today however, these historical spatial-temporal trends of communication have reached an unparalleled point in human history. The extensity and intensity of media and communications around the world is characterised by six analytically distinct features, each of which now impacts on the field of disasters. Though each have their earlier precedents, as suggested above, it is their advanced and often combined involvement in disasters that grants media and communications such centrality today, often in ways that could hardly have been imagined only a decade or so ago.

1) Significant parts of today's media and communications ecology now exhibit extensive *scale* in terms of their encompassing global reach, which, since the advent of geo-stationary satellites and the Internet, can communicate images and information simultaneously to vast swathes of the world's population. 2) The accelerated *speed* of media and communications around the globe has now also reached a point in which time has effectively become collapsed when transmitting 'live' or in near real-time images, speech and text. This grants increased emphasis to immediacy and experience over analysis and deliberation and undermines traditional practices of information management. 3) The increasing *saturation* of human society with universalising means of communication such as mobile phones (see below) contributes to the establishment of normative expectations about communications access and availability and the

preparedness to use them in disaster situations. 4) These same universalising technologies also communicatively expand and enfranchise disaster *social relations*, incorporating increasing numbers of survivors as well as relief workers and those responsible for averting disasters or ameliorating their effects, and reconfiguring the communications field. 5) The increasing availability of new ‘bottom-up’, ‘many-to-many’ ‘interactive’ communications alongside established ‘top-down’, ‘few to many’ ‘one way’ communications, with both ‘old’ and ‘new’ media facilitating communications beyond as well as within national borders, all significantly enhance the *surveillance* capacity of contemporary media as does, importantly, satellite monitoring sponsored by civil society actors and governments. This renders attempts by states to keep major disasters ‘out of sight’ and ‘out of political mind’ much more difficult than in the past, as was demonstrated, for example, by the haemorrhage of video images and eye-witness accounts from Burma following Hurricane Nargis in 2008, in comparison, say, to the news blackout imposed by the Chinese authorities following the Tangshan earthquake in 1976 - one of the deadliest in human history. 6) Contemporary media and communications also provide unprecedented opportunities for us to not only read and to hear about but also, importantly, to *see* disasters, sometimes as they unfold ‘live’ on screens in front of us. This enhanced capacity for media visualisation, as we shall hear, also provides enhanced opportunities to ‘bear witness’ to disasters around the world and their human consequences - a pre-requisite it seems for empathetically informed humanitarian response (Chouliaraki 2006, Cottle 2013a)

In these six analytically distinct, but in practice often condensed characteristics of *scale, speed, saturation, social relations’ enfranchisement, surveillance and seeing*, earlier historical spatial-temporal trends of media and communication have now reached new global heights of extensity and intensity. In such ways today’s media and communication environment is not only deeply entwined within wider society but, inevitably, becomes infused within contemporary disasters. Moreover as these six characteristics begin to suggest, it is not helpful to view communication technologies simply as external technologies or as communication adjuncts to society. From the printing press to the Internet and beyond, they are in fact better seen as profoundly entwined within the fabric of social life and constitutive of processes of societal change – features no less relevant, as we shall hear, in the context of many disasters.

To take media and communications seriously and to explore their involvement in disasters, therefore, is not to presume a simple media causality or technological

determinism, but rather to propose that we begin to see how today's media ecology is interwoven within social relations and the conduct of society more generally. As John Thompson argues, 'In a fundamental way the use of communication media transforms the spatial and temporal organization of social life, creating new forms of action and interaction, and new modes of exercising power, which are no longer linked to the sharing of a common locale.' (Thompson 1995: 4). Crucially, this re-ordering of time and space by media and communications contributes to the 'transformation of visibility' that in turn unsettles traditional social relations and the exercise of hierarchical political power (Thompson 1995: 119-148). This more socially embedded, less technologically fixated view of media and communications and the 'transformation of visibility' as *constitutive* rather than simply *causative* in social life, has particular relevance for understanding disaster communications today.

Consider, for example, how the following contribute to the 'transformation of visibility' of disasters. Geospatial remote-sensing satellites now document and help to verify humanitarian disasters and human rights abuses in different conflict zones, whether Darfur (2004-2005), Sri Lanka (2009) or South Sudan (2012) and Syria (2013) and routinely map the shifting progress and severity of droughts, hurricanes, forest fires and melting glaciers. The proliferation of 24/7 television news channels around the world in recent years (Rai and Cottle 2010) has expanded the capacity to circulate images of disasters and human suffering from distant locations, and global news providers such as CNN and BBC World frequently commission or produce their own film reports on distant disasters (Volkmer 1999, Robertson 2010). National broadcasters, for their part, have access to significant resources and the latest technologies which enabled, for example, Japan's NHK to put helicopters into the air and film and broadcast live the 2011 tsunami that brought a wave of death and destruction to communities along the country's South Pacific coast. Ordinary people and citizen journalists around the world now routinely use videophones and social media, recording images of the drama and despair of cataclysmic events and uploading them to the Internet and You-Tube (Allan 2006, Allan and Thorsen 2009) or forward them direct to the world's news media for wider circulation (Hänska-Ahy and Shapour 2013). Open access crowdsourcing technologies such as Ushahidi (Swahili for 'testimony') dynamically map and visualise the moving hotspots of disaster, and crowd funding technologies can electronically target donors and transact donations immediately following major disasters. As I write, Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful and devastating storms recorded, has just

swept across the Philippines (8-10th November 2013) with the loss of many thousands of lives and displacement of millions. Google has released two tools to assist people in the immediate aftermath: [a 'crisis map'](#) that shows the path of the typhoon and pinpoints evacuation centres and a 'people finder' to help survivors locate missing family and friends, tools that can also be accessed via SMS. On a planet of 7 billion people where there is now 96 % mobile phone penetration and 89% penetration in the developing countries (ITU 2013), this relatively unremarked but profound revolution in communications facilitates early disaster warnings as well as the communication of public health messages and survivors' needs (Nelson et al. 2011, United Nations Foundation 2011, IFRCRCS 2013, OCHA 2013).

In these and other fast-moving ways, today's media and communications are undoubtedly contributing to Thompson's 'transformation of visibility' and, as they do so, they enter into the course and conduct of disasters. How and with what consequences around the world will be explored further below. But first it is also important to recognise how the world of disasters is transforming in global context, discussed next.

What is a Disaster ? Revisited in Global Context

Commonsense ideas of a "disaster" as any event that has negative consequences quickly lose analytical traction when applied to such diverse phenomena as unexpected events in the natural environment (floods, fires, hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions); technological and industrial failings (aviation crashes, train derailments, industrial accidents, toxic releases); politically precipitated crises and conflicts involving mass death, violence or attrition (wars, acts of terror, civil disobedience); and longer term and systemic failings (poverty, human rights abuses, environmental collapse). Entangled within the catchall term "disasters," therefore, are thorny issues of agency and intentionality, differences between latent and manifest disasters, between rapid onset events and slow-burn processes, and implicit judgments that have to be made about disaster thresholds and referents—whether in respect of scale of negative impacts, size of the social collectivities involved or the degree of system disruption caused (see Perry 2007, Rodríguez et al. 2007). Most critically of all perhaps, reflection on the concept of disasters raises fundamental questions of claims-making and power, that is, of who defines what is a disaster, when and how and with what consequences—questions that are no less pertinent when applied to the academic field of disaster study.

Notwithstanding efforts by disaster researchers to bring analytical precision and conceptual clarity to “disasters” as an object for social scientific inquiry, there appears to be a reticence to engage more critically and theoretically with issues of power, structural determination and cultural performativity with respect to disaster communications. As Kathleen Tierney (2007) has observed, traditional approaches to disaster research have too long been defined by their applied and organizational focus and they need to link to fields of environmental sociology and risk as well as focusing more critically on core sociological concerns of social inequality, diversity and social change. Established approaches to disasters conceived as “disruptive events”, for example, too easily suggest a normative acceptance of prevailing systems and norms rather than regarding them as structurally implicated in the reproduction of humanly injurious outcomes, routinised over the longer term and contributing to “permanent emergencies” or “unending disasters” that fall off the disaster researchers’ radar. How we conceptualize “disasters,” what’s ruled in and what’s ruled out, it seems, is not without political or ideological effects.

Craig Calhoun (2008) makes a similar point when castigating the “Western cultural imaginary” encoded in news representations of “humanitarian emergencies” (often referred to as “humanitarian disasters”). Calhoun argues that the term *humanitarian emergencies* ‘implies sudden, unpredictable events that require immediate action. But many “emergencies” develop over longer periods of time and are not merely predictable but are watched for weeks or months or years before they break into public consciousness or onto the agendas of policy makers’ (p. 83). This commonly accepted “emergency imagination,” he suggests, is implicitly powered and ideological. It “reflects both the idea that it is possible and desirable to ‘manage’ global affairs and the idea that many if not all of the conflicts and crises that challenge global order are the result of exceptions to it” (Calhoun 2008, p. 97). Not only does the fixation on disaster “events,” then, tend to displace from view the normalized “abnormality” of profound inequality and systematically stunted life chances that constitute for many their ongoing disaster, it also becomes insufficiently attentive to those powered processes of claims-making by which some disasters, and not others, become publicly labelled as such and thereby positioned for various forms of intervention or response (Benthall 1993, Molotch & Lester 1974, Stallings 1998, IFRCRCS 2005, Tierney 2007, Hawkins 2008, , Cottle 2009a).

Arjen Boin goes some way in meeting these objections when arguing for the inclusion of “disaster” under the more encompassing conceptualization of “crisis” (Boin

2005, Boin & 't Hart 2007). Boin proposed that disasters, in the contemporary era, are better conceived as a subclass of “crises” in that the latter “not only covers clear-cut disasters but also a wide variety of events, processes and time periods that may not meet the disaster definition” but which nonetheless “makes way for situations of threat and successful coping efforts” as well as “all processes of disruption that seem to require remedial action” (Boin 2005 p. 161). Disasters in this sense, therefore, are crises that have gone bad. These ideas have recently been extended to international/global phenomena that Boin and his colleagues refer to as “trans-system social ruptures” (TSSRs, Quarantelli et al. 2007).

‘Trans-system social ruptures’ are said to be phenomena which a) jump across national, international and political boundaries, b) at speed, c) have no central or clear point of origin, d) are potentially catastrophic in terms of possible victims, e) cannot be resolved by local responses, and f) involve both formal organizations and informal networks (Quarantelli et al. 2007). This reads as a timely conceptual development of “disasters” when situated in international and transnational contexts, but underplays somewhat the *constitutive* role of media and communications and the interdependencies between different TSSRs and their embedding within processes of globalization or what the social theorist Ulrich Beck refers to as “world risk society” (2000). For Beck latent risks and perceived threats, not only manifest disasters or the unfolding phenomena described above as ‘trans-system social ruptures’, profoundly condition the institutional and knowledge-based systems of contemporary societies including how they anticipate and respond to perceived threats (Beck, 2000, 2009).

When situated in global context, therefore, disasters do not sit comfortably within earlier conceptual attempts to delimit them as objects of social scientific inquiry or when simply conceived as unforeseen and disruptive events (Held 2004, Held et al 2010, Bauman 2007, Virilio 2007, Rifkin 2009, Ahmed 2010). Disasters, we also know, are changing. They are on the increase around the world infused by four principal factors: climate change, rapid urbanization, poverty and environmental degradation (Global Humanitarian Forum 2009, UNISDR 2012). Oxfam reports that, "the total number of natural disasters has quadrupled in the last two decades – most of them floods, cyclones, and storms. Over the same period, the number of people affected by disasters has increased from around 174 million to an average of over 250 million a year" (Oxfam 2007) and this is predicted to increase dramatically in the years ahead (Oxfam 2012).

Some “natural disasters” can therefore be more accurately described as “*unnatural*”

disasters.” Classifying “environmental conflict” or “disasters” too narrowly for the purposes of research runs the risk of dissimulating the complex interpenetration of disasters with ecology and other global dynamics, ultimately under-playing their complex, interlocking and, frankly, more disturbing nature (Cottle, 2013b). The Japanese disaster of 2011 involved an unfolding complex of an earthquake followed by a devastating tsunami that, in turn, unleashed a nuclear meltdown and economic crisis. These events contributed to a world oil price rise as well as contamination of marine species in the world’s oceans, and increased nuclear distrust around the globe. A prominent UK newspaper, *The Independent*, (16 March 2011) proclaimed on its front page at the time: “Four explosions, one fire, and a cloud of nuclear mistrust spreads around the world” . In the wake of Fukushima (2011), and before that, Chernobyl (1986) and Three Mile Island (1979), public concerns about the risks associated with nuclear power have seeped into national debates about energy policy and, more recently, the desired combination of fossil fuels and sustainable energy sources in the worsening context of climate change

The increase in “natural disasters” in recent years underlines the consequences of globalization and what Anthony Giddens refers to as globally “socialized nature” (Giddens 1990) and what Ulrich Beck calls global “manufactured uncertainty” (Beck 1992), with anthropogenic climate change, alongside other globalizing forces, contributing to new forms of “manufactured (in)security” (Beck 2009). These include the exacerbating crises of water, food and energy shortages, forced migration, intensified tribal conflicts, state human rights violations, as well as the global insecurity of transnational terrorism and new forms of Western “risk-transfer” warfare (Dillon and Reid 2000, Duffield 2001, 2007, Abbott et al. 2006, Kaldor 2006, 2007, Amnesty International 2009, Oxfam 2009, 2012, Shaw 2005). In short, many disasters today are endemic to, deeply enmeshed within and widely encompassing within our globalised world and represent globalisation’s dark side (Cottle 2009a, 2011a).

How disasters are signalled and symbolized, turned into spectacles or effectively rendered silent on the media stage, can also have far-reaching consequences for the victims and survivors involved, relief agencies and the wider conduct of social relations. Beck grants media staging central significance (1992, 2009) in “world risk society” discerning mediatised disasters, for example, as “cosmopolitan moments” based on “globalizing emotions” (2009: pp.70-71). But we need to be more closely attuned, however, to different instances of disaster reporting and theorize their various cultural forms and appeals (Chouliaraki 2006, Orgad 2012, Madianou 2013, Pantti 2013),

production dynamics (Cooper 2011, Cottle 2013a, Franks 2013, Wang et al 2013), processes of audience reception and news interpellation (Höijer 2004, Kyriakidou 2008, Yell 2012) and discursive constructions of the political and policy field (Hannigan 2012) as well as the ‘national’ and ‘global’ within them (Berglez 2013, Olausson 2013, Roosvall and Tegelberg 2013) before we can simply accept this generalising cosmopolitan claim. So too Beck’s claim that in a world of risk media exhibit “political explosiveness” (Beck 2009 p. 98). We must explore further, then, how politics and the political enter into mediatized disasters before turning to consider how the nexus between institutionalised political elites and mass media is now being challenged by the arrival of new social media.

Politics, power and the state-media nexus

When staged in the world’s news media, major disasters have variously been theorized as opportunities for elites to capitalize on the “disaster shock” of catastrophic events furthering corporate economic interests and establishment political goals (Klein 2007), “focusing events” that condense wider cultural frames and discourses to soften up publics into accepting, for example, future militarized control of disastrous events (Tierney et al. 2006), or as moments of “elite indexing” in which the media align their coverage to the prevailing political views and degree of consensus about what needs to be done (Bennett et al. 2007). Briefly attending to each proves instructive for a more politically nuanced approach to mediatized disasters.

In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, subtitled, *The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Naomi Klein (2007) develops her thesis about the ways in which disasters and crisis can serve powerful corporate and government interests.

That is how the shock doctrine works: the original disaster—the coup, the terrorist attack, the market meltdown, the war, the tsunami, the hurricane—puts the entire population into a state of collective shock. The falling bombs, the bursts of terror, the pounding winds serve to soften up whole societies much as the blaring music and blows in the torture cells soften up prisoners. Like the terrorized prisoner who gives up the names of comrades and renounces his faith, shocked societies often give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect. Jamar Perry and his fellow evacuees at the Baton

Rouge Shelter (following Hurricane Katrina) were supposed to give up their housing projects and public schools. After the tsunami, the fishing people in Sri Lanka were supposed to give up their valuable beachfront land to hoteliers. Iraqis, if all had gone according to plan, were supposed to be so shocked and awed that they would give up control of their oil reserves, their state companies and their sovereignty to U.S. military bases and green zones. (p. 17)

Klein's thesis should cause pause for thought. It urges us to step back from the immediate effects of seemingly disparate crises and disasters to see the bigger picture of how they can become politically appropriated and put to work. Disasters shock societies into giving up that which in normal circumstances would be defended against the further encroachments of corporate capitalism and neoliberal governance. Here the nebulous notion of "disaster," discussed earlier, is nailed down not by specific types of destructive events or processes but rather by an overriding sense of the political interests that can both profit from and steer them. Klein's thesis reminds us, then, of how disasters and collective traumas cannot be approached as if in a political vacuum. Politics and the political enter into disasters and precede and surround their destructive eruption into everyday life and also through the trauma and confusion that they cause. But in a mediated age, we might reasonably argue, "disasters" affect more than those caught up within their immediate destruction, and they have to if wider reactions and responses are to become activated. Here Klein's relative silence on the nature of media involvement in disasters is conspicuous. She notes only in passing the "creeping expansion of the disaster capitalism complex into media" and how this "may prove to be a new kind of synergy," given the media profits that can be won from panics (2007, p. 427). Disasters, when seen through this prism of political economy, are good for media ratings and revenue but this reads, it has to be said, as a rather blunt and deterministic account of media involvement in disasters.

Kathleen Tierney and her colleagues (2006) provide a more culturally nuanced and empirically focused discussion of "the political" in their study of how the news reporting of Hurricane Katrina perpetuated a number of "disaster myths" and "framed" the aftermath of the disaster in politically consequential and damaging ways—ways that can also be interpreted as supportive of U.S. military and government interests. The authors summarize their findings and principal argument as follows:

...initial media coverage of Katrina's devastating impacts was quickly replaced by reporting that characterized disaster victims as opportunistic looters and violent criminals and that presented individual and group behavior following the Katrina disaster through the lens of civil unrest. Later, narratives shifted again and began to metaphorically represent the disaster-stricken city of New Orleans as a war zone and to draw parallels between the conditions in that city and urban insurgency in Iraq. These media frames helped guide and justify actions undertaken by military and law enforcement entities that were assigned responsibility of the postdisaster emergency response. The overall effect of media coverage was to further bolster arguments that only the military is capable of effective action during disasters. (pp. 60–61)

Based on this critical analysis of Katrina reporting, the authors argue that such media framing effectively serves to construct the disaster of Hurricane Katrina as a “focusing event” in which surrounding political discourses became condensed and served to legitimize the operations of state political (and military) power. And this undermined the known capacity of survivors to help each other by criminalising them in the media and by imposing martial law.

Disasters are also capable, however, of sustaining different political outlooks and projects, some rooted in civil society and seeking opportunities for change. And this requires a more differentiated consideration of how disasters can become constructed and communicated in the media. A model that begins to move in the direction of recognizing a more dynamic and politically contingent interface between news media and political and official elites is that of press-elite indexing (Bennett, 1990, see also Hallin 1994). This approach opens up for discussion the possibility that the news media can in fact entertain a more independent or even, on occasion, critical stance to the operations of political governance and power. According to the indexing model, the U.S. mainstream press normally report the news based on the sphere of official consensus and conflict, calibrating their stories accordingly. Only exceptionally, when the political centre itself is divided and uncertain, do journalists feel capable of asserting a more independent and critical view. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, Lance Bennett and his colleagues argued that the political vacation period caused a rare “no-spin zone” that meant officials were not able to manage the flow of information as effectively as they might normally have (Bennett et al. 2007, p. 64).

Each of the studies above in their different ways signal the operations of political power in the media's reporting of disasters and how this generally privileges the interests of political authorities and dominant elites. This, as we have heard, is theorised and explained, respectively, through the combined logic of neoliberal capitalism exploiting disasters and media corporations seeking out their profitable synergies (Klein, 2007); the circulation of frames and cultural metaphors that already shape the political field and which serve to align disasters to dominant political projects and legitimize elite political control (Tierney et al. 2006); or the indexing of media to the prevailing views and consensus found in the political centre of society—and executed on the basis of routine source dependencies and shared cultural values (Bennett et al. 2007). In today's complex media ecology, however, we may want to inquire further how globally expansive media and interpenetrating communication flows unsettle, influence or simply circumvent traditional agenda setting, gatekeeping and elite indexing by national based news media (Volkmer 1999, McNair 2006, Berglez 2013, Cottle 2009a). And here we must also incorporate into our thinking the rise of new social media and their impacts.

New social media and the civilian surge

The arrival and rapid uptake of new social media contributes to the “transformation of visibility” (Thompson 1995) of disasters in the contemporary media ecology. According to Nik Gowing (2009) a “civilian surge” of information in crises is having an asymmetric, negative impact on the traditional structures of information management. His ideas have particular relevance in the context of disaster communications and the possible reconfiguration of traditional relations of communication power:

In a crisis there is a relentless and unforgiving trend toward an ever greater information transparency Hundreds of millions of electronic eyes and ears are creating a capacity for scrutiny and new demands for accountability. It is way beyond the capacity and assumed power and influence of the traditional media. The global electronic reach catches institutions unaware and surprises with what it reveals. (Gowing 2009, p. 1)

In times of crises and disasters this “civilian surge,” argues Gowing, unsettles the traditional monopoly on information and media by elites. And in such pressurized moments, “the time lines of media action and institutional reaction are increasingly out

of synch,” precipitating potential public relations disasters with the fast release of unverified or insecurely sourced information into the public domain. Though this is undoubtedly the case so too, however, can the civilian surge, facilitated by new social media, play a more progressive part in disasters, expanding and enfranchising disaster social relations (See, for example, Nelson et al, 2011, IFRCRCS 2013, OCHA 2013, Cottle and Cooper *forthcoming*). The disaster relief community generally see, for example, the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti on January 12, 2010, with an estimated loss of 230,000 lives, as a communications turning point with the deployment of SMS (short message service) texting, interactive online maps and radio-cell phone hybrids (Nelson et al. 2011; United Nations Foundation 2011). The United Nations Foundation report, *Disaster Relief 2.0*, highlights some of the far-reaching developments involved:

The global response to the January 2010 7.0 magnitude earthquake in Haiti showed how connected individuals are becoming increasingly central to humanitarian emergency response and recovery. Haitians trapped under rubble used text messaging to send pleas for help. Concerned citizens worldwide engaged in a variety of ways, from sending in donations via SMS, to using shared networks to translate and map requests for assistance. Powered by cloud-, crowd-, and SMS-based technologies, individuals can now engage in disaster response at an unprecedented level. Traditional relief organizations, volunteers, and affected communities alike can, when working together, provide, aggregate and analyze information that speeds, targets and improves humanitarian relief. This trend toward communications driven by and centred on people is challenging and changing the nature of humanitarian aid in emergencies. (United Nations Foundation 2011a, p. 7)

As these and other voices now suggest, today’s rapidly changing communications environment is indeed challenging traditional relations of communication power, and possibly the nature of power itself, in an increasingly interconnected and networked world (Castells 2009). Today’s “civilian surge” is sometimes seen as challenging the mainstream media with its industrially organized, top-down and elite dominated communications. But to formulate the issue in stark oppositional terms is not always helpful. There are good grounds to suggest that it is now more productive to keep ‘old and ‘new’ media firmly in view *together* when addressing crisis and disaster situations

(Cottle 2011b) and to decline strict conceptual dualisms, whether 'mainstream' and 'alternative', 'old' and 'new' media, 'hierarchy' and 'networks', or 'representation' and 'connectivity' (see Cottle 2013b). In practice, as Haiti 2010 demonstrated, disaster communications both *in situ* and more widely depended on both old and new media working in tandem and sometimes producing new hybrid forms of communications (a finding not dissimilar to the creative adaptations and interacting forms of new social media and mainstream news media mobilised in and communicating the Arab Spring)(Cottle 2011b, c).

But the political does not only enter into the communication of disasters through the state-media nexus or the civilian surge mobilised through new media. It also enters into disasters through how they are made to culturally mean and register in wider global society, eliciting sympathy and solidarity, or indifference. And this it has to be said still remains dependent in large measure on the dominant forms of traditional media and their cultural representations of disasters. Here, then, we need to attend more closely to how major disaster events can be rendered culturally meaningful and thereby politically consequential.

Making disasters mean: Media performance

The reporting of the South Asian tsunami (2004) and Hurricane Katrina (2005) serve to illustrate how major disasters can become reported in ways that variously construct public views and elicit differing responses (Cottle 2009a: 50-70). Predictably, perhaps, the South Asian tsunami was first reported in the Western news media (and elsewhere) through national journalist outlooks — initial disaster reports, for example, focused on the ever-rising death tolls followed by stories of involved nationals and affected tourist destinations. But the Western news media thereafter also began to inscribe their coverage with collective appeals and a moral infusion that extended beyond their own national prism of interests to convey a humanitarian concern with the geographically distant wasted landscape and its survivors. This ritualistic appeal to ideas of moral community found expression through a succession of newspaper articles, features and accompanying photographs with headlines variously drawing and re-drawing boundaries of solidarity and collectivity — nationally, internationally, and transnationally. For example: "Britain Unites to Help Victims," "£1 Million Raised in One Hour After Tidal Wave Disaster," and "Generous Britons Pledge To Help Victims" (*International Express*, p. 4, January 10,

2005); "Friendship Blossoms in the Rubble, Indonesia, Australia Closer" (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 5, 2005); "Aid Forges Closer Links," "Generosity Worldwide Amazes UN," and "We're in For the Long Haul, Howard Tells Indonesians" (*The Courier Mail*, January 7, 2005).

Such headlines simultaneously encode relations of national hierarchy and power while they proclaim international solidarity and extend boundaries of collective compassion. As time passed, further opportunities for collective representations instantiating both "cosmopolitan moments" and the "globalization of emotions" (Beck 2006, pp. 5-6) presented themselves. This included public ceremonies of remembrance, both religious and secular, and played out principally through the news sphere. For example: "Let Us Pray: A Nation Stops to Remember" (*Sunday Telegraph*, January 8, 2005) and "They Are Not Alone: Australia Stops in Sorrow, In Fraternity" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, January 8, 2005).

Not all disasters staged in the news media, however, prompt such consensual and integrative forms of ritualized news coverage from the national to the international and transnational. Some reported disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina as we have heard, can become focusing opportunities for states to militarize disaster zones and increase their control of affected populations. But, occasionally, so too can they tip over into political contention and challenge on a worldwide stage. In the terms of Jeffrey Alexander and Ronald Jacobs (1998), these reported disasters become "mediatized public crises" moving discernibly beyond the more integrative appeals of ceremonial "media events" (Dayan & Katz 1992)(see also Liebes 1998, Katz and Liebes 2007, Alexander et al. 2006).

Celebratory media events of the type discussed by Dayan and Katz tend to narrow the distance between the indicative and the subjunctive, thereby legitimating the powers and authorities outside the civil sphere. Mediatized public crises, on the other hand, tend to increase the distance between the indicative and the subjunctive, thereby giving to civil society its greatest power for social change. (Alexander & Jacobs 1998, p. 28)

In today's globally encompassing and interpenetrating news ecology this public and political reflexivity can become conducted both inside and outside the national public sphere and conditioned by wider communication flows (Serra 2000, McNair 2006, Cottle and Lester 2011, Hannigan 2012: 130-145). News media around the world also gave vent

to a more critical elaboration and framing of these same events. Criticisms of city officials, failed evacuation plans, inadequate relief efforts, and the seeming abandonment of some of the poorest people in American society to their fate as well as the militarized response to the aftermath, were all voiced in the world's news media. U.S. President George Bush was identified by some as a principal source of blame for not heeding advance warnings and then, unthinkingly, commending state officials "for doing a great job." By such means, Hurricane Katrina served to expose the normally invisible inequalities of race and poverty in American society and became an opportunity for political appropriation by different projects and discourses worldwide. The BBC online news Web site, for example, positioned itself as a portal for world opinion, exhibiting opinion pieces from newspapers from around the world and providing hyperlinks to many of them. For example:

"Hurricane Katrina has proved that America cannot solve its internal problems and is incapable of facing these kinds of natural disasters, so it cannot bring peace and democracy to other parts of the world. Americans now understand that their rulers are only seeking to fulfill their own hegemonic goals."

Editorial in Iran's *Siyasat-e Ruż* (Web site last accessed April 9, 2009)

"Co-operation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions can no longer be delayed, but there are still countries — including the U.S. — which still do not take the issue seriously. However, faced with global disasters, all countries are in the same boat. The U.S. hurricane disaster is a 'modern revelation,' and all countries of the world including the U.S. should be aware of this."

Xing Shu Li in Malaysia's *Sun Chew Jit Poh* (Web site last accessed April 9, 2009)

"This tragic incident reminds us that the United States has refused to ratify the Kyoto accords. Let's hope the U.S. can from now on stop ignoring the rest of the world. If you want to run things, you must first lead by example. Arrogance is never a good advisor."

Jean-Pierre Aussant in France's *Figaro* (Web site last accessed April 9, 2009)

(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4216142.stm>) (Web site last

accessed April 9, 2009)

Differences of geo-political interests and cultural outlooks clearly register in these very different national views from around the world and here relayed via BBC online news onto the global news stage. Clearly, the exposure of America's continuing racial divides and depth of poverty by the hurricane sullied its projected international image for some as a "free democracy." Countries normally regarded as political pariahs or as economic supplicants by the U.S. government turned the tables and offered their support to the world's mightiest power in its evident failure to respond to its home-grown humanitarian disaster. And yet others took the opportunity to make the connection to climate change and the irony of the U.S. position having not signed the Kyoto Protocol. Indeed, such was the mounting criticism played out in the news media that commentators even began to speak of George Bush's "Katrinagate." In such ways, then, Hurricane Katrina became not only a national focusing event (Tierney et al 2006) but a "global-focusing event" (Cottle 2009, 2011d).

In today's global news ecology, the flows of news and commentary traversing continents, countries, and cultures can infuse different views and values into the field of disaster communication — from the outside in, and inside out. Some disasters, evidently, give vent to the national political field, its contending discourses and struggles for change; others are staged as moments of national integration and/or the pursuit of political and corporate projects of control. And some, when witnessed by the world's news media from afar, such as Katrina (2005), Cyclone Nargis in Southern Burma, or the earthquake in Sichuan province in China (both May 2008), can serve to express different discourses, views, and voices circulating worldwide. These, as in the cases of Burma and China, can involve public evaluations of state legitimacy following state actions or inactions in respect of the humanitarian needs of their disaster citizens and when spotlighted in the world's media.

As this brief discussion highlights, media performance can inscribe disasters with different cultural meanings. How they do so can prove politically consequential whether in respect of reinforcing public understanding and views of worthy and unworthy states and disaster victims or in mobilising sympathies and support for humanitarian responses.

Conclusion

From the foregoing a number of key findings can be highlighted and which need to inform our approach to mediated disasters in a global age. These cohere around the necessity to recognise the changing ontology of disasters within the globalised present – endemic, enmeshed and, increasingly, globally encompassing - as well as their epistemological constitution in and through local-global flows of media and communications. In a globalised and increasingly mediatized world questions of ontology and epistemology can no longer be assumed to be so distinct, given their mutual imbrication within the unfolding trajectory of, and responses to disasters. In a globalized and mediated world, disasters increasingly need to be conceptualized and theorized in relation to endemic and potentially encompassing global crises that are themselves expressive of late modernity and the production of planetary threats (Beck 1992, 2009, Bauman 2007, Virilio 2007, Cottle 2011a). Moreover, disasters and crises, both “old” and “new,” have become increasingly dependent on media and communications in respect of how they become known and responded to. The extensity and intensity of media and communications in respect of characteristics of *space, speed, saturation, social relations enfranchisement, surveillance* and opportunities to visualise and *see* disasters in the world today is historically unparalleled. It is in and through these communication forms and flows that disasters today principally become defined, dramatized and publicly constituted.

There is considerable complexity at work, however, in the media’s different constructions of disaster and how these register political power, surrounding social relations and cultural meanings, as well as processes of global interdependency. Mediated disasters can variously be theorized as opportunities for the legitimation of political authority and economic power as well as occasions of critical reflexivity in which political projects, contending discourses and the voices of dissent seek to mobilize and build support for their cause. A new cacophony of voices and views can also now circulate and infuse disasters communications, launched through new media and new communication networks, helping emergency services to focus their efforts and resources or challenging erroneous official claims and ineptitude. When mediated, disasters can also become performatively enacted and culturally charged, drawing and re-drawing boundaries of moral community, from the local and national to the international and transnational. But to what extent and in what way exactly disasters and catastrophes may serve as “cosmopolitan moments” based on the “globalization of emotions” (Beck 2006, 2009) cannot simply be assumed (Kyriakidou 2009, Pantti et al 2012), as we have heard.

The scale of death and destruction and the potentially catastrophic results of major threats and disasters, we should all now know, are no guarantee that they will necessarily register prominently in the world's news media (Galtung and Ruge 1965, Moeller 1999, Seaton 2005). So-called “forgotten disasters,” “hidden wars” and “permanent emergencies” still abound in the world today, but their invisibility is less likely than in the past. Images from satellites sponsored by civil society actors combined with those first-hand eyewitness reports and/or social media footage on the ground can sometimes force such disasters into the mainstream media and public eye. These complexities and fast-moving dynamics of media and communication indicated above now need to be granted increased theoretical recognition alongside a reconceptualised view of proliferating disasters in a globalised world.

Note

(1) This article deliberately highlights recent scholarly work on disasters and media when approached in global context, a necessary departure given the increasingly globalised and mediatized nature of disasters as argued. It encapsulates and builds on the author's previous publications on global crises and media (Cottle 2009a, b, 2011a, b, c, 2013 a, b), sole-authored chapters 2, 5 and 9 in *Disasters and the Media* (2012) (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, and Cottle) and forthcoming edited collection with Glenda Cooper, *Humanitarianism, Communications and Change* (2014). For useful overviews of earlier and established approaches to both disasters and media, see Rodríguez et al, 2007, Scanlon 2007.

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