

“Not an Act of God”:

Anger and citizenship in press coverage of British man-made disasters

*Anger motivates people to engage in political action, fuelling collective struggles for justice and recognition. However, because of its close association with irrationality and aggression, the public expression of anger has historically been discouraged. This article focuses on expressions of anger in British disaster coverage between 1952 and 1999. In particular, we look at the relationship between anger, journalistic practices and opportunities for ordinary people to express themselves politically. We examine the following questions: How is anger articulated, mobilized and managed within news media? Who is authorised to express anger, under what circumstances, and what are the subject positions and power relations produced and legitimized by these representations? How are expressions of anger used as the basis for a critique of society and politics? To explore these questions, the paper examines the coverage of five national man-made disasters in two national newspapers, *The Times* and *the Daily Mail*, and local papers from the area where the disaster occurred. Our paper concludes that anger opens up a space for ordinary people to critique power holders, allowing victims and those affected by disasters to raise questions of systemic failure and blame. And such questions, it appears, are increasingly part of the emotional management style of disaster journalism.*

Introduction

The significance of emotions for public life is receiving increasing attention in social, political and cultural analysis. Recent scholarship has examined the ways in which emotion interacts with thinking and its consequences for social and political life. The main arguments arising from the literature point to the importance of emotions in the

constitution of citizenship and public life. First, emotions are seen to matter to the construction of collective identities and the formation and breaking of social bonds (e.g. Ahmed, 2004; Berezin, 2002; Jasper, 1997). Second, emotions are perceived as powerful motivators which incite people to participate in political processes (e.g. Goodwin et al., 2001; Goodwin and Jasper, 2003; Gould, 2003). Third, emotions are seen to have a significant role in the process of making political and moral judgements (e.g. Marcus et al., 2000; Newman et al, 2007; Nussbaum, 2001; Muldoon, 2008). The existing literature on “public emotions”, however, has little to say about the role of news media as a central site for the production, management and sharing of emotions in contemporary society.

Emotions are little studied in the context of journalism because they appear on the “wrong” side of the traditional dichotomies such as rationality/emotionality, public/private, objective/subjective, serious/trivial etc (Calhoun, 2001: 52). Emotionality is one of the characteristics used to separate fact-based and neutral “quality” journalism from popular or tabloid journalism. Studies of how specific emotions are constructed in news and articulated within particular historical, cultural and media contexts are limited (but see Kitch and Hume, 2008; Thomas, 2003; Pantti and Wieten, 2005; Pantti and Van Zoonen, 2006; Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007).

In this article, we are concerned with the articulation of anger in British newspapers. Specifically, we look at the role of anger in constituting citizenship and community in the wake of major British man-made disasters, that is, disasters that involve human error or negligence, or systemic failure. In taking this approach, we draw on a conception of

citizenship which goes beyond a “thin” conception of rights and responsibilities associated with the membership of the legally defined community of the nation state (cf. Marshall, 1950). Instead, we assume that citizenship involves active participation in, and deliberation on, politics (cf. Bohman and Rehg, 1997), and that the media play a central role in facilitating such participation and deliberation. To us, those affected by disaster are discursively constructed as citizens when they are given the opportunity to speak up about larger political issues associated with the events. As such, we take it for granted that journalism has a key role to play in democratic societies, in relation to providing information about important events and opportunities for citizens to express themselves (e.g. McNair, 2000). However, we also believe that the media play a role in constructing citizenship by *representing* citizens and their views in ways which both describe and proscribe. That is to say, while providing a venue for citizen voices, they structure public discourses on citizenship insofar as they describe the parameters for acceptable and/or normative forms of expression.

In the context of understanding the political consequences of emotional expression, we view news media as a key site for expressing and managing public emotions, bound to historically changing “emotional styles” (Stearns, 1994). Emotional expressions articulated in newspapers are more than descriptions of feeling at a certain historical time: they work to change emotions, magnifying some and repressing or concealing others, and thus play a role in the emotional dynamics involved in politics and societal change (Reddy, 2001). William Reddy’s notion of the “emotional regime” refers to a particular emotional element – a set of normative emotions and emotives that express

them - which guides action in society, and we see journalism as a central venue for enforcing the emotional regime.

In particular, we assume that the coverage of major national disasters represents the site for “mediatised conflicts” (Cottle, 2006a), opening up a space for political negotiation and contestation. Whether disasters are conceived as “cosmopolitan moments” (Beck, 2009) that encourage an awareness of global interdependency, “disaster shocks” (Klein, 2007) that are appropriated by political and economic elites to reassert forms of social and political control and/or capitalize on the misfortunes of others, or as “focusing events” (Tierney et al., 2006), they provide the opportunity for the articulation of ongoing political tensions, debates and projects. In particular, we believe that disaster coverage crystallises politically charged emotions in the public sphere. Here, our focus is on expressions of anger, which has been characterized as an “indispensable political emotion” (Lyman, 2004). Typically, anger emerges in contexts that underscore our shared vulnerability to suffering such as disasters (Nussbaum, 2001: 300). Rethinking anger’s status as a wholly “negative emotion”, we will examine it as political speech which forms attachments to others and may move people to protest and make claims for justice. Ultimately, then, an examination of the representation of anger speaks to larger questions about power relations in society and, in particular, to questions of citizenship.

Anger in the political realm

Recent attempts to create a link between emotions and aspects of political life shows increasing awareness that different emotions and emotional expressions “do” different

things in social and political life (Ahmed, 2004; Holmes, 2004a; Clarke et al., 2005). Deborah Gould's (2001) study of AIDS activism, for example, sheds light on the relationship between particular emotions and political action. Both anger and grief are responses to injustice but, as Gould illustrates, they may have different public consequences. The gay community she studied was able to launch a more radical political activism only after the shift from grief to anger as a dominant emotional response to the issue.

Anger has been seen to have a particular political significance in realms ranging from mainstream politics (see Ost, 2004) to oppositional political activity and the politics of everyday life. Recent scholarship on social movements and politics has demonstrated that anger motivates and fuels activity and collective struggles for justice (e.g. Goodwin et al., 2001; Holmes, 2004b; Jasper, 1997; Lyman, 2004; Muldoon, 2008; Thompson, 2006). The political value of anger has been seen to lie in its capacity to communicate that an injustice has been committed, and through it question the legitimacy of power (Lyman, 2004: 133).

It is, however, widely recognized that anger may, in Nussbaum's (1994: 404) words, have both "humanizing" and "dehumanizing" tendencies; both socially constructive and disruptive effects. On the one hand, philosophers have emphasized that the capacity to respond with anger is crucial to a sense of justice (Nussbaum, 1994: 403; Solomon, 1990: 242). On the other hand, they have pointed out that anger threatens humanity by making the distinction between "we" and "them", which may lead to violent excess (on the

“righteousness” and “viciousness” of anger see Muldoon, 2004: 308-11). It is because of the potentially excessive nature of anger that authorities and political elites have traditionally perceived it as a social problem, especially when it comes to the anger of powerless or marginalized groups (Spelman, 1989; Stearns and Stearns, 1986). As Lyman (2004: 133) argues, anger is typically “domesticated by the dominant to serve order.”

We cannot assume that all expressions of anger are inevitably constructive but need to examine the conditions under which anger can be seen as a useful form of *political speech*. Peter Lyman (2004) argues that it is essential for a dialogical politics that angry speech is heard, rather than silenced or domesticated. As he writes: “The benefit of taking anger seriously is that listening to those who feel they have lost their right to be heard reduces social suffering, enriches political dialogue, and enhances the ability of politics to redress injustice” (Lyman 2004: 133). From this point of view, the focus is on the potential of anger in forming productive relations with others (Nussbaum, 2001: 300; Holmes, 2004a: 130). Therefore, expressions of anger should be taken seriously as a means of representing the voices of groups and individuals who are otherwise marginalised within the media’s discursive universe. In the context of disaster coverage, anger can be politically significant because it enables citizens to call authorities to account and hails an enraged audience/public.

Emotions are deeply embedded in our social and cultural worlds, and styles of emotional management vary across geographical and historical contexts (Reddy, 2001). This means that emotions are bound to public norms and judgements; in some circumstances, and as

a response to certain actions, anger can be appropriate and justified, while in others it cannot. Emotional expressions that are communicated by media texts provide insights into the emotional regime and emotional management styles of a given society at a particular historical juncture. In contemporary mediated societies, media also work as a bridge between personal and public emotions: Through the process of mediation, personal emotions become public, and public emotions in turn shape personal emotions. Simon Thompson (2006: 128-129) writes that subjective anger needs a “framework of interpretation” in order to become impersonal aspiration and lead to collective struggle against injustice. Here, we suggest that news can be seen as such an interpretative framework.

The emotional nature of (mediated) national disasters

In this context, disaster coverage presents a particularly compelling case study.

Traumatic, tragic events shatter our sense of security and belonging. They generate intense emotions, which, in turn, can elicit the kind of social sharing that is imperative for an adequate functioning of the public sphere. Social psychologists have suggested that sharing emotions contributes to coping with emotional events and, at a socio-cultural level, to the strengthening of solidarity, trust and optimism (e.g. Paez et al., 2007). However, scholars who study media and ritual have argued that such a consensus-oriented understanding of the implications of emotionally charged events is limited, suggesting that whereas some work to reinforce solidarity, others may contribute to dissidence and conflict (e.g. Cottle, 2006b; Couldry, 2003).

The news coverage of national disasters is embedded with emotion, whether it focuses on the emotions of individuals directly affected by a tragedy, or the collective emotions of the larger community. While grief and compassion are typically emphasised in disaster coverage, there is often also room for anger at those held responsible. High-profile national disasters are usually inscribed with four emotional discourses: Those of horror, grief, empathy and anger (Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). The coverage of disaster typically opens with a discourse of horror that depicts the dreadful consequences of the tragedy – death, destruction and debris. This is followed by the discourse of grief, which focuses on the victims - bereaved families and communities. Such accounts, in turn, give rise to the discourse of empathy, which constructs imagined communities of shared loss by telling stories of heroic individuals and collective relief efforts. Finally, the discourse of anger may assign blame and call those perceived responsible to account by telling stories of the anger of the afflicted. In this, disaster coverage follows a particular set of formulas for journalistic story-telling, or what Lule (2001) has referred to as “myths.” Lule (2001) argues that journalists draw on a limited range of “eternal stories,” including those of the victim, the hero and the scapegoat.

In telling such stories, the discourse of anger opens up a space in the public sphere for particular forms of political expression. While natural and technological disasters are not overtly “political” in the same sense as, for example, conflicts or terrorist attacks, they create a disruptive and emotional situation that may be of political significance (e.g. Cottle, 2009). If disasters themselves are exceptional events, the political questions and issues that they may generate, such as those of transportation safety, the wisdom of

privatisation, and corporate and state responsibility, belong to the realm of “ordinary” politics and are important for everyday life. This is particularly significant because, as scholars have long argued, the newsworld belongs to political, economic and social elites and tends to neglect the issues, concerns and voices of regular citizens or “ordinary people” (e.g. Gans, 1980). Although ordinary people appear relatively frequently in the news, they tend to be represented as apolitical and passive spectators to a political drama that plays out on a stage far removed from their influence (Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). Their voices carry little authority and they are rarely consulted on matters of policy and politics. As we will argue here, some moments in disaster coverage, however, provide exceptions from this rule insofar as they allow ordinary people to express themselves politically, authorised as citizens by the subject position of the disaster victim.

The study

To better understand the political implications of this particular form of emotional discourse, the paper will examine expressions of anger in disaster coverage from 1952 to 1999. By adopting such a historical approach, we can trace changing journalistic practices around the constructions of citizens and their emotional expression in the public sphere. The disasters that have been selected for this study are man-made disasters, as opposed to natural disasters. We have not included domestic disasters that were the result of a criminal act, such as Lockerbie crash in Scotland in 1988 or Dunblane Primary School disaster in Scotland in 1996. Certainly, such crimes may also generate discussion and criticism of public policies – in the case of Dunblane, for example, on topics of gun

control and school security (see Jemphrey and Berrington, 2000). However, the questions of causation and culpability are not debatable as in the case of traditional man-made disasters such as fires and train crashes. We have focused on man-made disasters because of their increasing occurrence – research shows a growth in the frequency of man-made crisis in industrialised countries during the past century - and because they are often seen to have been preventable if the proper management and regulatory practices had been applied (Coleman, 2002). Thus public discourses around such disasters open up debates on political issues of accountability and power. Our study involves five serious British disasters between 1950s and 1990s, which resulted in the death and injury of many innocent victims. The cases are selected to provide a sample across a significant time period, with relatively similar intervals between each disaster (10-14 years):

- 1) Harrow and Wealdstone rail crash (October 8, 1952): The worst peacetime railway crash in Britain claimed the lives of 112 and injured 340.
- 2) Aberfan landslide disaster (October 21, 1966): a colliery waste tip collapsed into the mining village of Aberfan and engulfed schools and houses, killing 144 people, 116 of whom were children.
- 3) Moorgate tube crash (February 28, 1975): The worst London underground accident in peacetime killed 43 people at the scene and several more subsequently died from injuries.
- 4) Bradford City football stadium fire (May 11, 1985): 56 people died and over 200 were injured by a fire started in the main stand.

- 5) Ladbroke Grove rail crash (October 5, 1999): 31 people died and 400 were injured in the train crash at Ladbroke Grove, two miles outside London's Paddington Station.

We examined all coverage of these disasters for two weeks after each event in two national newspapers, *The Times* and *the Daily Mail*, and local papers from the area where the disaster occurred: *Evening Standard* (Harrow and Wealdstone Rail Crash, 1952, The Moorgate Tube Crash, 1975, The Ladbroke Grove Rail Crash, 1999), *South Wales Echo* (The Aberfan Landslide Disaster, 1966) and *Telegraph and Argus* (The Bradford City Football Stadium Fire, 1985). These papers were selected to provide a combination of local and national, as well as mid-market and quality papers. The national papers, *The Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday* and *The Times* were specifically selected for historical continuity: They have published continually throughout the entire time period under study and covered all the disasters discussed here. *The Daily Mail* is a mid-market, right-leaning tabloid and *The Times* is a moderate quality paper. While the *Evening Standard* is a mid-market London paper with a wide readership outside the capital, the *Telegraph and Argus* and *South Wales Echo* were the most significant local papers covering the Bradford stadium fire and the Aberfan landslide, respectively. Our analysis included 1287 articles in total.

Table 1: Coverage of British man-made disasters 1952-1999

Domestic disaster	<i>The Times</i>	<i>Daily Mail</i>	Local paper	Total
Harrow and Wealdstone Rail Crash 1952	21	30	26	77
Aberfan Landslide Disaster 1966	45	28	226	299
Moorgate Tube Crash 1975	20	19	31	70
Bradford City Football Stadium Fire 1985	45	35	571	651
Ladbroke Grove Rail Crash 1999	93	59	38	190
Total	224	171	892	1,287

Stories of the Ladbroke Grove rail crash in the *Times* and *Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday* were gathered from Nexis using the following search terms: “Ladbroke Grove”, “Paddington,” and “train crash.” Other stories were gathered from microfilm reels in several newspaper archives (British Library Newspaper Library, Cardiff Public Library and the archive of *Telegraph and Argus* in Bradford). Microfilm copies were taken of all stories that appeared within two weeks following the disaster.

We conducted an initial basic content analysis on this sample, identifying all articles which included expressions of anger, and then analysing (1) who expresses anger and (2) who the anger is directed at.¹ Content analysis, as a “research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the context of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004:18) or, in Berelson’s (1952: 18) original definition, a method for “the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication,”

¹ This included the use of terms like “angry,” “anger,” and synonyms like “rage,” as well as words such as “disgust,” “repugnance,” “loathing,” “resentment,” and “bitterness.” Expressions of anger were coded by both authors and one external coder to ensure reliability of coding.

allows for the identification of recurring patterns in large bodies of data. Here, we were merely interested in understanding the frequency of expressions of anger within the coverage of the disasters, as well as getting a sense of two relatively simple features of the texts. We then conducted a more detailed qualitative analysis of this sample of stories containing expressions of anger. This analysis focused on how anger is articulated, mobilised and managed. In particular, we explored the following questions: Who is authorised to express anger and under what circumstances? What are the subject positions and power relations produced and legitimised by these representations? What is the role of the press in constructing citizens' emotional responses? Are there differences between national and local coverage? How is anger related to social processes and concepts such as justice, responsibility and blame? And how are they invoked as the basis of critique of society and politics?

Expressions of anger comes in a variety of forms. First, there are direct expressions of anger from the news sources: Journalists report on emotions through quotes, allowing the news sources to express their anger directly (thus remaining "objective"). Direct expressions of anger are also found in letters to the editor. Second, disaster coverage includes indirect descriptions of anger, which occurs when journalists report on emotions by interpreting individual and collective emotions (e.g. references to the public mood). Finally, some disaster coverage draws on what we refer to as "authorial emotions," which comes into play when journalists' own emotions are discussed, typically in editorials.

These analytical approaches allow us to provide an anatomy of representations of anger in disaster coverage to understand the specificities of this emotion in providing opportunities for "ordinary people" or "citizens" to express political views. Through the process of authorising individuals involved in the disasters to express their anger in a politicised manner, we suggest, journalism practices open up a space for the exercise of citizenship. First, we examine the circumstances under which anger is expressed. Secondly, in the section on the subject of anger, we look at who expresses it and why, as a way of accessing the opportunities and limitations of disaster coverage as a site for political expression. Thirdly and finally, we consider the object of anger, or who the anger is targeted at. We should stress that due to differences in the sizes of our samples for different cases, as well as the widely varying extent to which anger is drawn on as a key discursive resource in different cases, our observations ought to be seen as suggestive, rather than necessarily generalisable.

The circumstances of anger

We have chosen comparable events for our study, tragedies that have claimed several victims. However, they differ significantly in relation to expressions on anger: in some cases anger is almost absent, whilst in others there is an abundance of expressions of anger. Expressions of anger are divided over the five events as described in Table 2 below. This count represents those articles which contain at least one expression of anger; in the majority of articles there were only single utterances.

Table 2: Expressions of anger in disaster coverage

Domestic disaster	<i>The Times</i>	<i>Daily Mail</i>	Local paper	Total ²
Harrow and Wealdstone Rail Crash 1952	0	2	0	2 (77)
Aberfan Landslide Disaster 1966	12	7	13	32 (299)
Moorgate Tube Crash 1975	8	1	1	10(70)
Bradford City Football Stadium Fire 1985	2	7	25	34(651)
Ladbroke Grove Rail Crash 1999	17	29	9	55(190)
Total	23	46	48	133(1,287)

Anger was present in just under 13% of stories. It was least prominent in the first of our cases, the Harrow and Wealdstone Crash, appearing in 5% of stories, but played a much more substantial role in the most recent case, the Ladbroke Grove rail crash of 1999, where anger was present in over 35% of stories. Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence of a linear historical development regarding the prominence of anger.³

The immediate cause of all three train accidents - the Harrow and Wealdstone crash, Moorgate tube crash and Ladbroke Grove Rail crash – was an error of the train driver. However, among those, anger had a prominent role only in the Ladbroke Grove coverage. Both the Harrow and Wealdstone crash and the Moorgate tube crash were mainly framed in terms of individual fault. The coverage focused on the public inquiry, but anger did not play a significant role in this discussion. In the Harrow and Wealdstone crash, the cause

² The figure in brackets indicates the total number of articles covering each disaster.

³ It should be noted that the disproportionate number of articles in local papers in the Aberfan and Bradford cases does not necessarily indicate any systematic differences between local and national papers, but can be explained by the fact that local papers published a great number of brief items about the growth of relief funds.

of the accident was that the express sleeper train ran through the red signals (because of the fog, or the driver being distracted) without slowing down or stopping. It then smashed into the rear of the commuter train standing at the station. The other express train arriving into the station seconds later had no chance of braking in time and avoiding the wreckage that had spread across several tracks. While caused by individual fault, the disaster generated public discussion around rail safety and the need for an Automatic Warning System (AWS). In the Moorgate case, the cause of the crash was never conclusively determined. Instead of braking on arrival, the driver of the Northern City Line service increased the speed of the train and crashed into the tunnel end beyond the platform at Moorgate station. There was speculation that this might have been a suicidal act, that the use of alcohol was involved, that the driver may have been temporarily paralysed by a rare kind of amnesia, or that he simply lost his attention at the critical moment. In this case, there was not much room for anger, insofar as there were no problems with the train itself nor with other safety measures, and there were very few Underground accidents preceding it. By contrast, while the Ladbroke Grove disaster was also caused by a driver overrunning a red signal, it was typically framed in terms of political and fundamental structural problems around rail safety, often involving discussions of how private rail companies put profits before safety (before privatisation, British Rail was solely responsible for all aspects of rail travel).

The scarcity of expressions of anger in the case of the Bradford Stadium fire – appearing in just 5.7% of stories, or 37 out of 651, is particularly interesting. About 11,000 fans were celebrating winning the Football League Third Division trophy at the Valley Parade

stadium when a fire started in the main stand. Escaping people found the exit doors locked. The fire unfolded under somewhat similar circumstances to the Aberfan landslide. First, there were many children among the victims. Secondly, in both cases, there had been warnings around the lack of precautions and potential for accidents, and, third, the culpability could not be assigned to a single individual but to a collectivity (industry/organization). Instead of assigning blame, the substantial coverage in the local paper, the *Telegraph and Argus*, focused on tributes to the dead, stories of the survivors and a fundraising appeal for victims of the disaster. Out of 571 pieces, only 25 included expressions of anger, and 18 of these were letters to the editor focused on improper conduct following the disaster. The absence of anger in the coverage of Bradford disaster shows that that anger and blame were not perceived as acceptable responses to the tragedy. In letters to the editor, the writers express their moral outrage about the “witch-hunt”, or the insinuations that the management of football club would have ignored fire-risk warnings. Frequently, tabloid journalism or “the gutter press” was blamed, which ties in with a common discourse which expresses disgust with the popular press as a way of demonstrating responsible citizenship (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2008):

One feeling I would like to express is my disgust at the way certain national newspaper journalists have tried to enhance their own and their newspaper’s reputation by raking up dirt and apportioning blame (*Telegraph and Argus*, letters, “The muck-rakers”, 17 May, 1985)

I find it utterly repugnant when, at a time like this, the succour of the bereaved, the care and treatment of the injured and indeed the provision of immediate

financial assistance should be our first priority that the feuding and proving has already begun! (*Telegraph and Argus*, letters, “What did letter say”, 15 May, 1985)

The foregrounding of social integration over the articulation of anger outside the narrow context of letters to the editor is typical of the “journalism of consensus” that prevails in the local press, which is always eager to justify its central place in the community (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005).

The subject of anger

Along those lines, anger is most frequently expressed by citizens (or their representatives, such as a village priest or a union leader) or by journalists, either disguised as a description of “public mood” or described through straight political opinion. As demonstrated in Table 3 below, citizens are the subjects of anger in 50 out of 165 cases (30%), while journalists make up the second-largest category, expressing anger in 29 cases (18%). By contrast, elites express anger only when they deny responsibility in response to the assignment of blame. As Ost (2004: 236) argues, elites prefer calm discussion since it maintains the status quo; unlike outsiders the elite do not need to employ angry speech to get what it wants. As such, the discourse of anger provided a site for ordinary people to express their critique.

Table 3: Subject of anger

Anger/accusation by	The Disaster					Total
	Ladbroke Grove	Bradford	Moorgate	Aberfan	Harrow & Wealdstone	
Members of the public	14	23	1	12	0	50
Journalist	19	2	2	4	2	29
Victims, family, friends, & witnesses	11	7	2	8	0	28
Experts	4	2	7	1	0	14
Journalist – Interpretation of public opinion	8	1	0	0	1	10
Political authorities	1	1	0	8	0	10
Industry, business & organizations	3	1	2	3	0	9
Union	6	0	1	0	0	7
Individual suspects	0	0	2	0	0	2
Other	1	0	0	4	1	6
Total	67	37	17	40	4	165

In the Harrow and Wealdstone crash, ordinary people were quoted as eyewitnesses of the accident or speaking of their own good deeds to help others, but they were not included

in discussions about culpability. They appeared only in vague references to public opinion, as when an editorial commented: “Public uneasiness has been rising in direct proportion to the mounting death-roll, and people are asking: ‘What is wrong with the railways?’” (*Daily Mail*, “Safety on the lines”, October 13, 1952). Such use of unsubstantiated inferences about public mood is, in fact, very common in news media, where reference to the public opinion is often made by journalists as a way of constructing an interpretive framework and contextualising a particular story while ostensibly acting as the advocate for the citizenry (Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005; Higgins, 2008).

Letters to the editor form a conventional site for the often impassioned contributions of members of the public, parcelled off from the objective genres of the main news pages (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). One letter about the Moorgate accident, published in the *Evening Standard*, demonstrates the opportunities for critique offered to ordinary people. While all other letters about the disaster praised the rescue efforts, this one used the accident as a pretext to blame London Transport: “The awful number of fatalities and injuries in the Moorgate Tube disaster points to the need for London Transport to cut down the severe overcrowding on its trains. This can easily be achieved by the station staff being on the platform and stopping a stampede of people heaving and squashing themselves into already packed carriages (L.R. Welch, “A lesson for London Transport?”, 4 March 1975). Critiques of this variety, which detail specific courses of action and policy changes are, in fact, extremely uncommon in routine news coverage,

where most citizen expressions remain depoliticised and reactive (Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005).

In the Aberfan case, national papers offered a relatively restrained approach to the reporting of anger, communicating it through the use of direct quotes from the citizens of Aberfan. Thus, emotions were present in the comments of those directly affected by the disaster:

Anger erupted from grief at the inquest on some of the Aberfan victims yesterday. One father demanded that his son's death should record: "Buried alive by the National Coal Board". Amid uproar, a mother cried: "He's right. They killed our children". --- The man who accused the coal board is aircraft worker Mr. John Collins, 40, who lived next to the school. He was at work when the tip wrecked his home. His wife and two sons were killed. A third son is missing. Mr. Collins's interruption set off series of shouts from among 60 parents. *"Those are the feelings of all of us. We want those words on the death certificates."* *"Our children have been murdered"*. (Daily Mail, "Coal Board killed them, say parents", October 25, 1966)

This approach of representing anger by reporting of the statements of those affected by the disaster both allows citizens to express themselves in their own words *and*, by drawing on the practices of the "strategic ritual" of objectivity (Tuchman, 1972) in using sources to make political claims, leave the journalists as impartial observers of the events.

The local newspaper, the *South Wales Echo*, registered the prevailing mood in the devastated valley more widely in two large articles summarising readers' letters that reportedly had been pouring in. Thus, letters to the editor appear as the most significant venue for the explicit expression of "seething anger." Here are two passages from the readers:

I also feel cold anger and resentment that not only are these obscene coal tips raping the Welsh countryside, but that one has now been allowed to brutally cut short the lives of so many Welsh schoolchildren. ("Aberfan: What Echo readers feel...", October 26, 1966)

I have bitterness in my heart not only at the dreadful loss of life but at the callous attitude taken by Lord Robens, chairman of the Coal Board. He blames the Press and television for the way they brought this calamity into our homes. What did he want them to do, lift the carpet and brush it under? ("How long will the nation remember?", October 27, 1966)

By contrast, in the coverage of the Paddington crash some 33 years later, national newspapers gave citizens a wider opportunity to express their feelings of anger and frustration. These are typical "how something like this can happen" comments which the newspapers collected from the angry commuters or people otherwise connected to the disaster:

As the day drew on more anger did begin to surface as information failed to come forward. Back at the station, 21-year-old Lea McMahon said her best friend's

mother was lying in hospital after the crash. “This is the main route into London,” she said. “Hundreds of people travel from here every day. How could this happen nowadays? We can do anything, we can send astronauts into space but we can't control safety on our trains.” (*Daily Mail*, “A candle for the daddies who will not be coming home”, October 8, 1999)

In the Paddington case, the journalists did significant “anger-work,” going beyond just reporting on how people reacted. As the following example from a *Daily Mail* editorial illustrates, anger was an expected (and desired) response to the disaster: “If, as seems likely, the Ladbroke Grove tragedy was caused by an overshoot, it will fuel anger against both the Government and the previous Tory administration” (*Daily Mail*, “Did driver jump a red light?”, October 6, 1999). Newspapers, and the *Daily Mail* in particular, acted in a representative role to communicate the prevailing emotions of the (national) community, focussing on how people felt, and evoking emotions in readers with highly charged stories, as in the following example, describing a floral tribute (usually communicating grief and loss) expressing anger: “Besides the bouquet was a bunch of lilies with an unsigned message saying: ‘Bureaucratic incompetence has claimed more lives yet again, why?’” (*Daily Mail*, “A vision of hell in carriage H”, October 7, 1999).

While in the Paddington case, anger was represented as an expected and socially acceptable response, and journalists to some extent fuelled and channelled the emotion, in the coverage of the Bradford football stadium fire, anger seems to have been suppressed by journalists. An editorial in *The Times* pointed to anger among people but this was not

articulated in news stories. Moreover, the goal of the editorial, besides proposing a judicial inquiry to establish responsibility for the fire and safety standards in football stadiums, seemed to be the management and prevention of anger:

The first instinctive reaction to news of the calamity at Bradford football ground is that expressed by the Prime Minister, sorrow at the depth and breadth of the injured and the bereaved. Anger rises close behind, anger that such thing should have happened at all and anger directed at those who may be responsible or have contributory responsibility. But if anger is to be just and if it is to be constructive, it must be governed by a knowledge of the full facts. (*The Times*, “The Bradford tragedy”, May 13, 1985)

The answer to the question of *who* can express anger and in what form, then, is far from straightforward. Certainly it seems that conventional power hierarchies in media coverage are reversed when citizens’ emotional responses are privileged. That is to say, for the most part, elites were unlikely to express anger in disaster stories, whereas the reactions of those affected by the disasters were foregrounded and represented as newsworthy. Politicised anger at institutional neglect and malfeasance is given voice in disaster coverage, though most prominently through genres marked off as distinctive from “objective” news coverage, such as letters to the editor. Overall, though, the concrete ways of representing the subject of anger differ from one case to another, with no clear evidence of historical development. Next, we examine how these dynamics relate to questions of blame and responsibility, or the object of anger.

The object of anger

Anger needs an object, someone who can be held responsible and towards whom the subject can direct his/her anger. Questions of fault and responsibility are central to disaster news, but it depends greatly on the context whether the questions involve anger. It makes a difference, on the one hand, whether the culpability is clear, and on the other hand, whether those responsible for the disaster are individuals or impersonal social systems such as a private business or a national industry (and, by implication, the government). As indicated in Table 4 below, in all of our cases, anger targeted at a particular individual was acceptable only if the person was a member of elite.

Table 4: Object of anger

Anger directed towards	The Disaster					Total
	Ladbroke Grove	Bradford	Moorgate	Aberfan	Harrow & Wealdstone	
Industry, business & organisations	35	6	3	20	2	66
Political authorities	22	6	0	12	2	42
The media	3	6	0	10	0	19
Individual suspects	1	0	11	0	0	12
Members of the public	0	6	0	4	0	10
Unclear	2	5	1	1	0	9
Experts	1	3	0	0	0	4
Other	0	2	0	1	0	3
Total	64	34	15	48	4	165

The vast majority of expressions of anger within our sample (77%) was directed at impersonal institutions; either industry, business and organisations, political authorities or the media. Blame or anger directed at train drivers whose negligence or mistake caused the accidents was not acceptable, especially because they died in the crashes. As the proverb “Speak well of the dead” indicates, there is a social norm against speaking unkindly about the dead, drawing from the belief that it will tear apart the fabric of

community. In fact, in coverage of the Ladbroke Grove Rail crash, there was a sub-story about angry relatives who protested against the coverage which they saw as tarnishing the reputation of the driver.

In the Harrow and Wealdstone rail crash, the editorials of national papers expressed moderate critique, with a twist of irony, in relation to the political game between the Socialists and the Conservatives at the expense of the railway safety: “Transport is too vital to us all to be nationalised, denationalised, renationalised and, no doubt, denationalised until there is little left to play with.” (*Daily Mail*, “Not much to ask”, October 15, 1952). The *Evening Standard* was even more careful in avoiding the apportioning of blame towards the rail industry; an editorial pointed out earlier railway tragedies and the trend of the declining number of fatalities: “This is a record on which the railway authorities have taken some pride. They have done so with justice. But, if they were to show complacency in accepting any standard of safety, however high, as satisfactory, the public would be swift to insist on new vigilance and a firmer insistence on precautions of a more exacting kind” (“Tragedy on the line”, October 8, 1952).

By contrast, in the Aberfan case there was little ambivalence about the target of the anger. The National Coal Board, which had responsibility for the management of the tip, was clearly to blame. As the village priest was reported to have said, what happened in the village was not “an act of God” but “a direct consequence of man’s neglect and man’s failure to act when every intelligent person must have foreseen a disaster of this kind” (*Daily Mail*, October 10, 1966). The board had reportedly ignored warnings of danger for

many years: “Yesterday, Mr. Bernard Chamberlain, of Pantglas Road, Aberfan, said he had been battling for two years to get something done. ‘It was only two days ago that I made a further protest against nothing being done.’” (*Daily Mail*, “Warning of danger given 3 years ago”, October 22, 1966).

In the Paddington case, journalists’ references to the public feeling were used to legitimise journalists’ own criticism towards the rail industry and the government. The use of references to the public mood as a journalistic strategy for channelling opinion is well-documented, and is often seen by journalists as a way of meeting their social responsibility of representing the public and holding the powerful accountable (Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). The Paddington disaster has been taken as an example of “therapy news” focused on the grief of victims (Mayes, 2000), but in fact, reporting on rail safety easily outnumbered the victim stories. Editorials and comments presented harsh criticism targeted at Britain’s privatised rail industry and government’s inability to address safety problems. The use of the editorial as way for journalists to express anger reflects the unique place of this genre within the culture of journalism. Editorials are the only pages of the paper where the ideal of objectivity does not apply: They allow for the expression of opinion, often guided by the political leanings of the newspaper, but also informed by the desire for a “balanced forum” (Page, 1996: 21). As McNair (2000: 31) has pointed out, through opinion journalism like editorials, “the institutions of the press take the lead in establishing the dominant interpretative frameworks within which ongoing political events are made sense of.” Here is an example:

Today there is real rage among rail users, who pay some of the world's highest fares for poor service, unpunctual and often filthy trains and also – it seems – the risk of death or injury. – But Mr. Tony Blair should recognize that public anger about the state of Britain's transport system is running high, and will be intensified by what has happened in Paddington. The travelling public cares nothing for dogma and political posturing. It wants answers, and solutions. (*The Evening Standard*, "Carnage at Paddington", October 5, 1999)

It is apparent, then, that disaster coverage has the potential to open up larger structural and systemic questions precisely because issues over the apportioning of blame and accountability tend to be *political* – they tend to turn to questions of collective and elite responsibility, rather than taking a more common – and depoliticising – approach of apportioning blame to individuals. For the most part, the discussion of the object of anger unusually allows those affected by the disaster to serve as the "primary definers" (Hall et al., 1977) of the story of blame and accountability – their version of events and their explicitly political critique creates the framework within which subsequent actors and voices must position themselves. As such, the subject position of the *victim* allows for the making of a politically engaged *citizen* entitled to raise significant questions that require a response.

Conclusion

Our analysis has sought to shed light on some of the key ways in which anger is expressed and politicised in newspaper coverage of national-level disasters. It reveals that

there are systematic patterns, born out of the conventions of journalism, structuring who is authorised to express anger, and under what circumstances and constraints. The subject position of the victim or the individual otherwise affected by the disaster allows for the articulation of anger – either through letters to the editor, or in stories where ordinary people were used as sources. As such, it opens up a rare space for “ordinary people” to direct criticism at power holders in society – corporations, governments and other social institutions that they otherwise rarely have to opportunity to directly hold to account. More profoundly, the discourse of what we might call “disaster citizenship” allows for a democratised systemic critique of complex social processes such as privatisation that generally lie outside the bounds of acceptable topics for public debate. It makes citizens out of victims, even if such empowerment comes at a heavy price.

Our research also indicates some historical change in the nature of disaster coverage, caused by an expansion in the amount of news in the disaster coverage and an increase in the amount of journalistic reflection in the news. While opinions and the expression of emotion were confined to editorials and letters in our cases from the 1950s and 1960s, the more recent Ladbroke Grove case provides evidence of an increase in opinion journalism interpreting events and offering views, although sometimes this is done in the name of the public. Earlier coverage is not devoid of emotion but it is more factual, especially in the *Times*. It privileges the telling of what has happened and what is going to happen. Our finding support the claim several media scholars have made that journalists are doing more than merely reporting events, that they have become more active participants in political and social processes, especially in the contexts of social crisis (e.g. Cottle 2006a;

Liebes et al., 2008). In recent disaster stories – especially Ladbroke Grove – there is evidence of journalists developing moral narratives around anger, thus abandoning their conventional position of neutral observers which so strongly structured reporting practices in earlier events.

On the other hand, coverage of recent disasters exemplifies a more emotional society, in which the open display of emotions and emotionally charged rituals is valorised. The role of (news) media in this development cannot be underestimated; in our highly mediatized culture changes in emotion practises and styles are due both to the cumulative practical experience and media discourses (Turnock, 2000: 70). Interestingly, and in contrast to the claims of some academic commentators (see Furedi, 2004), the more open display of emotion also concerns anger that is traditionally perceived as socially destructive or dangerous, in the sense that it poses a threat to the ruling power. Even if news media tend to construct ordinary people in profoundly depoliticised ways, there is no evidence that anger is treated in this way.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, we can discern the contours of an emotional regime that is authoritative and highly controlling regarding anger and highlights rationality. The main emotions performed are patriotism and constraint. From the 1980s and onwards, there are indications of a shift to a more open emotional regime, which values individualised emotional expressions on the part of the journalists. This shift in emotional management, we suggest, has profound political implications, insofar as such *individualised* emotional expression enables journalists to engage in practices of disaster citizenship, drawing on

the register of anger identified here, to raise *structural* questions of *collective* significance which might previously have been outside the bounds of “objective” journalism. It would appear, then, that such questions are increasingly part of the emotional management style of disaster journalism.

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