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Disaster aid as a domain of humanitarian communication

Mervi Pantti

Introduction

Disasters are the most visible domain of humanitarian communication, with images of floods, hurricanes and earthquakes, and the resulting destruction, death and shock, frequently used by different media sources and genres to generate attention, promote compassion and facilitate disaster relief. They intermittently expose people to consequences that fall outside the normalcy of everyday life. As Beck in *Risk Society* (1992) argues, disasters reveal the risks facing contemporary society – risks that emerge as side-effects of modernisation and are global in their present impacts. There is agreement among scholars that disasters and other catastrophic events have become more common but also more destructive and complex in terms of both their impacts and humanitarian, political and emotional responses. Disasters have become an integral, and most likely increasing, part of social reality not only in the global South but in the world's richer countries as well (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle, 2012; Warner, 2013, p. 80).

High-profile disasters, often described as being extraordinary, unthinkable or unprecedented, are today met with immediate and intense global media coverage. Consequently, they also represent the best opportunities for creating global communities of solidarity and for accumulating private donations and government funds. As Chouliaraki (2006, p. 188) observes, natural disasters bridge the distance between 'us' and distant sufferers because of the acute awareness of common vulnerabilities they create. This chapter argues that disasters offer an exceptional lens through which to examine the workings and dilemmas of humanitarian communication, understood here as referring to the myriad communicative and discursive practices of transnational actors that turn

public attention towards and mobilise action on human suffering caused by different kinds of disasters (Chouliaraki, 2012).

To be sure, a vast array of communicative and media activities by multiple actors precedes, accompanies and follows a disastrous event. In the literature on crisis communication, the 'disaster communications' that precede disasters put emphasis on disaster warnings and actions that individuals and communities can take in anticipation of a disaster (Rodriguez et al., 2007); communications during disaster response provide critical information that individuals and communities can use to survive, facilitate collaboration among different actors engaged in relief activities, and mobilise the public to act; in the recovery phase, disaster communications focus on informing individuals and communities of the aid available from a variety of governmental, non-governmental and private sector sources that they can use to help rebuild their lives (Haddow and Haddow, 2014). However, it is argued here that the intersection between disasters, media and communication exceeds this strategic level, instrumentally focused as it is on effective disaster management or effective delivery of humanitarian aid.

Communication and media are profoundly entwined with disasters, inscribing them with different cultural meanings, shaping the political projects of control and societal change that emerge from such events, and motivating solidarity and political action through images and stories of suffering (Cottle, 2014; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle, 2012). Changes in media technologies have accelerated scholarly interest in the role of media and communication in both constituting and shaping today's disasters. The increasingly diverse and networked nature of contemporary digital media, together with the changing nature of the events themselves, has raised new questions about the role of humanitarian communication in enabling new forms of solidarity, empowerment and voice, and sustaining or correcting the power imbalances present in humanitarianism. While humanitarian organizations have been identified as leading actors in the promotion of global humanitarianism (Cottle and Nolan, 2007), academic research has also critiqued humanitarian

organizations as being increasingly entangled with various political, economic and military interests which aim to maintain existing power structures (Duffield, 2016).

Along this line, this chapter draws attention to the theoretical and empirical work on how media and communications affect the manner in which a disaster is responded to. The chapter is organised around four major themes which address the relationship between communication, disasters and power from different perspectives. The first section, ‘The power to define disasters’, explores the conceptual dimension of humanitarian communication. Over time, conceptions of disasters have radically changed, in particular shifting the responsibility for them from God to nature and, finally, to politics and human acts. This section addresses the definitional power of humanitarian discourses, arguing that the ways in which disasters are conceptualised and categorised by researchers and various humanitarian actors impact actual responses to humanitarian crises. The second section, ‘Media and the politics of disaster’, offers insights into the political dimension of humanitarian communication. It examines the politicisation of disasters in order to understand the role of media and communication in sustaining various political and economic interests and existing power relationships or, alternatively, facilitating projects of social change following a disaster. The third section, ‘The new visibility of disasters’ explores the technological dimension of humanitarian communication. It asks to what extent new media technologies have contributed to the democratising of visibility, mobilising global publics and empowering disaster-affected people. The cultural dimension of humanitarian communication is considered in the fourth section, ‘Cultural scripts and moral storytelling’. Drawing on contemporary cultural research on disasters, this section addresses the powerful systems of meaning that are evoked by and circulated in disaster narratives. Together, these four perspectives provide broad insight into the literature on the role media and communications play in the ‘construction’ of disasters – shaping the meaning-making and political action in relation to them.

The conceptual dimension of humanitarian communication: the power to define disasters

A 'humanitarian disaster' refers to an event that affects a large number of people and results in the loss of lives and livelihoods, massive suffering and displaced populations. Typically, humanitarian disasters are defined as 'major disasters' caused by 'natural' phenomena (such as storms, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, droughts or landslides) or industrial accidents (explosions, chemical spills, etc.) and aggravated by social, economic and political conditions. In today's interconnected world, a combination of powerful processes, including climate change, accelerating population growth, urbanisation and technological development, have all increased the likelihood of humanitarian disasters (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle, 2012). As De Smet, Lagadec and Leysen (2012, pp. 139–140) observe, contemporary disasters are both quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from those which occurred in previous eras, having a more devastating impact on society and its infrastructures and producing increased suffering for affected populations. These trends are transforming the domain of humanitarianism through increasing humanitarian needs, putting new demands on humanitarian action, and involving new actors in the humanitarian domain. Consequently, contemporary disasters should be approached as global phenomena, as they are spatially transgressive, have global impacts, often require global forms of response, and have become profoundly dependent on transnational cultural mediation (Beck, 1992; Cottle, 2014; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle, 2012).

Humanitarian disasters have been studied from a range of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. Indeed, disaster studies started to proliferate in the early 1950s across many fields, including sociology, geography, psychology, anthropology, and communication studies. Accordingly, scholars have produced conceptions of disaster which prompt different questions about power and decision-making with respect to disaster response and recovery. Traditional approaches in disaster research have been characterised by an instrumentalist rationale that

constructs disasters as isolated and manageable subjects (Tierney, 2007). The orientation of such 'realist' disaster studies towards effective management, planning and response has overlooked the 'symbolic politics' of disasters – that is, the role that symbols, narratives and rituals play in their dynamics ('tHart, 1993). Moreover, the 'realist' perspective has neglected the critical questions of how disasters are entangled within wider economic, political and social processes, or how communicative practices shape and constitute disasters (Chandler, 2001; Cottle, 2009; Olson, 2000).

Since the 1980s, scholars have embraced social constructionist insights that emphasise the pre-existing social conditions that interact with disasters. Social constructionist approaches have also drawn attention to the discursive nature of disaster typologies, such as 'natural disasters', 'technological disasters' or 'man-made disasters'. Reflection on the social construction of definitions of disaster is important for understanding why some disasters and not others might generate media attention and mobilise aid organisations and states (Calhoun, 2010; Cottle, 2014; Tierney, 2007). It is now understood that the origins of disasters and their outcomes are never 'natural', as various human actors are complicit in all their phases and aspects, from causes to relief and reconstruction (Matthewman, 2015; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle, 2012; Quarantelli, 2005; Tierney, 2014). Social constructionist perspectives have stressed that disasters are outcomes of pre-existing vulnerabilities (rather than solely of physical agents such as earthquakes) that make some people more likely than others to be affected by a disaster (Quarantelli, 2005; Tierney, 2007). Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005, has been frequently cited as an example of a disaster that was an outcome of multiple existing vulnerabilities, including the physical (a hurricane-prone area and the inadequately engineered levees) and the socio-economic (racialized poverty and inequality) (Cupples and Glynn, 2014).

Thus, emphasis on the social origins of disasters has called into question traditional definitions of disasters as *sudden, isolated events with disruptive social consequences* (Perry, 2007,

p.6). Current theorisations highlight the view of disasters as *long-lasting and open-ended processes involving economic, political, social and cultural factors* (e.g., De Smet, Lagadec and Leysen; 2012; Matthewman, 2015; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 2002). The ways in which disasters are understood and narrated inevitably shape how they are responded to. Scholars have pointed out that even declaring an event a 'disaster' or 'catastrophe' is not without political implications, since such a declaration performatively shapes the way in which these events are responded to by governments, international agencies, humanitarian NGOs, corporations and the media (Calhoun, 2010; Warner, 2013). Ultimately, this suggests that humanitarian actors and the media have a power to name whose lives ought to be saved and whose suffering should be acted on (Barnett, 2013; Fassin, 2007).

Both humanitarian actors and the media have traditionally addressed disasters as unique *events* with a temporal structure comprising a beginning, middle (the emergency phase) and end (the recovery phase). Accordingly, humanitarian aid is still predominantly focused on short-term emergency management, rather than disaster risk reduction or long-term development (Benthall, 2017; Calhoun, 2010). What Calhoun (2010) refers to as '*emergency imagination*' positions emergencies as exceptional – concealing their social, economic and political causes and relations. Scholars have argued that discourses on the 'naturalness', 'suddenness' or 'uniqueness' of disasters function to disregard human responsibility and overlook suffering as an ongoing global problem (Cupples and Glynn, 2014; ten Have, 2014). As media and communication scholars have pointed out, media coverage of disasters has also been event-focused rather than process-orientated. In mainstream media, disasters – except when they happen to 'us' – typically fade from view within a matter of days after the emergency phase, allowing those who are not caught up in them to imagine them as extraordinary and contained, after which life goes back to normal. Ekström (2016), however, claims that disasters are increasingly connected to other emergencies – past, present and

future – in Western media coverage, rather than simply being represented as singular events, as they become framed as extreme symptoms of human-induced climate change.

Although such a socially and culturally informed model of disasters is now generally adopted in contemporary disaster studies, the tendency to frame disasters in natural rather than social or political terms has not disappeared from humanitarian, political or media rhetoric. As Walton (2017) writes, humanitarian communication by NGOs tends to adopt a traditional 'disaster frame' that diagnoses problems and justifies strategic choices through a language of morality, rather than through political or judicial language (see also Chandler, 2001, p. 683). Sudden 'natural' disasters are often treated as politically neutral humanitarian matters, whereas complex emergencies (caused by human violence) are seen as politically risky (Hannigan, 2012; Matthews, 2009; Spiegel, 2005) – meaning that generally disasters are usually interpreted in terms of urgent need for material aid and assistance, ignoring questions of accountability and blame.

Moreover, the distinction between 'natural' and 'man-made' disasters persistently shapes both the humanitarian response and the mediation of disasters. A key implication of this dual classification is that it introduces specific political, moral and emotional discourses into wider understandings of disasters. The importance of labelling disasters is seen in the fact that there is no need to assign accountability or attribute responsibility in the public debate as long as a disaster is framed as 'natural' (Olsson and Paglia, 2008). Moreover, research has shown that 'natural' disasters tend to generate more global media attention and humanitarian help than violent emergencies or prolonged crises, such as famines: 'For every person killed in a volcano disaster, 40,000 people must die in a drought to reach the same probability of media coverage' (Eisensee and Strömberg, 2007, p. 694). Accordingly, ten Have (2014, 18) claims that 'natural', and therefore 'morally neutral' disasters are a paradigmatic case for humanitarian communication because they create 'innocent' and blameless victims, which in turn more effectively mobilise solidarity and the possibility of generating substantial public donations. In the US context, sociologist and historian

Michele Landis Dauber’s book *The Sympathetic State* (2013) points out that while disaster response is considered a fundamental responsibility of a strong national government, narratives of ‘blameless loss’ have been critical to the success of claims for state money for disaster relief. In the same way, news media prefer innocent casualties and ‘unpredictable mortality’ (Seaton, 1999). Thus, victims of ‘natural’ disasters appear worthier of generosity than victims of political conflicts or complex emergencies. In the next section, I will explore further how media and communications are entangled with the politics of disaster.

The political dimension of humanitarian communication: media and the politics of disaster

As discussed in the previous section, humanitarianism has traditionally presented itself as an apolitical regime, focused on saving life and alleviating suffering (Barnett, 2013; Chandler, 2001; Fassin, 2007). In the context of Hurricane Harvey and the flooding of Houston in August 2017, Klein (2017) argues that even when media and other public actors choose a moral and depoliticising frame – that is, treating disasters as ‘human tragedies’ or ‘acts of God’ that are beyond human responsibility – doing so is nonetheless a highly political decision because it works to obscure the question of the root causes of a disaster, such as political actions (or inactions) related to climate change:

> That’s politics being made out of a disaster — it’s just the kind of partisan politics that is fully inside the comfort zone of conventional media, politics that conveniently skirts the reality that placing the interests of fossil fuel companies ahead of the need for decisive pollution control has been a deeply bipartisan affair.
>
> (Klein, 2017)

During the last decade, disaster studies have increasingly paid attention to the 'politics of disaster' – to the role of power, politics and capitalism in shaping disaster responses (e.g., Hannigan, 2012; Pyles, Svistova and Ahn, 2017). Disasters have been addressed, on the one hand, as opportunities for the concentration of political power as well as for suppressive political measures, such as suspending civil rights and facilitating military interventions (Chandler, 2001; Pelling and Dill, 2010; Weiss, 2016). From this perspective, scholars have stressed the strong relationship between political power and the ideological power of media narratives (Klein, 2007; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006). On the other hand, inequalities unveiled by the media have been seen as an important catalyst of political awareness, prompting popular demands for policy solutions (Atkeson and Maestas, 2012; Macomber, Rusche and Wright, 2006). Pelling and Dill (2010), for example, see disasters as inherently political events themselves, but also as potential producers of subsequent political struggles.

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Klein (2007, p. 6) theorised disasters as opportunities for 'disaster capitalism', claiming that by creating a state of 'collective shock' through media and political rhetoric, disasters open windows for political and corporate elites to profit from human suffering. The 'disaster capitalism' doctrine argues that in times of disaster, 'neoliberal forces are unleashed through media discourse, and transnational policy-making and social practices in collaboration with both the for-profit and not-for-profit private sectors' (Pyles, Svistova and Ahn, 2017, p. 587). Thus, humanitarian actors and media, as 'marionettes' of governments and powerful elites, are seen as complicit in facilitating disaster capitalism in devastated and vulnerable post-disaster areas (Hannigan, 2012).

The political science perspective emphasises disasters as domains in which especially unprivileged people may be controlled and their circumstances capitalised on (Pyles, Svistova and Ahn, 2017). Along these lines, Chandler (2001, p. 700) has argued that humanitarian actors exercise increasing power over non-Western societies through the implementation of 'humanitarian

intervention'. At the core of the concept is the idea that states can intervene in the affairs of another state to restore order and end atrocities against its people. Since the 1990s, military interventions have been increasingly justified in terms of humanitarian emergency (Fassin and Pandolfi, 2010; ten Have, 2014). Thus, militarisation requires a narrative that constructs the disaster setting as a dangerous or unsafe place, and vulnerability as a security risk (Chandler, 2001; Pyles, Svistova and Ahn, 2017).

The military is today one of the major providers of humanitarian assistance: 'A global force for good', as claimed by the media publicity campaign for the US army (ten Have, 2014). The increasing obfuscation of distinctions between humanitarian and military interventions is discussed in empirical research examining organisational and communicative practices in relation to specific disasters. Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski (2006) demonstrate that mass media coverage has justified actions by the US military and government via the circulation of 'disaster myths', particularly the 'civil disorder' myth, which suggests that disasters foster dangerous antisocial behaviour, such as looting. Tierney and Bevc (2007) argue that the framing of the victims of Hurricane Katrina as criminals in media and public discourse provided a justification for the US political elite to hasten the militarisation of such disasters and to treat disaster victims as 'enemy insurgents'. Scholars increasingly address military-humanitarian interventions as also being manifestations of disaster capitalism. As Hurricane Katrina showed, public discourses emphasising 'lawlessness' or unsafe conditions served the interests of business in privatising public services such as housing and education, and displacing poor black survivors (Pyles, Svistova and Ahn, 2017; Saltman, 2007).

Disasters occasionally become political crises that threaten the status quo. They have been theorised as 'tipping points for change' (Pelling and Dill, 2010) or 'critical junctures' (Olson and Gawronski, 2003) from which critical discourses and alternative social and political projects may emerge. In part, this is because disasters constitute 'special time' when the public and the impacted community expect their leaders to respond with diligence and care (Olson and Gawronski, 2010).

The media closely follows governments' handling of disasters, and today's intense, often real-time coverage of disasters in mainstream media and social media can put public officials in a constant limelight. Moreover, a networked media perspective highlights the role of media as watchdogs demanding accountability for failures in responding to the disaster as well as for the shortcomings that precipitated it.

Thus, disaster communication can shake political systems, lay bare pre-existing social injustices and experiences of marginalisation, and feed into social activism (Harvey, 2017; Pelling and Dill, 2006). Crucial to this political function of disasters as occasions of dissent are digital media platforms. Grievances expressed by disaster-affected people themselves have been seen as creating opportunities for collective action, such as pressuring governments into providing more resources, influencing politicians' re-elections or challenging official narratives (Albala-Bertrand, 1993; Curato, Ong and Longboan, 2016). In some situations, popular discontent and criticism of the authorities have been met with further marginalisation, while in others, these actions have paved the way for more positive outcomes, such as more inclusive citizenship (Sørensen and Albris, 2016). It is therefore worth looking more closely at the promises of such new horizontal communication networks for facilitating disaster responses and reconstructing power relations.

The technological dimension of humanitarian communication: the new visibility of disasters

Visibility has emerged as one of the key concepts in the study of disaster communication in contemporary media and communications scholarship. Visibility can be understood as a metaphor for knowledge – what can be known – but also as a sociopolitical field of attention, action and care (Brighenti, 2007). New communication technologies promise new kinds of visibility for disasters: Satellite imagery, camera-enabled drones and social media images allow us to see disasters literally from afar, helping us to act upon disaster-affected populations. What is more, digital technologies promise new opportunities for disaster-affected populations to become recognised as a subjects with

voices. A key question in the field of humanitarian communication is whether – and if so, how – digital technologies might improve and democratise the visibility of disasters and the (distant) suffering they bring about (Cottle, 2014; Duffield, 2016; Madianou, 2013). In this section, I will examine the expanding literature on the relationship between digital technologies, disasters and power from the perspectives of the news media, citizens, aid organisations and victims.

Thompson (2005, p. 49) notes that 'to achieve visibility through the media is to gain a kind of presence or recognition in the public space'. Visibility thus involves symbolic power, and disasters and conflicts are key sites of struggles to achieve visibility. Previous research has emphasised that in terms of attention, some disasters (typically those which are geographically, politically, economically or culturally close to some assumed 'center') have been made highly visible by the media, while others have remained invisible (Benthall, 1993; Calhoun, 2010; Chouliaraki, 2006; Cottle, 2009; Moeller, 2006; Natsios, 1997; Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle, 2012). Similarly, in a digital media environment with an increasing number of communication channels, media visibility necessarily involves selectivity, influenced by various factors ranging from geopolitical considerations to journalistic routines. As a result, the (in)visibility of disasters in news media or in humanitarian communication more generally both reflects and constructs inequalities and vulnerabilities as it shapes and directs public attention.

New communication technologies have, however, profoundly shaped disaster coverage in news media, particularly source relationships. The incorporation of big data and new communications platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, is integral to the ways in which information about disasters is gathered and disseminated today. The incorporation of social media and user-generated content into news reporting has not only increased the speed and scale of relaying information about disasters but also enhanced the role of media in bearing witness to disasters (McCosker, 2013). Intimate and affective non-professional accounts have been potent political tools for bearing witness to humanitarian disasters or 'weaponising visibility' in order to

speak out on behalf of the victims. In the 2008 Sichuan earthquake that killed almost 90,000 people, including thousands of children, for instance, parents and bystanders shared their mobile phone images of the earthquake with international journalists and activists, in an attempt to challenge the official narrative of responsible leadership, heroism and gratitude in the Chinese media, and gain recognition for their sense of injustice, inequality and the lack of transparency in Chinese society (Svensson, 2017).

Thompson's (2005) theory of extended mediated visibility in the age of globalisation and digitalisation suggests a new concern for distant others, which he terms the 'democratization of responsibility'. As the mediated public domain is broadened, humanitarian issues and campaigns that previously might have been invisible can now receive attention in social media (Madianou, 2013). The visibility granted by social media can be used to create affective publics that become (momentarily) sensitised to distant suffering. While citizens have traditionally volunteered to assist aid organisations in their disaster responses, contemporary civic responsiveness has extended the range of engagement to include conducting both humanitarian communication and action (Pantti, 2015). As the information science and computer science literature in particular have shown, digital technologies now give volunteers the capacity to form horizontal online networks to lend help during distant emergencies by collecting, verifying and analysing data at the onset of disasters (e.g., Starbird and Palen, 2013). Social media are believed to be capable of circumventing the deficit of direct, meaningful action (such as donating or collecting funds, or participating in raising awareness by sharing information), which has been cited as a principal reason for public rejection of the moral requests of humanitarian campaigners (Madianou, 2013). The direct involvement of citizens in humanitarian communication arguably represents a development in the diversity of points of view through which scenes of disaster and human suffering have become globally accessible. However, the increased visibility of humanitarian causes on social media and the increased number of citizen voices and framings of disasters do not necessarily represent a qualitative improvement in moral

attitudes towards distant others. The emergence of new media technologies and online platforms that permit the proliferation of ordinary voices and encourage action also introduce new moral conventions which reduce the emotional and moral weight of appeals (Chouliaraki, 2010; Madianou, 2013).

For NGOs that have traditionally been dependent on the news media for visibility, raising awareness and soliciting donations (Powers, 2018; Vestergaard, 2013), new communication technologies have offered channels to address specific audiences directly (Walton, 2017) and raise issues neglected or simplified by the news media – such as in the case of blogs or videos published on organisational websites and via social media sites. In digital environments, humanitarian NGOs have become news producers themselves (see Powers, 2018), aiming to attract the attention of news organisations with information packages 'in the form of visual intelligence (photographs and video as well as infographics, maps, satellite imagery, drone surveillance and so forth)' (Dencik and Allan, 2017, p. 1181). However, scholars have also claimed that the democratisation of access to the means of communication does not fundamentally resolve the core problem of attention. An increasing number of NGOs (and disasters) and decreasing amount of government support have intensified the competition for visibility (Vestergaard, 2013). Such competition for scarce global attention is heavily skewed towards the largest and best-funded NGOs, who have the most resources available for the production and dissemination of compelling information to both the media and public at large (Powers, 2018; Thrall, Stecula and Sweet, 2014).

Visibility is closely associated with recognition and voice, even though, as Brighenti (2007) notes, visibility is not correlated with recognition or other positive moral values in any straightforward way. New communication technologies have presented opportunities to give voice to affected populations inside the disaster zone to communicate their own experiences and needs, rather than being spoken for by humanitarian workers, journalists or Western citizens (Maasilta and Haavisto, 2014). Digital technologies are expected to allow those affected to narrate and frame their

situation, thus achieving some degree of autonomy from professional practices of framing. This transformative potential for correcting power imbalances in representation has been met with serious doubts, however - not least because of inequalities in access to information technologies. Studying the use of communication technologies by those affected by Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, for example, Madianou, Longboan, and Ong (2015) concluded that digital platforms have not removed the old hierarchies present in disasters but rather, 'created new exclusions and exacerbated divides among the affected communities'. Additionally, research undertaken by Rae, Holman, and Nethery (2018) points to the continuing power of the mainstream news media to generate attention to suffering. The project examined the 'self-represented witnessing' of detained asylum seekers in Australia using social media to bear witness to their own suffering and address online audiences directly, due to the inability to speak to journalists directly. In this case, it was only when their witness accounts were re-mediated by mainstream media that the detainees were able to reach wider audiences.

An optimistic view claims that the global visibility of disasters enhances attention to and caring for distant others, while a sceptical view challenges the idea that the enlargement of mediated visibility through technological advances can produce moral orientation towards distant others, or empowerment of disaster-affected people. In the next section, I discuss how media representations condition meaning-making and public engagement with disasters from a cultural perspective.

The cultural dimension of humanitarian communication: cultural scripts and moral storytelling

Over the last decade, disasters have become an expanding research field in anthropological, historical, cultural and media studies. Cultural perspectives in disaster research have emphasised the importance of cultural framing – the repertoire of metaphors, images and narratives employed in public discourse – in shaping how we make sense of disasters and the ways in which disasters are

managed and responded to (Holm, 2012; Illner and Holm, 2016; Webb, 2007). The public imagination of disasters is media-borne insofar as they are culturally mediated – that is, filtered through recurring patterns of the representation of disasters. Thus, disaster narratives – such as the 'emergency imaginary' (Calhoun, 2010) – can be understood to *constitute* disasters rather than just representing them.

Some scholars have claimed that the imagination of disasters is comprised of a relatively small variety of cultural scripts (such as the theodicy, the apocalypse, the state of exception and the trauma) that are powerful insofar as they endow events with meaning and provide models for social responses (Holm, 2012; Rozario, 2007). For instance, through a cultural script of 'a state of emergency', a disaster becomes intelligible as a breakdown of social order, while the 'blessing in disguise' script suggests that disasters can lay the groundwork for new developments. A cultural script of 'trauma' is active when disasters are approached as a threat to the human psyche (Holm, 2012). Such scripts migrate between the cultural imagination of disasters and theoretical and professional discourses, including humanitarian campaigns and media representations. These ideas about the power of persistent disaster images or 'myths' to produce material effects have also been present in sociological disaster research, in which media frames have typically been negatively implicated in the social production of disasters, as they highlight social unrest and 'blind' people to the political choices and existing inequalities behind them (Garfield, 2007; Tierney, 2014; Tierney, Bevc and Kuligowski, 2006, p. 29). Humanitarian appeals and campaigns, as media and communication scholars have shown, are not immune to such cultural frames. Scholars have long argued that the focus on problem-solving by Western relief agencies is a narrative convention that works to naturalise suffering (Tester, 2001).

Within media and communication studies, empirical research has offered sophisticated views of the role of media in the social construction of disasters and creating audiences' moral agency. Chouliaraki (2010, p. 838) introduces a view of mediation as moral education that relies on

the capacity of representation 'not only to re-present the world to its audiences but also to propose to them how to think and feel about the world'. Thus, disaster narratives are as much about imagining an 'us' and our responsibility towards distant suffering as they are about imagining 'them', i.e., victims (Ignatieff, 1998). Aid agencies, Ignatieff (1998) argues, are moral story-tellers, but so too are journalists and Hollywood disaster movies; they too play a role in interpreting disasters, their causes and their effects, as well as in facilitating adequate responses and identifying those in need of help.

In these ways, media and communication both shape public engagement with disasters and condition how they are morally responded to and politically negotiated (Cottle, 2009). Emotional impact is at the heart of both media and humanitarian narratives of disasters, aiming to capture our attention and encouraging us to engage compassionately. Of course, not all disaster stories exhibit the same degree or kind of emotional story-telling. As discussed, humanitarian communication makes distinctions between lives that may be risked and lives that need to be saved (Fassin, 2007), as well as between lives that are powerfully narrated in the first person and lives that merely become statistics (Chouliaraki, 2006).

The questions of how (and whose) suffering is constructed by mediated images and narratives, as well as how and in which contexts representations encourage compassion and responsibility, lie at the core of studies examining news coverage of disasters (e.g., Chouliaraki, 2006; Cottle, 2009; Franks, 2013; Moeller, 2006) or NGO campaigns and appeals (Chouliaraki, 2013; Vestergaard, 2008). This research has given critical attention to biases and patterns in the selection of stories of humanitarian disasters and suffering - showing, for example, that disaster coverage makes distinctions between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' victims based on prevailing power relations and geographical and cultural proximity. However, as Chouliaraki (2006) has suggested, rather than assuming that the best we can achieve is a politics of pity that reinforces notions of the superiority of 'Western' nations, we should instead carefully distinguish among different forms of

emotional responses that disaster narratives make possible. She sees media representations as *conditions* of possibility for public action and moral agency through the proposals for engagement with distant suffering that they make. Going forward, what is needed are empirical studies of these conditions - to understand better how media texts may contribute to promoting responsibility and care - or indifference - towards those affected by disasters.

Conclusion and implications for future research

This chapter has provided four perspectives – conceptual, political, technological and cultural – on disaster research that are relevant to understanding the sociological, political and historical underpinnings of humanitarian communication. I have argued that the study of disasters provides a prism through which the structures, politics and morality of humanitarian communication might be examined. In this chapter, my aim has been to introduce the key findings of this multidisciplinary area of research and to link them to the fields of humanitarian communication and media and communications, with a particular focus on the power of media and communications to constitute disasters.

High-profile disasters and catastrophes have made humanitarianism a visible and familiar topic. Narratives of disasters are powerfully disseminated in the contemporary digital media environment by the news and entertainment platforms as well as via humanitarian appeals. Humanitarian communication acts as a means by which disasters, victims and saviours are constructed and social differences between 'us' and 'them' sustained or challenged. As discussed, disasters are routinely inserted into established cultural frames, such as a narrative of emergency, which may have the effect of focusing on international aid while simultaneously producing voiceless victims who lack moral agency.

Beyond a focus on disaster narratives, recent scholarship has emphasised the need to study affected populations as both actively participating in disaster relief and recovery and capable of

determining their own needs and telling their own stories. Similarly, scholars have pointed out a need for humanitarian communication to advance the views of 'ordinary people', beyond their traditional role as donors. As Seu and Orgad (2017) have written, the emergency model employed in humanitarian communication to ensure attention and fundraising fails to offer different kinds of engagement with humanitarianism. At the core of these arguments is the question of the potentially changing relations of communicative power. New communication technologies have been associated with globally connected volunteers engaging in and developing humanitarian practices. These communication developments have been viewed as empowering wider civil society as well as citizens inside disaster zones, but as existing research shows, the enlarged mediated visibility that they facilitate does not directly correlate with the quality of humanitarian responses.

Reviewing any one area of research exposes a range of future research topics and directions. Examining disasters as a domain of humanitarian communication has revealed that in the literature on humanitarian communication – whether it be focused on texts, production or audiences – there is no clear-cut distinction between the domains of disaster, development and conflict. This reflects the situation in the field of humanitarian practice, in which humanitarian organisations may not necessarily be focused solely on emergency aid or longer-term development. Moreover, while there is a reasonably long tradition of studying the relationship between media and disasters, the existing research has not explicitly addressed differences in the reporting of *different* types of disasters and conflicts, nor has it adequately explained differences in audience responses to the suffering caused by 'natural' disasters or political conflicts. As scholars have observed, empirical studies on the production of humanitarian narratives by NGOs are scarce (Seu and Orgad, 2017). Existing research on humanitarian organisations' communication practices has also paid little attention to differences in communication practices and the motivations and moral frameworks that underpin messages and images about sudden disasters, silent disasters and political conflict-related crises. Existing research appears to stop at the point of noticing that some disasters, and some victims,

attract more visibility and generosity than (many) others. There is a need to pay more attention to how ordinary people develop moral and political subjectivities as a response to mediated accounts of disaster and become producers of humanitarian messages themselves.

Disaster studies have emphasised the global reach of disasters in an increasingly interconnected world, yet the global nature of contemporary disasters does not mean that ‘local’ or ‘national’ no longer matter. Disasters, which involve a variety of competing political and cultural practices, must each be appreciated in terms of its particular historical context and specific locality. Indeed, research can benefit from heightened attention to the ways in which political and economic interests and cultural meanings condition disasters and disaster responses in local, national and global contexts. Working within a global framework could also involve looking at how contemporary disasters connect a wide range of actors, various sites of mediation, and both top-down and bottom-up political forms, all of which may come to inform humanitarian action. Finally, the increasing convergence of humanitarian aid and Western governments’ political, military and economic goals raises concerns which research should continue to investigate - in particular in relation to how this merging of politics and humanitarianism affects traditional humanitarian principles of universality and impartiality – in other words, shaping the (in)visibility of disasters and (un)worthiness of disaster victims.

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