MEDIA MYTHS AND REALITIES IN NATURAL DISASTERS

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ABSTRACT

$\mathcal{T}$he paper reviews how the media has contributed to combating natural hazards. A primary objective of the discussion is to focus the connections, tensions and areas of compromises of media during natural disasters highlighted within the recent literature. The paper emphases on three areas include: (1) media' response during natural disasters; (2) media myths about disasters victims; and (3) media act as an ally or pressure group in natural disasters. Focusing on these three aspects, the available literature reveals that media coverage of the disaster events leaves lasting impact on the minds and souls of the audience and can effectively motivate people to help or can cause criticism of the situation. Sometimes, media play a considerable role in propagating mistaken beliefs about disaster victims depicting them either helpless or looters. Media may exert pressure, rather than save or rescue victims and survivors, because they are there to gather first hand and exclusive disaster information as a commodity to sell in the open market of audience.

Key Words: Media, Natural Disasters, Disaster victims,

1.1 Introduction:

Natural disasters have a very unpredictable and untoward nature. They strike without warning and leave little scope for dealing with the situation. Natural disasters are not time-specific; rather, they can come in series and can strike any time. In such disasters, the importance of effective communication is widely acknowledged (Lee, 2008), whether it relates to natural hazards preparedness, response or recovery. Public most often switch to media for accessing disaster updated information and also trust the information provided. In a poll, 65% respondents gave the media positive marks during the coverage of Katrina as a trusted source of information regarding the risk associated with Katrina (Pew, 2005). Media stand to gain substantial audiences at moments of natural disaster (Fernando, 2010). Stewart and Hodgkinson (1988), in an article "Disaster and the Media", write that media coverage of natural disasters needs no further justification as increased consumption of natural hazard' coverage by readers and viewers reflects people's interest in crisis situations. People even pay to watch disaster movies. The audiences may feel dreadful seeing misfortunes of others but yet be attracted to watch such movies (Antilla, 2005). However, the eco-disaster movies also contribute to environmental arguments (Murray & Heumann, 2007). Majority of eco-disaster movies portray loss of vast agricultural lands and uprooting of forests as the impact of natural disasters and mass destruction due to natural disasters. Al Gore in his film forewarns that "what is at stake is our ability to live on planet Earth, to have a future as a civilization" (Bailey, 2006).

Media have evolved myths of their involvement in the wake of any disaster. According to their own mythology, media are the first to reach and rescue the victims of natural disasters, share updates and latest developments on the scene with the audience. They motivate the local population, who escaped luckily or suffered less, to engage in community rescue and relief activities. They invoke the attention of the international community to help the disaster-stricken population and motivate the domestic and foreign aid agencies to come forward with immediate aid allocations and practical help in rescue and relief operations. Overall, they claim to provide a common forum for all stakeholders to exchange their viewpoints and agendas, increasing pressure through public opinion on international and national political leaders to address the issue on an emergency basis. They induce local and foreign NGOs, environmental activists, community leaders and local inhabitants to come forward to help victims and survivors. Last but not the least; media claim to play a pivotal role in saving mother earth, nature and disaster-stricken sons and daughters of the mother earth. At the same time, however, news of disaster is available commodity. The media must fulfill their commitments to sell the news to acquire business and promote and safeguard their political motives. Media are also exploited by various stakeholders to achieve their own vested interests through publicity and image-building. According to Benthall (1995), 'disasters do not exist-except for their unfortunate victims and those who suffer in their aftermath- unless publicized by the media. In this sense the media actually construct disaster'. Media coverage of environmental change and natural hazards plays an important role in setting and reinforcing public perceptions of issues and the social construction of events (Boykoff, 2007; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Carvalho & Burgess, 2005). Though, the media myth of being the first at the disaster scene is a fact to the extent that reporters and camera crew are the first to approach the scene yet, it is arguable whether in reality they are there for humanitarian cause or to sell the events to the outer world; compelling most of the media begin disaster marathons and every channel starts its race of being number one.

1.2 Disaster Marathons

Media have always been concerned with events and stories which have human impact. Natural disasters in some sense have the most impact as they destroy a large volume of human and material elements. Disasters have been part of media discourse ever since there were newspapers. Even before television, news pictures like the explosion of the Hindenburg captured the attention of audiences (Joseph Scanlon, 2007) . As soon as a big disaster hits, media suspend regular programming and start broadcasting "disaster marathons" (Liebes, 1998). Media provide the latest information and updates on the catastrophe

and ongoing occurrences. Reporters are interested in collecting data and information about damage, destruction and casualties even when no one is yet clear about the situation in the early stages of the disaster. MacDougall & Reid (1987) are of the opinion that no reporter covering a disaster can avoid reporting casualties, collateral damage, causes of the disaster, rescue and relief activities. But the economic priorities of media compel them to send half-baked information about a natural hazard at its early stages without sufficient background research, which can lead to misinforming and misleading the public. At such moments of competition and hurry, information is disseminated without much "quality control" to fill the time and space already devoted to the coverage (Waxman, 1973). Responding to the increased interest of people for information about natural hazards in the wake of a natural disaster, media often go to their resource files and disseminate background information about natural disasters to cover the time and space allocated for disaster news stories. Such background information helps create awareness among the people about causes, impacts and aftermaths of a natural disaster. However, in many disasters, the media remained focused on the single story event (Joseph Scanlon & Alldred, 1982), such as the coverage of 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, ice Storm in Ottawa, Hurricane Katrina in USA and fires in Russia. As Miller & Goidel (2009) have noted, during Hurricane Katrina, the media had the invaluable role of reporting the 'breaking news' and everyday developments of the disaster, but were unable to gather contextually rich information about the causes and consequences of the natural disaster. Media such as television and newspapers also tend to favour the dramatic components of the disaster if they are available to "pump up ratings" and to be critical of governments (Ardalan, Linkov, Shubnikov, & LaPorte, 2008). Media personnel are trained to gather information. Moreover, they are also trained to compete. They jump into an unknown situation to capture the story in the rush of being the first, original and exclusive. During disaster, hype is accelerated by journalistic competition with a drive to be the first "with the scoop". So journalists try to reach the scene immediately and use traditional as well as non-traditional methods to gather information which in turn becomes a commodity. Reporters not only head towards the scenes themselves but also rely on gathering information from victims, survivors, rescue workers, relief activists and government officials. Thus, media make the best use of the opportunity to sell themselves as organs of information when a disaster strikes. Their sole purpose to be there at the scene of disaster is to uphold their status of information provider in the eyes of the audience who thoroughly rely on the media for this specialized task.

In most disasters, reporters, photojournalists and news crews act as the first responders and witnesses when they arrive to capture havoc created by a disaster. Sometimes, they have to face questions whether to help injured victims, evacuate the affected and remove dead bodies before the rescue teams and government functionaries reach there. No doubt, reporters, photojournalists and camera crews also face volatile conditions and extraordinary challenges, like rude and harsh responses from the victims, survivors, and surrounding mobs as well as bureaucratic and non-cooperative attitude of law enforcement personnel. Even so, they continually return to the scene to update their information from different sources and confirm events. Extended exposure to death, causalities and injuries may develop traumatic depression among the media personnel covering the disaster. It may also imprint deep memories of agony and loss on their minds just like the victims and sufferers.

In disaster scenarios, particularly, national and international media coverage plays an important role in either expediting or hindering rescue and relief activities. Media coverage rouses humanitarian passions among the mass audiences, which can yield the quick response of a nation in providing relief activities to the victims. Media are the most important and significant actors in dealing with all stages of a natural hazard. Media coverage can prop up rescue and recovery efforts by imploring charitable actions from the members of audience. Media can also enhance public awareness and facilitate public assistance in local communities (Brown & Minty, 2006; Oosterhof, Heuvelman, & Peters, 2009). Media encourage affirmative behaviours from members of the audience.They also play a pivotal role in relieving the psychological stress of the victims by providing emotional support and developing social connection to disaster victims (Perez-Lugo, 2004). Television and online media sources transmit images and stories of disasters, focusing on the victims'

emotional responses of shock and helplessness (Liebes & Blondheim, 2002; Walters & Hornig 1993). More broadly, media have the capacity to enhance public discourses of compassion that can potentially influence individuals' readiness to give a helping hand to others affected by the disaster (Cohen, Ball-Rokeach, Jung, & Kim, 2002). According to Putnam (2000), mass media "at its civic best can be a gathering place, a powerful force for bridging social differences, nurturing solidarity, and communicating essential civic information". This enables common social experience in any heterogeneous society that may lead people to join together for relief work in the wake of natural disasters. Live and recorded reports and visuals showing people dying of hunger and epidemics as well as shortages of shelter and security produce a psychological and emotional response that causes the audiences to come together for a national and humanitarian cause. Bernett and Kottasz (2000) found that images of victims in media, representation of people helping themselves and thoroughly emotive publicity imagery boost fund-raising in disasters. Public attention built up by media coverage activates civil society, relief activists and NGOs to come forward for rescue, relief and rehabilitation activities. But, sometimes, oversimplified and distorted characterization of the human responses to the disasters increase the already suffering people.

1.3 Media Myths about Disaster Victims and their Consequences

Disaster researchers have long since understood that both the general public and organizational actors are likely to believe in various disaster myths. Notions that victims are looters, having deviant behavior, most of the time sitting idle, waiting for outside help during disaster are some of the instances of such myths. Media quite often represent the desperate mob searching for food as looters. Repeated media myths of individual behaviors of looting and lawlessness not only distort the image of the whole community during a disaster but also lead people to believe that victims are looters. As Wenger, James, and Faupel (1980) found, people tend to believe the myths of individual behaviors in disaster due to the frequent repetition of the same media reports. Aid agencies and relief workers may feel uneasy about visiting these areas and most of the relief funds are then diverted towards law and order situation instead of primary concerns of food, shelter and relief works. Haiti earthquake resulted in a situation of helplessness and devastation and instead of highlighting the miseries of the victims, international media intensely focused on a few Haitian outlaws, allegedly escaped prisoners with long knives in their hands engaged in looting (Fernando, 2010). Similar framing conventions of portraying victims as helpless and looters influenced the media reporting on disaster victims in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina (Tierney, Bevc, & Kuligowski, 2006). Repetition of these events focused the attention of audiences on the law-and-order situation. Political authorities exploited this situation to transform a humanitarian crisis into a law-and-order situation. When both media reporting and official discourse of the disaster affected areas revolve around the mythical notions that disasters result in lawlessness and social breakdown, this also helps the military to enter the civil arena(Tierney, et al., 2006). The international community, already seduced by media stereotypes believes the third world people to be the worst to help out. Media are required to behave very carefully and cautiously while reporting the events during natural hazards.

While engaged in both reporting and public service, the media sometimes present oversimplified and distorted characterization of the human responses to the disasters. Updated reporting and images of chaos may be immediately useful to the affected public in the wake of a natural disaster, but media over-emphasizes destruction and devastation (Wenger & Friedman, 1986). Media often portrays these communities as helpless waiting for external aid and support, unable to cope and deserving of charity. News reports and media stories that depict victims and survivors as dazed and confused can create an environment of public misunderstanding. It is pertinent to mention that every community has the potential to cope with a disaster (Jean-Christophe, 2007). Not all are paralyzed; only a few are panicked and confused, while most of the community members, even stricken with grief, start immediate rescue and relief activities either individually or in groups. Media may not be able to focus, in the first instance, on the local and self-devised strategies of the communities. Media may fail to cover rescue and relief efforts by focusing only on the

death tolls and material losses. According to Fernando's (2010) 'Media in Disaster vs. Media Disasters', inadequate media reports created confusion among the victims and international public in general about the situation in the Haiti earthquake. The media coverage was not very much different in 2005 Earthquake and 2010 flash floods in Pakistan. The majority of news organizations are not free from the institutional biases that may lead to misinformation, stereotypes and misunderstanding and create a biased picture of the reality (Miller & Goidel, 2009). Such partial view of the community facing a natural hazard can throw in doubt whether the media can serve a favorable ally. Media coverage of disasters, however, should contain not only stories of sorrow and misfortune but also stories of survivorship and bravery (Walters & Hornig 1993; Worawongs, Wang, & Sims, 2007), and such stories are very few in numbers.

International media reports and stories portray victims and communities of the third world countries stereotypically. Media often build negative image of minorities in both developing and developed countries. In repeated photographs in Katrina's aftermath, African Americans were consistently shown as 'looting' goods, while white people involved in exactly the same activities were described as 'finding' supplies. As a result of media portrayals and decisions of official bodies, 'black victims were seen and treated as unworthy victims'' (Moeller, 2010). However, media's role need to be positive and they could cautiously avoid sensationalism and trivialization. Natural disasters are no exceptions to sensationalism because media assume that disasters sell. Steering the media in positive direction can be invaluable as the overzealous or sensational portrayals of events can cause irreparable damage to the victims and the relief operations, rather media can be affirmatively engaged in educating the communities in areas of high risk and within the range of natural disasters about the precautionary measures and positive attitudes of the members of the communities to reduce the vulnerability of natural hazards and disasters.

1.4 Media as an Ally or Pressure Group in Natural Disaster

It is an acknowledged fact that media are the best equipped and most powerful stakeholder to enter into disaster-stricken regions to dig out facts from all available sources such as victims, survivors, and any accessible staff and management in doing their professional tasks. Scanlon and Alldred (1982) reveal that the media are inclined to overrun a disaster scene and make demands on the existing sources of communication and facilities of transport. As a result, crisis management run by the local authorities tends to work out on how to handle such media presence and to administer the resource pressures likely to crop up in case of such invasions. So the media myth of being first at the disaster site as a savior can be turned on its head: media may be seen as invaders. F. Payne (1994) in "Handling the Press" mentions that media pressure is intensive during any disaster. Media believe that they have as much right as the emergency aid services to be at the scene of the incident. They consider themselves solely responsible for reporting the disaster news and commentary on the incidents as it is the primary duty of the media to disseminate the updated information to the audience. They can thus never take a position of "nothing to say", although providing them with correct information they require with the help of the official sources. Payne proposes that there will be less chance of rumors or half-truths being circulated by providing reporters which accurate information, since, if media do not have any information, they will go with estimates, which may create chaos and panic. Therefore, it is also very necessary to ensure media's cooperation in handling the natural disasters effectively. Government functionaries dealing with the natural disasters know the media's requirements during the early hours of the disasters and provide them with tailor-made information on regular basis. Visual representation of the natural hazards is a primary need of the media, so they are provided with opportunities for photography and filming to show the relief work going on. The official on-the-record information communicated to media through press conferences with the concerned persons also helps in portraying a positive image that government officials are very active in handling the situation.

Both media and humanitarian workers rush to the scene of disaster and both have their own role and significance in their respective fields. Humanitarian workers are involved in rescue and relief activities dealing with deaths, causalities and volume of losses, while journalists are there to gather information about

human and material losses. As media tries to report immediately and to transmit the developments during rescue and relief operations, there are strong chances of any short comings of relief workers being exposed to the audience and other stake-holders. Consequently, it creates a healthy tension between media and humanitarian agencies. Humanitarian workers have to perform their duties under media stress. They have to endure media either as irritants or treat them as allies in their relief and rehabilitation activities. Sometimes, media join in a friendly partnership with the disaster managers present on the site. Instead of investigating the causes, updates and effects of the disasters, they choose to be the spokespersons of the official authorities and prefer to work on "scratch my back, I will scratch yours" basis. When the situation is normal, media consider the information provided by press releases and conferences as a "controlled environment called by somebody for reasons of their own" but in an abnormal situation of disaster, media are under the pressure to fill the informational void and accept the information released as a valuable commodity (Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989). Furthermore, reporters during disaster reporting protect themselves from charges of bias, their organizations from legal or political harassment, by using "official" sources preferably as a shield and ensure the trustworthiness of their stories (Wenger & Quarantelli, 1989).

1.5 Conclusion:

Unpredictable natural hazards bring disastrous changes to the face of the planet. All concerned quarters and stakeholders, especially the media, rush to the devastated areas to encompass the human and material chaos. The media myth of being the first to help save victims of disasters is debatable when, instead of rescuing the victims and supporting the survivors, for which media crews are not trained, a fierce competition of first reporting, filming and exclusive stories starts between various media organizations for which they are equipped and what they are directed to achieve. Although they take extreme risks and face serious threats and restrictions, they fight to be first on spot and somehow maneuver to reach the scene and put their utmost efforts to dig out the reality. Though the myth of finding reality is itself arguable and reality is always diversified, yet every media reporter claims his or her story is an objective representation of the reality. Their content provokes emotional appeal and induces immediate response among the audience for rescue and relief efforts. Media's extensive coverage of human sufferings in natural hazards attracts full attention of the audience.

When considering the role of media, it is important to keep in mind that it is not just a means of information transfer; rather it is also an independent actor with its own biases and agendas (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004). Media sell the news information as a commodity and also safe guard their political agendas. Media are owned by individuals or business groups; consequently, their media content, editorial and news agendas openly reflect their political and economic interests (Monbiot, Lynas, Marshall, Juniper, & Tindale, 2005; Oreskes, 2004) . Local and International media have their own vested agendas. Where, media are vulnerable to political motives, however, it may create complications for the audiences and policy makers in natural disasters. As Perera (2006) noted the Sri Lankan media were and are indisputably part of the conflict , which is why it has been providing biased reporting to the public. Reporters failed to highlight the concerns of the victims due to their political bias that seriously hampered the recovery operations in Sri Lanka (Fernando, 2010). The attitude of media in other developing countries is not very much different. Media report humanitarian crises, yet not objectively; rather their reporting of crises is necessarily in accordance with the needs of the political economic situation of that particular media (Robinson, 1999). Despite, the motif of the information transfer, the fact that numerous audiences relying on media for updates, these news stories made them realizing the pains and agonies of the victims and survivors of the natural disasters and thinking of the ways and means how to help the disaster affectees and contribute for relief activities. But in reality, media may exert pressure, rather than save or rescue victims and survivors, because they are there to gather firsthand and exclusive disaster information as a commodity to sell in the open market of audience. As far as, media myth about victims is concerned, media's stereotypical portrayal of victims deforms the image of disaster-stricken community in the eyes of domestic and international audience and can generate negative attitudes among the other stakeholders.

So the media myths and realities have not clear-cut contours to be defined and challenged; rather myths and realities of media coverage of the natural hazards and disasters overlap with each other and can neither be fully criticized nor fully embraced. As it is, media myths do have some realities in them and media realities encompass some myths. The role of media as watchdog during natural hazards and disasters must, however, is constantly monitored, as it thoroughly affects public opinion and leaves a lasting impact on the responses of the international community, foreign aid agencies and relief activities in toto.

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