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Disaster and the Ethics of Sympathy

Abstract

Disasters promise to be a permanent feature of globalized, industrial society in the twenty-first century as economic divides combine with climate change to produce massive suffering and dislocation. At the same time as these global changes occur, the media landscape shifts to become fragmented and “monetized” across a variety of platforms. This article examines the impulse towards sympathy for others in this global milieu, in which it can become easy for people in developed nations to ignore the turmoil they experience through mass media. Coverage of disaster can become just another form of entertainment: in order to genuinely care for others, consumers of media must become active participants, working against the grain of information culture.

Key words: *media, disaster, sympathy, ethics, globalization.*

The city spreads and extends all the way to the point where, while it tends to cover the entire orb of the planet, it loses its property as a city, and, of course with them, those properties that would allow it to be distinguished from a 'country'...In such a network, the city crowds, the hyperbolic accumulation of construction projects (with their concomitant demolition) and of exchanges (of movements, products, and information) spread, and the inequality and apartheid concerning the access to the urban milieu (assuming that it is a dwelling, comfort, and culture), or these exclusions accumulate proportionally. The result can only be understood in terms of what is called an agglomeration. --Nancy, Jean-Luc, The Creation of the World, or Globalization, 33

Is there not a growing conviction, clearer today among innumerable people, that the dying of people with whom we have nothing in common—no racial kinship, no language, no religion, no economic interests—concerns us? We obscurely feel that our generation is being judged, ultimately, by the abandon of the Cambodians, and Somalians, and the social outcasts in the streets of our own cities. --Alphonso Lingis, the community of those who have nothing in common, x

The current situation of globalization makes information transfers faster than ever before. Money and products change hands across the planet in networks of distribution. Legal and illegal goods crisscross the globe with amazing rapidity. And yet the same freedom associated with trade has not been extended into the human sphere. People cannot change citizenships as easily as the bar-coded products that they buy or the corporations which change nationalities according to the greatest tax advantages and subsidies. People, with few exceptions, remain tethered to the nationality of their birth, unless they are willing to become stateless immigrants with few rights. Corporations gain more personhood (and the Supreme court has made this doctrine official in the Citizens United and other decisions) while individuals lose personhood. Globalization sustains and generates massive inequalities, massive apartheid, between those who have access to flows of information and capital and those who do not. This lay of the land must be in place when talking about disaster. In one sense, disaster can strike anywhere and has an existential dimension: it exposes human vulnerability to the elements. And yet each disaster has an absolutely unique element, an unpredictability filtered through layers of political, economic, and cultural differences.

Not only is each disaster experienced differently because of its unique situation, but it is also experienced differently because of the layers of mediation offered by global communications. The element of mediation must also be taken into account when speaking of disaster, because media actors always interpret what they say and imbed that interpretation in what is called "news." The "news" can never really be new because it comes, in a sense, pre-digested. Media consumers must learn to read the news, view the news, with an eye to finding its newness beyond the layers of interpretation. To explain what I mean by that, I will speak of a pessimistic and an optimistic version

of the role of mass media in the world today. I will, myself, mediate between these two views and offer an engaged account of how to watch the news as it pertains to disasters.

In the pessimistic version, media images and texts, crafted artifacts for consumption, for a moment's glance and a quick ad spot or revenue stream, generate the *illusion of information*, of an objective picture of the world "out there." An earthquake victim, a corpse trapped under rubble, refugees fleeing a brutal regime, a building in Baghdad or Kabul ripped to shreds by a bomb. It almost doesn't matter where the image originated: it's all just "content" to be "monetized". "Content" gives the impression that all sorts of ideas have some sort of neutral exchange value, as if all thoughts were equally worthy, while "monetize," apart from being a management-speak bastardization of the English language, gives the impression that something must be sold in order for it to matter. The thoughts of a "content provider" do not matter. The words of an "author" do. The underlying message of mass media speaks louder than its particular iterations: sit back, click, relax. Gruesome scenes of violence, the "real" script, the scripted real, are all made manageable by their bite-sized presentations, complete with graphs and pictures, a crawler on the bottom of the screen giving sports scores. See the starving masses of the world, those brutalized by dictatorships and war, above all see the victimhood of *those people over there*, all without leaving the couch! Notice the feeling that reporting engenders: the feeling, the atmosphere, of being informed, the sense of knowing about the world, a righteous sense of having cared, all without doing a thing.

Look at the body postures occasioned by internet and television viewing: slumped, eyes glazed, only the fingers moving to type or click the remote or mouse, perhaps with hands occasionally grabbing a snack. The moving picture, brought into the domestic space, loses its visceral charge. Media scholar Lilie Chouliaraki writes:

The division between safety and suffering captures [the] asymmetry in the viewing relationships of television. This is the asymmetry of power between the comfort of spectators in their living rooms and the vulnerability of sufferers on the spectators' television screens. The viewing asymmetry of television does not explicitly thematize the economic and political divisions of our world but reflects and consolidates them. (2006: 4)

The television, or the laptop, becomes part of the furniture, so to speak, an article for entertainment or amusement, which leads to the question of whether images displayed through the use of these technologies ever really issue an ethical challenge to the viewer. In what Chouliaraki, following Luc Boltanski, calls, "the politics of pity," a subtext exerts itself in media portrayals of distant sufferers, a subtext that generates an imaginary public, often conceived as industrialized western nations, to include Western Europe and North America, versus an imaginary other, the global east and the global south. In this template or backdrop, this perpetual, systematic bias of reporting (not to be confused with the individual personalities and biases of reporters), the centers of power are portrayed as "safe," while the distant places are portrayed as dangerous (Boltanski 1999: 3-21). "Thank God we are not like them," would be a crude way of putting it, but this dynamic can be found in reporting on

a variety of natural disasters and political upheavals around the world. This script produces pity, but an impotent kind of pity that leads to a “narrow repertoire of participatory positions” (Chouliaraki 2006: 12) in relation to the suffering displayed. Only a rare piece of reporting shows a “third world” person as an agent in his or her own story; only rarely is the viewer ever encouraged to do more than be informed or at most, to send money. When the personal details of “victims” emerge, they emerge in order to craft an ideal type that “represents” the sufferings of an entire people.

One might be tempted at this point to just advocate unplugging altogether, at the thought of this overlay which suggests the futility of trying to change the world and forever separates the world into opposed camps (safe / unsafe, democratic / authoritarian, developed / developing, wealthy / poor). But there is another side to the story. I’ll first give the super-optimistic view which I think can now be dismissed and then move to a more cautious optimism that I think has some basis in reality. I think what surely must be dismissed now is the idea that the internet or technology or Western democracy will somehow automatically make the world into a better place, what Marshall McLuhan called “the global village,” predicting ahead of time the internet revolution (1962, 1964). Let me say that I am not talking specifically about McLuhan’s theories but about their popular appropriations, which imagine that somehow, when we are all brought “closer together,” a new global community will emerge that makes everything more democratic and just. It’s the glowing, gushing aspect of this account that I wish to challenge. I have no doubt that the world has been brought “closer together” by technology, but this elision of distance has taken place by ignoring the more negative features of globalization (loss of environmental and labor protections, increasing inequality, etc.). The other problem with this view is that somehow technology is supposed to bring about this effect automatically, without some sort of political engagement.

To move to a more cautious view that has some aspects of optimism, I have already said that the media, including the “new” media, tend to divide the world into opposed camps and make western consumers feel smug about our development and civilization. But it might be possible to read, to listen, to look, beyond the pre-fabricated meanings of the news. The anchorperson on the screen may engage in polite banter about this or that coup, economic crisis, or famine (“we’ll keep you updated”) but a counter-movement is possible that sees something more than the possibility for water-cooler conversation in the coverage of disaster. It might actually be possible for these images to engender a real global citizenship (or better, sets of international relationships, without the social contract baggage of citizenship), instead of just the idea of global citizenship perpetually used to sell soda and software. The passive consumption of media might just give way to a new form of engagement in which everyday people become not just producers of media (content providers) but producers of new templates, new narratives about the relation between the proximal and the distant, here and there, home and alien. The so-called Web 2.0 social media have not yet achieved this, because their citational structure still largely distributes, albeit virally, prevailing ideas about the power structures of the world and their inevitability. The ability to easily insert a comment at

the end of a story no doubt represents something a little less passive than the “old” media, but still leaves much to be desired in the way of action. These comments themselves are often no more than rehashed sentiments gleaned from pundit shouters on major news channels. In Soviet Russia, poets hid their typewriters under beds for fear of the informant and the secret police. We have rather the opposite problem—a profusion of sophisticated, portable media production devices but with no potent, transformative messages behind them.

No one would doubt that photos of war zones, disasters, and famines—pictures of people around the world in situations of suffering—do represent actual realities, and are “prosthetic memories” of those events (Landsberg 2004). The photograph, video, and text all extend events forward into the future, and yet, at the same time, break with those events and instantiate something new. The artifact has broken with its past and yet retains a trace of that past. Never will the original event re-appear in its fullness, and yet the artifact speaks to an ongoing situation, addresses itself to listeners, viewers, whoever they might be, impersonally, as it were. Dismissing the power of images or their relevance would be wrong. As part of the communion or community of subjects, the addressee, first in an anonymous fashion and then personally, undergoes a kind of election before the image that leads to engagement (once the event of election has been accepted as a challenge). One of my teachers, Brian Mahan, called events like this “epiphanies of recruitment” (2002). Max Scheler, a philosopher and sociologist, speaks of ethical requirements that are unique to each person. What ethically “ought not to be” he says, “is not...[an] absence of conformity [but] uniformity of all standards for men, people, and societies of every sort” (1973, 104). Scheler speaks to a rationalist prejudice in ethics which insists that moral requirements ought to be the same for each person, irrespective of their life situation, culture, temperament, etc. Scheler thinks that one of the problems with ethics is this “one size fits all” approach, which ignores the passions that motivate each individual. A genuine ethic should help people to become more themselves and not more generic.

We might apply Scheler’s philosophy to media representations of suffering. The image will be misdirected if the suffering so depicted divests individuals of their uniqueness and casts them in some sort of universal drama of suffering. Vagueness or blandness, attributing suffering to “the Third world” or even “disaster victims” makes recruitment less likely. On the other end of the image, audience members must work to remember the “victims” in their full personhood. If master narratives (about the intractability of poverty, the inevitability of disaster, etc.) get in the way of compassion, responsible viewers must peel them away, allowing the image to invoke a response. To be responsible means to respond to suffering, to allow personal transformation to take place in response to another’s situation. This enables us to see a mutuality in ethical relationships. No doubt asymmetry of economic and political power will remain, but the sufferer is heard and experienced in all particularity, and the audience member, the listener, is called into action with interests, feelings, and dispositions intact. Nell Noddings called this the “twin sentiments” of morality: caring for others and caring for my own best self (2003, 80).

For this kind of engagement with media images to happen, an engagement that doesn't just inform or entertain, but actually changes the viewer's relationship with the world, the media consumer must become more than a consumer. Without necessarily espousing the whole of his system, we can take some cues from French psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget, who wrote in his *Genetic Epistemology*:

I think that human knowledge is essentially active. To know is to assimilate reality into systems of transformations...I find myself opposed to the view of knowledge as a copy, a passive copy of reality...knowing an object does not mean copying it—it means acting upon it. It means constructing systems of transformation that can be carried out on or with this object. (quoted in Turkle, 2007, 38).

Knowledge that does not involve some kind of engagement, either through interaction or application, will remain marginal and will likely disappear altogether. In order for knowledge to be knowledge, it must have the character of what William James called a "living option." That is, it must bear upon my situation; it must be susceptible to transformation and action. I come to know something as I modify it, as I make it my own, as I transform my life according to its dictates.

If we accept the basic thesis that knowledge involves transformation, this will lead to a different way of approaching texts, to include all sorts of texts. Transformation happens at several levels, first of all, with the text itself. A new form of viewership emerges in which the "recipient" acts as a "bricoleur." The "bricoleur" ...does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution; he 'speaks' not only *with* things... but through the medium of things." Turkle 2007, quoting Levi-Strauss, 22). In the passive reception model of media consumption, the viewer simply received the information conveyed and absorbed it, similar to what Freire called the "banking method of education" In the web 2.0 version of media consumption, the viewer talks back to the image by citation and commentary, and perhaps becomes a media producer as well. On the bricoleur model, the viewer breaks the image, breaks the text and re-assembles it, reading against the grain and making the text say things that were perhaps never originally intended. This is the transformation carried out on the object, but another type of transformation happens with the object, and that means taking the object or artifact as a cue for action. The object becomes the occasion for recruitment, which then translates into social action. The bricoleur wonders about the missing content, the context in which the image or text was made. The bricoleur wants to fill in the gaps of knowledge left by the image of a disaster victim and actively seeks social connections that will satisfy this thirst for curiosity. This social action then returns to the text, creating more occasions for bending the text towards justice (echoing MLK).

As José van Dijck writes, in simply taking a picture, we may not be able to foresee its future use. It "may materialize in an unintended or unforeseen arrangement...Therefore, it is a fallacy to think of memory products as purely constraining or conformist. They do not only enable structured

expression but also invite subversion or parody, alternative or unconventional enunciations.” (2007, 7). The mainstream media images can be bent and transformed to new purposes (think of *Adbusters*, DJ Spooky, and Cory Doctorow) and new media can be created that take the individuality of persons seriously. As an example of the latter, I would like to take Jana Napoli’s installation art project, *Floodwall* (2007), which reflects on the flooding of New Orleans. The piece consists of hundreds of dresser drawers salvaged from the flooded wreckage of the city and arranged to fit the gallery space. Napoli recorded the address associated with each drawer and invited new Orleans residents to find their drawers in the exhibit. Residents could then tell their stories on the web and link them to a particular drawer. Even without the web dimension, viewing the drawers themselves creates a ghostly impression. One wonders about the missing contents and the people to whom those drawers belonged. The empty drawer testifies to a missing world.

So it is with media images of catastrophe. The power of images lies in what is outside the frame, the missing referent. This context left out of the picture leaves the viewer with unanswered questions, wondering more about the person depicted. The most powerful stories generate this kind of questioning, an ellipsis at the end of the sentence... Good stories do not tie things together neatly and wrap them in a bow. They capture the frayed edges and leave things unsettled. They call forth questioning and action by their ambiguity and acknowledge incompleteness. Jana Napoli is one bricoleur who collects objects and repurposes them: she also creates a bricolage of media: artifacts and web, personal and collective history, local and global. She represents a new kind of cosmopolitan bricoleur capable of remaking the images with a bent towards justice.

Now let me ignore my own advice and recap everything that I have just said, and tie it together into a neat package. First, viewers should be wary of messages that reify and maintain the divisions of the world, messages that portray western democracies as inherently more safe, sane, and civilized than the world “out there” in the global south and the global east. These vestiges of orientalism must be contested. At the same time, despite these overlays, media images do depict real suffering that should catch our attention and lead us to action. Do we have a responsibility to care for distant others? In brief, yes, yes we do. But we should avoid the politics of pity that would cause us to see those others as pure victims, which will entail reading against the grain. Media, new and old, do not automatically create a more connected or a more just world. Information and entertainment, no matter how well-crafted, cannot take the place of engaged action. This means that contemporary viewers must resist the impulse to passively absorb the news and become genuine citizens, of their own country and of the world. A progressive media politics demands engagement on two levels: first, a willingness to break and remold the images where they do not fit reality, where they do not speak to the concerns of justice, and second, a willingness to take action that prolongs and specifies the caring impulse. Finally, I’d like to say that the real problem isn’t “compassion fatigue” or the sheer level of noise that confronts us everyday. Nor is the problem the competing demands on our time and energy. These may be problems, to be sure, but they do not get at the root of the problem

of distant suffering. The real issue is attunement, paying attention to suffering, drawing close to it and seeking to understand and help. Gabriel Marcel called this *disponibilité*, rather unfortunately translated as “disposability.” It means disposability in the sense of “putting oneself at the disposal of,” “making oneself available,” and that’s what I think the world most needs today. It needs people who are available, who make themselves ready to be affected by others.

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Katastrofe i etika sućuti

Sažetak

Naslućuje se kako će katastrofe postati trajno obilježje globaliziranoga, industrijskog društva dvadeset i prvoga stoljeća, dok se ekonomske podjele udružuju s klimatskim promjenama u proizvodnji goleme patnje i dislokacija. Istovremeno s pojavom ovih globalnih promjena, medijski krajolik postaje fragmentiran i 'monetiziran' diljem raznolikih platformi. Ovim člankom istražuje se impuls za sućut naspram drugih u ovoj globalnoj sredini, u kojoj ljudima u razvijenim zemljama može postati lako ignorirati krize koje doživljavaju kroz masovne medije. Izvješćivanje o katastrofama može postati tek još jedan oblik zabave: kako bi uistinu brinuli za druge, konzumenti medija moraju postati aktivni sudionici koji se bore protiv struja kulture informacija.

Ključne riječi: mediji, katastrofa, sućut, etika, globalizacija.



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