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**IN THE NEXT ISSUE**

‘Fundamentalisms Revisited’ is the working title of the 1/2007 issue of *Media Development*... Based on an international conference held in cooperation with the University of Colorado at Boulder, USA, and the North American Regional Association of WACC, articles will discuss aspects of this global challenge.
A ‘disaster’ can be characterized as the violent impact on human beings of acts of nature or actions by people. When a volcano erupts, or a tsunami strikes, or a mudslide eradicates a village, we speak in terms of a ‘natural’ disaster. When a war takes place, or a famine occurs, or an industrial accident destroys a community, the label changes to ‘human-made’.

Natural disasters are not the biggest killers. In sub-Saharan Africa in 2005, two million people died from HIV and AIDS and 24.5 million were living with the infection. Disease, lack of water and food, poor healthcare and poverty exacerbated this catastrophe.

In many parts of the world, increased urbanization also creates new risks. For example, inadequate sanitation kills two million people a year, many of them children.

All disasters have humanitarian consequences. But blaming nature, rather than the actions of people, sometimes becomes a way of sidestepping responsibility. No one can predict the sudden movement of tectonic plates that causes a tsunami. Yet we know that the consequences for people living in poverty – who often lack information and communication – are likely to be severely different from those living in a world of insurance, healthcare, and immediate reparation. What can be done?

Better information and communication networks at the local level will facilitate better relief in those areas most affected. At the global level, better media coverage of disasters – including neglected humanitarian disasters such as the famine in the Sahel region of West Africa – is also a priority if aid is to reach those most in need. But how should the mass media respond to disasters? What news values apply in disaster situations?

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies believes that better information and communication will lessen the impact of many disasters. A recent report asks how aid organizations can attract media coverage more proportionate to human suffering.

It points out that, ‘News judgment reflects established criteria. News must be new. Editors sort stories by death tolls. Disasters that are unusual yet explicable, and that cause considerable death or destruction in accessible places which the audience is believed to care about, get covered. Baffling stories get less attention.’

The report goes on to note that, ‘The commercial imperative has sharpened journalists’ quest for ratings. Today, TV news is part news and part entertainment. So it’s understandable that sudden, dramatic disasters like volcanoes or tsunamis are intensely newsworthy, whereas long-drawn-out crises (difficult to describe, let alone film) are not.’

Then there is the gender dimension of disasters. The capacities and vulnerabilities of women and men, as well as the gender and social dynamics of disaster situations, are often ignored.

Women and children are particularly affected, often accounting for more than 75% of displaced persons. Women are portrayed as mere victims of disaster and their central role in response to an event is often overlooked. It is women who secure relief from emergency authorities, meet the immediate survival needs of family members and manage temporary relocation.

Similarly, people with disabilities are often overlooked in relief efforts. To state the obvious, communication technologies are vital in disasters and it is crucial for people with disabilities to have access to communication resources and reliable technology.

Evidence suggests that the media today give more coverage to disasters than in the past. Even so, journalists and humanitarian agencies need to cooperate more.

Journalists may need specialist knowledge about humanitarian issues and sources, bigger budgets for disaster coverage and to find ways of overcoming crisis fatigue.

In turn, humanitarian organizations need to develop media skills, exploit new technologies, provide the press with more information and to make better use of field-based data.

Together they could do wonders to highlight neglected as well as new crises and to communicate concerns and compassion to the world at large.

Notes
1. HIV and AIDS Statistics for Africa. www.avert.org.uk
Disaster, democracy, and the problem of the sublime

Ned O’Gorman

At the basis of the present-day concern with disaster, whether natural in origin (e.g. hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, or volcanic eruptions) or directly human in cause (e.g. wars, terrorist acts of violence, or breakdowns in technological systems), is a modern desire for social order. As the following article argues, media attention to disaster may take up many concerns, but it is always infused with a distinctly modern disquiet about social order.

Important foundations of the modern social order, including theories of human rights, international law, and just war, were laid in response to social disaster. A contemporary of the Eighty Years War and the Thirty Years War, Hugo Grotius (1583-1643) was perplexed at the violence among Christian states. His influential theories of rights, law, justice, and international society grew out of this perplexity, writing in his *Prolegomena*:

‘Throughout the Christian world I observed a lack of restraint in relation to war, such as even barbarous races should be ashamed of; I observed that men rush to arms for slight causes, or no cause at all, and that when arms have once been taken up there is no longer any respect for law, divine or human; it is as if, in accordance with a general decree, frenzy had openly been let loose for the committing of all crimes’ (Grotius, 1957, p. 21).

Similarly, Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) presented the inspiration for his work as social disaster. Hobbes, however, amplified the disasters of his age, tying them to the state of nature, where he insisted social chaos was inevitable. Hobbes argued that only an awe-inspiring sovereign could successfully circumvent the human tendency toward social chaos, as awe of power overcame natural competition, diffidence, and glory-seeking. ‘Hereby it is manifest,’ Hobbes famously concludes, ‘that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man’ (Hobbes, 1962, p. 100).

Thus, at the philosophical basis of the modern social order is a quest for a stability and security over and against social chaos. One could go so far as to claim that the modern social order is basically therapeutic in origin, in the broad sense of ‘the treatment of disorder’. Indeed, this is important, for it suggests the basis of the modern social order goes beyond revolutions in thought and polity to the more subjective but no less significant realm of desire. (It was Augustine, of course, who put the affections at the center of social life and, indeed, of life itself.)

It is at this point of desire that philosophical theories of social order, as in Grotius and Hobbes, powerfully intersect with what the philosopher Charles Taylor has recently described as the ‘social imaginary’, meaning the way people more broadly ‘imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain’ (Taylor, 2004, p. 6). Grotius and Hobbes shared with many of their less philosophically-inclined contemporaries, and especially with subsequent generations in Europe, a desire for a more certain guarantee of social stability.

Desire for social order

In ancient and medieval societies order was taken for granted as natural or god-given. In a certain sense, there could be no real breakdown in order because the foundation of order was grounded not in human fashioning but in a transcendent source or a mysterious ‘time of
origins’, as Mircea Eliade calls it in his book *The Sacred and the Profane*. Indeed, whatever collapses or disasters occurred were seen as a form of judgment wrought against a people for a violation of transcendent order, as in the story of Oedipus. Thus, order in antiquity was pervasive — even when it broke down, the breakdown was meant to restore order.

Taylor argues that the pivotal shift from the ancient to the modern with respect to the ‘social imaginary’ has to do with the origins of social order, which were transferred from the transcendent to the immanent. Order was no longer a given, but something humans made. Hobbes is therefore eminently modern. Whereas the ancients assumed that the ‘natural’ state of things was orderly, Hobbes assumed it to be chaotic; and where the ancients assumed that order would be ‘naturally’ preserved or restored, Hobbes assumed it was up to human agents to create and maintain order.

A fundamental concern with the construction or preservation of order is evident in the stories journalists habitually tell after disasters regarding technology, science, and engineering. Even in reporting on war and terrorism, directly human-wreaked disasters, there is a fascination in media stories with either the primitivism or sophistication of the arms wrought and the defenses used. This helps explain why more than any other segment of modern society, engineers and scientists are forced to bear the social burdens of circumventing or mitigating disaster. Even when the Trade Towers were destroyed on September 11, 2001 — an act unprecedented and fantastic in the United States — much of the following discourse about the tragedy focused on the faults of actors within the technological sphere of society, e.g. engineers who failed to design the Towers properly or security professionals who failed to connect the dots buried within reams of data and detect the plot.

Similarly, much of the focus of the Western media after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 was on inadequate engineering standards within the area and a poor warning system. If the modern age is one burdened with the responsibility for social order, modern attention to science and technology is the expression of a pervasive wish to be set free from that burden through the perfection of inhuman instruments.

However, the modern social order is also deeply allied to democracy. And here between the technologically channeled desire for order and the celebration of democracy we enter a profound set of tensions within modern life. For democracy does not guarantee fail-safe security. There is substantial evidence that it contributes over the long haul to relatively more stability in a society because it cultivates prudence, that is, wise decision making. But democracy is an intensely social form of polity, and therefore it does not lend itself to rapid action, wide powers of oversight, and efficient operations — the capacities praised within the technological sphere with respect to security and the maintenance of social order.

Indeed, the intensely social nature of democratic polity has made it at different times in history the equivalent of a kind of social disaster. It has repeatedly been connected with mobocracy, the irrational feelings of the crowd, or demagoguery. However, the connection between democracy and disaster runs deeper than associations with mobocracy and the like. In the modern age, democracy is indelibly tied to revolutionary freedom and absolute human rights. Indeed, the reason democracy carries so much weight for many on the left and the right is because of this connection.

Democracy’s strong ties to revolution, freedom, and the satisfaction of human rights have to do with what political philosopher Patrick Deneen describes as a form of ‘faith’ in democratic transformation toward a perfect or near-perfect state. This view follows the thinking of Rousseau, assuming ‘a conception of human beings as both infinitely malleable and ameliorable, along with an accompanying belief in the compatibility or malleability of nature and the universe to such perfectionist inclinations’ (Deneen, 2005, p. 5).

Critically, however, this view tends to support forms of radical intervention by an enlightened group in order to usher in such dramatic transformation, and this intervention can assume a violent and disastrous form. While the violence of the French Revolution...
had numerous causes, it is impossible to divorce this radical Rousseau-like vision of democratic transformation from it. Similarly, the neo-conservative drive to democratize the Middle East by beginning with a ‘Shock and Awe’ campaign in Iraq is intimately connected to a Rousseau-like faith in the possibility of democratic transformation and revolutionary freedom. There is something of the image of the tabula rasa lurking here: if only the political slate can be wiped clean, democratic transformation will blossom.

This image, of course, is closely aligned with the technological order. Democracy becomes the ‘organic’ complement to the instrumental component of the modern social order. Both are potentially revolutionary in scope and power. Both aim at perfectibility. In the United States, the alliance of such visions of democracy and technology was vividly displayed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. An immense amount of energy in the media was directed not toward memorializing the losses wrought by the disaster, above all the city of New Orleans, but toward projecting a Gulf Coast region made anew. The focus was not just rebuilding, but a kind of wholesale renewal, rebirth, and transformation of the area and its people.

In his speech just after Katrina, President Bush pithily described this vision as ‘a powerful American determination to clear the ruins and build better than before’ and declared ‘we will not just rebuild, we’ll build higher and better’ (Bush, 2005). A great disaster therefore became the occasion for collectively imagining a transformed society. For those on the left, the image projected was a nation free from poverty and racism. Katrina had taught us a great lesson, or so it was believed. For those in the middle or nearer to the right, the image of New Orleans that emerged was a cleaner, safer, and more prosperous city. A faith in the radically transformative powers of democracy and technology made this sort of public discourse plausible.

Questioning beliefs
While we should desire transformation and work for it, we must question the twin-beliefs that underlie so much of our modern social imaginary, namely that (1) social stability is the ultimate human good, and (2) disaster can be an occasion for revolutionary transformations in society (toward, of course, a strong and stable polity, which in the West must be democratic). The problem with these beliefs, whether they are held explicitly or remain tacit, can be described in very pragmatic terms. Making social stability the ultimate good and finding in disaster occasions for the radical transformation of society draw us toward absolute approaches to society’s problems, and this absolute approach has taken immensely destructive and dangerous forms. The most obvious and reprehensible example is the massive buildup of nuclear weapons during the Cold War in the name of geopolitical stability.

As Oliver O’Donovan has argued in Peace and Certainty, while the logic of such ‘deterrent’ measures seems on the surface to be airtight, a bit of probing reveals its ridiculous nature. What national interest could possibly be served by ‘massive retaliation’ when a nation has been obliterated? The answer is only wrathful revenge — of which millions of civilians would be the object. On a slightly more modest but still very important scale, an infinite faith in the powers of science and engineering to produce a prosperous, safe, and stable social order has had a great many negative repercussions, ranging from global warming to destructive land management to greater risk of large-scale accidents. Such technological and political ambitions have put societies in far greater jeopardy than if faith in science and technology were more modest. As we have built ‘higher and better’ we often have destroyed and risked more and more.

The issue here is not science and technology per se. The issue is not even the desire for social order and the belief that is up to humans to create such order. Rather, the issue is a matter of scale, size, or magnitude. Deterrence theory, as O’Donovan argues, seeks to take ‘the infinite into our threats’ (O’Donovan, 1989, p. 21). It is fundamentally about certainty in that it wants to enforce absolutely a world order by threatening world destruction if it is not followed. Here we have given our desire for social order and our sense of responsibility in estab-
lishing it an absolute status. We are tarrying with the infinite. We are gazing upon the sublime.

If the issue is one of magnitude, then it is rooted in our perceptions of ourselves and our world and especially in the nature and form of the stories we tell each other. Here, the media plays a crucial role. In as much as journalists cling to the story of the human possibility of absolute security and ultimate social stability — whether by focusing intently on technological failures and feats or by feeding a belief in the radical and transformative powers of democracy with respect to human crises — they perpetuate a quest for the sublime. Because news corporations often profit from spectacle, there is almost a ‘natural’ inclination toward stories concerning absolute forms of human experience. But, as I have argued, these stories put us in greater danger, not less. A more responsible story would assume a more modest key. Its aesthetic, if we can call it that, would come nearer to the tragic (in a non-fatalistic sense) than to the sublime.

To describe a bit more what I mean, I will return to Grotius and Hobbes. While Grotius and Hobbes together are part of the social-compact tradition of political philosophy, their thinking diverges in important ways. Above all, Grotius assumes that humans are inherently ‘sociable’ creatures. He writes, ‘But among the traits characteristic of man is an impelling desire for society, that is, for the social life’ (p. 6 Prolegomena). Hobbes, on the contrary, assumes that individual self-preservation is the most basic human motive. Sociability is important, but it is secondary — it is a means to self-preservation. Peace, which is of immense value for Hobbes, is nevertheless also instrumental, in as much as it is a means to the end of self-preservation. Peace means avoiding violent death. And peace requires a sovereign, who establishes and enforces social order by keeping people in ‘awe’.

These philosophical differences are very significant, not the least because they lead to very different aesthetic orientations toward the world. Hobbes’s outlook is consistent with the aesthetic of the ‘sublime’ in that he tends to see the world in terms of radical and drastic extremes. At one end of the spectrum, we have the war of all against all and at the other we have the awe-inspiring and order-mandating sovereign. Likewise, for Hobbes ‘peace’, though instrumental, becomes the object of an absolute quest, as the avoidance of violent death and the war of all against all is the preeminent and ultimate human goal. Thus, on an aesthetic level, Hobbes theory is very much like deterrence theory regarding nuclear arms. Both operate on an ultimate register.

Grotius’s aesthetic, on the other hand, is best characterized as falling under the heading of the tragic. His belief in basic human sociability, however ordered or disordered, prohibits any absolute solution to the problem of order, for sociability is always complex and multi-faceted. It cannot be reduced to a single motive. Grotius looks at the world about him and is perplexed by the problematic and disastrous events and actions he sees. He sees them as both wrong and tragic. However, and importantly, he seeks their relative redress. Whereas Hobbes’s speaks of the awe-inspiring sovereign, Grotius writes of the need for relatively successful systems of binding international law. The difference is not just philosophical, it is aesthetic.

Sociability, complexity and perplexity

Thankfully, as I have suggested, we have very persuasive reasons, having to do with greater social stability, to tell stories about crises and disasters in a more modest key. And in ‘democracy’, a watchword of our age, we also have a means to shift our attention from the absolute to the probable and from the sublime to the tragic. Democracy lends itself to an emphasis on sociability, and therefore on complexity and perplexity. Indeed, within democratic thought there is a tradition centered not on absolute revolutionary freedom and right but on mutual dependence, reciprocal chastening, and self-introspection. Democracy, in this tradition, is about reckoning and living with limits rather than attempting to subdue the infinite. This tradition, at the very least, inculcates a strong sense of the tragic and directs one toward modest but still very fruitful forms of problem solving.

Media are pivotal agents in shaping social
desire and aesthetic orientations. With respect to disaster, Western media, and especially American media, have been drawn to the sublime, that is, to casting disastrous events through the lens of the extreme, absolute, and ‘unthinkable’. This includes taking part in the absolute demonization of the ‘enemy’, projections of world cataclysm due to our neglect of the environment, and perpetuating a feeling of radical insecurity in the world. Any shift toward greater stability, however, depends a good deal upon media shifting its narrative strategies away from the sublime toward the tragic and from the absolute toward the relative. For the stories we habitually tell structure the world we inhabit.

References

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‘Natural’ disasters as catalysts of political action

Mark Pelling and Kathleen Dill

Originally a briefing note prepared for Chatham House,1 the following article presents the initial findings of a study reviewing historical data on the political outcomes of disaster at the level of the nation state and below. It draws on academic papers, practitioner and media reports of large natural disaster events from 1899 to 2005.

Aneecdotal evidence suggests that the socio-political and cultural dynamics put into motion at the time of catastrophic ‘natural’ disasters create the conditions for potential political change – often at the hands of a discontented civil society. A state’s incapacity to respond adequately to a disaster can create a temporary power vacuum, and potentially a watershed moment in historical trajectories. This generates (albeit temporarily) a window of opportunity for novel socio-political action at local and national levels. Interventions may include manoeuvres to entrench or destabilize current power-holders, change power-sharing relationships within recognized sectors, or to legitimise or de-legitimise new sectors.

Natural disasters, development and security
Renewed interest in the political and economic aspects of disasters triggered by natural phenomena is part of a wider acceptance that development has failed in many parts of the world and that it is development failures that have led to an accumulation of disaster risks.2
Reflecting this understanding, we situate our analysis of disasters within the wider discourse on human security. Rather than approaching disasters as humanitarian crises, we treat them as the products of maladaptation between interlocking socio-environmental relations at local, national, international and supranational levels. This reframing raises questions about equity, justice, vulnerability, power relations and whose security is threatened or enhanced by environmental change.\(^3\)

We approach disasters as both political events in and of themselves, and potential producers of secondary political effects (e.g., new alliances, leadership and social critiques). We suggest that a political reading of disaster requires the situating of political action within the wider national and global socio-cultural and historical contexts in which they occur. This supports an analysis of the trajectories of post-disaster popular and elite actions from riots to spontaneous civil society organization, and from states of emergency to martial law. We attempt to assess whether such actions served to entrench or destabilize existing political regimes and/or alternatively, support or curtail subversive and/or novel political action. We compare political outcomes, and assess whether significant patterns arise from particular state / civil society relationships within the context of international and supranational influences and interventions.

Disasters triggered by environmental phenomena do not cause political change, rather they act as catalysts that put into motion potentially provocative social processes at multiple social levels. The character of political change is influenced by the nature of the pre-disaster socio-political and cultural milieu, and the actions and reactions of popular and institutional actors involved in disaster response and reconstruction.

Seven hypotheses
A global security perspective deepens our understanding of a disaster as the product of particular dynamics between socio-political policies (and the cultural milieus in which they obtain meaning) and environmental phenomena. It is necessary to go beyond portraying disasters as discreet, episodic events. Disasters are events occurring in specific socio-ecological zones, where particular types of social organizations flourish, and where particular types of relationships with external power affect local and national conditions. Seven working hypotheses born out by our survey are discussed below.

Disasters often hit politically peripheral regions hardest catalysing regional political tensions. The 23 February 2004 Moroccan earthquake led to a rare display of open dissent with protestors taking to the streets, stopping military and aid convoys and marching to the regional governor’s office in north-eastern Morocco to protest the poor response of the government. The demonstrators came from a region with a long history of resistance to a succession of colonial and national rulers with the earthquake having symbolised perceived inequality and partiality in the dominant regime.\(^4\)

Disasters are a product of development policies and can open to scrutiny dominant political and institutional systems. The spectre of a multitude of largely African-American, poor and elderly citizens trapped in New Orleans before catastrophic flooding inundated the city in 2005, combined with the federal government’s astonishingly inept response, led to the eruption of a national socio-political crisis. The national crisis (as distinct from the crisis lived by those trapped in the city) was fuelled by the jarring effect that this highly publicized manifestation of race and class discrimination in the United States had on the nation,\(^5\) and was further ignited by the revelation that cronyism within the Bush administration was a clear precursor to disaster.\(^6\)

Existing inequalities can be exacerbated by post-disaster governmental manipulation. Political conflict following disaster often manifests around attempts to re-distribute titles or usefactory rights to land. It is commonplace for developers and speculators to claim rights over low-income settlement space (assessed by government agents as too dangerous for further habitation) with the effect that land is transferred from low to high-income groups. A recent example comes from Lago de Apoyo,
where reconstruction following an earthquake led to the relocation of labourers and the expansion of a luxury lakeside hotel.7 At a larger scale, the transfer of coastal land from village to commercial use in Indonesia and Sri Lanka following the Indian Ocean Tsunami is also well recognised and a source of local political tension.8

The way in which the state and other sectors act in response and recovery is largely predicated on the kind of political relationships that existed between sectors before the crisis. The relationship between political regime form and disaster risk is complex. Amarta Sen9 famously observed that in democracies, a free press reduces famine risk (and its attendant instability) through holding government accountable. In politics without a free press other mechanisms can operate to reduce disaster risk (and potential political instability). Cuba has an international reputation for efficient disaster evacuation10 drawing on highly effective social mobilisation. This suggests that political commitment to risk reduction, rather than the level of regime authoritarianism, may be a better indicator of how successful a particular state will be in its approach to disasters.

Regimes are likely to interpret spontaneous collective actions by non-government sectors in the aftermath of a disaster as a threat and respond with repression. There is a host of data on authoritarian and democratic regimes to support this hypothesis. Following the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala, the military dictatorship focussed rehabilitation on the capital city, ignoring severely damaged rural Maya communities. Abandoned by the state, local organisations adapted to new community needs and continued working past the search and rescue phase to co-ordinate re-building. The government perceived emerging local Maya leaders as a political threat and violently repressed them.

Though accomplished without bloodshed, the democratically elected Turkish government also repressed civil society organisations activated during a disaster. In this case, the state proved incapable of providing assistance during the critical first days following the 1999 Marmara earthquake and local associations and NGOs stepped in to fill this gap. To regain control, the government froze NGO bank accounts and proclaimed illegal all but select state-authorized NGO activities. The repression was focussed especially against organisations identifying with a religious, Islamic orientation.

These examples also point to the need to explain national political action following disaster within the international political context. Repression in Guatemala unfolded in a Cold War client state. Turkey is caught between the external pressures of EU candidacy and US strategic interests, which magnify internal struggles between political, religious and ethnic groups.

In the aftermath of disaster, political leaders may regain or even enhance their popular legitimacy. This hypothesis is exemplified by political responses to a 1966 hurricane in the city of New Orleans11 and at a larger scale with events surrounding the 1976 Tangshan earthquake in China.12 In the former case, an incumbent mayor used disaster relief to bolster his public image and was re-elected to office a month later despite being personally responsible for the reallocation of city funds originally destined to shore up the levee. The latter took place in China during a period of enormous political upheaval largely due to the death of Mao Zedong.

Mao’s successor, Hua Guofeng expertly portrayed the Tangshan earthquake as a culturally symbolic event revealing social imbalance and portending great change. He appropriated the disaster as a site from which to introduce a new leadership, and successfully dismantled the opposing power base controlled by the ‘Gang of Four’. What these two cases have in common is leaders who successfully manipulated disaster events to maintain or elevate their popular legitimacy within a specific political institutional architecture.

The repositioning of political actors in the aftermath of a disaster unfolds at multiple scales. Local, as well as national political actors, use disaster relief and recovery to extend their influence over development policies and programmes. In Central America local NGOs stepped into the new political space created in the aftermath of the 1988 Hurricane Mitch, while strengthening regional alliances.13
Such influence may be temporary, lasting only as long as the relief or reconstruction periods, but can potentially lead to a long-term influence and involvement in development planning and thus access to political power. Following the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, several prominent activists involved in reconstruction efforts entered city and nationwide politics, the structure of city government was reconstituted, and the ruling party lost its 70-year hold on the capital city.14

Conclusion
Perhaps surprisingly, there are similarities in the ways in which democratic and authoritarian regimes respond to disaster. Political leaders in both systems manipulate disaster recovery to enhance their popular legitimacy. Disasters also open political systems up to scrutiny. In this way events can become symbolically important for politically marginalized groups and can catalyse political organising and dissent, examples of this process include class and cast based, and regional protest. Political manipulation and protest occur at local, municipal and national scales.

Political responses are largely determined by pre-disaster social contracts. Suppressed values and associated forms of organisation can re-emerge, or predominant institutions can become further entrenched. In reconstruction, power asymmetries can lead to the manipulation of aid and subsequently the distribution of economic power. Where new forms of organisation become too effective, they may be perceived as a challenge to the state. It is here that democratic and authoritarian regimes tend to differ in their strategies for survival. The international community has a role to play in setting the incentives that states consider when weighing up the comparative risks of internal dissent and international discredit.

Notes
1. Chatham House (London, United Kingdom) is one of the world’s leading organizations for the analysis of international issues. It is membership-based and aims to help individuals and organizations to be at the forefront of developments in an ever-changing and increasingly complex world. Chatham House: ISP/NSC Briefing Paper 06/01, pp. 4-6.
7. Professor Michael Redclift, King’s College London, personal communication, 2005

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Bridging the long ‘last mile’ in Sri Lanka

Nalaka Gunawardene

In the months following the mega tsunami of December 2004, some people believed that it had caught the Indian Ocean rim countries entirely by surprise. This misconception, repeated by governments and aid donors alike, as the following article shows, even found its way into some independent analyses.

While the countries of South and Southeast Asia were largely unprepared to act on the tsunami, it was not really a complete surprise. As the killer waves originating from the ocean near Indonesia’s Sumatra Island radiated across the Indian Ocean at the speed of a jetliner, the alert about the impending tsunami moved through the Internet at the speed of light. Scientists at the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre (PTWC) in Hawaii, who had detected the extraordinary seismic activity, issued a local tsunami warning one hour and five minutes after the undersea quake.

That was a bit too late for Indonesia – which, being closest to the quake’s epicentre, was already hit – but it could have made a difference in countries further away, such as India, Sri Lanka and Thailand. As is now well established, an authentic warning was delivered to each country, but there were few listeners at the receiving end – and even fewer to act on it.

For example, the warning went unheeded by the centres of power in Sri Lanka: no one reacted with the swiftness such information warranted. Institutional, technological and societal failures combined to prevent the timely sharing of this warning within Sri Lanka. For example, the tsunami progressively pounded the tear drop-shaped island for nearly four hours – starting on the south-east coast from around 8.30 am local time. If only the rest of the island had been alerted soon after the east was first hit, coastal evacuation could have significantly reduced deaths elsewhere, which in the end came to nearly 40,000 (or 1 in 500 Sri Lankans).

But alas, that was not to be. No official telephone call or police emergency message travelled across the Ireland-sized island, much of whose interior was unaffected by the coastal disaster (a few private telephone calls helped save some lives). Elsewhere in tsunami-hit Asia, government officials chose to suppress the warning for various reasons. Thailand, for example, didn’t want a false alarm to affect its thriving tourist industry.

Where were all the ICTs?

It was astonishing that a disaster of this magnitude could arrive in so many places in Asia without any public warning. The region has witnessed a rapid proliferation of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in recent years. Yet with thunderous impact, the tsunami drove home the point that the timely and efficient management of information mattered more than delivery technologies.

As Arthur C Clarke, author and long time resident of Sri Lanka, remarked: ‘The Asian tsunami’s death toll could have been drastically reduced if the warning – already known to scientists – was disseminated quickly and effectively to millions of coastal dwellers on the Indian Ocean rim. It is appalling that our sophisticated global communications systems simply failed us that fateful day.’

Clarke, best known for inventing the communications satellite, added: ‘We need to address the long-term issues of better disaster preparedness, functional early warning systems and realistic arrangements to cope with tsunamis and a multitude of other hazards. It is imperative that we improve our monitoring and early warning systems, but we must also put in place a fail-proof plan to sound the alarm as and when necessary.’

In response to the Indian Ocean tsunami, the United Nations and aid donor countries ini-
tiated an inter-governmental process to build a high-tech tsunami early warning system in the Indian Ocean. By June 2006, UNESCO – whose Inter-governmental Oceanographic Commission coordinated the effort – reported that the system was ‘up and running’. Some 25 new seismographic stations would detect underwater earthquake tremors, while three deep-seabed sensors were in place to detect tsunami waves through tiny changes in water pressure. More equipment, including satellite sensors and additional seabed sensors, are to be added to the system in 2007 and 2008. A network of 26 national information centres will enable Indian Ocean countries to receive and distribute warnings of potential tsunamis, UNESCO added.4

The Director General of UNESCO was quoted at the time as saying the system ‘needed to be tested in real situations’ and that its success depended on the open and free flow of data between nations.

Java tsunami of July 2006
Such a ‘test’ arrived sooner than many expected. On 17 July 2006, a 7.7 magnitude undersea earthquake occurred off the resort town of Pangandaran on Java island in Indonesia. The tremor was detected by various groups of seismologists overseas, and within 17 minutes, the PTWC issued a tsunami warning. That warning reached the Indonesian capital in two minutes by email, but officials there lacked a proper system to get the warning across to areas at risk in their vast, archipelagic nation. Two-metre high waves hit the southern Java coastline 37 minutes after the quake. A timely public warning could have saved many of the nearly 600 people who died.5

UNESCO was quick to acknowledge ‘big gaps in getting the warnings to coastal communities in time’. Indonesian officials said there just wasn’t enough time to react to the warning.

The Java tsunami further underlined a point we have been emphasising since the Indian Ocean tsunami: even the most sophisticated early warning system will be rendered ineffective without adequate mechanisms to disseminate warnings in a timely, credible manner.

I had stressed this in an op-ed article written for the Science and Development Network in December 2005: ‘Developing effective early warning systems for multiple hazards is an urgent priority for the Indian Ocean rim countries. But setting up a state-of-the-art, high tech and high cost system is not a solution by itself. Because the most advanced early warning system in the world can only do half the job: alert governments and other centres of power (e.g. military) of an impending disaster. The far bigger challenge is to disseminate that warning to large numbers of people spread across vast areas in the shortest possible time.’6

Then as now, the crucial question remains: how can we travel that all important ‘last mile’?

As the residents of Java found out, that answer is not quite worked out yet. Obsession with gadgets still seems to dominate the discussion on delivering hazard warnings. This is what President Bill Clinton, UN Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery, had cautioned against at the Third International Early Warning Conference in Bonn, in March 2006: ‘All the sophisticated technology won’t matter if we don’t reach real communities and people. Satellites, buoys, data networks will make us safer, but we must invest in the training, the institution building, the awareness raising on the ground.’7

Going the last mile in Sri Lanka
Precisely these elements form the cornerstone of an action research project currently underway in Sri Lanka. Its combination of community training, awareness raising and the use of appropriate ICTs offers a ‘real world test’ whose outcome would be of much interest across the developing world.

The Last Mile Hazard Information Dissemination Project is a civil society and corporate partnership initiative to complement other action being taken at national and regional levels. It involves four Sri Lanka-based entities that value the role of information, communication and community mobilization in disaster preparedness:

● Sarvodaya,8 the large grassroots development organisation;
● LIRNEasia,9 a research and capacity-building
organisation on ICTs;
- TVE Asia Pacific,\textsuperscript{10} a media organisation specialising in communicating development; and
- Dialog Telekom,\textsuperscript{11} a leading telecommunications service provider.

Financial support has come from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada.\textsuperscript{12}

The action research project aims to study, experiment and understand which ICTs and community mobilization methods will work most effectively in disseminating information on hazards faced by Sri Lanka coastal communities. The exercise is not confined to tsunamis alone; coastal erosion, cyclones, drought and floods are among the other hazards being covered.

Focusing on the crucial ‘last mile’ dissemination, the project will:
- test different ICTs to deliver timely warnings to local people immediately at risk; and
- build community capacity to respond to such warnings rapidly and systematically.\textsuperscript{13}

In the first phase, the project involves 32 villages from eastern, western, northern and southern coastal areas of Sri Lanka – all impacted by the Indian Ocean tsunami. The project will evaluate the role played by several factors that contribute to the design of an effective last mile hazard information dissemination system, viz:
- Reliability and effectiveness of various ICTs as warning technologies;
- How community training influences effective warning responses;
- Contribution of the level of organizational development of a village to an effective warning response; and
- Gender-specific response to hazard mitigating action.

Different combinations of ICTs and community mobilization will be tested out in the participating villages. These are:
- Fixed telephones;
- Sinhala/Tamil SMS (text messaging) with alarm for Java compatible mobile phones;
- Very Small Aperture Satellite Terminals (VSATs);
- Disaster Warning Response & Recovery (DWRR) units based on addressable satellite radio developed by the WorldSpace Corporation (see box 1); and
- Early Warning Network Remote Alarm Device developed by Dialog Telekom and University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka.

While some ICTs have been in public use for years or decades, others are recent innovations whose utility in disaster warning communication is being tested for the first time through this initiative. But all ICTs – old and new — are only means to an end. Based on the project’s findings, we plan to identify the optimum combinations of training, community mobilization and technology tools that could help Sri Lankan communities to receive hazard warnings and disseminate them locally.

**Training youth leaders**

Among the first and most important activities was training 30 youth leaders attached to Sarvodaya’s Shanti Sena (Peace Brigade) — a volunteer youth force of over 100,000 dedicated to peace building and community development. The training, delivered by TVE Asia Pacific, covered topics such as understanding vulnerability and hazards; community-based hazard identification using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques; communicating risks and hazards; understanding and responding to early warnings; and community response planning.\textsuperscript{14}

Following their training in April 2006, the youth leaders returned to their areas to mobilize selected coastal villages. They facilitated each community to determine the most appropriate method/s for locally communicating a disaster warning they would receive through one of the five ICTs being tested in the project. By August 2006, different villages had opted for different dissemination methods: temple/church bells, sirens and fixed or mobile loud-speakers among others.

But such a ‘last mile system’ will only be as good as the information and warnings it is fed with. Recognising this, Sarvodaya has set up a Hazard Information Hub (HIH) at its headquarters in Moratuwa, south of Colombo. The HIH will maintain close links with official disaster warning agencies of the government, as well as many international sources, on a round-
the-clock basis.

The project partners are well aware of the need to maintain credibility. ‘We will rely on designated governmental authorities to issue a specific warning on an impending disaster,’ says Ravi Kandage, Coordinator of Sarvodaya Shanti Sena. ‘Our role is to seek, receive and amplify such warnings to the participating villages.’

In this, the project will work closely with the government’s own civilian and military personnel trained on disaster preparedness and management.

In late 2006, after a few months of grassroots mobilisation, the project will evaluate the preparedness and the response capacity of trained communities. A carefully simulated disaster warning and evacuation drill will be carried out, which will also test the efficacy of different ICT tools deployed.

As Sri Lanka’s largest development organization, working in over 15,000 villages, Sarvodaya has a long term interest in this project. It is hoped that this will lay the groundwork for giving all Sarvodaya villages the necessary skills and training to successfully handle warnings on a multitude of hazards.

‘One of the biggest lessons of the Tsunami was how lacking Sri Lanka was in terms of an emergency warning system,’ says Dr Vinya Ariyaratne, Executive Director of Sarvodaya. ‘This project seeks to prepare our villages from the ground-up to become disaster-resilient. When the official warnings come, we hope the villagers will be ready to act on them promptly.’

Managing risks

Dr Rohan Samarajiva, Executive Director, LIRNEAsia, sees this project as a grassroots attempt to manage risks. ‘We don’t need to take unnecessary risks, but we also don’t have to run away from every risk,’ he says, pointing out that choices must be made based on best available information and calculated risks.

In his view, Sri Lanka has experienced a multitude of natural disasters (mostly floods and cyclones) in recent years, but ‘we have passed up opportunities for effective preparedness.’

He also sees wider social benefits of any investments. ‘Early public warning protects the poor, given that the sectors of the economy most vulnerable to disaster are often the poorest. It is heartening that advanced hazard detection and monitoring systems are now being established across the Indian Ocean. What is now a priority is effective national action to establish last-mile warning systems, along with awareness and response programmes.’

Governments, civil society groups and mass media organisations in the Indian Ocean countries are now challenged to work out practical, reliable methods to broadcast disaster warnings to all communities at risk. The more redundancy and less bureaucracy we build into such systems, the greater our chances will be for actually saving lives with timely information.

The Last Mile Hazard Information Dissemination Project can be a pathfinder for Asian countries that united in grief when the tsunami struck not too long ago. They can now unite again in ensuring public safety and community preparedness.

Notes

2. Kenya offered the only case of a warning and evacuation resulting from the warning. But there was more than 10 hours between the earthquake and the arrival of the tsunami on the east African coast.
6. http://www.scidev.net/content/opinions/eng/a-long-last-mile-the-lesson-of-the-asian-tsunami.cfm
8. www.sarvodaya.org
9. www.lirneasia.net
10. www.tveap.org
11. www.dialog.lk
12. www.idrc.ca
Prepublication version placed online at: http://www.lirneasia.net/2005/07/icts-and-early-warning/

Trained as a science writer, Nalaka Gunawardene worked in print and broadcast media before co-founding TVE Asia Pacific, www.tveap.org, in 1996. He currently heads the regional organisation specialising in communicating development through moving images, and is also on the Board of the Science and Development Network, www.scidev.net. The author thanks Rohan Samarajiva for review and comments on this article.

Tsunami lessons for the mass media

Ullamaija Kivikuru

With the growing speed of the news apparatus and the harsh media competition found in practically all countries in the world today, conflict and disaster reporting have become a central part of front-page journalism. However, the tsunami on 26 December 2004 was exceptional in its scope. The catastrophe that caused the death of 300,000 people became the most reported natural disaster in history, prompting millions of news stories and a flood of funding amounting to over US$ 9 billion, according to Reuters. On the other hand, the tsunami coverage brought up issues which characterise the whole field of catastrophe communication today.

One reason for the huge number of tsunami headlines was the fact that the tsunami appeared as a ‘new’ type of catastrophe, affecting nations far away. It was not a political conflict. It was not an annual flood or monsoon, but it represented an attractive theme for journalism: people’s struggle against the has always fascinated the media. A new word, tsunami, was added to the global vocabulary. Until 2004 it had belonged only to expert discourse.

Although the death toll and destruction were by far the highest for Indonesia, the other eight countries in the region carried their share of the burden as well. Tourists from the wealthy North learned that their welfare networks cannot save them from hard experience if a tsunami hits. Thus it is justified to state
that the tsunami, unlike most other catastrophes, stretched all over the world. The tsunami experiences evidenced the cynical fact that the global media agenda is limited and selfish. The earthquake in Pakistan in 2005 never achieved the same volume of attention, because it did not directly touch the industrialised world. And while the world was focusing on the tsunami and its aftermath, the human suffering in Darfur – reaching a death toll equal to that of the tsunami – disappeared from the media agenda.

Short-tempered media, persistent grassroots

No doubt the enormous publicity assisted in the collection of solidarity funds, mitigating the post-tsunami destruction in the countries around the Bay of Bengal, however poor coordination of the relief operations might have been, especially in the beginning. There is evidence that the size of emergency assistance followed the big headlines. When the headlines became smaller, public interest in the issue dropped accordingly. The tsunami became ‘outdated’. In this sense, reliance on media publicity in catastrophes has its limitations. Media attention is short, anarchistic and capricious, and the news is the dominant mode of delivery. This means that only rarely are the reasons and consequences of catastrophes properly discussed in the media. The aid agencies try to collect funds for long-term assistance. For example, early warning systems would decrease human suffering, but the construction of such infrastructures requires long and systematic funding. Hectic media attention does not promise much support for such an exercise.

In the sharing of information, local networks have turned out to be best in the long run. Civil society seems to have been far better at communicating about local priorities and provided networks that gave people time to recover in South-East Asia. However, the State and the military have also been needed in relief operations, although it seems to have been difficult for NGOs to work with public agencies which tend to represent totally different worldviews than NGOs. This has been documented in detail in, for example, the World Disasters Report 2005. However, the ‘odd bed-mates’ that communication networks have created during the months after the tsunami might, in the long run, have a role to play in the work for democratic communication in societies hit by the catastrophe.

But recovery takes time and has many phases. As an Oxfam field officer in India said in March 2005, ‘People seem to be going through the usual phases of recovery: shock and denial, frustration and anger, then recovery. The anger is powerful!’ During the months after the tsunami, the anger was partly able to break down the strong bureaucracies that tend to prevent relief action. Grassroots anger has assisted in making communication more democratic, at least sporadically. This should not be romanticized, but it should be remembered. The victims of catastrophes are motivated and innovative, if given a chance.

Solidarity and citizenship

Worldwide attention tends to be short-lived and quite selfish, focusing primarily on the nearest. For example, in the Nordic countries, some 80-85% of the total volume of tsunami reporting focused on their own citizens after the first shock which lasted for two days. As soon as all Finns, Danes, Swedes and Norwegians were brought home, the headlines became smaller and discussed entirely the domestic problems the tsunami had caused. Cynical analysts have even suggested that the solidarity toward ‘the Other’ was expressed in the form of aid and assistance money, while the real sympathy and empathy was reserved for ‘Us’ alone. According to this interpretation, people bought themselves free from solidarity.

Nordic media coverage was quite superficial concerning the Bay of Bengal nations. In fact, after the two first days, the media apparatus focussed entirely on what happened to Nordic citizens in the area. A deeper interest in the Bay of Bengal nations increased after a few months, when journalists travelled to the region to check whether assistance funds had been used properly. The losses of the Nordic countries were still minimal compared to Indonesia, Sri Lanka or Thailand. However, the audience did not criticise their media for selfishness or limited scope. What it was not satisfied with was
how the media treated their receivers.

In many countries, considerable criticism about the activities around the tsunami was directed at the doings of the authorities, but the media received their share of criticism as well – even if one takes into account the fact that those motivated to react and write letters to the official investigation commissions naturally tend to be those who felt that they or their loved ones had been treated badly. Relatively speaking, the strongest criticism in both directions was expressed in the Nordic countries. The ideology of the welfare state obviously made people think that the State is responsible for its citizens’ well-being also when they voluntarily and without informing the authorities travel to far-away countries. For example in Sweden, the Prime Minister was threatened with a court action, accused of neglecting citizens’ needs.

In the case of Swedish government, political confidence has been assessed fairly low in international comparisons. It was low before the disaster and the government did not succeed in improving the figures in its management of the catastrophe. First of all, the government remained silent far too long. When attempting to understand why citizens feel the way they do about their government, it is important to note that the subjective appraisal of government performance is what ultimately matters. Thus it is relevant to analyse both the information flows and the existing standards for public evaluations of political actors during a disaster.

A subdued and careful discussion about a citizen’s rights and responsibilities is gradually starting in the Nordic countries. How far do the responsibilities of a welfare state go, especially in the age of neo-liberal tendencies and privatization, which are also found at the heart of the welfare state? The question is highly relevant but politically sensitive, because welfare state rhetoric is still strong in Scandinavia, although the implementation of welfare policies has become more limited than, say, in the 1970s and 1980s.

The tsunami media coverage also showed interesting global tendencies. The web has established itself as part of the global information structures, but never before has it dominated the arena for a short while as strongly as it did immediately after the catastrophe. Radio has traditionally been the fastest medium to deliver information about social changes, also catastrophes. It still was, but very soon the internet took over. The Guardian reported on 29 December 2004 that as the use of conventional means for news transmission appeared slow, weak and out of focus, people turned to the Internet to get more information about the tsunami. Some researchers even claim that, in such a time of crisis as the tsunami, the conventional media houses turned out to be of secondary significance, while the Net appeared crucial. Also these daring researchers admit that such shake-downs of conventional media modes tend to be temporary. After a few days, the conventional media houses recover and take over again.

Reception studies in the Nordic countries indicate that people felt that they were treated like a mass without specific needs, while in fact they wanted to know what had happened to their loved ones vacationing in the region. Further, they felt that they or their relatives were treated unfairly by the media. People in shock were used as ‘normal’ interviewees, and children were exploited by journalists, shown as miserable and helpless on TV screens.

In the North, this was a middle-class rebellion, a rebellion of people who knew well their rights and responsibilities, although they perhaps had not often been in contact with the media before. Although a trip to the South once a year belongs to the lifestyle of most Nordics, only the well-to-do can afford an expensive trip to Thailand or India.

Option for two-way traffic
A middle-class rebellion could perhaps have been put into perspective, if the media use figures had not testified that the public did more than criticise. It really behaved in a way it had not done before. In addition to television, radio and the press, people used the web. This was not a surprise. Some 650,000 Finns on a daily basis visit the web versions of the conventional media, as well as the websites of authorities such as the ministries. Visiting the web belongs to the daily routine of Finnish media users. The
exposure of these sources rose by one-third immediately after the tsunami. But the most radical increase was experienced neither by the media web versions nor the websites of the authorities, but by a few amateurishly-run websites of odd interest groups, such as Finnish divers operating in Thailand and the site of the Finnish-Thai Friendship Association. In Sweden, similar behaviour was detected.

The publishing policy of such websites was fairly similar: a ‘mixed grill’ with global news, petty details, local information and pictures, plus a multitude of discussion openings. People were encouraged to discuss, to seek specific information, and to comfort each other and to create ‘I could have been one of them’ proximity. This was obviously a very successful formula, because the number of visitors on these websites displayed a rising curve for three weeks in a row. Both Finnish sites were daily visited by more than 400,000 Finns for almost three weeks. After that, the figures dropped to their normal few hundred per day.

Thus the web discussions on these discussion sites did not offer any radically new communicative horizons as such. They were filled with news fragments, hero narratives, rumour-spreading, accusations and calls for help or comfort - elements which Elisabeth Anker calls ‘villains, victims and heroes’. As such these elements were not unique; they could be found in conventional journalism as well. The State and its institutions were included only as targets of accusations and criticism. But the sites created an air of openness and assistance, which the conventional media obviously failed to do. This very fact suggested that there is need for a redefinition of the receiver in the media system.

Another medium which became crucial for the Nordics during the tsunami catastrophe was the mobile phone, especially its SMS mode. For a short while, telephone traffic between Scandinavia and the Bay of Bengal increased by 600-800%.

The web and the legacy of mass communication

Within a few weeks use of the amateur websites dropped back to normal. Use of the conventional media did not drop. Criticism of conventional media coverage by its audience calmed down as well. However, it was admitted, for example in Finland, that the public arena just after the tsunami had surprisingly many conservative characteristics. Unlike studies stating that the multiple use of information technology reduces hierarchies, decentralises information distribution and leads people to focus on the future, Finnish society during the crisis seemed to do quite the opposite. It emerged as old-fashioned, hierarchical and more backward-looking than future oriented. Despite fine policies and delicately designed websites, public institutions adopted a top/down form of information, the media used predominantly the news format that can hardly be called democratic and attentive.

It was interactivity, not information as such, that was missing in the post-tsunami days in the Finnish mediascape. In this particular situation, immediate interactivity was expected, because the need for information, comfort and therapy was immediate. In principle, the relationships between democracy, the public sphere and journalism are assessed to be closer in the web than in conventional journalism, but this was obviously not enough.

Some researchers have claimed that the challenge offered by the web discussions is not really dangerous for the media, because the Internet tends to privatise the political public sphere, since individuals can only tap its potential in isolation. Even when conversations in the interactive zones of Net communications include many people, they still have the air of exchanges between private persons, not action groups. The individual lacks the opportunity to emerge from the private sphere into a public space. True participation and the potential for empowerment are missing.

The new technology has opened new avenues for media/receiver relationships, and the public seems to have adapted to the potential of new technology faster than the media, although the media have reported so much about it. Media professionals obviously thought they could carry on a slow, regulated change which would still keep sender dominance as in conventional mass communication. But that is
no longer possible. The tsunami aftermath burst that bubble. People – or at least the most active part of the public – no longer accept being treated as an audience, if news really touches them.

Another aspect requiring further scrutiny is the web public. The numbers of visits in the tsunami aftermath was enormous, but it is still only a fraction of the total population that discusses on the net. In Finland, it became clear that although the number of daily visits to the most popular websites was as high 400,000 for each, only a fraction – under 1,000, obviously mainly people with relatives or friends in the Bengal Bay region – participated in discussions. The majority just followed developments on the websites. Their behaviour thus came quite close to the use of conventional mass media. How is it that with the wide scope of possibilities to express oneself on the web, once again it is mainly the same people using this possibility, the rest just checking what is on the agenda? If the number of those participating remains small, it can be claimed that getting rid of the legacy of mass communication seems difficult for both the producers and the receivers of messages.

In any case, one could claim that during the tsunami catastrophe, the State and the conventional media, for the first time on a large scale, met a public having the characteristics associated with the ‘information age’ in slogans: these people did not accept being turned into an audience and served with non-tailored messages. They wanted special services; they wanted to have the choice of participating even if not everybody took it. During the first days after the tsunami, neither the State nor the media could meet this challenge. Such crossings of interest might become frequent in the coming years, also under normal circumstances, and neither side seems really prepared for this new situation. It is easy to talk about interactivity and difficult to implement it – not to mention empowerment.

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Disaster mitigation for persons with disabilities

For millions of people with disabilities around the world, surviving a disaster can be the beginning of a greater struggle. Relief organizations and rescue personnel must be increasingly prepared to address the needs of individuals following a disaster.

Efforts to accommodate disabled Americans frequently ignore disaster preparedness and response. As a result, too few disaster response officials are trained to deal effectively with people with disabilities, and too few disabled Americans have the knowledge that could help them save their own lives. The following seven key principles should guide disaster relief.

1. Accessible disaster facilities and services
Communications technology is vital for people with disabilities during a disaster to help assess damage, collect information, and deploy supplies. Access to appropriate facilities — housing, beds, toilets, and other necessities — must be monitored and made available to individuals with disabilities before, during, and after a disaster. This access also must be ensured for those who incur a disability as a result of a disaster. Appropriate planning and management of information related to architectural accessibility improves the provision of disaster services for persons with disabilities.

2. Accessible communications and assistance
As communications technology and policy become more integral to disaster relief and mitigation, providing accessibility to the technology for people with disabilities becomes more essential. For example, people with hearing impairments require interpreters, TDD commu-
nichations, and signalling devices. In addition, written materials must be produced on cassette tape, on CD-ROM, or in large print for people with visual impairments. People with cognitive impairments, such as those with developmental disabilities, Alzheimer’s disease, or brain injury, require assistance to cope with new surroundings and to minimize confusion factors.

3. Accessible and reliable rescue communications
Accessible and reliable communications technology is critical to ensuring fast, effective, and competent field treatment of people with disabilities. Current satellite and cellular technology as well as personal communication networks permit communication in areas with a damaged or destroyed communication infrastructure. Communications technologies can assist field personnel in rescue coordination and tracking and can be combined with databases that house information on optimal treatment for particular disabilities or that track the allocation of post-disaster resources.

4. Partnerships with the disability community
Disability organizations must join with relief and rescue organizations and the media to educate and inform their constituents of disaster contingency and self-help plans. A nationwide awareness effort should be devised and implemented to inform people with disabilities about necessary precautions for imminent disaster. In the event of a sudden natural disaster, such a program would minimize injury and facilitate rescue efforts. In addition, more young people with disabilities should be encouraged to study technology, medicine, science, and engineering as a way of gaining power over future technological advances in disaster relief and mitigation.

5. Disaster preparation, education, and training
Communications technologies are crucial for educating the public about disaster preparedness and warning the people most likely to be affected. Relief and rescue operations must have the appropriate medical equipment, supplies, and training to address the immediate needs of people with disabilities. Affected individuals may require bladder bags, insulin pumps, walkers, or wheelchairs. Relief personnel must be equipped and trained in the use of such equipment. In addition, relief personnel should provide training, particularly for personnel and volunteers in the field, on how to support the independence and dignity of persons with disabilities in the aftermath of a disaster.

6. Partnerships with the media
Many natural disasters can be predicted in advance. Disaster preparedness for people with disabilities is critical in minimizing the impact of a disaster. The media — in partnership with disability and governmental organizations — should incorporate advisories into emergency broadcasts in formats accessible to people with disabilities. Such advisories alert the public, provide a mechanism for informing rescue personnel of individual medical conditions and impairments, and identify accessible emergency shelters. The creation and repetition of accessible media messages is critical for empowering people with disabilities to protect themselves from disasters.

7. Universal design and implementation strategies
Designing universal access into disaster relief plans, far from being a costly proposition, can pay off handsomely. As accessible communications tools become more widely available, their price will decrease. In addition, a universal design approach to meeting the needs of people with disabilities before and after a disaster will benefit many people without disabilities, such as the very young or the aged. A look at existing agreements among relief organizations and local, state, federal, and international governments will offer guidance in developing effective strategies for universal design and implementation plans.

From a report by The Annenberg Washington Program written in collaboration with the President’s Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities by Dr Peter David Blanck, Annenberg Senior Fellow.
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Terremoto: ¿Espacio para reconstruir ciudad y ciudadanía?

Por Ana María Miralles

En enero de 1999 un terremoto destruyó casi por completo la zona del eje cafetero colombiano, lo cual puso en marcha un modelo de intervención sui géneris de reconstrucción en casos de desastre: el gobierno colombiano atendió el desastre a partir de la colaboración Estado y ONGs de todo el país, a través del Fondo por la Reconstrucción.

El modelo, interesante desde la perspectiva de la colaboración público-privado en la atención de situaciones de emergencia, suscitó otra serie de intervenciones para calibrar la participación de la ciudadanía de las localidades afectadas en el propio proceso de reconstrucción. Lo que sucedió es que ONGs dedicadas a la construcción de viviendas y en general a la atención de los múltiples aspectos que planteó el desastre, eran de otras ciudades del país que no estaban articulando de manera convincente a los ciudadanos al proceso de la reconstrucción. Alrededor de esos tres momentos es posible rastrear cómo la ciudadanía vivió la tensión entre la demanda de reconstrucción y protección por parte del Estado en una perspectiva que se acerca más a la mirada paternalista de la clásica mirada liberal del Estado como responsable de la reconstrucción (sujeto de derechos) y su tránsito hacia una actitud más participativa por parte del ciudadano, generada justamente por el proceso de exclusión del que estaba siendo objeto, que sería excesivo formular como un tipo de ciudadano republicano cívico, pero que indudablemente representó un modo en que el individuo fue llevado por la tragedia, pero especialmente por el sistema de exclusiones del proceso de reconstrucción, al espacio público.

El contexto sociopolítico de la zona de desastre nos habla del predominio de una mentalidad premoderna, cuyas raíces se visibilizaron con el terremoto, marcada por las relaciones clientelistas –sistema de favores que...
desactivan lo público- de las cuales no escapan- ban los propios medios de comunicación. En el entendido de que la comunicación es un ele- mento central en un proceso de emergencia colectiva, los medios locales en lugar de estar al servicio de la causa de la reconstrucción y de constituirse en catalizadores de propuestas que favorecieran lo colectivo, entraron en la puja por conseguir recursos para mejorar las condi- ciones técnicas de producción, solicitando entre otras cosas consolas de radio y manejo directo de recursos económicos, es decir, a nombre de un supuesto bien público agazaparon el uso pri- vatista de fondos de naturaleza pública.

A lo largo de todo el proceso, sin embargo, es importante analizar la manera en que los ciudadanos enfrentaron un sinnúmero de con- tradicciones, sin unos medios ni una clase política que pudieran representar adecuada- mente sus intereses, lo cual los catapultó de forma improvisada a irrumpir por ellos mismos en el espacio público.

La ciudad-desastre
El primer sentimiento ciudadano frente al terre- moto fue el miedo vinculado a la incertidumbre sobre la situación de los familiares, aún por encima de la propia seguridad. En segundo lugar, apareció el miedo a las pérdidas físico- materiales y a la destrucción misma de la ciu- dad. El descubrimiento de que no solamente había sido su ámbito privado el que había sido destruido, sino también los grandes íconos locales representados por las iglesias, los edifi- cios de gobierno y las escuelas, generó en la ciudadanía una sensación generalizada de indefen- sión.

En los días posteriores el principal temor era frente a las réplicas del sismo y en segundo término a cómo sobrevivir sin vivienda, ni comida, expuestos a la lluvia, en la noche y con la sensación de inseguridad, esta última estimu- lada por las imágenes de los medios mostrando hechos aislados de vandalismo por parte de personas que aprovecharon las circunstancias para atracar.

La mayoría de las preocupaciones ciu- dadanas de los primeros días, no obstante, podemos situarlas como individuales. De forma secundaria aparecen las solidaridades primaria

(Garay\(^1\)) y en tercer término una aproximación a lo que podrían ser las solidaridades abstrac- tas, la preocupación por los otros y la destruc- ción misma de la ciudad, propias de un tejido más colectivo.

Lo que en principio le permitió el terremoto a los ciudadanos fue valorar más asuntos de orden privado: la familia, los amigos, volverse más creyentes en lo religioso y solamente sólo en último término tener conciencia de ciudad. Después del terremoto los ciudadanos percibieron una mejoría en sus relaciones inter- personales. Se perciernon como más unidos, más solidarios y más amables. Las principales transformaciones se dieron pues en el plano de lo privado y se traducen en el ejercicio de las solidaridades de tipo primario, condición nece- saria pero no suficiente para la construcción de tejido sociopolítico.

Mientras las relaciones familiares y de amis- tad parecerían haber mejorado, la percepción sobre las instituciones oficiales se deterioró notablemente: Concejo Municipal, Asamblea Departamental, Gobernación y Alcaldía no estaban presentes ni habían cumplido con sus funciones frente al desastre. El hilo entre la sociedad y el Estado estaba roto. Los ciu- dadanos empezaron a comprender que todo debía mejorar a partir del tejido asociativo, de las relaciones entre miembros de una comu- nidad antes no muy bien delineada, pero ahora a pesar de difusa por el contexto de la dev- astación, más fuerte que antes en razón de la percepción de un problema que a todos los afectó.

Ciudad-memoria
En relación con la ciudad-memoria, las pérdi- das más notorias fueron las vidas humanas, la vivienda y las instituciones educativas. Entre las pérdidas físicas después de la vivienda, identifi- caron de manera muy consistente los sitios públi- cos como el centro, el departamento de bomberos, la Alcaldía, la Galería (mercado popular, símbolo de una sociedad pueblerina que comercia los productos del campo), la Universidad del Quindío, y de modo particular las iglesias, concebidas como espacio de reunión de los ciudadanos y lugares “en donde se podía estar tranquilos”, además de consider-
Otro terreno de las pérdidas se sitúa más en el plano de la autoestima y se le verbalizó como la inestabilidad emocional y económica, la sensación de retroceso en relación con el progreso, la identidad, el tejido social y las esperanzas de futuro.

En el orden económico, el resquebrajamiento del modelo económico basado en el monocultivo del café hizo parte del repertorio de recuerdos más afectado por el terremoto. Lo que el desastre le permitió a un sector de la ciudadanía fue cuestionar casi por primera vez lo que parecía incuestionable, visibilizar ante los demás su incipiente discurso político sobre las opciones para el desarrollo de la región, sin temor a ser considerados como personas contrarias a los valores ancestrales de la zona.

Esta tensión entre la tradición y la modernidad empezó a hacerse cada vez más evidente. La fuerte tradición de los recolectores de café, hombres y mujeres campesinos que de generación en generación se dedican al cultivo y la cosecha del café, hablan de una cultura raizal, poco permeada por los valores de la modernidad, marcada por relaciones de tipo prepolítico que indudablemente afectaron el proceso de reconstrucción por lo que ya se mencionó acerca de una clase política promotora de relaciones clientelistas y unos medios de comunicación insertos en este sistema de favores.

Esta ciudadanía ligada a las actividades de cultivo del café, ya desde antes del terremoto estaba empezando a ser contrastada por una incipiente actividad comercial, pero no de modo suficientemente contundente como para atreverse a colectivizar esa sensación de que la vocación definitiva de la ciudad no debería seguir anclada a la economía del café. Fue el terremoto lo que permitió dejar al descubierto no solamente las fundaciones de los edificios y las raíces de los árboles sino la fragilidad de esa apuesta económica en medio de la inestabilidad de los mercados internacionales.

Esta tensión hizo evidente un movimiento de aspiración a la modernidad, al cambio de paradigmas, a una visibilización más fuerte del interés público, de momento identificado con la necesidad de salir adelante ante la tragedia. Los investigadores percibieron un desgarramiento interior, una tensión entre lo que ya no eran y lo que no habían llegado a ser. En últimas, uno de los cuestionamientos fuertes fue hacia su propia identidad que como todo proceso de identidad se construye en la diferencia con el otro, en este caso contrastada con la de todo el país, empezando por una labor más modesta —compararse con las ciudades vecinas- y tomar partes del resto del país como referencia de lo que querían ser.

**Ciudad-reconstruida**

Por la exclusión de que habían sido objeto los ciudadanos en el proceso de la reconstrucción, en la jerarquización de aspiraciones, la participación ciudadana subió a los primeros lugares. El 78% de los ciudadanos calificó como negativo el proceso de reconstrucción, por lento y particularmente porque lo percibieron como un proceso muy burocrático y del cual dieron poca información para la ciudadanía. El 67% dijo no haber sido tenido en cuenta como ciudadanos en la reconstrucción.

Sin abandonar su agenda de necesidades básicas, dos movimientos tuvieron lugar:

1. Un nuevo tipo de solidaridad se empezó a gestar en medio del proceso de la reconstrucción, que se tradujo en el paso de las solidaridades primarias muy propias de la gente del eje cafetero, a solidaridades de tipo más abstracto ante la transversalidad de la tragedia. Es posible que esto no se pueda identificar con mucha nitidez, pero sigue siendo motivo de reflexión si la relación de vecinos marcada por esas solidaridades primarias fue haciendo el tránsito hacia las relaciones con los ciudadanos, de tipo más anónimo sin que ello impida entender en ese nuevo otro sus necesidades y la posibilidad de afrontar colectivamente sus problemas.

2. La construcción colectiva del nuevo imaginario de ciudad. Esta ciudad, como tantas otras en el país, creció de forma algo desordenada en torno a un eje indudablemente rural, pueblerino, con casas-fincas, iglesias tradicionales y una mentalidad parroquial.

Pero desde la modernización de las ciudades colombianas que se inició en los años 50, fue configurándose una ciudad que comenzó a adicionar elementos modernizadores como...
grandes edificios, nuevos conjuntos residenciales y un mayor desarrollo de la vialidad para albergar al nuevo parque automotor, además de una mayor concienciación del turismo montado a partir de grandes parques como el del Café, dedicados a mostrar lo propio de la zona. La mayoría de los ciudadanos respondió que no quería una nueva Armenia igual que la anterior. Básicamente le incorporarían más vías, la harían como una ciudad más moderna (menos pueblo), con más parques y zonas verdes, con una vocación más orientada hacia el comercio, sitios para la recreación y la cultura, bibliotecas y centros educativos. En este catálogo, la principal prioridad, no obstante, era la vivienda (67.66%), instituciones educativas (43.41%) y generación de empleo (18.29%).

El resultado de estos procesos fue un modelo híbrido de ciudad que podríamos denominar pueblo-ciudad y una deuda pendiente: la modernidad como nuevo paradigma de pensamiento, la secularización de la cultura y la politización de las relaciones de la ciudadanía con los poderes.

Cuando llegó a Armenia el proyecto Voces Ciudadanas ya se estaba dando una mayor politización de la ciudadanía en la línea de participación en un nuevo sentido de lo público, plagado de contradicciones, sin eco en la clase política empeñada en favorecer sus intereses electorales y con unos medios de comunicación basados en los patrones de la información tradicional, que no entendieron, hasta el final de la reconstrucción, que hablar del terremoto, sus víctimas y el proceso de la reconstrucción no tenía qué ver con la forma tradicional de un periodismo informativo que además no era muy profesional, estaba hecho por personas empíricas o profesionales absorbidos por un medio periodístico a su vez pre-moderno.

Dos proyectos de comunicación cuestionaron esa mirada rancia, imitadora de un periodismo de la primicia y el estatus del periodista que no está al servicio de la sociedad sino que se siente una clase especial de ciudadano que se coda con el poder y recibe de él favores de vez en cuando. Esos dos proyectos fueron Voces Ciudadanas, en la modalidad de periodismo público y el proyecto de Comunicación Pública que desde esa institucionalidad Estado-ONGs apostaron por una reconstrucción democrática de la ciudad atendiendo a procesos más profundos relacionados con la participación ciudadana, las identidades y la colectivización de un nuevo sentido de lo público.

De lo que nos hablan estos dos proyectos es de una comunicación concebida como escenario de encuentro y de construcción de nuevos imaginarios colectivos, con la inclusión por primera vez de sectores que habían sido tradicionalmente excluidos. La dificultad mayor fue justamente no poder trabajar con la dimensión masiva porque los periódicos y las emisoras de radio estaban plegadas a intereses de los polítiqueros.

El proyecto de Voces Ciudadanas fue el que más padeció este modelo y tuvo que contar con esos periodistas tradicionales y al mismo tiempo abrir una nueva brecha de trabajo acercándose de forma creativa a la ciudadanía, yendo a los cambuches (tiendas en donde estaban los albergues temporales de vivienda para los que habían quedado sin techo), preguntando, interpelando a la gente en diferentes espacios públicos de la ciudad.

Por su parte, el proyecto de Comunicación Pública tuvo que crear sus propios medios, emisora y periódico, y dedicarse a la producción de otro tipo de periodismo y de otro tipo de comunicación, apelando por ejemplo a la radionovela para colocar temas de agenda colectiva y situar el nuevo rol de los ciudadanos en el proceso de la reconstrucción, al tiempo que le apostaba a la construcción de un nuevo sentido en las relaciones entre los agentes encargados formalmente de la reconstrucción y la ciudadanía.

Así, a través del proyecto de Voces Ciudadanas la gente del común construyó su propia agenda para la reconstrucción, la cual se visibilizó no solamente en los medios de comunicación locales, sino en un periódico de carácter nacional editado en Bogotá (El Espectador) y se entregó en un acto público al que asistió el líder del proceso articulador del Estado y las ONGs. Esa agenda tuvo un impacto directo en la Gerencia de Comunicación del Fondo de la Reconstrucción (FOREC), que a partir de ahí y dado que su permanencia en la zona iría hasta
el final del proceso, se encargó de volver transversales las demandas ciudadanas a todas las estrategias comprometidas en la reconstrucción. En este caso se puede considerar que el periodismo público contribuyó de alguna manera al desarrollo de tres expectativas ciudadanas:
● La inclusión de la gente del común en la reconstrucción
● El debate sobre una nueva identidad ciudadana más participante en el espacio público.
● Una nueva identidad de la ciudad.
Finalmente la reconstrucción siguió afrontando algunas contradicciones, pero lo cierto es que en su momento, quizás el más grande conflicto obedeció a la falta de un tejido comunicativo que fue abordado a partir de Voces Ciudadanas y el proyecto de Viva la Ciudadanía de manera coherente y en el horizonte de la producción de una comunicación democrática.

Notas
2. Incipiente en relación con dos ciudades vecinas como Pereira y Manizales.
4. Encuesta Voces Ciudadanas (ibid.).

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Chernobyl – The U.S. media’s slant

William A. Dorman and Daniel Hirsch

On 26 April 1986 a catastrophic accident occurred at the Chernobyl reactor in the Ukraine, 100 kilometres northwest of Kiev. Over a hundred times more radiation was released than that of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Radiation fallout contaminated parts of Belarus, Russia, and the Ukraine, resulting in the resettlement of more than 350,000 people. In 2005 the World Health Organisation estimated that some 4,000 people could eventually die of radiation exposure from the accident. During this era of the ‘Cold War’, Western media coverage was intense. But was it fair? And what lessons does it have for media manipulation today?

In international news, first impressions usually are lasting ones. The impressions about the Chernobyl tragedy, given currency by the news media and most likely to linger for many Americans, are that a similar nuclear disaster could not happen in the United States and that the affair was further evidence that the Kremlin cannot be trusted to carry out a nuclear arms agreement. Yet a sampling of early crisis coverage poses the troubling possibility that these impressions were the product of a Cold War journalistic rush to judgment rather than the result of sound news practice in a situation that demanded more than the usual prudence.

Of course, the Soviets’ failure to promptly warn neighbouring countries invited suspicion.
And clearly the media’s job was severely complicated by a news vacuum created by the Soviet Union’s grudging release of only meagre information after the initial announcement, although it is still not clear how much the Soviets knew early on or when they knew it. An official at a Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) briefing on May 8 concluded: ‘It is most likely that the Soviets do not yet know with certainty the actual sequence of events. This is similar to our knowledge of the sequence of events at TMI-2 within the first week or so after the accident.’

Still, at least for those concerned about a better understanding of both the Soviet Union and nuclear matters, the Kremlin’s behaviour cannot justify the news media’s rush to fill the information void with rumour and an uncritical presentation of the views of the Reagan Administration and the nuclear power industry.

**Media speculation**
The most disturbing aspect of U.S. press coverage was the willingness to give currency to speculation about casualties and thereby to charge, implicitly or explicitly, that the Soviets were trying to cover up the true death toll. An egregious example of such irresponsibility was a *New York Post* front page, whose headlines screamed, ‘MASS GRAVE - 15,000 Reported Buried in Nuke Disposal Site’, a report that relied on nothing more than a Ukrainian weekly in New Jersey.1

Perhaps an even more serious lapse, given its prestige and number of clients throughout the United States, was United Press International’s handling of the death toll. Its report of 2,000 deaths received wide play, and the wire service did not retract its story until almost a month later. The report was based wholly on the word of a single unidentified source in Kiev whose story could not be confirmed.

Several major news organizations – including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the Associated Press, and the three television networks – exercised varying degrees of caution in using the figure of 2,000 supposed dead but used it nevertheless. It is doubtful that caveats about lack of confirmation counted for much in the superheated atmosphere. The Soviet announcement that two had been killed in the initial accident was all but dismissed by the news media.

U.S. government sources dominated the news. For instance, prominent play was given to Kenneth Adelman, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, who called the official Soviet statement regarding casualties ‘frankly preposterous’, and Secretary of State George Shultz, who said he would ‘bet $10’ that the deaths were ‘far in excess’ of the figures given by the Soviets. The press can be expected to report what prominent members of the Administration have to say, but journalists did not challenge these and other assertions about Chernobyl, nor were these officials pressed for hard evidence despite their obvious bias.

Ironically, the initial Soviet statements turned out to be largely correct on a number of significant concerns – for example, the number of casualties, the number of reactors on fire, and whether the fire had been contained – while those of the Reagan Administration, which were taken by journalists at face value, proved not to be. Yet elements of the national press were all too quick to echo the Administration’s position that the whole affair demonstrated that negotiating arms control with the Soviets was senseless because they could not be trusted to tell the truth on nuclear matters.

The *New York Times* intoned in a May 1 editorial: ‘Gorbachev cannot win confidence in his pledges to reduce nuclear weapons if he forfeits his neighbours’ trust over the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.’ U.S. journalists frequently erased the distinctions between verifying nuclear weapons treaties, with all of the technical safeguards that such schemes have to provide, and the slow release of information by the Soviets about a totally unexpected explosion at a civilian nuclear plant—a situation for which no treaty obligations currently exist.

**Media manipulation**
The U.S. nuclear industry seems to have made a major effort to use the press to distance itself from the Soviet accident, apparently in order to preserve deregulation gains achieved under the
Reagan Administration. The New York Times, belatedly but to its credit, pointed out some three weeks after the accident: ‘Nuclear proponents and industry officials have tried to minimize Chernobyl’s relevance to American power plant operation by contending that American units have better features.’ The article quoted a mailing to reporters from the Atomic Industrial Forum as flatly stating that Chernobyl had no containment structure, and cited industry-sponsored advertisements claiming that many Soviet reactors—including those at Chernobyl—lack the steel and reinforced-concrete containment structures common to U.S. reactors.2

Similar views were advanced by spokespersons for the Electric Power Research Institute – Chernobyl ‘was not encased in a reinforced-concrete containment building, as is required of reactors in the United States’ and therefore ‘there was nothing to stop’ radioactivity escaping from the plant – and the Edison Electric Institute: ‘We have not and will not have a Chernobyl-type plant accident here.’3

At least during the early period of the crisis, there is evidence that the industry’s efforts were successful. For instance, the theme pushed by the industry that allegedly backward Soviet technology was the sole explanation for the accident at Chernobyl was caught in the April 30 editorial judgment of the New York Times: ‘The accident may reveal more about the Soviet Union than the hazards of nuclear power... Behind the Chernobyl setback may lie deeper faults of a weak technology and industrial base.’ While the editorial did carefully conclude with the observation that Americans are as vulnerable as Soviets to ‘technological disasters and human error’, its overall tone and that of other mainstream coverage was markedly less humble.

The impression conveyed by the news media during the early stages of the accident was that Americans had little to fear from a Chernobyl-like disaster. Virtually absent in news columns as well as editorials was the perspective that the real lesson to be learned from Chernobyl was the fallibility of complex technology, not Soviet backwardness.

In particular, editorial writers seemed quick to accept the industry’s contentions about the total lack of containment at Chernobyl. As early as April 30, the Los Angeles Times told readers: ‘Minimum safety standards... clearly have not been met in the Soviet Union, where most nuclear reactors – apparently including the ill-fated plant at Chernobyl – do not have containment structures of the sort that are almost universal outside Russia.’ A May 2 editorial in the San Jose Mercury News echoed these views with the conclusion that ‘the U.S.S.R. simply has not built safe reactors.’

The possibility that the plant had some form of containment should have been immediately obvious to reporters and editors. Both the New York Times and the Los Angeles Times reported the first day that, although older plants were often built without containment structures, the Soviets began adding them for newer nuclear plants in 1980, in the wake of the Three Mile Island accident.4 Both papers furthermore reported that the four units at Chernobyl had been completed between 1977 and 1983. Unsure of which unit was involved or its construction date, the New York Times was careful to state that ‘it is not known’ at which of the Chernobyl reactors the accident had occurred nor whether it had containment.

Such caution, however, appeared to evaporate the following day, even though by this time the Times was able to report that the accident had occurred at the newest of the four reactors at the facility, which went into operation in 1983, and therefore – at least based on what was reported the day before – presumably had some form of containment.5 Rather than pursuing this line of inquiry, the media opted to repeat the no-containment theme advanced by U.S. nuclear power advocates. Nor was it pointed out that, even if Chernobyl had no containment, the failure or bypass of such structures remains one of the most troubling potential aspects of severe accidents in U.S. reactors.

American minds had probably long since been made up on the question of containment by the time the New York Times reported on May 19, three weeks after the first story on the accident, that the reactor which exploded had a large containment structure of heavy steel and concrete, and ‘that at least some of this con-
tainment structure was designed to withstand pressures similar to those in many American reactors.’ The Times also reported that the stricken reactor ‘had more safety features and was closer to American reactor designs than Western experts had assumed’, and in fact ‘incorporated enough of the advanced safety features used in American reactors to raise questions... about the effectiveness of plant designs in the United States.’

Why this information took so long to surface in the national press is puzzling. Much of the material in the Times story, for instance, was revealed at the May 8 NRC briefing in a room packed with reporters, 11 days before the Times or other major news organizations finally ran its story. And two days before that briefing, NRC Commissioner James Asselstine had testified at a House hearing that Chernobyl indeed did have containment and that it was built to withstand greater pressure than some U.S. containments. Yet his disclosure received only passing mention in a Wall Street journal article and barely surfaced elsewhere.6

In short, mainstream journalists first ignored the strong possibility apparent from day one of the crisis that Chernobyl might have containment, and then for whatever reasons continued to ignore the possibility even after NRC officials brought it to their attention.

### Them vs. us mentality

Throughout the early days of the Chernobyl story, U.S. journalism seemed determined to make the disaster into a morality tale about U.S. and Soviet cultures. Over and over, the accident was linked to the nature of Soviet society, the absence of debate, and state control of the press. Editorialists and commentators adopted a self-congratulatory tone, implying that the virtues of U.S. democracy – in particular a free press – made such a tragedy practically impossible in the United States. Journalists should have been alert to the possibility that they were being manipulated by those with a vested interest in portraying the Soviets in the worst possible light.

A number of news organizations eventually took a critical view of Chernobyl coverage, but the usual explanation for the media’s questionable behaviour during the crisis let journalists off with little more than a mild reproach. According to Newsweek: ‘For all the frenzy, the press was just obeying a natural law: journalism abhors a vacuum.'7 Thus, Soviet secrecy was blamed for defective U.S. coverage of the Chernobyl accident.8

While journalism does indeed abhor vacuums, such an explanation avoids the question of how vacuums are to be filled, which is not a matter of nature but rather of choice. These choices may have had as much to do with a reflexive instinct to believe the worst of the Soviets as with a journalistic rush to fill a void.

**First published in Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, August/September 1986. Reprinted with permission.**

### Notes

1. The Post’s actions are recounted in ‘Did the Media Hype Chernobyl?’ Newsweek (May 26, 1986), p. 31.
7. ‘Did the Media Hype Chernobyl?’

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Media and the right to communicate in Sierra Leone

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Bernadette Cole

Sierra Leone is emerging from a decade-long civil war, which ended in 2002. The war undermined an already fragile political, educational, economic and media infrastructure, leaving the nation struggling to pick up the pieces. Nevertheless, Sierra Leone also has a proud tradition of indigenous independent media. This article looks at Sierra Leone’s newspapers as a case study in the difficulties of supporting the right to communicate under conditions of poverty and underdevelopment.

The right to communicate comes out of Article 19 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which states that: ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression: this right includes freedom to hold opinion without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’ (United Nations, 1997).

Key aspects of communication rights have been enshrined in legal frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Ó Siochrú, 2004, p. 23). Debates over the right to communicate have focused on access to information and active participation through mass media, seen as both an individual and collective entitlement.

A notion of communication rights therefore allows us to ask questions about ‘how communicative opportunities [can] be assured and enhanced for everyone’ (McIver, Birdsall & Rasmussen, 2004, p. 9). Communication rights are often invoked in discussion of media development, as a way of framing the need to empower the most marginalized and poorest populations. It is in this light that we examine the relationship between poverty and the right to communicate.

We suggest that a regulatory framework supporting the right to communicate is a necessary, but not sufficient starting point for media development that gives voice to everyone. In Sierra Leone, poverty and underdevelopment conspire to undermine communication rights, and must be addressed before a rights-based philosophy can be substantiated.

Sierra Leone: Media and society

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world. It is at the bottom of the United Nation’s index of human development indicators. The nation is slowly emerging from the civil war which devastated the country between 1991 and 2002. After the war, 70% of the population are illiterate, life expectancy stands at 38 years, and infant mortality is 170 per 1,000 (Coker, 2003).

Despite its traumatic recent history, the country has a distinguished media history. Sierra Leone was the first nation in Anglophone West Africa to publish newspapers. The Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser first came out in January 1801. A seminal publication, it stimulated newspaper activity throughout British West Africa. During the 19th century, a variety of newspapers were published in Sierra Leone, which became the ‘hub of African journalism’ (Ziegler and Asante, 1992: 12). The strength and diversity of Freetown newspapers were sustained throughout the colonial era.

When Sierra Leone gained independence in 1961, a viable media infrastructure was thus already in place. In the post-colonial era, the climate was initially supportive of a free press, under the rule of Milton Margai. However, subsequent governments sought to control the media by means of legislation, threats and coercion (Cole, 1995). The climate for media oper-
ation deteriorated dramatically during the civil war. 70% of trained media professionals left Sierra Leone, ‘leaving the industry in the hands of mostly untrained media practitioners’ (Coker, 2003: 78).

Since the end of the war in 2002, and the return of many displaced citizens and journalists, a vibrant and diverse media has emerged once again under the democratically elected regime of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. Today’s media landscape in Sierra Leone includes a total of 44 newspapers, 33 community radio stations, 6 international radio relay stations and 4 television stations (Independent Media Commission, August, 2006). Most of the community radio stations are supported by international donors. Talking Drum Studios, supported by the worldwide NGO, *Search for Common Ground*, distributes programs to 20 community broadcasters (*Search for Common Ground*, 2006).

The Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) and the Radio Netherlands Training Center, through its local subsidiary INFOMOTRAC, have between them supported the establishment of over 25 community radio stations. In addition, popular media forms, including theater and music, have long played a key role in shaping public debate. Since the end of the civil war, popular musicians including Daddy Saj and Emmerson Bockarie have called attention to the problem of endemic corruption. Their music has been so influential that some observers have likened them to an unofficial opposition.

While most areas of the country now have access to at least one community radio station, the popularity of newspapers appears to be waning. Of the 44 newspapers registered with the Independent Media Commission, only about 12 of them are published regularly. Half are printed on a daily basis, while others come out once, twice or three times a week. Leading newspapers include *New Citizen*, *Standard Times*, *Independent Observer*, *Concord Times*, and *Awareness Times*.

Here, we look at how newspapers in Sierra Leone can contribute to the right to communicate, but also critically examine how legal constraints and a scarcity of resources interact to make it difficult for these home-grown newspapers to provide information and give voice to the population.

**Legal constraints**

Journalists in Sierra Leone have been enjoying increasing freedom of expression since the end of the Civil War. Today, Sierra Leonean journalists report freely on any event, issue, or activity. They name and shame corrupt officials in the hope that this will serve as a deterrent; they play their watchdog role by monitoring the activities of the government and institutions of public trust. Nevertheless, this is not to say that it is all rosy under the democratic dispensation. Like the legal frameworks prevailing in most other African countries (Ogbondah, 2002: 58), the Sierra Leone Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, supporting aspects of the right to communicate.

However, the defamatory and criminal libel laws contained in the 1965 Public Order Act work against the guarantee of communication rights, insofar as they criminalize seditious libel. The act empowers the judiciary to jail journalists convicted of libel. It also allows for the conviction of anyone who utters, prints, publishes, sells, distributes, reproduces or imports seditious information. Not only are individual newsworkers vulnerable to charges of seditious libel; the legislation also criminalizes printing houses and vendors. Critics of the legislation argue that it is used as a tool to suppress dissent against power holders, while proponents insist it is a necessary tool in enforcing the responsible practice of journalism.

The most high-profile Public Order court case since the return to democracy in 1996 has been that of Paul Kamara, the editor of *For Di People*, who spent 13 months in jail (October 2004 to November 2005) for publishing stories about President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah which the courts found to be libelous. The sentence was later overturned by the Appeal Court which argued that Kamara’s action did not amount to sedition.

However, since the establishment of the Independent Media Commission in 2002, very few journalists have been charged under the Public Order Act as the public instead take their complaints to the IMC. In 2005, a total of
27 complaints were lodged at the IMC by the public (IMC 2005 Annual Report). From January to June 2006, 18 complaints were lodged. At Commission hearings, the complainant and the offending newspaper are present. If the complaint is proved to be libelous, defamatory or false, the editor is requested to publish a retraction and apology.

Overall, guaranteeing free expression does not necessarily provide all that is required for the right to communicate to thrive. Such a right must also be considered in the context of responsible journalism practice.

**Operational problems**
The most significant challenge to newspaper operation in Sierra Leone is the lack of a viable economy. It is extremely difficult for newspapers to gain significant advertising revenues and income from sales. The cost of advertising is the lowest in sub-Saharan Africa and probably in the world; a full-page advertisement can be bought for Le300,000 (US$95). The largest advertisers in Sierra Leone are mobile phone companies, the government, and NGOs, especially the UN.

The combined circulation of all newspapers does not exceed 10,000 copies. This small figure should be viewed in the context of overall newspaper circulation in sub-Saharan Africa, where ‘daily newspaper circulation remains at twenty per 1,000 compared to the worldwide average of ninety per 1,000’ (Ogundimu, 2002: 220).

There are several reasons for the low circulation figures. First, low literacy rates severely restrict the audience. As a result, newspapers cater to urban, English-speaking and affluent elite of ‘government officials, politicians, business executives, university students, lecturers and the diplomats’ (Sumana, 2005). Secondly, because of their weak financial base, very few newspapers can afford to station reporters outside the capital, Freetown.

These factors highlight a significant challenge to the right to communicate in the Sierra Leonean context and beyond: While the proliferation of newspapers in the capital allows political and economic elites to ‘seek, receive and impart information and ideas’, there is little access to information and participation for the majority of the population living outside Freetown.

**Shortage of technology and equipment**
Though reporting from urban centers allow journalists to hold elites to account, this task is made more difficult by a lack of basic resources. One of the most fundamental challenges to running a technology-intensive enterprise in Sierra Leone is the lack of a consistent electricity supply. It means that newspapers, like most other businesses, rely on expensive gas-fueled generators. There is also a shortage of adequate printing presses in the country (Nasralla, 2005).

The owners of the presses that do operate are often fearful of publishing material critical of the government because they are liable for contents under the Public Order Act. The printing presses are unreliable because their outdate equipment frequently breaks down, suffering from a lack of spare parts and routine maintenance. Only two newspapers, Standard Times and AWOKO, print in color. The printing presses are also affected by short supply of consumables.

Moreover, there is a scarcity of basic technologies and materials necessary for newspaper production. This includes access to computers, printers, telephones, cameras, paper, notepads, pens and pencils, tape recorders, office space, and office furniture for journalists. A visit by the IMC to newspaper houses in 2005 revealed that several of the papers do not even have office space. A survey of 50 Freetown print journalists showed that while one out of five respondents have access to computers and telephones in the newsroom, only one out of ten have access to tape recorders and note pads (Parkinson, 2005).

Without such basic technologies, it is much more difficult for newspaper journalists to cover even basic breaking news stories dealing with political elites, let alone make the effort to broaden access by seeking out the voices of the marginalized and underprivileged.

Exacerbating these resource problems is the fact that because of the limited financial resources of newspapers, few are able to pay
their employees a living wage. According to one study, the average monthly salary of Sierra Leonean journalists is about Le 60,000 (US$25.48) (Nasralla, 2005: 9). By comparison, the per capita GDP of Sierra Leone was US$600 in 2004, according to the CIA World Factbook. On this basis, Sierra Leone was ranked at 230 out of 232 countries in the world. And even within the impoverished national context, journalists’ wages stand out as particularly low. A considerable percentage of newspaper journalists – at least 20% – work entirely without pay (Parkinson, 2005: 33). Because newspapers cannot pay their workers a living wage, journalists are forced to find other means to support themselves. This occasionally translates into unethical practices.

Some journalists engage in what is known as ‘coasting,’ or the use of blackmail. Coasting is a significant source of revenue, accounting for 30% of reporters’ income according to one study (Parkinson, 2005). It works as follows. Upon joining the newspaper staff, journalists are issued with a press ID card. They ‘coast’ by using this card to coax money out of individuals or organizations (Parkinson, 2005). First, journalists may require payments by organizers of events in exchange for coverage. For example, the local coordinator for the aid agency ADRA recalled that at a news conference held by his organization, a photographer demanded payment for covering the event.

A second form of ‘coasting’ involves journalists making demands for payment in exchange for keeping secret damaging information – whether real or fabricated. Coasting is the consequence of resourceful individuals adapting to a resource-poor environment. However, this does not make it defensible. The end result of widespread coasting is that journalists are mistrusted (Reno, 2004).

Altogether, these resource problems highlight the fact that vibrant news media do not guarantee the right to communicate. What is also needed is a sound financial basis to create a framework for the responsible operation of mass media, and an audience empowered to access these media.

References


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Can the media be a sanctuary for human rights?

Philip Lee

Amnesty International wants nations to ‘reaffirm and reassert human rights as embodying the common values and universal standards of human decency and dignity, equality and justice’ (Report 2005). It also calls on them to ‘be vigilant in protecting civil society, because the pursuit of freedom depends on civil society as much as on the rule of law, an independent judiciary, free media and elected governments.’ How can the mass media contribute?

One of the great dramatic moments in Victor Hugo’s novel Notre-Dame de Paris comes when Quasimodo snatches the gypsy Esmeralda from the hands of her would-be executioners and escapes with her into the great church of Notre-Dame:

‘The people, fond of daring deeds, followed him with their eyes through the dark nave, regretting that he had so quickly withdrawn himself from their acclamations. Suddenly he was seen again at one end of the gallery of the kings of France. He ran along it like a frenzied person, lifting his prize in his arms and shouting, “Sanctuary!” The crowd again burst forth with applause. When he had crossed the gallery, he plunged again into the interior of the church. A minute later, he reappeared on the upper platform, still carrying the gypsy in his arms, still running madly along, still crying, “Sanctuary!” And the crowd applauded again. At last he made a third appearance atop the tower of the great bell. There he seemed to show proudly to the whole city her whom he had saved, and his thundering voice, that voice which was heard so rarely, and which he had never heard, repeated three times with frenzy, even to the clouds, “Sanctuary! Sanctuary! Sanctuary!”’

This moment is equally striking in the best-known film adaptation of the story, The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1939) starring Charles Laughton.

What was ‘sanctuary’ and why was it held inviolable? In ancient Egypt the temples of Osiris and Amon offered the right of sanctuary. In ancient Greece all temples enjoyed this privilege, and certain of them, like the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, were known throughout the Mediterranean as a haven for fugitives. In ancient Rome, sanctuary was often sought by runaway slaves.

Emperor Constantine I is said to have given Christian churches the right of sanctuary. Asylum was originally confined to the church itself, but later its limits were extended to include the precincts and occasionally a larger area marked by ‘sanctuary crosses’. In England in Norman times there were two kinds of sanctuary, one belonging to every church by prescription and the other by special royal charter. The latter was considered much safer. A fugitive convicted of a felony and taking sanctuary was afforded protection from 30 to 40 days, after which he had to leave the kingdom and take an oath not to return without the king’s permission.

During the Middle Ages, the period in which Notre-Dame de Paris is set, sanctuary served as a refuge for persons fleeing from violence or the penalties of the law. To injure a person in sanctuary or to remove him or her forcibly was considered sacrilegious. Violations were punishable by fines or excommunication. In some cases there was a stone seat within the church, called the ‘frith-stool’, which the seeker of sanctuary had to reach in order to establish a claim to protection. More commonly, there was a large ring or knocker on the church door, holding on to which gave the right of asylum.
In the last few years, the concept of sanctuary has come under fierce political and social pressure. In Bethlehem in April 2002, 124 Palestinians sought refuge in the Church of the Nativity, which was quickly surrounded by Israeli armed forces. A five-week stand-off ensued, after which the Palestinians, including 13 ‘senior terrorists’ according to Israel, were allowed to emerge unharmed. They were flown by British military aircraft to Cyprus and then exiled in several European countries. Israel did not, on that occasion, violate the church’s sanctuary and, with the eyes of the world on it, accepted the ‘voluntary’ exile of the Palestinians.

In April 2004, police in Quebec City, Canada, stormed the Église Unie St. Pierre to remove 35-year old Mohammed Cherfi, who had taken refuge in the basement. The man faced deportation to Algeria for violating bail conditions by taking part in a demonstration. Immigration Minister Judy Sgro criticised the practice of offering sanctuary to refugees. In response a panel of leaders representing 11 major churches was convened, who declared that ‘For us, the duty to care for refugees at risk takes the form of hospitality and nurture and solidarity and protection and hope’, adding that there are situations in which sanctuary is the only recourse that is fair (The Globe and Mail, 4 August 2004).

The controversy provoked a flurry of newspaper articles and letters, including a response from Audrey Macklin, University of Toronto professor of law, one of Canada’s foremost experts on refugee law and a former member of the Immigration and Refugee Board. In an interview she called the practice of sanctuary a valuable ‘safety valve’ for an adjudication process that is significantly flawed (The Globe and Mail, 5 August 2004).

The media pick up such stories as ‘newsworthy’, sometimes sensationalising them. In the Israeli/Palestinian case, there was every possibility that the confrontation would escalate into open violence. In the Canadian case, a single incident was a topical reminder of the precarious status and treatment of political refugees. Yet there is a sense that it is the media today – rather than the churches – that are the bastions of sanctuary. If the media ignore an event, it has not ‘happened’. Public opinion is silent, because no one ‘knows’ what is going on. Conversely, when the media cover a story, particularly one that involves human rights violations, public opinion responds.

When media coverage fails
The media cannot provide the bricks and mortar protection of a church building, but they can offer a kind of metaphysical environment that, at least, draws public attention to human rights violations. Unfortunately, in the worst situations, media coverage cannot save lives. This was dramatically and tragically proven by the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa, television producer, writer of satirical novels, children’s tales, and plays.

Saro-Wiwa, imprisoned in 1994 by order of Nigerian dictator Sani Abacha, had strongly defended the rights of the Ogoni people and criticised the government’s environmentally and culturally damaging oil policies. Despite wide international protest, Saro-Wiwa was hanged in Port Harcourt, on 10 November 1995, after a show trial involving eight other Ogoni rights.
activists. A media-led campaign was unable to save him.

In 1990 Saro-Wiwa had founded the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). A more radical youth movement, also founded by Saro-Wiwa, was allegedly engaged in sabotage against Shell. The company decided to cease operations in Ogoniland in 1993. In his books *Nigeria, The Brink of Disaster* (1991) and *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (1992), Saro-Wiwa criticised local corruption and condemned Shell and British Petroleum. The Nigerian government decided to break MOSOP and Saro-Wiwa was arrested.

In a letter written in prison and published in London in both *The Mail* and *The Guardian* in May 1995, Saro-Wiwa stated: ‘Ultimately the fault lies at the door of the British government. It is the British government which supplies arms and credit to the military dictators of Nigeria, knowing full well that all such arms will only be used against innocent, unarmed citizens.’

In another letter he said: ‘The most important thing for me is that I’ve used my talents as a writer to enable the Ogoni people to confront their tormentors. I was not able to do it as a politician or a businessman. My writing did it. And it sure makes me feel good! I’m mentally prepared for the worst, but hopeful for the best. I think I have the moral victory.’

**Why is media coverage important?**

Most governments care about their public image. Democratically elected governments wish to be re-elected. All governments wish to attract foreign investment and promote their country’s tourism industry. No government likes domestic or international criticism. With regard to human rights, the media can:

‘Play a key role in building awareness and shaping public opinion on human rights and related issues; shape the framework and nature of debates over important issues affecting human rights, not least the death penalty or human rights in foreign policy; generate action from its audience; influence government policy, both directly and through its power to influence and mobilise opinion; put direct pressure on a government by placing it in the spotlight; help build the morale and influence of human rights activists and organisations all over the world; investigate and expose human rights issues.’

One problem for the media – setting aside proprieterial or editorial obstacles – is access to accurate and reliable information. The problem for human rights groups is how to ensure that the massive amount of violation data they collect reaches its intended audience. A large part is lost due to confiscation or destruction, neglect, the passage of time or because the activists who gather the data lack the resources and infrastructure to document and communicate it systematically and securely.

Now a new, tried and tested tool is available to human rights groups and accessible by others via organisations that use it. The Martus Project (*martus* is the Greek word for witness) is a free software based on open source technology. Launched in 2003 and built by Benetech as a ‘global social justice monitoring system’, it uses built-in encryption to safeguard data, enables text-based bulletins about violations to be created easily and quickly, and securely backs up information and replicates it in multiple locations to guard against loss.

Martus is currently being applied to areas of social justice, including human rights, political rights and violence against women. Martus can also be used to monitor and report other issues such as human trafficking, environmental destruction and hate crimes based on gender, sexual orientation or religious persecution. Training in how to use the system has been done by the U.S.-based Asia Foundation, which is supporting work in the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia and Nepal. Since 2005 the Citizens’ Coalition for Constitutional Change in Kenya has also been using Martus.

There are problems. According to the Global Internet Liberty Campaign, many logistical and legal issues remain to be resolved. In its current form, Martus requires users to have computers with Internet connections, which can be problematic in developing or conflict-
torn countries. In addition, many countries have laws that ban encryption products.5

The mass media as ‘sanctuary’?
In the past, the notion of ‘sanctuary’ provided a temporary haven from the hazards of persecution. In today’s world of gross human rights violations, political refugees and attacks on social activists, the mass media – at least those that are relatively independent of governments and owners – could serve as a metaphorical ‘sanctuary’ for people whose human rights are under threat.

To do so, the media would have to take the moral ‘high ground’ previously occupied by the concept of sanctuary in church. The media cannot physically defend individuals and communities, although many journalists have lost their lives trying to do so. However, they can offer a measure of protection to the degree that they make public – and keep in the public eye – actual human rights violations. They can and should systematically denounce potential human rights abuses.

While this may appear to contradict the mass media’s much lauded precept of ‘impartiality’, many feel that such principles have already gone out of the window:

‘Broadcasters gesture cryptically at the truth, but continue, as if by instinct, to present received wisdoms in clichéd language acceptable to “us”, the term frequently used for Western power: its narcissism and censorship by omission, its good and bad terrorists, worthy and unworthy victims. This is journalism through a one-way mirror.’6

The mass media have always been subject to particular economic and political interests, most recently camouflaged as the war on terrorism or the struggle to preserve democracy. Denis McQuail says that one of the public and collective issues on which the media can be called to account is the way it upholds (or not) human rights and international obligations. He identifies two specific types of media responsibility:

‘Having causal responsibility. The media are potentially powerful agents that can affect behaviour and attitudes, whether intentionally or not, giving rise to claims of harm. The failure to achieve certain effects, for instance in the sphere of public information, leading to public ignorance, apathy or cynicism, may be treated under this heading.

Having moral responsibility. While moral responsibility [is] a matter of the conscience of the many individuals in media, there may also be a collective responsibility, not for direct harm but for general and long-term consequences, usually unintended, of publication practices.’7

Taken together, the careful exercise of both causal responsibility (intentionally affecting behaviour and attitudes) and moral responsibility (ameliorating the general and long-term consequences of harm) could significantly improve human rights worldwide. While the media cannot provide de facto sanctuary, they can create an environment in which human rights are persistently upheld and human rights violations exposed to public scrutiny and condemnation.

It is unrealistic, if not naive, to think that today’s mass media might be so altruistic. They are ‘a prisoner of what people in power say’ and of the paucity of public participation in media ownership and control.8 Even if political sanctuary in the media were possible, it ought to be complemented by renewed commitment to sanctuary in social sectors. For example, commitment by the state health sector to sanctuary for those who cannot afford hospital treatment; commitment by the state welfare sector to sanctuary for those suffering from mental disability; commitment by the state education sector to sanctuary for those with learning difficulties.

In some countries and to varying degrees, such protection (sanctuary) is available. In the majority – large parts of sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Asia – it is not. The argument for sanctuary can be seen, therefore, as an essential aspect of the discourse on democracy and, indeed, of the discourse on media ethics. In their detailed discussion of agape (understood in both secular and New Testament terms
as the highest order of self-giving love), Craig and Ferré propose it as an ethic of care for journalism. In particular they identify two aspects that have the potential to strengthen journalism’s best practices:

‘The first potential contribution is a challenge to pursue the best of journalism steadfastly – especially journalism that serves the ill-treated and those lacking power – in the face of market pressures or desires for professional self-advancement... The second potential contribution of agape to journalists’ understanding of care lies in its radical and unalterable commitment to fairness.’

In this light, by systematically and steadfastly advocating human rights in order to fulfill their political and social responsibilities, the mass media attain the highest level of public service. Idealistic, perhaps, but it can be seen as a normative claim for the mass media to become a virtual sanctuary for the ill-treated and powerless – a universal claim unconstrained by religion or philosophy or culture because it is founded on the common humanity of all people.

Where do we go from here?

Notes
2. Several other film adaptations of Victor Hugo’s novel have been made: *Esmeralda* (1905) – Alice Guy-Blache’s lost silent short; *Esmeralda* (1922), a silent British adaptation with Booth Conway as Quasimodo and Sybil Thorndike as Esmeralda; the silent classic *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) with Lon Chaney; *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1956) with Anthony Quinn and Gina Lollobrigida; a BBC TV play *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1977) with Warren Clarke and Michelle Newell; a Hallmark Hall of Fame TV movie *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1982) with Anthony Hopkins and Lesley-Ann Down; the Disney animation *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996); and *The Hunchback* (1997), a TV movie adaptation with Mandy Patinkin and Salma Hayek.

Philip Lee studied modern languages at the University of Warwick, Coventry, and conducting and piano at the Royal Academy of Music, London. He joined the staff of the World Association for Christian Communication in 1975, where he is currently deputy program director and editor of the international journal *Media Development*. Publications include *Requiem: Here’s Another Fine Mass You’ve Gotten Me Into* (2001); and *Many Voices, One Vision: The Right to Communicate in Practice* (ed.) (2004).
Tarkovsky - ‘You can hear the sound of life breathing’

Carlos A. Valle

‘Why, as we look back, do we see the path of human history punctuated by cataclysms and disasters? What really happened to those civilizations? Why did they run out of breath, lack the will to live, lose the moral strength?’ (Sculpting, 225) asked the great Russian cinema director Andrey Tarkovsky in Sculpting in Time. He died 20 years ago but these questions are still present in a world that mercilessly repeats oppression by hunger, pain and death.

Tarkovsky not only raised questions but also looked very deeply into these issues and tried to find ways to restore the dignity of life. Because ‘art must give man hope and faith. The more hopeless the world in the artist’s version, the more clearly perhaps must we see the ideal that stands in opposition to it - otherwise life becomes impossible!’ (Sculpting, 192). He is not talking about false promises, of providing entertainment that may help to forget pain and frustration. In an interview, asked what was for him the most important thing for cinema, he asserted: ‘The truth. When an artist abandons his search for the truth it is going to have a disastrous effect in his work. The artist’s aim is truth’ (Diaries, 355).

But what truth? What is the truth that Tarkovsky reveals in his art? Tarkovsky died prematurely at 52, on 28 December 1986. He only produced seven feature films full of endless richness. In every one of these films he looks into crucial unavoidable human problems. We can see his spiritual search and his profound poetry in all of them.

Controversy and censorship

The difficulties Tarkovsky had to face in his own country to produce his films are well known. He found himself involved in serious controversies with bureaucrats and ideologists. The five films he produced in the USSR before his exile were surrounded by censorship and jealousy. Two examples illustrate some of the problems he faced.

In the first place, the different political readings on his first feature film, Ivan’s Childhood, by the European left-wing after he received a prize at the Venice Film Festival (1962). These controversies brought him serious political problems that affected his work. Later on difficulties were raised with his second and more ambitious project, Andrey Rublyov. The movie was made between 1964 and 1966 and was realised an immediate success. Nevertheless when he tried to show the film outside of the URSS, it suffered restrictions and obstacles.

After many negotiations and numerous requests the film was shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969, but Tarkovsky was barred from competing for a prize. However, Andrey Rublyov was given the FIPRESCI prize of the international critics. Maya Turovskaya recalls that ‘Tarkovsky’s opponents accused the film of a lack optimism, a lack of humanism, a failure to show the known resistance to the Tartar yoke... a surfeit of violence and nudity and over-complexity of form’ (Turovskaya, 48).

In this context we cannot ignore the paradox emerging in film production at that time. If we take into consideration the five films that Tarkovsky produced in the USSR we have to agree with Pablo Capanna that ‘only the State could finance such a poetic and least commercial work that would fill any western producer with fear’ (Capanna, 51).

Many times the work of great artists comes up against countless difficulties. Blindness tends to be a response when they reveal the injustices they perceive and propose new ways to overcome them. In these circumstances, in spite of all the pain and rejection they suffer, their creativity tends to increase.
Tarkovsky’s work was moving upwards and dangerously. At every step it become clearer to him that the world had arrived at such a ruinous situation that at any time it could suffer an irreversible catastrophe. He was afraid of the modern world that had made the purely material its only basis of life. ‘It is clear to everyone that material progress doesn’t in itself make people happy, but all the same we go on fanatically multiplying its “achievements”’ (Sculpting, 221). For Tarkovsky in this extreme situation human beings have only to reestablish consciousness of their responsibility for their own destiny. To understand what this means and how it is shown in his work we shall consider the last film produced by him in the USSR: Stalker (1979).

The Zone

Stalker is based in a short story by Arkadi and Boris Strugatsky - well known Russian writers of science fiction - called A Roadside Picnic. The story moves around an area called the Zone. It is a place that had been invaded by some mysterious celestial entity but that now remains as a dirty and abandoned place. The Zone is, at the moment, well guarded and access to it is forbidden and mysterious and strange laws dominate it.

The Zone has become the center of attraction for scientists and adventurers because it is like an enormous rubbish dump where valuable objects might be found. There are those who make of this search a clandestine profession. They are called stalkers, prowlers, and false guides. In the Zone, moreover, it may be possible to find the golden sphere that has the power to fulfil the dreams of those who find it.

The Strugatsky brothers in their discussion with Tarkovsky finally agreed to eliminate the science fiction character of the story. For a start the stalker, ‘instead of being some kind of drug dealer or poacher has to be a slave, a believer, a pagan of the Zone’ (Diaries, 147). The golden sphere became the room of desires. This essential change imbued the script with new possibilities of dealing with more concrete and familiar interpretations.

The film was compared with the fields of the vast Soviet prison network in the Gulag Archipelago. It is said that people used to call it ‘the Zone’ to indicate the fate of those who had disappeared there (Capanna, 65). Nevertheless, Tarkovsky denied that the Zone had a special significance. For him: ‘The Zone doesn’t symbolise anything, any more than anything else does in my films: the zone is a zone, it’s life, and as he makes his way across it a man may break down or he may come through’ (Sculpting, 200).

At the beginning of the film Stalker, in spite of the pleas of his wife, left her and his little invalid daughter and goes to meet with the Writer and the Scientist - the characters have lost their names - to be their guide in the Zone. Once they have avoided the fierce vigilance that surrounds the Zone they move forward into a land covered in waste and water. It is a picture of a disintegrated world without possibility of been restored. Even so the visitors don’t seem to see this as an obstacle to making their most intimate desires real.

Stalker recalls the story of another stalker, Diko-ôbras, who went to the Zone to ask for his brother to come alive again, who had died because of him. Returning home home Diko-ôbras finds out that he has became rich. His most intimate desire has been fulfilled, one that even he was unaware of. He could not stand it and decided to hang himself.

Neither the Writer nor the Scientist seem to represent Science or the Arts, but they raise some scientific and artistic questions and points of view. The Scientist has rational views of every issue and enormous doubts with respect to the mystery surrounding the Zone and the Room. The Writer is more ironic and cynical. He has become sceptical about his profession as a writer. He is convinced that he will fail and very soon nobody will read his books.

These attitudes produces acrimonious dialogue along the way. At one point the Scientist challenges the Writer: ‘Why don’t you teach me the meaning of life and at the same time how to think?’ It is Stalker who later on will answer to both of them. ‘You were talking about the meaning of life, of our life, the unselfishness of art. Now take music. It is connected least of all with reality. Or, if it is connected, then it’s without ideas; it’s merely
empty, sounds without associations. Nevertheless, music miraculously penetrates your very soul. What chord in us responds to its harmonies transforming it into a source of supreme delight, and uniting us and shattering us?

Tarkovsky saw art as a way of expressing life creatively, allowing us to get rid of the false security that the materialistic and consumer society offers. Eran Josephson – the great Swedish actor, from Nostalghia and Sacrifice - affirmed that Tarkovsky was not a mysterious man but a man who was in contact with mystery. He is one of those who dares to challenge himself to explore unknown ways that put aside scepticism and discouraging rationality.

In a world that tends towards its own destruction Tarkovsky, against all the odds, is convinced that his ‘function is to make whoever sees my films aware of his need to love and to give love, and aware that beauty is summoning him’ (Sculpting, 200).

When the moment arrives the Writer and the Scientist have the moral strength to enter the Room. The Scientist, who in secret brought with him a bomb, says that he will detonate it because he wants to prevent dictators or ‘enlightened’ people taking possession of it. But the Stalker prevents him doing so because he says that hope would be destroyed and because he himself would be totally forsaken.

At the end they manage to leave the Zone. Stalker returns to his home and his wife. She was frightened when he left for the Zone but now is happy to receive and console him. She is the one who stresses the importance of love. Looking at the camera he recalls that her mother insisted on avoiding contact with stalkers because they are marked men, ‘the fools of Go’” and this would affect their children. But this was not an obstacle for her and she concludes: ‘I was sure I’d be happy with him. I knew there’d be a lot of sorrow but I’d rather know bitter-sweet happiness than a grey, uneventful life.’

Love offers hope
For Tarkovsky ‘In Stalker I made some sort of complete statement: namely that human love alone is - miraculously - proof against the blunt assertion that there is no hope for the world. This is our common, and incontrovertibly positive possession.’ Nevertheless, perhaps he is moving between what he wanted to be and what sadly is: ‘Although we no longer quite know how to love...’ (Sculpting, 199)

Is art only a fantasy that tries to make us forget or at least to deny the painful truths that face humanity? If that is so, is what Tarkovsky proposes diluted into an illusory way without end? Must we resign ourselves to believing that we are dealing with mere utopias?

Tarkovsky seems to come up with an answer in his last film, Sacrifice. Near the beginning the principal character, Alexander, and his little boy are watering a dry tree.² The boy, because he had been through a throat operation, cannot say a word and is listening quietly to the story his father tells about a Russian monk who watered for years a dry tree until the moment the tree flourished.

In the final scene the little boy is alone again watering the tree and he breaks his silence saying: ‘In the beginning was the word. Why Papa?’ Because only communication can avoid isolation and break down the barriers of race, religion, gender, opening avenues of genuine encounter.

Tarkovsky knew this very well. ‘In a world where there is a real threat of a war capable of annihilating mankind, where social ills exist on a staggering scale, where human suffering cries out to heaven – a way must be found for one person to reach another. Such is the sacred duty of humanity towards its own future, and the personal duty of each individual’ (Sculpting, 200).

Notes
1. from the poem ‘Ignatiev Forest’ by Arseniy Tarkovsky.
2. Although Tarkovsky denied using symbolism in his films, the dry tree is a symbol of faith.

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Reformas constitucionales
De libertades a derechos

Carlos A. Camacho Azurduy

Bolivia se encuentra en un importante período histórico de redefinición y readecuación del papel del Estado y de la sociedad a través de un proceso constituyente estructural, que estuvo siendo demandado desde hace más de una década por los pueblos indígenas y originarios. En este marco, se ha comenzado a plantear temas fundamentales en la mesa de discusión pública; empero, la comunicación no parece ser uno de estos. Frente a este panorama, periodistas y comunicadores han iniciado el debate desde diversos enfoques. El presente artículo plantea pistas para coadyuvar a la reflexión que si bien pertenece a un país específicamente, puede ser aplicada a cualquier otro que se encuentre en una etapa fundacional similar.

Uno de los temas fundamentales para la vida democrática del país y que no se puede dejar de tratar y analizar en la Asamblea Constituyente es el Derecho de la Comunicación y el Derecho de la Información. La única norma que regula en parte este tema es la Ley de Imprenta (1925), que establece la protección del honor, la dignidad y la privacidad de los ciudadanos comunes, al castigar la calumnia y la difamación en el mal trabajo periodístico. Esta perspectiva ética es totalmente pertinente para el trabajo periodístico actual; empero, al circunscribirse en el periodismo impreso, deja de lado la urgente necesidad de normar la difusión actual de los medios audiovisuales (televisión, video) y las nuevas tecnologías de la información y la comunicación (informática, Internet).

Sobre el tema, en el gremio periodístico y académico presenciamos el debate entre dos visiones disímiles y contrapuestas que se deben seguir discutiendo públicamente de manera amplia. Por una parte, la Asociación de Periodistas de La Paz que plantea mantener esta Ley y el artículo 7º de la actual Constitución Política del Estado (CPE), el único donde se establece como uno de los derechos fundamentales de toda persona el de emitir libremenete ideas y opiniones por cualquier medio de difusión (¿por qué esta libertad debe estar limitada en su ejercicio a los medios masivos de comunicación?). Por otro lado, un grupo de periodistas y comunicadores, convocados a partir de la iniciativa de la Asociación Boliviana de Investigadores de la Comunicación (ABOIC), va más allá al plantear la necesidad de que la nueva CPE debería tratar el derecho de la comunicación y el derecho de la información.

¿Libertad o derecho?
Para coadyuvar la reflexión, se debe apuntar que en el ámbito de la comunicación se habla de una serie de libertades como la de pensamiento, opinión, expresión, prensa e, incluso, información. Empero hay que recordar que toda libertad es concedida, definida, perfilada y protegida por un determinado Estado para que se ejerza de manera pública sin sufrir impedimentos por parte de otros hombres o de la sociedad. Sin embargo, el poder público que da, puede limitarla, cercenarla, bloquearla o hasta anularla en el momento que crea conveniente.

En cambio, los derechos de la persona son anteriores al Estado, ya que su raíz está ligada a la persona humana, por lo tanto no pueden ser concedidos ni limitados extrínsecamente. En consecuencia, se concibe la libertad como la emanación de un derecho o una de las formas en que éste se puede ejercitar. Los derechos se ejercen siempre libremente.

Empero, los textos constitucionales ameri-
canos no son tan precisos respecto al tema ya que aluden, principalmente, a la facultad de expresión de la palabra, algunos a la de difusión, circulación o divulgación y, muy pocos, la de recepción. Empero, las normas internacionales ayudan a comprender e interpretar adecuadamente el alcance y contenido de éste, independientemente de la denominación que se utilice. Tanto la expresión como la divulgación de la palabra son indivisibles, de modo que una restricción a cualquiera de ellas representa directamente, y en similar proporción, un límite al ejercicio de la otra.

En las primeras declaraciones de derechos, tanto la americana como la francesa, de finales del siglo XVIII, la información se concibe jurídicamente como la libertad de expresión de un grupo reducido de personas en quienes recae, en definitiva, la libertad de palabra y la libertad de prensa para periodistas y empresarios de la información. El derecho de la información tiene un sujeto universal: todos los hombres, cada hombre. Además, este derecho crea un mandato del público en cuyo nombre el informador y la empresa informan. El derecho a la información es un crédito social, una expectativa garantizada que engendra —en periodistas y empresarios— el deber profesional de satisfacer el derecho a la información del público.

La idea de derecho (conducto técnico jurídico) va ganando terreno a la de libertad (vehículo técnico político), por lo que se puede afirmar que nos encontramos en los albores del tratamiento científico del derecho a la información. Una etapa de transición en la que, tanto en la doctrina como en las leyes, coexisten las ideas reduccionistas de libertad de expresión y las que, por otro lado, configuran y entienden la información y la comunicación como un derecho.

Comunicación como derecho humano

Esta oportunidad histórica del proceso constituyente nos debe ayudar a reconocer la necesidad urgente de plantear y garantizar en el país la vigencia y el respeto del derecho humano a la comunicación, que engloba el ejercicio pleno e integral del derecho a la libertad de opinión (potestad de las personas de formular y emitir juicios propios sobre cualquier asunto público o privado), el derecho a la libertad de expresión (utilización de cualquier medio, canal, forma o estilo para exteriorizar ideas, sin que se ejerzan formas de control o censura), el derecho a la libertad de difusión (realización de actividades de comunicación en igualdad de condiciones jurídicas, además de la posibilidad de constitución de empresas o entidades dedicadas a la comunicación), el derecho a la información (potestad de todas las personas para acceder, producir, investigar, circular, intercambiar y recibir todo tipo de información, salvo que afecte el derecho a la intimidad de las personas o que esté protegida por una cláusula de reserva estipulada en el ordenamiento jurídico), el derecho al acceso y uso de los medios y tecnologías de la información y comunicación (potestad para acceder y usar libremente los medios y tecnologías de la información y la comunicación en la producción, circulación y recepción de contenidos).

Entonces, el objeto del derecho a la comunicación está integrado no sólo por pensamientos, ideas y opiniones, sino también por la información, materia prima para la formación y ejercicio de fortalecimiento de ciudadanías responsables de lo sujetos y grupos, y la construcción del desarrollo humano sustentado en la participación activa a través del diálogo y el debate democráticos y plurales, con capacidad de incidir en la toma de decisiones públicas. Por eso, son indisociables el derecho a la comunicación —como postulado de la sociabilidad humana— y el derecho a la información.

Más de medio siglo después de la Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos (1948), se torna ineludible incorporar a la CPE un derecho más extensivo: El derecho a la comunicación. De ahí que se empiece a reflexionar la comunicación como escenario social de mediación, proceso, interacción, intercambio de sentidos, superando la visión netamente tecnológica que la reduce a medios masivos, y lo que ello conlleva principalmente respecto a la difusión de información o búsqueda de persuasión.

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Locarno’s international film festival 2006

Maggie Morgan

The Locarno Film Festival is not Cannes. There are no red carpets and grand entries and no photographers vying for the attention of stars. In fact, stars are not the highlight of the event and the festival screenings are even open to the public. Going to the Piazza Grande, the vast square in the middle of Locarno, is the highlight of the day for festival participants and local cinema goers.

The tradition is to have daily open-air screenings in a space that seats 7,000 people before a giant screen—after which they can vote for the winning film. This year, the Public’s Choice Award, was given to Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s Das Leben der Anderen (The Lives of Others.)

The film takes place in the 1980s in East Germany where a surveillance official wholeheartedly working for the STASI, the State police service, is assigned to spy on a renowned playwright. He does his spy work faithfully hoping to advance his career yet he never anticipates that literature, art, and music—an integral part of the playwright’s life—would change him as he spies.

Every night 2-12 August 2006, a camera showed a bird’s eye view of the Piazza full of spectators. At exactly 2130 it moved to the clock tower in the square to show that it was time to start. First-time artistic director of the Locarno Film Festival, Frederic Maire, would then go on stage for his nightly introduction of the director of the film about to be screened.

Though 2006 marked the 59th edition of the Locarno Film Festival, Maire, along with other organizers, seemed particularly keen to highlight the identity of the festival—the fact that since its start, Locarno has been a forum for premiere ouevres and not just international premieres of films. Whatever is new, experimental or ‘first-time’ can find space on the testing ground of the festival.

Michael Bertrami, award-winning Swiss documentary and feature filmmaker, was on the festival programming board this year. He was previously in charge of the selection process for the Leopards of Tomorrow Short Film Competition. He says, ‘The festival takes pride in being the springboard for many new directors, trends and styles. It has been interesting to watch young directors come in with their short films and later come back again to premiere full length feature films.’ The Promised Land, Bertrami’s first long feature, was premiered in Locarno in 2004.

Locarno has also had a history of being open to filmmaker from the Arab world. To cite a few examples from the recent past, films such as Yousri Nasrallah’s El Medina 1999 (The City,) Ossama Fawzy’s first film Afaret El Asphalt 1996 (Asphalt Devils,) and Nacer Khemir’s Tawq El Hamama El Mafqud 1991 (The Lost Ring of the Dove,) all premiered in Locarno and got the Special Prize of the Jury in their respective years. Babl El Chams (The Gateway to the Sun) was also screened in Locarno.

Golden Leopard

It was with a sense of pride that Frederic Maire mentioned that one-third of the films in the international competition were the first long features of their directors. Das Fraulein, the directorial debut of Swiss/Croatian director, Andrea Staka was given the Golden Leopard, the festival’s most prestigious award. The film shows the lives of three women from former Yugoslavia who immigrated to Switzerland. Issues of identity, language, culture and homeland, are raised in the film.

Staka speaks of her work saying, ‘Das Fraulein is a personal film that connects my two worlds. I grew up in Switzerland even though former Yugoslavia is my family’s country... The film shows the lives of three modern
women from different regions of a country that no longer exists... I wanted to explore the displacement in our era; more and more people are moving between cultures, be they refugees, travelers or simply homeless.’ Ryan Fleck’s Half Nelson, also a first work, is the American film that was awarded the Special Jury Prize. Portuguese director Hugo Vieira da Silva received a special mention from the jury for his first film, Body Rice, which was a quasi-experimental film that went far from conventional story-telling and filmmaking styles.

Interestingly many films occupied themselves with issues of cultural and social interactions. Other than Das Fraulein, a German film, Der Mann von der Botschaft (The Man From the Embassy,) spoke of a German man on diplomatic mission to Georgia and his relationship with a young Georgian girl. This friendship develops in the context of the German embassy’s foreign aid mission to the Georgian population. Le Dernier des Fous (The Last Madman,) a French/Belgian film that received special mention from the Ecumenical Jury for being both ‘vivid and visionary and for its denouncement of a world where there is an absence of hope and love,’ there is another significant cross-cultural encounter. Malika, the Moroccan housekeeper of a highly dysfunctional family is its balancing force and the one character to which all the family members could resort to find acceptance and comfort.

Highlighting difference
The fact that people who occupy the same geographical space can be extremely different—culturally, socially, and religiously, was a recurrent motif in this year’s films in Locarno. Many film characters were bilingual. There were many silences that interrupted stuttered efforts at communication, and many heavy accents that made themselves understood in the language of another. Whether or not it is significant, it is certainly worth noting that in comparison, most of the films of the grand film-masters in this edition of the Cannes film festival were
much more focused, ‘local’, and culturally specific in their subject matter.

For example, Nanni Moretti’s Il Caimano (The Crocodile) is a film that occupies itself with Italian characters, life, film-scene and politics. Pedro Almodovar’s Volver (Return) has a brilliant cast of exclusively Spanish women. While such films have an undeniably lofty content and universal appeal, it is striking that the films of the younger film directors screened at Locarno were more earthy, edgy, and matter-of-fact when it came to portraying the daily realities of globalization.

The Locarno Film Festival does not shy away from risks—both stylistically and thematically. Play Forward is a section that features video art and installations. The Filmmakers of the Present competition was created to be ‘the space for discoveries and event films... navigating among the unexpected and increasingly blurred frontiers between fiction and reality.’ Le Dernier Homme (The Last Man,) directed by Ghassan Salheb, the Lebanese filmmaker, was screened in this section of the festival. The film is a modern vampire story that mixes reality with magic realism, and takes place in contemporary Beirut.

Plunging deep into current events, the Leopards of Tomorrow Short Film Section featured films from the East of the Mediterranean. Chicca Bergonzi, the director of the section wrote, ‘In light of the tragic events that have plunged the Middle East back into the drama of war, the films we have chosen symbolically represent an unbearable current situation: stories full of humanity, anger, despair, tenderness, and desires often told without any filter or mediation, from which we can and we must draw the courage to demand a different future.’

Marco Cameroni, working with the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs was heavily involved in the planning and programming of a festival section entitled ‘The Open Doors’. This year the focus was on Asian cinema. He said, ‘the work of certain cinematographers is foregrounded and because they are here, they are able to meet other producers, distributors and filmmakers so that they can do more work and bigger projects. We hope that these same filmmakers will come next year with their films for the official competition.’ Next year, Open Doors will feature Middle Eastern cinema. Cameroni explained that, ‘Locarno is a place for serious artists... People with social and political awareness come here, people who are politically engaged.’

Ecumenical Jury award
This year's festival took place while the Israeli army continued its attacks on Lebanon. A few weeks before its start, the festival administration decided to cut off one of its sponsors, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, removing logos and mentions from all printed materials. It was in the shadow of such atrocious events that the various juries of the festival—including the ecumenical jury—did their work.

This year, the ecumenical jury gave its prize to Agua, a Portuguese film about two swimmers of different generations, the older of whom enables the younger man to continue in the sport after he had decided to give up. The film could have easily taken place anywhere in the world. Its dialog is sparse. The rhythms of swimming, plunging, and gasping, again and again, hypnotize and entrance spectators—irrespective of race, religion or class. It was for the universality of the film and its comprehensive and inclusive world-view that the ecumenical jury gave it the award. There was an aspect in Agua that insisted that a single discourse/language could address audiences regardless of who they were.

The atmosphere at the Locarno Film Festival is inclusive and welcoming. Sitting in the Piazza Grande to watch films, makes it seem like the sky is the limit. There were no rainy nights or cloudy skies to spoil the charm of the Piazza Grande in this edition of the festival. Every night, you could see the stars.

Report by Maggie Morgan, MediaHouse, Cairo, Egypt.
ON THE SCREEN...

Karlov Vary 2006

The Ecumenical Jury at the 41st Karlovy Vary International Film Festival 30 June – 8 July 2006 awarded its prize to the film El destino (Destiny) directed by Miguel Pereira, Argentina/Spain (2005).

A man disguised in priest’s clothes, after a violent drug transaction, lands up in a small, isolated border town. Acting as a priest in the community provokes a struggle in search of his real identity. The director succeeds convincingly in telling the story as a parable of the recurrent choice in life between good and bad as a conflict between progress and tradition. The composition of music and images leads to an excellent aesthetical experience.

Synopsis: On the border of Bolivia and Argentina, where stunning scenery contrasts with the hopeless poverty of the inhabitants in their remote villages, a plane lands carrying a young man dressed as a priest and bringing luggage apparently stuffed with bibles for the salvation of souls. But in these parts people need a different kind of salvation. To make a living, the villagers produce original ceramic works: the patterns, together with their destiny, are engraved using the bones of dead ancestors. Pedro’s fate, after a dramatic event, is in the hands of these inhabitants.

Conversely, the village sees the sudden arrival of a priest as a sign and a chance to change their destiny. They are in disagreement as to how to overcome their poverty: either they continue their potter’s trade, or surrender to the avarice of some of them and destroy their sacred sites and culture. The hopes of both camps lie with Pedro: he is deemed the most qualified judge. Destiny is an adaptation of the novel by Héctor Tizón, The Man Who Came to a Village (El hombre que llegó a un pueblo).

The jury awarded a commendation to the film Shab Bekheir Farmandeh (Goodbye Life) by Ensieh Shah-Hosseini, Iran (2006). It was commended for its pacifist message and for the convincing way in which it emphasises the community spirit, the power of sacrifice and the love for the strangers, which rest unaltered under the most cruel conditions of war.

Synopsis: A film that describes the terrors of war as seen through the eyes of a fragile reporter who manages to overcome her thoughts of suicide on the battlefield. This drama, conceived as harsh ‘psychotherapy’, tells of the beautiful Maryam who, after her unsuccessful marriage, thinks of committing suicide in a way that would at least be of some use to others. She thus enters the Iran-Iraq war as a reporter.

Her time spent in the devastated desert landscape, armies spilling over from one side to the other depending on which has the upper hand, totally changes her vision of the world. She is surrounded by suffering and pain, even in the village where she goes to find shelter after her unit is massacred. A wedding in the village ends in tragedy. The close of the film again finds Maryam at the front, where she comes across her friend, the commander Beshar.

The jury was made up of Jos Horemans, Belgium (President); Elena Jecu Dulgheru, Romania; Julia Laggner, Austria; Kai Voigtlander, Germany; Milos Rejchrt, Czech Republic; and Jan Elias, Czech Republic.

Montreal 2006

The international Ecumenical Jury at the Montreal World Film Festival, composed of six members from Switzerland, Canada, Cuba, and the USA, gave its award to the film Nagai Sampo (A Long Walk) by director Eiji Okuda, Japan.

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The jury citation read: ‘Out of the broken relationships of a retired widower alienated from his daughter, a five-year old abused by her mother, and a lost teenage boy, director Okuda has unveiled transformational moments that make this a movie filled with grace. These three are all on a walk that leads to a journey where redemption and hope may come.’

Eiji Okuda was the producer of the film Kamataki by director Claude Gagnon which won the Ecumenical Award in Montreal in 2005.

Film synopsis: Matsutaro Yasuda, retired principal of a girls’ high school, has moved from the city to an apartment in a small provincial town. Yasuda is alone. After losing his wife to alcohol, he has become estranged from his daughter. But at his new address he has neighbours. In particular 5-year-old Sachi, a little girl with cardboard angel’s wings on her back who clutches the iron fence with her fists and gazes into the distance. She is barefoot and wears a summer dress despite it being winter.

Yasuda tries to speak to Sachi but gets neither words nor even a smile in return. When night falls, Yasuda can hear the girl’s mother and her boyfriend arguing loudly next door. Yasuda tries to block it all out. He doesn’t want to hear or see anything. Only little Sachi affects him. She also seems to be blocking things out. ‘Have you ever seen a blue sky?’ he asks her. ‘Where clouds look like cotton candy and a white bird is flying high? Would you like to walk with me?’ Eventually he connects.

Yasuda and Sachi take a long walk during which they meet a young boy named Wataru at a small, desolate train station. Wataru is also lonely. He joins the two on their journey, but the trip takes an unexpected turn when Sachi begins to open her heart to Yasuda and Wataru. Her cardboard angel wings begin to fly up to a real sky.
Communication for peace

The International Peace Research Association (IPRA) held its biennial conference in Calgary, Canada, 29 June to 3 July 2006. Its theme was ‘Patterns of conflict, paths to peace’.

Some 400 researchers, teachers and activists gathered for a program whose breadth and depth were astonishing. The event was seductive. One began to think that if only the world’s politicians, economists, military, and media professionals could hear their arguments, the world must change overnight.

In his opening remarks, current secretary general of IPRA, Luc Reychler, emphasized the options of peaceful confrontation and creative imagination in addressing situations of conflict. He described building peace as the greatest challenge facing the world, the way to survival or extinction. But he did not, for a moment, suggest that the task was easy. And he stressed the role of peace research, which ‘implies leadership by people young and old who respond with intellectual and moral energy to crises or challenges in meaningful ways.’

The welcoming ceremony was graced by the presence of Doreen Spence, a First Nations woman who asked countries to respond to local as well as global injustices. She called for greater awareness of the spiritual dimension of the earth as a living creation on which people are only transient. In a presentation later in the conference, she also spoke about the struggle to gain recognition for a UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The opening plenary on ‘Peace journalism’ set the tone for much that followed. Majid Tehranian, director of the Toda Institute and specialist in the relationship between political economy and communication for peace, said that the opposite of peace journalism is not, paradoxically, war journalism. Very few professional journalists intend war. For him, the opposite is ‘muddled journalism’ where information is presented with so little context it is practically useless. He also decried the notion of objectivity: ‘We are all biased and some of us are prejudiced as well.’

Tehranian set out the ‘Ten Commandments’ of peace journalism. In brief they are:

• Never reduce the parties in a conflict to two.
• Identify the views and interests of all parties in a conflict.
• Don’t be hostage to one source of information.
• Develop a healthy sense of skepticism.
• Give a voice to the peace-makers.
• Seek peaceful solutions to conflict problems, but offer panaceas.
• Your representation of conflict can become part of the problem if it exacerbates tensions.
• Your representation of conflict can become part of the solution if it employs creative tension to find common ground.
• Use the media ethics of accuracy, veracity, and fairness and respect human rights and dignity.
• Transcend your own ethnic, national and ideological biases.

Jake Lynch, BBC World reporter and co-author of Peace Journalism (Hawthorn Press, 2005), on which much of Majid Tehranian’s presentation was based, responded with a insider’s view of practical problems that beset journalists in conflict situations.

In a second plenary Don Hubert, consultant for Canada’s Department of Foreign Affairs, profiled ‘Security with a human face’ or the human face of the statistics in conflict situations. Using examples ranging from Rwanda to Darfur, he argued for the need in international relations to move from a State-centered perspective to a people-centered perspective.

‘Sustainable peace-building architecture’ was explored in a joint presentation by Ho Won...
Jeong (George Mason University, USA), Pregs Govender (African Gender Institute, South Africa), Jayne Docherty (Eastern Mennonite University, USA) and Luc Reychler (University of Leuven, Belgium). All agreed on the interdependence of peace-building activities and the urgency of long-term peace-building to prevent future conflict.

Three practical challenges were mentioned: the need for a mixed portfolio of funding sources for peace work, including government and corporate money; the need to engage with those using ‘top-down’ models; and the need to build a global constituency for peace among multiple constituencies that already exist.

In particular, violence against women and misogyny were forcefully underlined as structural impediments to sustainable peace-building. Govender highlighted the ongoing and appalling situation facing women and young girls in South Africa and the urgent need for changing and reshaping social and cultural attitudes there.

A highlight of the conference was a talk by Johan Galtung, whose theories of direct violence and structural violence, and of negative and positive peace, are the foundation of peace studies today. Invited to speak about ‘Professionalism in violence and peace-building’, Galtung used the medical profession as a metaphor for the skills, codes of ethical practice and accountability demanded of peace professionals. A doctor is a professional who does not have an address; the address is the work.

Illustrating his ideas with real-life examples of peace mediation undertaken during the past year, Galtung dismissed moralizing as a dead end. What you need, he said, is a proposal, a good idea. But that proposal must never be imposed (no carrots or sticks) and it must not have a nation-state agenda.

And in order to have a chance of success, a mediator needs empathy (for all sides), an intimate knowledge of parallel cases (proposals that have worked elsewhere or proposals that have not yet worked), and an ability to respond instantly and creatively to sudden developments.

Conferences are a mixed bag. The IPRA conference brought together people passionate-