

ZiF-Research Group *Communicating Disaster*
Closing Conference “Dealing with the Disasters of Others”
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Presentation Abstract:

Breaking News on a Restless Planet
Covering Disasters in a Networked Society

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Communicating disasters - before, during and after they happen - is fraught with many challenges. The increased volume and flow of information, enabled by the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs), fills some gaps - but not all. Other critical elements such as institution building, training and awareness raising are needed at all levels to create societies that are better informed and prepared.

The news media, driven by their quest for what is new, true and interesting, can be useful allies for disaster managers. But the nexus between these two groups has always been contentious, and the acceleration of the news cycle has made it more so. Having to sustain 24/7 coverage for their fragmented and distracted audiences places enormous pressures on news media to break news first - and reflect later. In this scenario, how can empathetic, ethical and balanced reporting happen?

As disasters increase in frequency and intensity partly due to climate change, mainstream media practitioners across Asia struggle to keep up. Disasters are more drawn out (e.g. Pakistan floods, 2010 & Thailand floods, 2011), geographically scattered (Indian Ocean tsunami, 2004) and economically devastating (Fukushima, 2011) than before. This stretches the capacities and resources of many news organisations. Saturation coverage of unfolding disasters can also cause ‘compassion fatigue’ and apathy in audiences.

In today’s networked society, news media are no longer the sole gatherers or distributors of news. Without the trappings and inertia of the institutionalised media, citizen journalists are quick to adopt ICT tools and platforms. What does this mean for communicating disasters that requires care and sensitivity? In which ways can we find synergy between mainstream and new/social media to better serve the public interest on a warming planet? What value-additions can the mainstream media still offer to the coverage of disasters near and far?

We examine these and other larger questions with reference to recent disasters in Asia.

For further questions on the conference or the research group,
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