



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


KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY

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ZiF-Research Group Closing Conference  
**"Dealing with the Disasters of Others"**  
Bielefeld, Germany: 26 – 28 January 2012



## Line-up...

- Media-Disaster nexus revisited after a decade where lines blurred:
  - Mainstream media & new media
  - others' disasters & our disasters
- Going beyond deaths & destruction: empathy, investigation, reflection
- Media as reporter & analyst++ for disaster risk reduction (DRR)?
- Surviving *both* media saturation & disaster intensification

## My style...

- Asking lots of questions
- Connecting the dots
- Understanding nuance, complexity
- Sometimes getting attached to issues (advocacy journalism)
- Bridging divides:
  - Natural & social scientists
  - Scientists & public
  - Researchers & policy makers

## TVE Asia Pacific (TVEAP)

- Asian regional non-profit media foundation, est. 1996
- Using TV, video & web to communicate sustainable development issues
- Journalistic story-tellers
- Anchored in Sri Lanka
- Covering developing countries in the Asia Pacific



## Disasters & Me!

- 1986: Largest dam breach in Lanka history
- 1988: Hottest year on record: global warming acknowledged
- 1992: Flooded at home!
- 2004: Indian Ocean tsunami
- 2010: Flooded in office!
- 2011: La Nina's fury



## Sri Lanka's 'Triple Whammy'

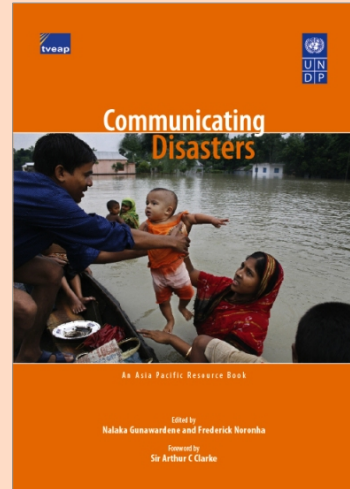
- 26 year long civil war (ended May 2009): 100,000+ killed
- Indian Ocean Tsunami (Dec 2004): 40,000 killed on a single day
- Worst floods in decades (Jan-Feb 2011): massive economic costs & livelihood damage

*As seen by Red Cross official*



## My response has evolved...

- News reporting
- Features & analysis
- Op-ed & column writing
- Documentary film making
- Blogging & tweeting
- Training journalists & disaster managers
- Reflecting on issues & challenges: 2007 book →
- 'Zooming out' for bigger picture, e.g. governance



*No, sir, this is neither a flood-hit nor a drought-hit area. We are only hit by bad government!*

**“No Sir, this is neither a flood-hit nor a drought-hit area. We are only hit by bad government!”**

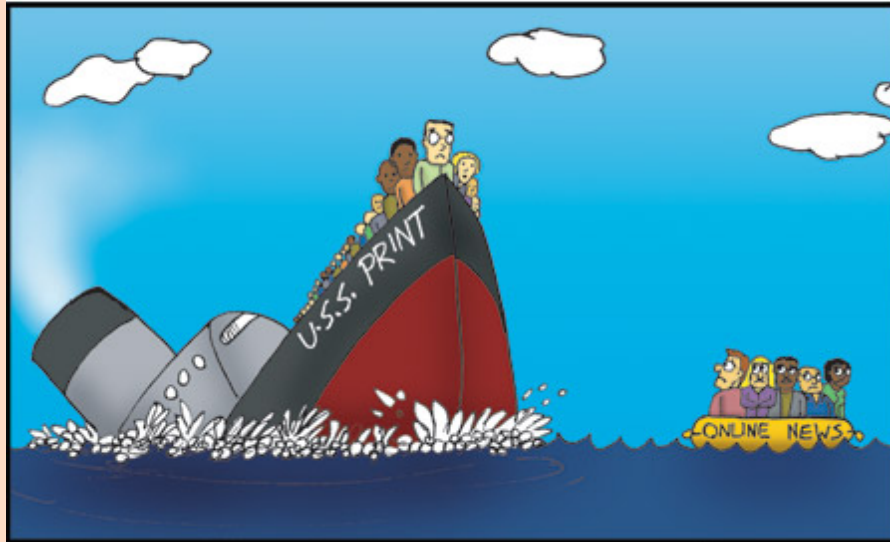
## Media Landscape in 25 yrs...

- Changed beyond recognition
- More tech tools, platforms, voices
- Citizen journalism
- Passive media consumption gone
- Chaos + cacophony!
- MSM/New Media



# Journalistopia

By Danny Sanchez



## Resilience...

- Disasters test how we:
  - pick ourselves up
  - return to normalcy
  - improve our systems
- Modern ICT tools & platforms can support resilience, e.g.
  - More 'eyes & ears' on the ground
  - Better management of information
  - More voices heard & heeded?
- **Empathetic Journalism can help!**

“Citizen journalists, flawed as they may be as individuals, are nevertheless tremendously powerful as a group. They have the potential to capture, over the long term, **a multiplicity of rich and insightful perspectives on disasters not often covered by the traditional media.**”

- **Sanjana Hattotuwa**, Co-editor, Groundviews.org, Sri Lanka citizen journalism website



## Sri Lanka: Key differences...

### Mainstream media:

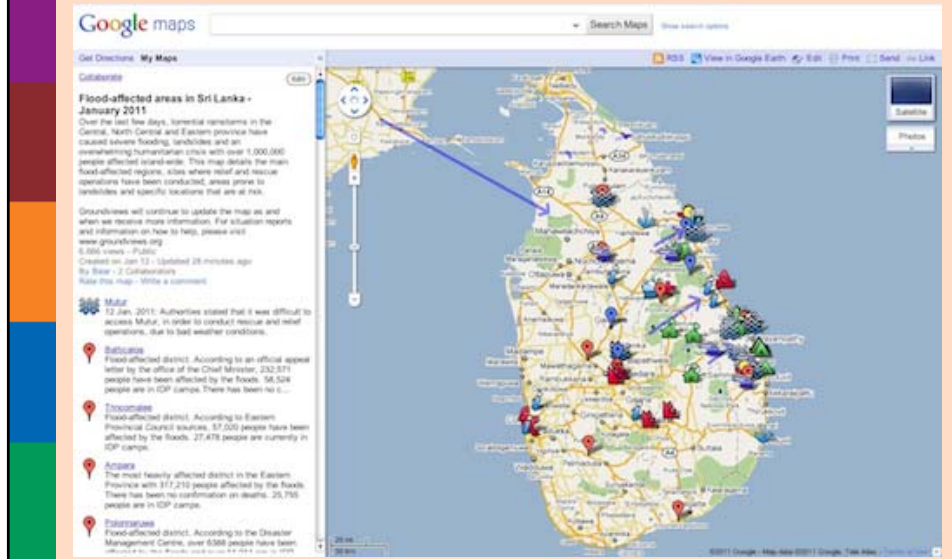
- Gathered & processed by paid journalists thru' large news operations
- Disseminated through TV, radio, newspaper
- Urban centric editorial standpoint
- Not very interactive

### Citizen media:

- Produced by unpaid enthusiasts 'bearing witness' to disaster
- Reporting from more locations and angles
- Grassroots voices + official/expert analysis
- Highly interactive, widely shared

**Not much collaboration between the two, at least for now...**

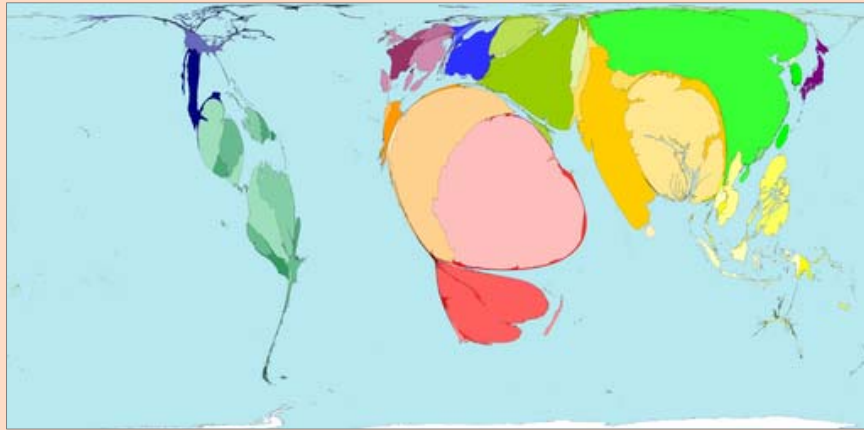
## Groundviews.org: Google Maps for tracking SL floods, Jan-Feb 2011



## How can new media help?

- Dig deeper; connect the dots
- **Also: create more 'dots'!**
- Disasters today seem to:
  - Last longer
  - Spread over larger areas
  - Beyond reach & capacity of most mainstream media
- **Citizen journalists need to apply time-honoured principles: accuracy, balance, credible sources, etc.**

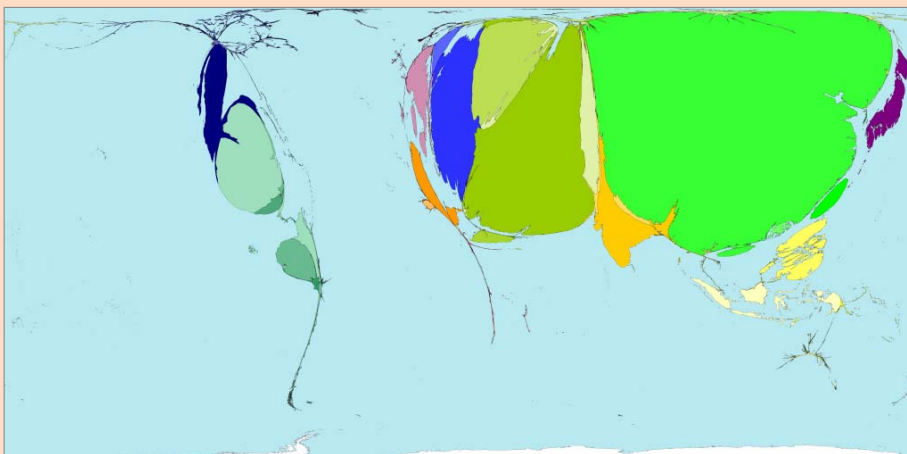
## Is it how we look at our world?



Territory size shows the proportion of all deaths caused by disasters, which overwhelm local resources, that died there 1975-2004. Incl outbreaks of infectious diseases not normally found there.

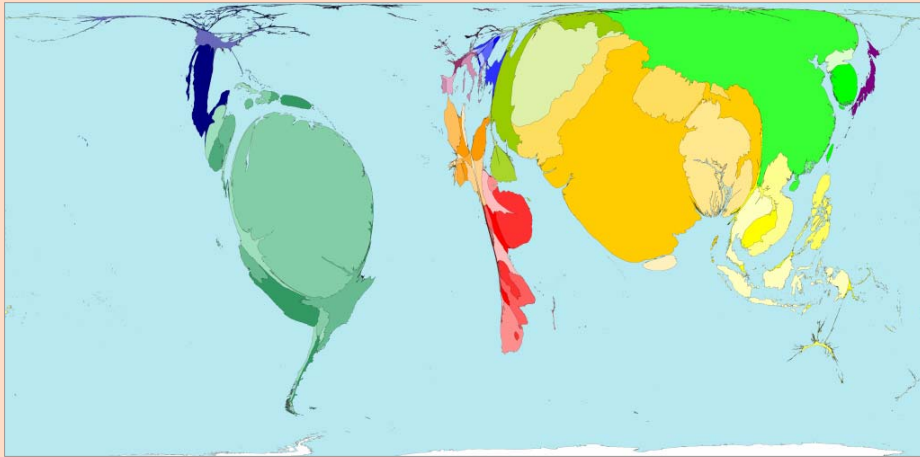
<http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=246>

## Killed by Earthquakes 1975-2000



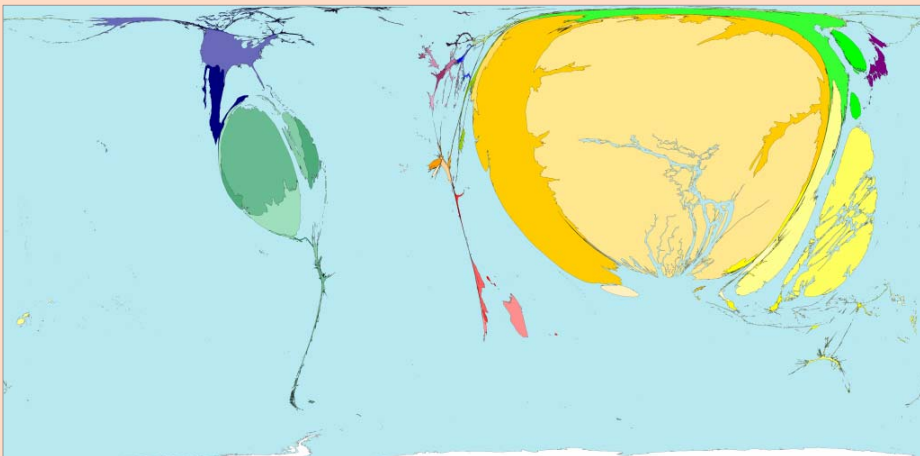
<http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=247>

## Killed by floods, 1975 - 2000



<http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=250>

## Killed by storms, 1975 - 2000



<http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=251>

## Data mining: Joy of Stats?

- **World Mapper**: University of Sheffield  
→ *Atlas of the Real World* (rev. ed 2010)

[www.worldmapper.org](http://www.worldmapper.org)

 WORLDMAPPER

- **GapMinder** software by Hans Rosling:  
visualised & animated data: helps  
understand data trends over time

[www.gapminder.org](http://www.gapminder.org)

 GAPMINDER

## Fury of La Nina: 2010-11



## Sri Lanka: Floods Jan/Feb 2011

- High intensity of monsoon rainfall in short period
- Floods, landslides
- Irrigation reservoirs & canals overloaded
- 2.2 million people (10% of population) affected
- 35% of rice harvest lost
- 62 deaths



**Elephant death that attracted global AND local media coverage amidst so much human suffering!**

## Drowning in media's indifference?

“As we brace for more extreme weather events and disasters, all our mainstream media need to adapt fast to better serve the public interest. **We need all our media to be more caring, robust and innovative...**”



*Himal Southasian*  
Magazine, March 2011

Op-ed by Nalaka  
Gunawardene

## Drowning in media's indifference?

“To survive the new media tsunami, media managers must come to terms with the new reality of collaborative, user-involved news generation and consumption.”

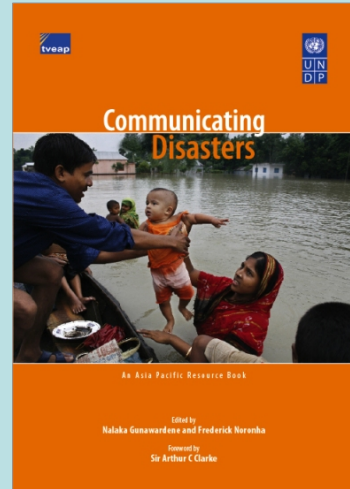
- **Nalaka Gunawardene**

Full text at: <http://tiny.cc/Drown>



## Communicating Disasters

- Bringing Asia's leading media & disaster professionals together
- Exploring common ground
- Brainstorming meeting: Bangkok, Dec 2006
- Asia Pacific Resource Book, released Dec 2007
- 19 chapters written by 21 contributors + 7 appendices
- Full book & meeting report at: [www.tveap.org/disastercomm](http://www.tveap.org/disastercomm)



## Disaster impacts vs. media interest

- Floods **affect** more Asians than any other type of disaster
- More *affected*, but fewer *deaths*
- Living with annual floods: skill mastered by millions
- Cyclones, typhoons, tsunamis: short-bursts → more media coverage
- Floods & droughts: longer term, less dramatic, less interesting for mainstream media!

## Declining coverage on floods...

“Nowadays, our media proprietors seem to have decided that **middle class urban readers don't need to be troubled with news about natural disasters hundreds of km away** from where they live!”



- **Kalpana Sharma**, senior Indian journalist & columnist, *The Hindu*; commenting on rural flooding

## Double whammy in Asia?

- Being hit by **Nature's fury**
- Followed by **social inequalities**
- Not all victims/affected equal
  - Urban/rural hierarchy
  - Military/civilian hierarchy
  - Rich/poor disparity
- Media can reinforce these
- Diligence essential

## Thailand Floods - Late 2011

- Covered 65/77 provinces incl. capital Bangkok
- US\$45 billion economic loss (World Bank est.)
- 1,000+ factories shut down for weeks
- 700,000 people out of work
- 800+ people drowned
- Livelihood losses in informal economy very high



## Saving Bangkok?

- Flooding diverted to selected suburbs of Bangkok to save the heart of Thai capital
- Engineers, politicians & soldiers “forced to decide who is drenched – and who stays dry” (CNN rept)
- Choosing “between bad & worse options”





"The blame for these floods is 30% with nature and 70% with mismanagement of the authorities,"  
- **Stop Global Warming Association of Thailand**

## Pakistan Floods, Summer 2010

- Indus River swelling
- Lasted for 6 – 8 wks
- 1/5 of Pakistan flooded
- 796,095 sq km affected
- 20 million people impacted
- Nearly 2,000 dead
- Total economic loss est. US\$43 billion
- Livelihood damage?



## “Pakistan, Drowning in Neglect”

- Compelling op-ed essay in *New York Times*, 25 Aug 2010 by Ali Sethi, Pakistani novelist
- Travelled with a local TV crew during massive floods of Summer 2010
- Many untold stories, incl: how local politicians & military selectively flooded villages to save towns or army installations
- Full text at: <http://tiny.cc/ASethi>



## Who gets saved – and why?

“...This (Pakistan) is a place where peasants drown in rice fields they don’t own, where mud-and-brick villages are submerged to save slightly less expendable towns, and where dying villages stand next to airbases housing the most sophisticated fighter jets in the world. Such a country is owed more than just aid, it is owed nothing less than reparations from all those who preside over its soil...”

Full text: <http://tiny.cc/ASethi>

## Rethink water management?

- 1,000s of dams in South & Southeast Asia
- Historically: store water in rainy season → use in dry season.
- Keeping reservoirs full can be disastrous when extra-heavy rains come (extreme weather/climate)
- Stored water can worsen flooding?
- What's to be done?



## Dam breach disasters

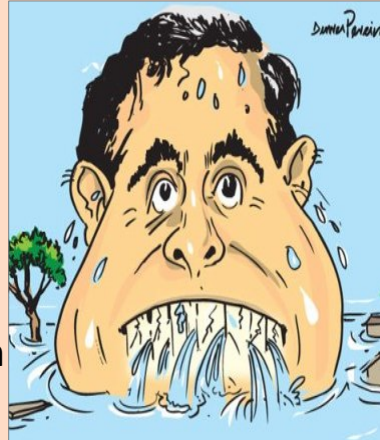
### *Kantalé Dam:*

- 1,000+ yr old earth dam in eastern Sri Lanka
- Still used for agriculture
- 16m high, 4km long
- Breached 20 April 1986
- 130+ killed, 1,600 homes destroyed
- Affected had no warning
- Livelihood damage to 10,000s not assessed



## 2011: Kantale + 25 years

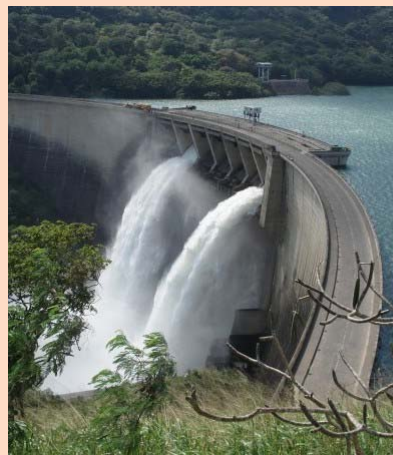
- Sri Lanka has: 320 large (modern) dams, 10,000+ smaller, much older dams
- Jan/Feb 2011 floods → 200+ smaller dams breached, worsened impacts of flooding
- Now: more interest in dam safety + dam maintenance
- **Downstream disaster preparedness is vital**



SL's hapless Minister of Irrigation as seen by cartoonist Dervin Pereira, in *Daily Mirror*

## Media interest in dam safety

- LK media: mostly in capital city, urban biased
- Dams in rural areas: **out of sight, out of mind?**
- Not enough debate on costs & benefits of large dams
- Post-disaster: Counting bodies & damaged property is common (and easier!)
- Livelihood loss: not done by experts or discussed much in media



## Cruel ironies in DRR...

- More lives saved, the more people with destroyed livelihoods will survive!
- Scarcity can drive up market prices for produce (e.g. rice in Asia after Thai, Cambodia & Lao floods in 2011)

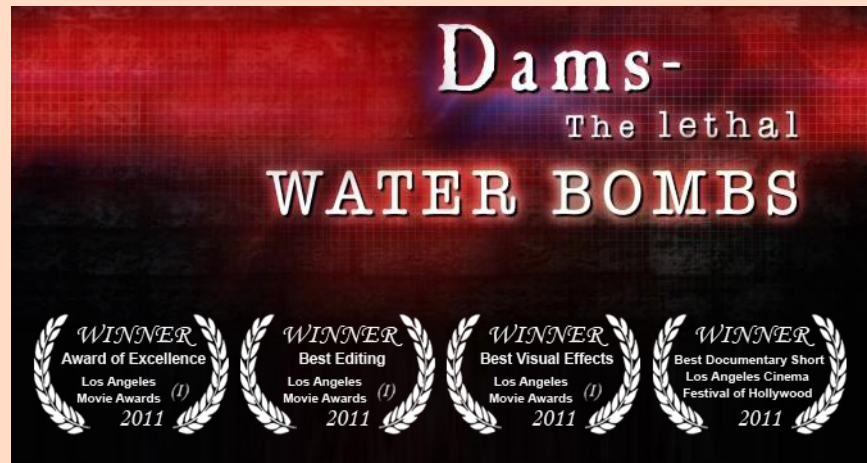


## Mullaperiyar: Dam disaster in waiting?

- Across Periyar River, Kerala state of India
- British built, 1895
- Benefits to Tamil Nadu, all downstream hazards to Kerala people!
- **Two states locked in a fierce debate over public safety vs. optimising ageing dam**
- **3 million downstream!**



One ageing dam, two new movies...



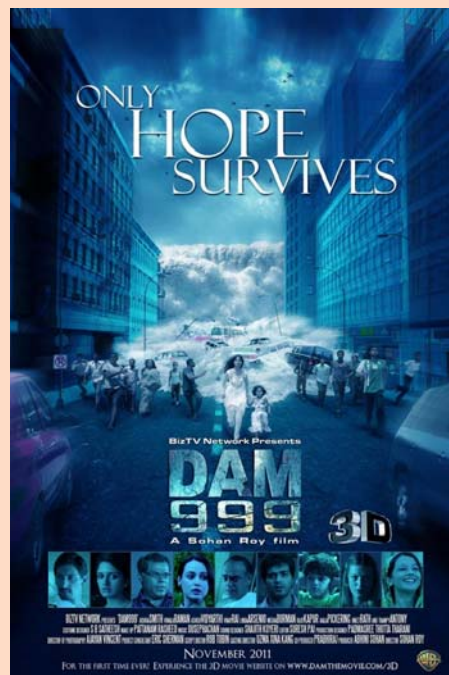
Watch online:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gS0PwCmjlt4>

## DAM 999

- 2011 Nov: Bollywood movie ignites dam safety debate in India!
- Screenings banned in Tamil Nadu state
- Sensationalist? Maybe!
- Prospect of many cross-border disputes in Asia over dams built on shared rivers (esp. China's)

[www.damthemovie.com](http://www.damthemovie.com)



## Another way forward: Multistakeholder dialogues on dam safety



<http://nalakagunawardene.com/?s=Kantale>

## Summing up...

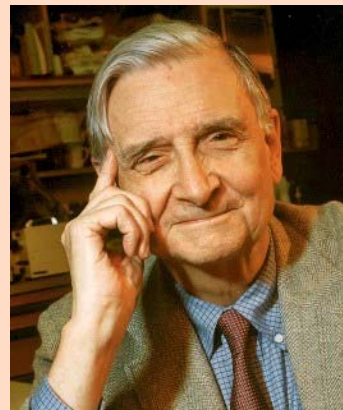
- For mainstream media, is this: “The best of times and the worst of times...”???
- All of us living have to brace for:
  - Wikileakable World, information flooding
  - Warming Planet with topsy turvy weather
- Challenge: making sense of our chaotic, cacophonous, unequal & unfair world
- Dickens again: “...it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness...”

## Summing up 2

- Old order crumbling everywhere:
  - Mainstream, industrial media
  - global economic systems
  - Geopolitics & international relations
- We all bear witness...but no longer just passively
- More voices join the conversation
- But who among us is really listening?
- Who has **perspective**: reflect on our actions, consequences, alternatives?

## Our Big Challenge...

*“We have Stone Age emotions, medieval institutions and God-like technology. That's the source of all of our problems!”*



- **Edward O Wilson**, Harvard biologist and ‘father’ of biodiversity

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