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

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY
Nalaka Gunawardene
Director, TVE Asia Pacific
Science writer, blogger & Film maker

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

[www.tveap.org](http://www.tveap.org)
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!”
Media Landscape in 25 yrs...

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mainstream media:</th>
<th>Citizen media:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Gathered &amp; processed by paid journalists thru’ large news operations</td>
<td>• Produced by unpaid enthusiasts ‘bearing witness’ to disaster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Disseminated through TV, radio, newspaper</td>
<td>• Reporting from more locations and angles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Urban centric editorial standpoint</td>
<td>• Grassroots voices + official/expert analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not very interactive</td>
<td>• Highly interactive, widely shared</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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](http://www.worldmapper.org/display.php?selected=246)

Killed by Earthquakes 1975-2000

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)

- **GapMinder** software by Hans Rosling: visualised & animated data: helps understand data trends over time
  [www.gapminder.org](http://www.gapminder.org)

Fury of La Nina: 2010-11

- Sri Lanka
- Australia
- Brazil
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

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”

- 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=gS0PwCmjIt4

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
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
Email: nalaka@tveap.org
Blog: http://nalakagunawardene.com
Twitter: NalakaG