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Neoliberal Disaster and Compassion Fatigue

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By **Toby Miller and Rune Ottosen**

The recent earthquake in Nepal has drawn global attention in ways that offer something positive in the wake of these tragic moments for one another at profound levels. Altruism and trans-territorial citizenship appear to have transcended consumerism and nationalism.

But the overall story of this disaster, its causes and coverage, is very complex, due to twin factors: the political economy and the nature of the disaster itself.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY

Weather and geology describe not only naturally-occurring events and circumstances, but ones that are affected by humans: think of everything from mineral extraction to manufacturing and transportation.

Much discussion of the background to the *temblor* has criticized Nepal as a failed state, riven by corruption, Maoist revolt, and other factors, but so are several other issues, which are grounded in historical and contemporary inequality. https://theconversation.com/41063?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Latest+from+The+Conversation+for+5+May+2015+-+2723&utm_content=Latest+2723+CID_733e77d97636a44df56bdeb9b60216fc&utm_source=campaign_monitor_uk&utm_term=Classquake%20What%20

The dwellings that collapsed mostly failed to meet construction codes: homes that were built from bricks, timber, and mud collapsed, while concrete buildings generally remained standing.

The people living in unsafe accommodation were largely indigenous and poor. In many cases, they were recent migrants from rural areas (as a result of policies enacted by states in the name of free markets).

Such policies were generated and implemented under the sign of the World Bank and other high priests of comparative advantage making since the 1970s. They have stimulated programs favoring privatisation and specific industrial sectors, such as tourism, and surveys. <http://www.enterprisesurveys.org/~media/GIAWB/EnterpriseSurveys/Documents/Profiles/English/nepal-2013.pdf>. The land reform and the redistribution of wealth and income have been missing from the agenda.

It was ever so. Scandalously, the Asian Development Bank predicted that good would follow from the 2004 tsunami. The economic 'sadness' created by such disasters, 'a quick recovery process follows in a V-shape' with 'a large multiplier effect' <http://internationallaboroffice.org/publications/Earthquake-and-Tsunami-of-December-26-2004-on-South-and-Southeast-Asia.pdf>.

The Bank's reaction to the 2015 earthquake has been more judicious and less arrogant, but remains fixated on corporations as the primary market forces on nature in terms of urbanization and poverty housing. <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/evaluation-document/2015/05/2015-earthquake-nepal-evaluation-report.pdf>.

THE MEDIA

As we all know, for countries in the Global South, First-World assistance at such times of crisis depends to a certain extent on the idea that the tragedy should supposedly be beyond human agency, such as when weather and geology combine to wreak havoc.

There is much debate in the aid community over ‘compassion fatigue’ in the West, supposedly ‘the unacknowledged cause of [the] short attention span, the media’s peripatetic journalism, the public’s boredom with international news, [and] the media’s preoccupations with images of childlike innocence disrupted and imperiled, and a ratcheting up of capricious horror as a qualification for attention [ht](#)

Patrick Cockburn argues that so-called natural disasters amplify tendentious practices in reportage, from c
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/tv-radio/catastrophe-on-camera-why-media-coverage-of-natural-disasters-is-flawe>

In addition to the impact of the political economy on where and how the Nepali population lives and its subsequent vulnerability, the geographical location of Nepal, with Mount Everest and Kathmandu.

That focus derives from generations of imperial exploration and conquest and masculinist desire <http://www.upcolorado.co> largely white, wealthy-world pastime <http://www.palgraveconnect.com/pc/doi/finder/view/10.1057/9781137026705.0014>. Even power <http://library.la84.org/SportsLibrary/JSH/JSH2007/JSH3401/jsh3401e.pdf>. In contrast with that ethos of domination, Kathr its own materialism <http://digitalcommons.maclester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1287&context=himalaya>.

These fixations have produced two tourism legacies. One is about strength and bodily courage. The other is about excess and indulgence. The white tourist's body is both centered and surpassed—but remains at the core of popular narratives.

The GDELT Project monitors media coverage across the globe <http://gdeltproject.org/>. Its first statistical findings about the N Everest climber?’ The answer was quite shocking: 7% of reported deaths occurred on Everest, but they occupied almost a quarter of the coverage-bias/.

Most famously in this instance we have seen outpourings of media grief for the loss of a Google executive climbing the mountain. This was not an effective choice, as was the case for most people affected by the tragedy <http://money.cnn.com/2015/04/26/technology/google>

During the rescue operation in Nepal, the main characters in a Norwegian press story were the rescue dogs Gere and Mir, who for the first time were mentioned by name. The headline of the story read: "Norwegian dogs contributing in the rescue of woman in Nepal."

We learn that the dogs set a Norwegian record in Nepal since this was the first time such an overseas mission had found survivors in a hospital. After the main framing of the heroic dogs we finally read that five days after the earthquake had rocked Nepal, thousands of people will find more survivors <http://www.aftenbladet.no/nyheter/utenriks/Norske-hunder-bidro-til-a-redde-kvinne-i-Nepal-3687146.html>

Of course, this issue of coverage and chauvinism isn't only a problem of the wealthy West. The Indian media have been critic earthquake relief <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/twitterati-in-nepal-slam-indian-media-for-its-c> The US media have a tasteless but relevant saying: 'If it bleeds, it leads.' In other words, pain and suffering recorded in dramatic ci

Some of this folly derives from the narcissism of journalists—their competitive desire to be first, to be authentic, to show sen storytelling—in short, to thrive on suffering <http://www.ejbss.com/Data/Sites/1/vol2no1april2013/ejbss-1238-13-mediamythsar>

Recent revelations about NBC news anchor Brian Williams inventing huge slabs of his “eyewitness” reports provide telling ex
<http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/04/nbc-news-brian-williams-scandal-comcast>.

More importantly, it encourages short-term attitudes that focus on the responsehttps://vpn1.ucr.edu/+CSCO+0h756767633A2F777A642E666E747263686F2E70627A++/content/89/4/606.full.pdf.

The message is clear. In addition to the immediate empathy and altruism engaged by this disaster, we need to learn about two its costs and benefits on an unequal basis, and the dominant media's obfuscatory obsessions.



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