On the political possibilities of therapy news: Media responsibility and the limits of objectivity in disaster coverage

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FRANK Furedi (2004) has argued that in Western "therapy culture," "individual emotions and experience have acquired an unprecedented significance in public life" (p. 44). To Furedi, the expression of emotions has been rendered safe and depoliticized. In the contemporary newsworld, he argues, the public display of emotions is seen as an acceptable form of expression that doesn't threaten political or social stability. Here, we suggest that practices of disaster reporting provide a useful case study of the public expression of emotions. Discussing the coverage of disasters, British journalist Tessa Mayes denounced what she calls "Therapy News":

> Emotional indulgence and sentimentalism are replacing informative, facts-based news reporting. Today reporters are providing Therapy News... Unlike the past, contemporary news reports are swamped in emotion as if reporting and analysing feelings are the reporter's chief purpose. As a result, victims are granted expert status. ... the new therapeutic approach is allowing victims to be less criticised and more counselled by the media ... Therapy News offers an over-indulgent feast of feeling, re-playing individuals' emotions back to us as if we all feel the same way. (Mayes, 2000)

Such a narrative assumes that there was once a "golden age" of responsible, dispassionate and objective disaster reporting. As we will demonstrate, however, disaster reporting has always possessed some properties of "therapy news." Central to Mayes' observation is her fear that emotional story-telling, by privileging the voices of victims, "pollutes" informative and facts-based reporting and undermines the epistemic authority of journalist. Instead of objective transmission of information, disaster coverage gives voice, counsel and comfort to the victim.

Her critique is grounded in a conventional liberal view of news media as the lubricant for the wheels of representative democracy. James Carey (1987) suggested that this liberal ideal brings about a "journalism of information," or a:

> ...journalism of the expert and the conduit, a journalism of information, fact, objectivity, and publicity. It is a scientific conception of journalism: it assumes an audience to be informed, educated by the journalist and the expert. (p. 14)

A 'journalism of information' entails a view of mass media as transmission vessels for news, dispassionately shining the light of publicity on government actions. The more information they provide, the greater the ability of the public to make valid choices. The liberal model rests on the assumption that news is produced and consumed in instrumental and rationalist ways. Indeed, the political philosophy that underpins the modernist project of liberal democracy – exemplified, among other prominent contributions, by Habermas' notion of the public sphere (e.g. Habermas, 1989; see also Lunt & Pantti, forthcoming) insists on the universal value of ideals of objectivity and detachment.

In the context of journalism scholarship and practice, the ideal of objectivity, as a central "strategic ritual" of journalism in a liberal democratic tradition, has always been problematic (cf. Schudson, 1978). Worries about the fate of objectivity surface in discussions of the increasingly emotional nature of news reporting, enforced in particular by styles and genres of television – including reality TV, talk shows and 24 hour news coverage (e.g. Aslama and Pantti, 2006). Emotional reporting is seen as part of a larger social trend that is shifting public discourse away from matters of the common good, and towards a preoccupation with the intimate and affective.

At the same time, scholars from across the humanities and social sciences increasingly question the opposition between reason and emotion which underpins dominant conceptions of political life (cf. Wahl-Jorgensen, 2006). Instead, they call for recognition of the fact that passion, rather than undermining the rationality required for political deliberation, is central to it. That is to say, only people who feel passionately about an issue or event can be mobilized for political thought and action. As Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen have suggested, "emotion and reason interact to produce a thoughtful and attentive citizenry" (2000, p. 1).

Here, we enter into these debates by suggesting that disaster coverage creates affective communities by focussing on emotions that bring people together. Disaster coverage is emotional by nature, whether it focuses on the emotions of individuals directly affected by the tragic events or the collective emotions of the larger community reacting to the misfortunes of others like them. Disasters make emotions prominent because they involve reportorial practices outside of ordinary structural routines. Victor Turner's (1982) idea of 'liminality' points to an ambiguous period which gives occasion for the exceptional appearances of emotions and strong bonds between people, and contains "the germ of future social developments" (p. 45). Disasters differ greatly in the extent to which they involve practices outside established routines and elicit emotional engagement. However, it is important to note that emotional expression is frequently organized through ritual forms. As Solomon (2002, p. 118) argued, there is not such a thing as a raw emotion. Instead, they are all "'covered over' with the trappings of culture and experience, and constrained and complicated by the 'display rules' of society." Journalists are actively producing emotions (of victims but also of themselves) and placing them in story plots and wider cultural narratives. In contemporary news media, disasters have become normalised and are usually covered in routine manner; therefore we need to more clearly distinguish those that stray from the narrow path of routine. These, we argue, may trigger political and moral action.

Pantti and Wieten (2005) have noted that extraordinary tragic events are typically represented as integrative events, moments of national consensus and unity born out of mourning together (p. 301, see also Pantti, 2005). In describing news coverage of the deaths of famous people, Kitch argues that stories of mourning represent the "culmination of a longer-term phenomenon: it offers a magnified view of the ongoing ways journalists use narrative and personalization to explain rather than report news, and to unify audiences as communities (2000, p. 190). On the other hand, mediatised disasters can also be seen as social disruptions that have a potentially transformative effect and can give weight to the voices of challenger groups within society (Cottle, 2006). This paper studies the texture of these moments of consensus and unity, as well as commotion and challenge.

Media Coverage of Disaster: Empowerment and the Representation of 'Ordinary People'

We argue that media's representations of disaster have the potential to politically empower victims. If media rituals, such as disaster coverage, contribute to maintaining societal norms and values (Dayan and Katz, 1993; Couldry, 2003), we propose that representations of "ordinary people" and their voices are central to these rituals. Disaster coverage is one arena where "ordinary people" are given a voice. Ordinary people appear in the news primarily when they are victims of crime or natural disaster. Work in journalism sociology has consistently shown that journalism offers little room for the voices of citizens, focusing instead on the activities of the powerful and wealthy (Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1980; Lewis, Inthorn & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005). As Cottle (2000) observed, "the organization of news is not geared up to the needs of the socially powerless" (p. 434).

While the constraints and practices of journalistic production may work against providing political agency to ordinary people, we suggest that the coverage of disasters opens up space for empowerment and accountability. It authorises, through discourses of horror, anger, empathy and grief, critique of government and other power holders and their handling of disasters. If the media are responsible for holding government and other power holders accountable, such a responsibility is reflected in the frequently emotionally charged representation of citizens' voices in disaster coverage. While these representations have changed over time, they have been a persistent journalistic tool, reflecting the tenacity of emotional story-telling. Such calls for accountability are woven into the discursive registers of disaster coverage examined here. Alongside moments of political empowerment, representations of ordinary people's troubles and grief link frequently signal unity and the strength of communities.

As the famous saying has it, the job of the journalist is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Therapy news achieves just this. It does it in its representations of ordinary people's suffering, by calling government to account, strengthening communities and creating solidarity. If, in coverage of tragedies and disasters, journalism constructs "a news of feeling as well as fact" (Kitch, 2000), we argue that theories of the media's role in society ought to reflect this. They ought to reflect the opportunities and dangers of the emotional story-telling that shape the contemporary media landscape.

The Study

Our cases belong to the canon of great disasters and accidents in British history. These are frequently commemorated in the media and used as historical comparisons (typically in a list of past national disasters) when journalists try to make sense of new disasters. We can call them "media disasters", in that they "are publicly signalled by different media as major, often traumatic and, on occasion, historically momentous happenings, also frequently exhibit high media performativity, circulate potent symbols, and invoke/or mobilize solidarities" (Cottle, 2006, p. 421). We have chosen disasters that can be considered to be 'man-made' accidents, but which are not a result of criminal actions such as terrorist attacks or murders. In contrast to natural disasters, which can be interpreted as unpreventable "acts of God", "man-made" disasters are caused by human error or negligence, and are often connected to the modern technology or lifestyle. As such, they open up opportunities for questions of fault and responsibility, and therefore potentially also for "outlaw emotions" such as anger, which may be politically subversive (Jaggar, 1989: 144). Our six cases, chosen from each decade since 1920s to allow a historical comparison, include:

1. *Glen Cinema fire 1929*. 71 of 900 children attending a special matinee in Paisley, Scotland, on December 31, 1929, were killed because of the panic caused by smoke from a burning film reel. Children, aged between 18 months and 12 years, fought to leave the theatre through exit doors that would not open, and became victims of a massive crush. The cinema manager was placed under arrest but in the subsequent court case he was found not guilty for negligence.

2. *Harrow and Wealdstone rail crash 1952*. The worst peacetime railway crash in Great Britain took place on October 8, 1952. 112 people died and 340 were injured in the accident. A local passenger train from Tring to London Euston was standing at Harrow and Wealdstone station when it was rear-ended by the express train from Perth, Scotland. Seconds after the first collision, another express from Euston ran into the wreckage strewn across the line, causing further casualties. The reason for the collision remains unknown but the accident gave rise to much debate in the press on the need of extending automatic train control.

3. *Aberfan landslide disaster 1966*. On October 21, 1966, a colliery waste tip collapsed into the mining village of Aberfan. It engulfed Pantglas Junior School, part of an adjacent senior school, and several houses. 144 people were killed, 116 of whom were children. An inquiry found the National Coal Board fully responsible for the disaster, but nobody was prosecuted.

4. *Moorgate tube crash 1975*. The worst London underground accident in peacetime occurred on February 28, 1975, when a Northern City Line train crashed into the tunnel end beyond the platform at Moorgate station. Forty-three people were killed at the scene, including the driver, and several more subsequently died from injuries. The cause of the incident remains unknown.

5. *Bradford City football stadium fire 1985*. On May 11, 1985, about 11,000 fans were celebrating winning the Football League Third Division trophy at the Valley Parade stadium when a fire started in the main stand. Escaping people found the exit doors locked. Fifty-six people died and over 200 were injured. The Popplewell Committee of Inquiry was set up after the tragedy and led to the introduction of new legislation to increase safety in the football grounds.

6. *Ladbroke rail crash 1999*. On October 5, 1999, 31 people died and 400 were injured in the train crash at Ladbroke Grove, two miles outside London's Paddington Station. The report of the public inquiry conducted by Lord Cullen provided damning evidence of how the companies operating Britain's trains since privatisation of British Rail have consistently placed profit before public safety.

We have used the coverage of *Daily Mail* and the *Times* to study emotional discourses in disaster news. These newspapers were chosen as major national newspapers, which have been in continuous print throughout the period spanned by our study. The *Times* is a broadsheet paper, which has been historically considered as the "newspaper of record." The *Daily Mail* is a mid-market tabloid newspaper with conservative tone, printed in a tabloid format. Both newspapers have changed over time. However, our study is not mainly concerned with these changes or differences between two newspapers. Rather, we focus on the changes and continuities of emotional discourses in the disaster coverage. We believe that historicizing journalistic practices is vital for

understanding both what has changed in emotional discourses, and what has remained the same.

The *Times* has a digital database throughout the study period. Articles from the *Daily Mail* have been photocopied from microfilm, except the articles from our last case, which have been printed from Lexis/Nexis database.Our analysis included 583 articles in total, representing all coverage in the *Daily Mail* and *The Times* for a period of two weeks following each of the disasters. They are divided over the six events as follows:

	Daily Mail	*The Times*	In total
Glen Cinema fire 1929	19	12	31
Harrow and Wealdstone rail crash 1952	24	25	49
Aberfan landslide disaster 1966	32	59	91
Moorgate tube crash 1975	19	22	41
Bradford City stadium fire 1985	47	30	77
Ladbroke rail crash 1999	88	106	294

The volume of reporting has grown over the 70 years spanned by the study, but only the coverage of 1990s is significantly different in terms of the number of stories. There are also considerable changes in how the stories are organized in the newspaper. In earlier cases, coverage of disaster was dispersed around the paper in the midst of other news material. For example, next to the story of a service of prayer for the Aberfan victims (1966), there was a news article about the start of Christmas turkey shopping and an ad about a vitality-enhancing food supplement.

Since the Bradford stadium fire in 1985, stories about particular disasters have been packaged together to signal the gravity of news, and to add to the emotional value. Since then, the newspapers we studied have also begun to use distinctive design choices to set apart their coverage of disaster. For the Bradford fire, the *Daily Mail* used the logo, “Disaster at the match,” and included a picture of a burning stand. In the Ladbroke train crash, the newspaper’s design choices were more elaborate, as the banner changed daily, setting a distinctive emotional tone: The first day’s coverage was packaged under the banner, “Inferno on the 8.06”, while the second day’s coverage appeared under the heading, “Scandal of signal 109.”

To conceptualise emotions as discursive practice is to analyse them as “a form of social action that creates effects in the world” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz,

1990, p. 12). Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz (1990: 15) have pointed out that emotional discourses can both reinforce existing power difference and provide loci of resistance.

Our analysis enabled us to reconstruct four distinctive discourses through which the public emotion was articulated. First, there was a *discourse of horror,* which communicated the intensity of destruction and misery caused by the tragic event. Second, a *discourse of empathy* expressed compassion and condolences for the suffering and created sense of communitas. Third, a *discourse of grief* focused on individual and collective mourning, helping the afflicted to work through the loss. Finally, in the *discourse of anger*, the main descriptors were questions of responsibility and retribution.

The Discourse of Horror

Emotional story-telling in disaster news starts with graphic depictions of dreadful realities. The horror of the present is without exception contrasted with the accounts of happiness or ordinariness of the everyday life just before the disaster: New Year's festivities, a local football club's victory celebration, the normal opening of a school day, or a boring commute to work turn into unforeseen horror. In one journalist's eloquent description of the magnitude of Harrow and Wealdstone train crash in 1952, the "history of before" is portrayed through the displaced and damaged everyday objects, which communicate about our shared vulnerability:

> The station clock had stopped at 8.20. Clouds of escaping steam clothed the scene in an air of unreality. Its nightmare quality was heightened by the shrieks from trapped passengers and the heart-rending groans of the injured. Scattered everywhere were belongings which a minute before had rested on the knees of happy travellers; a child's shoes, caught by its laces, dangled from a razor-edged piece of metal; a brown high-heeled shoe; a diary; a torn jacket; a battered trilby hat. (*Daily Mail*, "Coaches plunged into shopping centre", October 9, 1952)

News stories about the responses of the elite to the horror, such as "The Queen shocked," contribute to constructing the general mood and emphasizing the national character of the disaster. However, it is the witnessing of the ordinary people at the scene that loads the news event with an exceptional

emotional charge and binds the readers to the disaster of others. John Langer (1998, p. 87) argues that news-makers may temporarily hand over the story to ordinary witnesses because their point of view provides a position for partisanship and emotional engagement: "Victims become more authentically sympathetic and worthy of our 'reflex of tears' when an ordinary person located in the real world, rather than someone from the potentially manipulative world of professional newsmakers, can guarantee the details of misfortune." Here are examples of survivors' and close observers' eyewitness accounts from different decades, which told in the first-person bring across the full horror of events than a re-telling by journalist in a third person :

> Mr. William Ingham, 48, of Chalfont-avenue, Wembley, was in the forth carriage of the Manchester train. He said: [–] "Then there was a crash, and our coach –or what was left of it–was on the platform. Alongside us was one of the locomotives. It was ghastly. The screams and groans from underneath were something I never want to hear again". (*Daily Mail*, "Daily Mail reporters tell the full story of yesterday's great train disaster: Coaches plunged into shopping centre", October 9, 1952)
>
> Shirley Garragan, who also lives close to the scene, rushed outside when she heard an explosion. "I could hear people screaming for help," said Miss Garragan. "One man whose face was covered in blood was trying to climb over the railings to get on to the road. He was screaming, "I'm Bill, please help me. Somebody please help me. Please call my wife". "He was desperately clawing at the fence trying to get out and away from the crash". (*Daily Mail*, "Strangers on a train who were united by disaster", October 6, 1999)

Even if today we consume more images of horror and death than ever before, there seems to be a change towards a more sensitive depiction of horror in disaster news. In the Paddington train crash, the depiction of horror was less focused on gory details than earlier disaster stories. Instead, journalists made their points through symbolic representations, such as cell phones ringing in the train wreck and commuter's cars with frozen windows left in railway stations' car parks. Here, a fireman provides an eyewitness account about the Paisley cinema panic, and a journalist tells of the Paddington crash through a survivor's story:

> There was a solid mass of humanity round the screen when we fought our way in. – Living and dead were laying breast high near the exits. Some of the children were blue in the face and very still; others could still scream. I saw what seemed to be a baby of about 18 months lying in the pile. Some of the youngsters who were still alive seemed to have gone mad with terror.(*The Times*, January 1, 1930)

Knowledge of the traumatic effects of disasters was evident in coverage of the Paddington rail crash. The coverage drew on stories of counselling (e.g. for the signalman who tried to prevent the disaster) and interviews with several commuters, including survivors, about their feelings after the disaster. This demonstrated that disasters can result in fear and anxiety about commuting. By contrast, in earlier cases the short or long-term psychological effects of the event were not discussed. Here is a typical example of the new focus on emotional trauma:

> Janice Willis, 33, has made her first trip back to Reading Station, where she boarded the Great Western train. For the human resources manager, the symbolic journey was the first step to in coming terms with her experience. Although she suffered only minor physical injuries, the emotional scars will prove harder to heal. Another survivor, David Taylor, from Didcot, has set up a support group to help those affected by the crash. He can be contacted via PO Box 603. (*The Times*, "We are just left hoping against hope", October 11, 1999)

In her scolding of therapy news Mayes (2000) suggested that journalists' "I-feel accounts" - the inclusion of reporter's own emotional reactions to events – are a new phenomenon. We found no evidence to support the claim that journalists have ever held back their emotions when confronted with the terror and suffering. On the contrary, journalists' descriptions sound the same note of shock and disbelief as do the quotes from witnesses. A journalist writing in 1930 about the most incomprehensible death in modern society; the death of children, used the same kind of intimate confessional style found in contemporary disaster news: "Early this morning I joined the relatives in their sad visit to the chamber of the dead. May I be spared by another such ordeal." (*Daily Mail*, "A silent town", January 2, 1930)

The discourse of horror is about bearing witness and giving testimony to the carnage. Detailed eyewitness testimonies from survivors and close observers, together with journalists' accounts of suffering, debris scattered across the disaster scene and the brutal reality facing rescue workers, construct a shared understanding of what has taken place, inviting readers to bear witness to the horror. Depicting horror and death is often deemed sensational and dehumanizing – and it has not been seen as particularly conducive to mobilization (Whittier, 2001). However, it is a precondition for emotional and intellectual meaning-making, and consequently for the action to relieve the present suffering and prevent future tragedies. It can be seen as motivating action by helping individuals and collectives decide on their priorities, as news reports articulate moral judgements over the deaths, and interpret the worthiness of victims (see Seaton, 2005, p. 193). In giving meaning to disaster, the discourse of horror also set off the other three discourses that articulate empathy, grief and anger.

The Discourse of Empathy

In disaster news, we can differentiate between informal civic empathy expressed by ordinary people, rescue workers and, increasingly, celebrities; and official empathy expressed by the political elite, which takes relatively unchanged ritual forms.

In the representations of informal public empathy, the main themes are people's unselfishness, bravery and equality in their attempt to relieve the suffering of others. A typical example emphasizes the communion and heroism which breaks down boundaries of class, gender or age:

> Senior railway officials and gangers, directors and clerks, shed their coats to work side by side. So it was with the injured. Their thoughts did not centre on their own pain, but were, without exception, for others similarly affected. Mrs. Elizabeth Jones, 28, of Highstreet Wealdstone, was among the housewives who left their chores and tended the injured. She comforted shaken passengers and brewed gallons of tea. (*Daily Mail*, October 9, 1952)

The simplest meaning of disaster is that it arouses compassion and pity for the sufferers. Even though the emotional address of a text is always ambiguous, the segments quoted above promote a certain kind of emotional response. Walter et al. (1995, p. 586) wrote about media coverage of the ex-

traordinary deaths of ordinary British citizens, suggesting that news audiences are likely to experience "pain on behalf of those suffering and/or anxiety that this could happen to them or to their children." Through story-telling about the compassionate feelings and acts of the characters of the story (including narrator-journalists), newspapers call on readers to share that empathy. On the other hand, the shift of focus from the sufferers to the heroes allows the rhetorical shift from despair to hope and national pride. The following example highlights the comforting rhetoric about how disaster brings out the best in people:

> [H]elp also poured in from London's citizens. At the blood donor centre at Moor House, just 50 yards from the station, a spokesman said: "There has been a tremendous response." One donor, bank clerk Peter Harvard said: "I heard the news of the crash on the radio this morning and I felt there was only one thing to do – give blood." (*Daily Mail*, "The day long struggle to save lives", March 1, 1975)

In every case, newspapers praised the heroes, including survivors and rescue workers. Journalists profiled individual heroes and heroines, such as the "American Angel" in the Harrow and Wealdstone crash: "With them [the American Air force] went Lieutenant Abbie Sweetwine, a coloured nurse from Florida and the only girl in the contingent. — A British doctor said: 'She was an Angel. She worked absolutely non-stop, caring for everyone" (*Daily Mail*, October 9, 1952). In the Aberfan disaster, both newspapers told the story of 10-year-old Ashley Coffey of Aberfan primary school who freed himself from the pile of debris and risked his own life to haul out his injured friend. The reporter wrote: "If medals are awarded for bravery at Aberfan this weekend, young Ashley deserves the first" (*Daily Mail*, October 24, 1966). Celebrating heroes was also the main theme in readers' letters to the editor. A typical letter called for honouring of the rescue workers of Moorgate tube disaster: "Every one of the team deserves nothing less than an honour from the Queen for bravery and endurance (*Daily Mail*, "Honour them!," March 6, 1975).

In the discourse of empathy, the meaning of national character is commonly defined through stories of heroism of ordinary people facing an extraordinary situation. Stories of ordinary heroes reassure readers that the most cherished cultural values were intact, as in this account from an ambulance driver:

> The trapped man and woman were at the limit of human endurance –but they did not complain. They showed tremendous courage. (*Daily Mail*, "Mystery of dead man's handle", March 1, 1975)

Empathy and compassion are also expressed in more ritualistic forms. This includes stories of how national and foreign leaders respond to the suffering, by sending their 'messages of sympathy' and visiting the disaster scene. The condolences of the Prime Minister to the people of Paisley in 1930 are typical in constructing the citizens of the whole country as co-mourners:

> The feelings of the country are harrowed this morning and its heart is full of tender sympathy because of the terrible thing which happened in Paisley yesterday. Such a tragedy at any time would have moved the country to sorrow, but happening yesterday when every one was happy with children, was given himself to them, and was planning fetes and gaiety so that the little ones might laugh and be glad -deep indeed is the gloom which this devastation has cast upon us. (*The Times*, January 2, 1930)

The discourse of empathy also included representations of material help such as disaster funds. In earlier cases (Paisley and Wealstone and Harrow), this was covered by offering lists of people and institutions who are donating money (amount mentioned) for disaster funds. In the Aberfan case, the coverage of funds and collections was similar to today's coverage. The "toy appeal" organized by Princess Margaret received much press attention and became a serial narrative. Stories on massive quantities of toys arriving to the devastated mining town from all over the country were used as a nation-building vehicle.

In sum, the discourse of empathy works as a counterforce against the onslaught of senseless death and horror: It tries to find some meaning or "something good" in chaotic, random, violent events. It is an inclusive and integrative discourse, telling tales of unselfishness, heroism, equality and patriotism, and working to form a unified (national) community.

The Discourse of Grief

Whereas the discourse of empathy has remained relatively unchanged, the discourse of grief has seen profound transformations, as a result of changes in

mourning practices. These two discourses, however, are inseparable, as the media play a significant part in the discursive construction of grief (Reimers, 2003). In the discourse of grief we can trace journalism's growing focus on the private and intimate, seen to characterize media content since the 1990s (e.g. Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Thompson, 1995; Hartley, 1996; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Accordingly, there is a change from covering grief merely in terms of formal religious rituals, and towards representing mourning within the garden-variety of formal and informal civic and personal rituals. The spontaneous shrines people create following disasters are central to today's reporting. This kind of mourning behaviour was first reported in the Bradford disaster coverage. A *Daily Mail* story described a simple turnstile shrine, a glass vase with some flowers, with a message on a card: "Richard and Robert (twins) and their father, at rest" (*Daily Mail*, "Turnstile shrine in the memory of a father and his twin sons", May 15, 1985).

This shift has meant that ordinary people are increasingly expressing their grief in their own words, and taking charge of mourning rituals. In our earlier cases, the personal loss and grief was mostly articulated by journalists:

> Some of the parents broke down completely as soon as they passed through the door. One father, feeling unable to stand the strain, refused to enter the mortuary. But his wife, although almost on the point of collapse insisted on going to see if her son's body was inside. No sooner had she entered than a shriek was heard and she was carried senseless into the street. Another woman came out of the mortuary beside herself with grief. "They are both there!," was all that she could sob out. She had found her two young children lying dead. *(Daily Mail,* "3 dead in one family", January 1, 1930)

In the Paddington case, the journalists were fascinated by a range of civic and religious rituals: Stories described the building of shrines, messages left at the railway station, candles lit in church. The number of religious rituals associated with the disaster was greater than in previous cases, and the newspapers reported all of them. Coverage of an informal religious service lead by Bishop of Kensington in a Sainsbury's petrol station suggested that such an event "can touch the heart as much as any as in any cathedral." This story is typical in showing that when tragic events occur, representatives of officialdom (bishop, "stern-faced police sergeant", politicians) show emotion like everybody else:

> He offered prayers for the dead and injured but also for the living, "scarred emotionally in their mourning, worry, anxiety, by their experiences, and for members of the emergency services, "who worked so valiantly to help their fellow human beings and whose pictures in the media have so evoked compassion and care" — The bishop and fellow clergy moved among relatives to offer comfort. But even a bishop sometimes finds it necessary to dab his eye when listening to harrowing tales of the premature, sudden and unnecessary deaths of innocents. (*The Times*, "Bishop leads car park vigil for bereaved", October 11, 1999)

The inclusiveness of the media-driven discourse of mourning has been questioned (e.g. Thomas, 2002) but nevertheless we suggest that mediatised rituals – for example those related to death - are among the few means available for the creation of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1989). Like empathy, the discourse of grief frequently has a strong community building element:

> The punk with green hair, the senior police officer and the elderly fan with his scarf knotted proudly at his throat...
> they came united in grief. – Survivors, fans, civic dignitaries, club officials, police officers and ambulance crews were among the 1.000-many in tears-who crowded the cathedral for the special service. (*Daily Mail*, "The grief and the courage", May 13, 1985)

The discourse of grief provides the peak of emotional engagement in the disaster news. Scholars of death and bereavement have pointed out that grief is remarkably invisible in everyday life in the Western world, with the exception of media representations following disasters and celebrity deaths (Walter et al., 1995; Walter, 1991; Reimers, 2003). To sociologists, media representations provide fundamental discursive resources for expressing and understanding grief, and for constructing a normative framework for mourning. According to Walter (1991, p. 607), the spontaneous mourning that followed the Hillsborough football stadium disaster in 1989 might have played an important role in propagating to a wider audience the more expressive mode of grief. We can see the coverage of mourning rituals following disasters as part of a new civil religion (Kitch, 2003) which functions "to maintain, in the face of ultimate chaos and anomie, one's culture and one's most cherished values" (Walter, 1991, p. 608).

The Discourse of Anger

The public('s) articulation of grief often involves anger at those seen to be responsible for the disaster. Similarly, the response to suffering may involve anger, encapsulated in the idea that it is wrong and something must be done about it. Anger and moral outrage on behalf of the suffering victims can be a powerful motivation for dissent and opposition when there is someone to blame for the injustice. And the clearer the target, the greater the likelihood of anger and opposition (Jasper, 1998).

Questions of fault and responsibility are central to news of "man-made" disasters. However, it depends greatly on the context whether the expression of such questions involve anger. It makes a difference whether those responsible for the disaster are individuals or a national industry, and, by implication, the government. In the Paisley case, the question of blame was represented through court reporting (four months after the disaster), in which ordinary people featured only as court witnesses. In the Harrow and Wealstone case, public inquiry and controversy followed over where the blame lay, but ordinary people were not included in this discussion, except in vague references to public opinion, as when an editorial commented: "Public uneasiness has been rising in direct proportion to the mounting death-roll, and people are asking: "What is wrong with the railways?" (*Daily Mail*, "Safety on the lines", October 13, 1952)

In the Aberfan case, the discourse of anger was prominent. The coverage highlighted that the entire mining community was bereaved. This fact, in turn, enabled the anger to be collectively expressed. In stories of accountability there was no ambivalence about the object of anger. As the village priest was reported to have said, Aberfan was not 'an act of God' but "a direct consequence of man's neglect and man's failure to act when every intelligent person must have foreseen a disaster of this kind" (*Daily Mail*, October 10, 1966). The Aberfan disaster became the story of a working-class community energised with the passion of anger against the National Coal Board, which was reported having ignored warnings of danger for many years: "Yesterday, Mr. Bernard Chamberlain, of Pantglas Road, Aberfan, said he had been battling for two years to get something done. 'It was only two days ago that I made a further protest against nothing being done."' (*Daily Mail*, "Warning of danger given 3 years ago", October 22, 1966). The anger became ritualized in Aberfan with protests and petitions. Aberfan parents boycotted temporary classrooms built in the shadow of a coal-tip (*Daily Mail*, October 31. Parents

in other Welsh mining villages were also told to refuse to send their children to school. The Aberfan story powerfully demonstrates that some types of disaster reporting authorise, through the expression of grief and anger, critique of power holders from below.

Journalists clearly took the side of the working-class people of Aberfan. The National Coal Board was given the space to respond that it was not to blame, but the voices of Aberfan people were much louder in media coverage. We can take the Aberfan case as an example of reporting that authorises, through the expression of grief and anger, critique of government and other power holders. Ettema and Glasser (1998) studied how investigative journalists, committed to the ideal of objective reporting, nevertheless inject their stories with a moral stance. They do this by drawing on the voices of the victims of wrong-doing, whose stories mobilize a community of moral outrage. On this basis, Ettema and Glasser (1998) suggested that a key resource of the most powerful in society is the refusal to comment. However, when reporting builds moral outrage, the powerful are forced to respond, and their privilege of silence is undermined.

The immediate cause of Paddington rail disaster was an error of the train driver who passed red signals. However, unlike the Moorgate tube crash, it was not discussed in terms of individual fault, but framed in the context of previous train disasters. As such, it became a hot topic of rail safety. As John Prescott, then Secretary of State of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, told the House of Commons: "The Ladbroke Grove rail crash touch the heart of the entire nation. It must be a watershed for railway safety. We must make it so." (*The Times*, October 20, 1999)

The Paddington disaster has been taken as an example of weepy journalism focused on the grief of victims (Mayes, 2000). However, we found that reporting on railway safety easily outnumbered the victim stories. Editorials, commentaries and in-depth reports articulated harsh criticism of Britain's privatised rail industry and government's inadequate efforts at addressing safety problems:

> Understandably, the first feelings of public shock over the Paddington rail tragedy are turning to seething anger. How could such a disaster happen, in the light of the seemingly very similar Southall crash two years ago? Why has there been such official reluctance to install the Automatic Train Protection system? Why is the now notorious signal 109 apparently so difficult for drivers

> to see? Why was no action taken, despite the fact that eight trains have passed it at red in the last six years? [–] Meanwhile worried commuters accuse those companies of putting profits before safety. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott faces mounting criticism for doing so little to improve standards. And some Labour MPs are denouncing the Tories for privatising the railways and supposedly putting safety at risk. (*Daily Mail*, "Why Parliament must be recalled", October 7, 1999)

Whereas in the Aberfan case, the journalists sided with the mining village by giving them an opportunity to express their feelings of anger, in the Paddington case newspapers acted in a representative role to communicate the prevailing emotion of the collectivity. Newspapers reported extensively on the anger of citizens:

> As the day drew on more anger did begin to surface as information failed to come forward. Back at the station, 21-year-old Lea McMahon said her best friend's mother was lying in hospital after the crash. 'This is the main route into London, ' she said. 'Hundreds of people travel from here every day. How could this happen nowadays? We can do anything, we can send astronauts into space but we can't control safety on our trains.' (*Daily Mail*, "A candle for the daddies who will not be coming home" October 8, 1999)

Such reporting was also constructed as an expression of the general public mood, legitimizing journalists' criticism towards the rail industry and the government. This general feeling of anger set the Paddington crash apart from other disasters:

> It is there too, in the messages with the flowers, a focused anger that goes beyond the despairing at fate that is the normal response. – The thoughts of those who have left flowers at the public site, which is against the wall at Sainsbury's have a theme. "This is crime," one card says. "Forget behaving with dignity and sensitivity. We need and we will scream and shout for justice." (*The Times*, "Quiet voice that says this horror is different, October 10, 1999)

More than anything, the discourse of anger provides a site for ordinary people to hold those responsible to account for their actions. As such, it represents a source of political empowerment that is often absent in mainstream journalism.

Towards Theorising Disaster Coverage

This paper has sought to historicise and theorise media coverage of disaster. We have done this by analysing coverage of six selected 'man-made' disaster in two British national newspapers, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail* over a 70-year period, from 1929 to 1999. We have taken a particular interest in how the "therapy news" of disaster coverage challenges a conventional liberal model of news media, which emphasises objectivity, fact-centred reporting and information provision. Disaster coverage, we have argued, provides an opportunity for exploring the political and integrative roles of journalism, by drawing on an emotionally charged paradigm of reporting. We have focused on how 'ordinary people' are represented in such coverage. Such representations, we suggest, carve out a unique space for non-elite voices that are otherwise marginalised in news coverage. These representations and the discourses they engender, create solidarity and political empowerment.

As we have shown, "therapy news" is not the newfangled invention of 24-hour news and "I-feel" journalism, but rather a sustained genre of journalism present in all the cases we studied. Our cases suggest that the coverage of disaster always opens with an account of the horrific aspects of the event – what we here call "the discourse of horror." This is followed by the discourse of grief, which focuses on the suffering of victims and bereaved. Such accounts, in turn, give rise to the discourse of empathy, which constructs imagined communities of shared loss by telling stories of individuals acting empathetically and heroically for the benefit of others. They call on feelings of national and community pride in accounts of heroes who provide hope and optimism by saving victims. Finally, discourses of anger assign blame and call those responsible to account by telling stories of the justified rage of the afflicted.

Media disasters are often discussed in terms of grief. We want to highlight that there is surely a wider range of emotions that needs to be addressed. Emotional reactions to disasters vary, and the media give more weight to some reactions at the expense of others. Not all emotional reactions contribute equally to collective action. "Political emotions" should be distinguished one

from another: anger, fear and hatred do different things in political life than, for example, compassion and grief. While some emotions strengthen social bonds and belonging in society, others heighten a sense a crisis and increase the chance of shaking up society's institutions.

In making these observations, we do not suggest that disaster reporting is a static form. Rather, it has subtly evolved over time. First, disaster coverage increasingly gives expressive authority to the victims of disaster, rather than the officials and elites responding to it. Secondly, discourses of grief reflect a growing focus on intimacy in the public sphere by paying increasing attention to informal civic and personal rituals of the 'ordinary people' represented. Thirdly, the *form* of disaster news (e.g. Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001) has changed. Whereas early disaster reports were scattered through the paper, disasters have become increasingly branded – all stories about a particular disaster are now packaged together, appearing under logos and emblematic photos.

However, disaster coverage remains remarkably consistent across time. Rather than demonstrating any decline in journalistic standards, our study has shown that disaster coverage draws on the power of an emotional politics, as a unique secular ritual that both builds communities and enforces accountability.

This is not to say that the ideal of objective, fact-centred reporting embedded in a liberal democratic 'journalism of information' is without its merits, only that we must recognise that politics is inherently emotional, as well as rational. As such, the therapy news of disaster reporting represents a resource for political life. However, this resource comes at a heavy price: Ordinary people are empowered in and through victimhood, rather than because as citizens.

Either way, because of its profound implications, therapy news cannot be dismissed as trivialisation, but should instead be taken seriously as a potential site for good journalism.

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