

Studies of Disasters in Argentina: the inception of a new discipline.

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Maximiliano E. Korstanje

Departamento de Ciencias Económicas. Universidad de Palermo, Argentina.

mkorst@palermo.edu

Abstract

Recently, the media bombarded audience respecting to new based on natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and economic. Although in other countries, there is a long tradition of disaster research with a strong intervention of State, in Argentina this field is in its infancy. This not only represents a serious problem for conducting evacuee programs in tourist destinations, but also gives to journalism a vital role in managing post disaster reactions. Since universities are not interested in forming the future policy makers, the gap is fulfilled by secondary non-skilled actors. As a result, tourist destinations run serious risk to collapse because of disasters.

Key Words: Lack of applied research, Disasters, Design, Evacuation process.

Resumen

Actualmente, los medios masivos de comunicación bombardean día y noche a sus audiencias con noticias que se refieren a ataques terroristas, desastres naturales o crisis financieras. Aunque en otros países existe un corpus avanzado de conocimiento e investigación respecto como manejar desastres, en Argentina, este campo se encuentra poco explorado. Ello no solo representa un serio problema porque no existen órganos que centralicen la información en momentos de emergencia, sino que además le confieren al periodismo demasiados atributos. Producto de la ignorancia y la falta de interés, el sector turístico afronta un serio desafío ante los desastres.

Palabras Claves: Falta de investigación, Desastres, Diseño, Proceso de Evacuación

In Argentina, it is unfortunate there is an evident lack of interest in the disaster-related literature. Unlike in other parts of the world, psychology, anthropology and sociology seem not to be interested in studying issues relating to disasters and emergencies. Even though, in last years, the argentine citizens witnessed how the world has been subject to many natural and made-man disasters, the fact is that a genre of this caliber is not taught at

universities for the moment. To some extent, the literature of disasters seems to be part of fiction or is consumed as a form of entertainment instead a scientific-discipline.

By the way, whenever a mega-disaster shocks the public opinion as the example of Tsunami in Asia, world Trade Center's attacks, the bombing in Spain or England, mass-floods in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro to be precise), the earth-quake in Chile and Haiti, hurricanes like Katrina in US, or the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong journalism recurs to a chain of experts who explain to lay people how the disaster emerges and how it can be avoided. The lack of scientific studies in management of disasters and catastrophes in this country generates a serious problem for lay-people because they are more vulnerable to the information given by mass media, first of all TN, the main Argentine mega-corporation dedicated to journalism and cultural entertainment. The greater the mass media is the worse for the community because vital information censored. No matter the country or the nation involved, mass media promotes a message where nobody is safe anytime and anywhere!. The extreme weather we come across now, which is a product of global warming, is wrecking havoc not only in local developing economies but also it paves the ways for a new form of entertainment based on the suffering of others. As the tourism or other activities, the global warming becomes in a mode of cultural entertainment. In spite of the thousand of congresses, films, books and papers warning on the effects of this process, industrialized-countries multiplied the emission of gases to atmosphere in last years. The paradox rests on the force of the same slogan simply because the social system tends to create fiction to perpetuate its own sense of reality.

Everyone recognizes exactly what contaminates the ozone-layer as driving a car or using a PC, but since the contamination has not an accurate punishment, subject often evaluates the opportunities and costs. As a final outcome of this decision-making process, the subject overemphasizes on the effects of global warming at once of trivializing the own contributions in the problem. Starting from the premise the journalism need to prophesize about the illness but gives at the same time the cure, the present piece focuses on the lack of interest of Argentine State in creating a Disaster- Management career that can give insight to would-be practitioners and planners in a near future. The monopoly of disaster

management is associated to classical biologists, doctors, geographers, geologists, meteorologists, rescuers or fire-fighters. Even though one admits each one of these specialists are familiar with their own scope of knowledge, it is truthfully they are unaware of how communicating information for a planned evacuation in order not to trigger a climate of alarmism in the population. On another hand, the coverage of media about disasters follows 4 stages. The following remarks have been based on my personal experience and field-work observation in contexts of emergencies. At a first glance, mass-media captivates the event in question evaluating the potential emotional impact on public opinion. News that are often included or excluded for the gate-keeper is of a high emotional impact. Basically, the vulnerability of victims is of paramount importance at time of deciding what news should be broadcasted in air or Press. By the needs of giving assistance to involved victims, mass media introduces the piety and charity as a mediated form of consumption and cultural entertainment.

With the passing of day, one realizes that the normal style of life sets the pace for new guidelines of behavior. The second element in this play is the manipulation of fear. In addition, Journalism and Media construct an apocalyptic meaning of the disaster with the end of indoctrinating the viewers. Fear not only triggers the mass-consumption of goods but also is aimed to reduce the degree of discontents in population. This psychological state of angst merges the probability (risk) with the possibility. For example, there are lower probabilities that I die because a sudden airplane accident but that of course may be possible on my mind. This possibility far away of being real can be real on my imaginary but many improbable to be concreted. What Media makes with efficiency is to replace the principle of probability with possibility generating a state of confusion. This can be seen in apocalyptic theories as the bottom-days, or the end of the world. When the boundaries between fantasy and reality break a sentiment of panic surfaces. The third aspects are the moral reinforcement of rules. In moments of uncertainty the people needs of viable frameworks to understand what is happening. The mass-media provides to viewers with moral guidelines that places the events into a judgment. This belief reinforces the material and moral order of every society. What is important in these types of coverage is not the event in such or the impacts but the odds to remind what are bad and good. For that, is

important the role played by expertise in this process. One of the strengths in these discourses consists in mingling a wide range of causes into similar effects. That way, a devastating hurricane as Katrina is placed in the same scenario than a quake or a Terrorist-Attack.

It is clear that experts are consulted as a valid source of information. Their comments and suggestions help viewers in reducing the sentiment of uncertainty which predominates in these types of contexts. Scholars bestow to these events a quota of reality reducing the expanded sentiment of dread. However, in a post-disaster context, the consulted scholars are not taking part of the recovery process and are misinformed about the causes and consequences of the event. The comments of experts rarely try to keep the calm in the audience. It is elaborated and framed to feed a show whose narrative is being enabled at the time thousand of interviews and depictions are distributed worldwide. Being-there, as the historical role of correspondents, is a valid sign of veracity which almost always is accepted. In this vein, one might speculate that the framing is more important than the content of what is being reported. The hegemony of visuality precedes the event as such. Lastly, there is a strong ideological component that accommodates the event into the mythical archetypes of other similar events which have taken place in past. Basically, these four facets can be seen in all new coverage regardless the culture or nationhood. Nonetheless, the problem lies not only in the sensationalism of some experts who promotes the fear and paranoia throughout the population without scientific basis but in the needs of audience and profits. As the previous argument given, Aristotle realized long time back the fear is the only emotion which has not bottom. As earlier noted, Mass media not only orchestrates the deficiencies of the system with specific politic purposes, but echoes of the citizenship's discontent in streets appealing to the misery of more vulnerable people. That way, the media gains more legitimacy and power to negotiate with politicians. In this facet, the media-corporations assign a one-sided meaning to the discourse ensuring to specify the reasons and effects of disasters.

From a psychological perspective, one might see that the fear seems to be an unlimited resource for enhancing the consumption. What is worthwhile to take into consideration

here, is how the lack of sustainable disaster-related literature, the manipulation of information by government as well as the ignorance of popular opinion in developing countries promote these types of strategies where the credibility becomes in an exchangeable asset. The disaster management as a disciplines have many years in United States, New Zealand and Europe, most likely because they experienced many situations of emergencies in the past or even the protestant faith corresponded with the need to know beforehand in what is predestined (following the weberian thesis this would explain the difference of interests in Anglophone countries respecting to other countries as Spain or Portugal). Whatever the case may be, Argentina needs to adopt the existent disaster-literature and their practices as a valid form to prevent and of course mitigate the crippling aftermaths of these events. This short manuscript has been aimed at stimulating the discussion in an issue that should be developed in Argentina because the preparedness for disasters plays a pivotal role in saving lives. An academic career in management of disaster is more than necessary to prevent the hegemony of the media in Argentina.