



This is the author's version of a work that was accepted for publication:

CURATO, N. (2017). 'We haven't even buried the dead yet': Ethics of discursive contestation in a crisis situation. *Current Sociology*, 65(7), 1010-1030.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116651662>

This file was downloaded from:

<https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/en/publications/we-havent-even-buried-the-dead-yet-ethics-of-discursive-contestat>

© 2016 Nicole Curato.

Notice: This is the author's peer reviewed version of a work that was accepted for publication in *Current Sociology* which has been published at <http://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116651662>.

Changes resulting from the publishing process may not be reflected in this document.



UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA

‘We Haven’t Even Buried the Dead Yet’:

Ethics of Discursive Contestation in a Crisis Situation

Curato, N. (Forthcoming) We haven’t even buried the dead yet: The ethics of discursive contestation in a crisis situation. *Current Sociology*.

Centre for Deliberative Democracy & Global Governance
Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis
Nicole Curato
E-mail: Nicole.Curato@canberra.edu.au

Abstract: Disasters are often described as exceptional moments that demand global solidarity. A 'state of humanitarian exception' emerges as citizens foreground norms of compassion and cooperation while contestatory discourse – the argumentative, blame-seeking and fault-finding forms of speech – are stigmatized as inappropriate interventions in a society seeking to recover from a distressful crisis situation. This article critically unpacks these representations of post-disaster situations empirically and normatively. By analysing the discussions in the public sphere over the first 100 days after Typhoon Haiyan battered Central Philippines, the article examines the moral force behind the 'discourse of compassion' and its 'ethical boundary work' that places the 'discourse of contestation' outside the scope of acceptable conduct. It proposes that the discourse of compassion's ethical boundary work is only democratically acceptable when one takes a short view of a crisis situation. Drawing on deliberative democracy theory, the article argues for the importance of contestatory discourse in fostering inclusive discourse formation and ensuring that the state of humanitarian exception does not become the rule.

Keywords: Deliberative democracy, discourse analysis, disasters, public sphere, social media

Introduction

On 8 November 2013, the strongest tropical cyclone that made landfall in modern history laid to waste a cluster of islands at the heart of the Philippines. Conservative estimates put the death toll at 6000, with at least half a million homes destroyed. The United Nations designated the disaster a Level 3 emergency, on par with the Syrian conflict. In the immediate aftermath, world leaders and global celebrities sent messages of compassion and solidarity. Barack Obama sent his sympathies to families devastated by the storm. Pop star Harry Styles called on his 24 million Twitter followers to donate to @oxfamgb's #Haiyan appeal. Diasporic Filipinos started an online campaign to boost the nation's morale by displaying digital badges with the caption 'The Filipino Spirit is Stronger than a Typhoon'. Others, however, used a politicized voice to expose issues of injustice. In the United Nations Climate Summit that occurred a few days after the disaster, a sobbing Naderev Saño, the Philippines' climate change negotiator, called on his colleagues to 'stop the madness' of extreme climate events. In the Philippines, people's movements organized protests and issued confrontational statements to call out the government for their 'criminal negligence' in the slow and discriminatory post-disaster response.

These two sets of discourses, which I refer in this article as 'discourse of compassion' and 'discourse of contestation', are prevalent themes in the digital public sphere in the immediate aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan. Each discourse forms a coherent storyline by which the tragedy can be interpreted. How these discourses relate to each other, however, uncovers broader normative debates about the role of contestatory discourse – the argumentative, blame-seeking and deficit-oriented forms of speech – in a crisis situation (see Curato et al., 2013). In online conversations, questions were raised about the propriety of politicizing suffering at a time when global solidarity needs to be mobilized to save lives. Should politicized discourses have space in vulnerable moments that demand solidarity? What is the ethics of putting forward contestatory speech in a crisis situation?

This article aims to respond to these questions in empirical and normative terms. While debates about the 'ethics of emergency' have received scholarly attention in the past decade, most of these discussions focus on the normative expectations from formal political and legal institutions when a state of emergency has been declared (see Dyzenhaus, 2011; Lazar, 2009). This article shifts the focus to the expectations within the public sphere, particularly the appropriate scope for contestatory action and space for authentic political discussions in crisis situations.

The article begins by characterizing the implications of emergency situations to public discourse formation. This section posits that, for the most part, the literature depicts crises as exceptional moments where political talk and democratic action are suspended to maintain social cohesion. I extend these observations in the second section by presenting the empirical case of the Philippines. I illustrate the discourse of compassion's 'ethical boundary work' that stigmatizes the 'ill-timed' politicization of a post-disaster situation. A humanitarian emergency, the discourse of compassion argues, demands collective rituals promoting solidarity instead of divisive practices of fault finding. In the final section, I critically analyse the discourse of compassion's ethical calculations. Drawing on contemporary theories of deliberative democracy, I propose that the discourse of compassion presents a democratically acceptable ethical position only when humanitarian emergencies are understood as discrete, short-term events. I argue for the long view – that contestatory discourses are best appreciated as part of broader 'sequences' of public deliberation. Developing a contestatory vocabulary of suffering, while seemingly insensitive during the acute phase of the disaster, serves a critical role in shaping the conduct of post-disaster recovery, particularly in questioning official narratives, enforcing inclusiveness and authenticity in public discourse and ensuring that the state of humanitarian exception does not become the rule. Overall, this article aims to spark a conversation among scholars of democratic theory and practice about the ways in which the norms of public discourse should be judged in fragile political contexts. The article also hopes to speak to the literature on active citizenship by problematizing citizens' discursive obligations in giving voice to those who are suffering from a distance.

Democratic rollback

Crisis situations are fragile political contexts. The immediacy and scale of the threat destabilize dominant paradigms of thought but at the same time appeal to society's propensity to act (Wuthnow, 2010: 1). Swift and decisive action tends to be prioritized, while protracted democratic decision-making takes a back seat. It is no surprise that the literature on emergencies is most vibrant in the fields of leadership and management as the political agency of those in positions of power is considered most crucial in crisis response (see Boin et al., 2008).

In the sociological literature, crises can result in conditions either or simultaneously of anomie and social solidarity, both of which posit tensions with democratic politics.

Conditions of anomie evoke a sense of urgency to arrest widespread disorder. This justifies drastic actions that diverge from practices of 'governance as usual' (Boin and 't Hart, 2007: 42; Neocleous, 2006: 194). Giorgio Agamben, among others, refers to this condition as the 'state of exception' – a period marked by overwhelming threats to 'life-sustaining functions' that demand the revocation of constitutional guarantees. Declaring a state of emergency is framed as the only way to respond – 'a necessity of common sense to avoid the worst' (Fassin and Vasquez, 2005: 400). Images of anarchy broadcast in mainstream media justify the heavy-handed conduct of disaster response. The deployment of combat-ready troops in downtown New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, imposition of curfew as a precautionary measure against looting and the forcible evacuation of at-risk populations for bush fires and tsunamis are some examples of actions that work against the logic of democratic governance but are legitimized in emergency situations (see Tierney and Bevc, 2007).

Crises, however, are not only moments of anomie where the coercive apparatus of the state needs to put things under control. Emergency situations, particularly in the aftermath of natural disasters, can also result in strong social solidarity. Building on Agamben's work, Didier Fassin and Paula Vasquez (2005) describe disasters as the state of 'humanitarian exception' where the rollback of democratic procedures is supported instead of denounced by the public. Studying the 1999 *Tragedia* in Venezuela where massive landslides occurred due to heavy rains, Fassin and Vasquez observed overwhelming emotions of compassion in an otherwise politically divided society. The 'gaze that brings people together and through which one feels compassion' was the same gaze that built national consensus around Hugo Chavez's militarized disaster response where special commandos wielded extensive powers in affected areas. As Fassin and Vasquez put it,

... it was not the fear or danger that authorized exceptional measures but sympathy for the disaster victims that called for and supported them. ... Far from being the decision of a single sovereign, the state of exception was desired by large segments of society, transported by a wave of generosity toward the victims. (Fassin and Vasquez, 2005: 391)

A state of exception, therefore, is not only marked by the government's withdrawal of democratic guarantees but also underpinned by a moral consensus in the public sphere. The combination of humanitarian consideration and trust in emergency lends legitimacy to the state of exception. Reiko Shindo shares Fassin and Vasquez's observations in his study on the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. Shindo observed that raising concerns about

radiation 'became, and continues to be, a taboo subject among the survivors' (Shindo, 2015: 30). Leaving Fukushima due to fears of radiation was labelled an act of desertion, such that anything that disrupts the sense of unity among Japanese communities is considered disloyalty to the nation. Discourses that evoked fear instead of hope were heavily criticized. A magazine cover featuring a member of the Japanese Self Defence Force holding a newborn baby amidst the rubble was held in high esteem, in contrast to a magazine bearing the headline 'Radiation is coming' with a man wearing a mask as front cover. While the former communicates positive images of rebirth and hope, the latter received numerous complaints on Twitter such that the magazine was forced to issue an official apology. Those who disrupted dominant narratives of unity were labelled '*hikkokumin*', a loaded concept in Japanese referring to traitors or 'anticitizens' during the Second World War.

While findings from the Venezuelan and Japanese cases cannot be extrapolated beyond their specific contexts, both examples give a preview of how norms of public discourse are negotiated in times of crisis. Moments of humanitarian exception tend to emphasize virtues of social cohesion, while practices that give life to democratic politics such as critical reflection, dissent and argumentation are stigmatized. These cases prompt questions about the precise ways in which politicized speech is restrained during humanitarian emergencies, the discursive strategies involved in such silencing, as well as the normative justifications for such actions. The next sections aim to systematically examine the ethics of emergency in the sphere of public discourse, through the case of the Philippines in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan.

The public sphere in the aftermath of Haiyan

'Stoical in the face of natural disasters' is a fair description of Filipinos' approach to calamities (*The Economist*, 16 November 2013). The archipelago is situated along the typhoon belt and the Pacific ring of fire, making the Philippines a place that 'experiences more earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis than any other country on earth' (Bankoff, 2003: 26). Yet Typhoon Haiyan (local name: Yolanda) was an unprecedented event. Described as 'the biggest typhoon recorded in almost a century', its sheer magnitude left a confirmed death toll of more than 6000 at a time when the government could not accurately count the lost. Villages along the coastline were reduced to a scatter of tin roofs and the occasional wall due to a 23-foot storm surge. The Tacloban Airport, from whose tarmac generals hoisted the bodies of dead soldiers, became barely operable. Devastated

roads, failed communications and lack of electricity forced relief and rescue work to a crawl. Two full years since Haiyan, many families still lived in emergency shelters waiting for promised homes.

To examine the character of the public discourse in the immediate aftermath of Haiyan, I started my empirical investigation with an examination of Twitter and Facebook posts from 9 November 2013 to 16 February 2014 – the first 100 days since Haiyan made landfall. One hundred days, as the literature on crises and emergencies suggests, approximate the acute period of the disaster where relief efforts are conducted. I am limiting my analysis to social networking sites for two reasons. First, the Philippines is known as 'the most active country on social media'. Facebook accounts are owned by 94% of all internet users. This figure is higher than most 'technologically advanced' countries like Japan and South Korea, where social media penetration is limited to 19% and 30% respectively. The Philippines also registers the highest average time spent on the internet globally and 42% of this time is spent in social networking sites (see We Are Social, 2015). Part of the reason for this is the Philippines' large overseas workforce. At least 11 million – a tenth of the total population – work abroad. This makes social media an important avenue for Filipinos working overseas to maintain transnational family ties and take part in public discussions in the homeland (Madianou and Miller, 2011). While these figures do not necessarily mean that Twitter and Facebook can serve as proxies for the broader public sphere (especially since the internet penetration rate is still at 38%), it can be argued that discussions in social media have considerable influence in shaping discourses in a highly mediated democratic system. Second, the literature on disasters has acknowledged the increasing importance of social media. The 2013 World Disasters Report underscored the role of social network sites in empowering disaster-affected communities to organize, get their voices heard and facilitate people-centred humanitarian action (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2013: 13). Examining the ways in which these digital platforms are used in the immediate aftermath of a megadisaster not only enables an appraisal of this 'technological optimism', but also an analysis of the norms that govern the behaviour of democratic citizens as they construct their narratives after a disaster.

To analyse the character of digital discourses in the aftermath of Haiyan, an initial random sample of 500 posts was gathered based on hashtags and Facebook pages that gained traction during the 100-day period (e.g. #Haiyan, #Yolanda, #BuildBackBetter, #bagyo,

#reliefPH, #tindogTacloban). The posts are encoded in NVivo and categorized using the following codes:

1. *Appreciative or contestatory*. These codes are based on Curato et al.’s work (2013) that examines the content and tone of speech in deliberations. Statements and images coded as ‘appreciative’ are those that focus on the positive qualities of disaster response or promote cooperation such as moral appeals (e.g. ‘Let’s pray for victims of Typhoon Haiyan’). On the other hand, deficit-oriented forms of speech, those that engage in critical questioning and blame-seeking, are coded as ‘contestatory’ (e.g. ‘We don’t need any other country’s funds to ‘rescue’ us; we need our politicians to STOP STEALING our own funds!’). Statements that do not fit in either category such as those pertaining to facts without commentary (e.g. ‘Six thousand now dead’) are coded in a separate category (neither appreciative nor contestatory). Statements that were both appreciative and contestatory (e.g. ‘Help the victims but do not give them to government. I don’t trust them!!’) are coded separately.
2. *Justification*. Posts that offered reasons to support an appreciative or contestatory statement are coded and clustered based on thematic analysis.
3. *Claims to representation*. This refers to constituencies for which the digital storyteller claims to speak. For example, ‘The Philippines says thank you’, is a statement claiming to represent the gratitude of the nation. ‘Victims need our prayers’ is a statement claiming to represent the victims.
4. *Challenge*. Statements that dispute the content of other posts are tagged. Justifications for their disagreements, if offered, are coded. Some posts may directly respond to a statement (e.g. tagging the Twitter user or commenting on a Facebook post), while others may express disagreement with ideas read online but not directly identifying particular posts.
5. *Speech style*. The style of communication used to express a statement is coded. Examples include metaphors, images, humour, testimonies, storytelling, religious references and use of scientific evidence, among others.

This coding framework is designed to map the character of public discourse in a crisis situation. It aims to empirically establish the extent to which the state of humanitarian

exception takes place (appreciative versus contestatory), the reasons provided to support claims put forward (justification), the distribution of discursive power by knowing who speaks for whom (claims to representation), the points of contention (challenge) and the diversity of speech cultures in the digital public sphere (rhetorical devices). The initial sample of 500 statements was capped as data saturation was reached. Once coding was completed, I compared these findings, albeit broadly, to narratives of affected populations interviewed ($N = 95$) during fieldwork (August 2014; January, July and November 2015) conducted in Tacloban, Leyte – the city worst hit by the typhoon to understand the extent to which discourses in social media mirror the discourses of affected populations who are ‘media poor’ or have little or no access to social media.

Findings of data analysis affirm the observation that crisis situations are, for the most part, defined by discourses of compassion and solidarity. Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of appreciative versus contestatory posts. This provides a broad indication of the state of humanitarian exception to the extent that the public sphere is predominantly defined by the positive language of generosity, hope and cooperation. Several studies on Twitter use after Haiyan share similar findings (Andrei et al., 2015; Takahashi et al., 2015). Tweets that refer to prayer, donation, well-wishes, condolences and patriotism compose the majority of themes, while political tweets had the least frequency. I further characterize these discourses in the following sections, followed by an analysis of how the discourse of compassion drew ethical boundaries against the discourse of contestation.

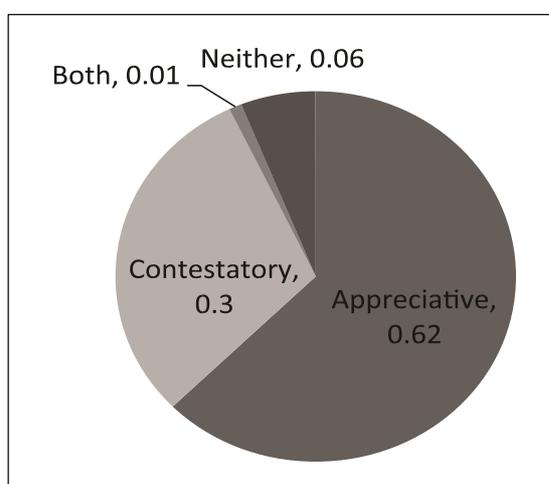


Figure 1. Appreciative versus contestatory discourse.

Discourse of compassion

Discourses of compassion are composed of three broad subthemes. These subthemes present different aspects of compassion, but all of them share an 'appreciative' quality such that they focus on the positive aspects of relief and recovery efforts.

1. *Appeal to help* is the most common subtheme, where help is defined as material, emotional or spiritual support. Most appeals for donations and prayers have no accompanying justifications but some are captioned with moral reasoning. The image shown in Figure 2 is an example, where audiences are persuaded to donate boats to fishermen who lost their livelihood from the typhoon. This appeal is accompanied with the following justification: to 'provide livelihood so their [fishermen's] kids can go to school' and 'to rebuild lives'. These reasons, arguably, may appeal to potential donors who subscribe to an anti-dole out mentality, such that donations made today are to have a lasting impact in the future. The reasoning behind other moral appeals is more subtle. For example, publishing photographs of frail-bodied children listlessly staring at their homes wiped out by Haiyan implicitly makes audiences reflect on their relative privilege and, in turn, engage in an act of charity. Appeals for help make claims to represent affected populations, by depicting them as sufferers 'deserving' of material and emotional support (Ong, 2015). These posts are often in the form of sleek images with concise captions, which can be easily consumed by a cosmopolitan audience.

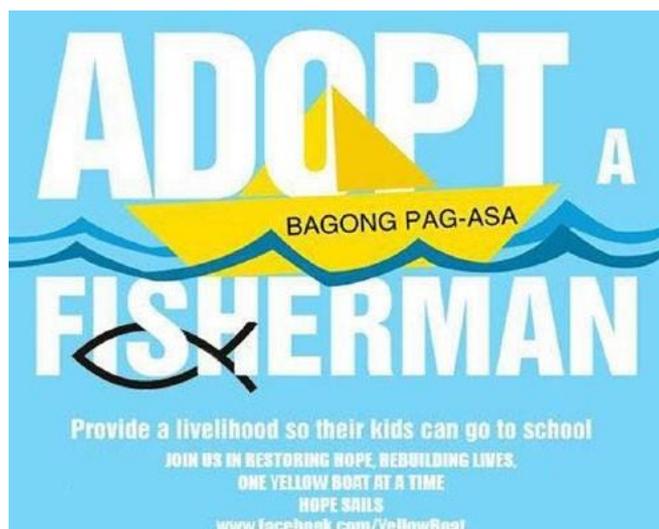


Figure 2. Appeal to help.



Figure 3. Rebuilding national esteem.

2. *Rebuilding national esteem* also shapes the discourse of compassion. Themes of heroism and indomitable spirit construct a national identity around which citizens can rally. Memes with phrases 'Where I'm from, everyone's a hero', 'The Filipino Spirit is Waterproof' and 'Roofless, homeless, but not hopeless' have become central plotlines in the nation's collective storytelling (see Figure 3). Circulating sentimental images of solidarity, hope and volunteerism celebrate achievements of ordinary citizens in helping each other during extraordinary times. Often, these claims are also made without accompanying justification. One could infer that such posts are particularly resonant to Filipinos observing the disaster from a distance, either in the capital Manila or overseas, as they provide a kind of psychological first aid for the

nation seeking to overcome the shock from the extent of the devastation. Like moral appeals for help, the images are simple and understated but evoke a sense of dignity and pride.

3. *The discourse of gratitude* completes the discourse of compassion. Recipients of donations are rendered visible through representations produced by the state, humanitarian organizations and ordinary citizens expressing appreciation for global relief efforts. The Department of Tourism, for example, spent its advertising budget on a #PHsaysthankyou campaign through video placements in cosmopolitan spaces such as New York's Times Square and London's Piccadilly Circus, which, in turn, were photographed and disseminated in social media (see Figure 4). This discourse claims to represent the nation, especially the affected populations whose positive images of recovery (such as taking part in a fiesta) provides closure to the narrative of global compassion.



Figure 4. Discourse of gratitude.

To help, to build national esteem and to express gratitude are some subthemes that characterize the discourse of compassion. These discourses form a part of a society's moral

achievement by rendering the suffering and recovery of distant others visible on a global scale (see Tronto, 1993). Such discourse highlights not only the moral relationship between givers and receivers of aid, but also the ethical impulse of citizens to act. As Robert Wuthnow puts it, the picture of humanity that emerges in this context is 'one of can-do problem solvers' as doing something, 'almost anything, affirms our humanity' (Wuthnow, 2010: 9). For the most part, the discourse of compassion is one that uses few justifications, as it banks on the moral consensus and the pragmatic demands to act swiftly and cooperatively. It restores ontological security by reaffirming collective virtues that provide comfort amidst uncertainty.

Discourse of contestation

Unlike the Venezuelan and Japanese cases where the sense of humanitarian exception was so strong such that contestatory discourses had little space in public conversations after the disaster, the Philippine case had some space to articulate statements that challenge the emerging humanitarian consensus. Two main points of contestation are presented in social networking sites.

1. *Mistrust and demands for accountability* directed at the national government have been articulated in the social media, particularly in spaces created by people's organizations to monitor disaster relief such as #AidMonitorPH and Yolanda Citizen Watch. Below is an example of a statement coded under this theme:

Govt.,NGO, Private cos. ...who is going to be in charge of this huge..huge...billions of dollars of donations..May we know?? Just make sure it doesn't go to pork barrel.. (Mary Lou, 16 November 2013, Tindog Tacloban Facebook page)

This statement, among others, uses an inquisitive yet controversial tone. Implicitly, it attempts to represent the sentiment of both givers and recipients of aid by demanding accountability ('May we know??'). Contrary to the popular view of crisis as an exceptional moment, connecting issues of aid to recent corruption scandals involving pork barrel funds establishes the continuity rather than uniqueness of the situation. Exceptional moments of national unity are disrupted by reminding the public to be vigilant against corruption.

People Surge, a local grassroots alliance of Haiyan survivors, puts forward a similar discourse. The movement politicizes relief operations by assigning blame to government for their ‘criminal negligence’ in the slow and discriminatory distribution of aid. Part of their repertoire in digital protests is disseminating alternative stories of survival (see Figure 5). Contrary to the discourse of compassion’s portrayal of affected communities as helpless sufferers, People Surge presents typhoon survivors as political agents with strong views about the relief and recovery process. The sufferer is personified by giving her a name, a tight shot of her face with decrepit living conditions in the background. Unlike the simplicity of images circulated by the discourse of compassion, images of contestation are accompanied by block quotes from testimonies which expose the victims’ vulnerabilities due to government policy. As the discourse of compassion frames the Philippines as ready to say thank you, the discourse of contestation continues to say that help has not yet arrived.

2. *Demands for climate justice* further add complexity to discourses online. Some humanitarian organizations and social movements have framed Haiyan as manifestation of the injustice brought about by climate change.

WAKE-UP CALL PHILIPPINES TYPHOON 13 million lives turned upside-down. Storms as intense as this may become the norm, not the exception. World leaders can’t ignore climate change forever. (Oxfam sa Pilipinas, 25 November 2013, Oxfam sa Pilipinas Facebook page)

Aside from Oxfam, local environmental movements and protest groups have also taken on this discourse. Justifications backing up claims about climate change are often accompanied by URLs pointing to scientific evidence or news reports, which frame Haiyan as ‘the new normal’, and not just a rare meteorological



Figure 5. Contestatory discourse.

event. In most cases, these statements claim to represent the poorest communities, hence most vulnerable to the risks associated to climate change (see Lavell, 2007). Some infographics, for example, explain that the regions worst hit by Haiyan, Leyte and Samar, are among the poorest in the Philippines, which explains the challenges citizens face in moving their homes to safer ground and accessing resources to mitigate the effects of climate change. This discourse can be understood in relation to anthropological research that underscores the political economy of disasters, particularly from the perspective of the global south (see Oliver-Smith, 1996: 314).

Overall, the discourse of contestation complicates the narrative of the recovery by providing a politicized voice of suffering. It is a kind of voice that contextualizes people's misery to broader political issues of accountability, corruption, discrimination and climate policy. Unlike the discourse of compassion which anchors narratives on moral judgements, the discourse of contestation underscores the political aspect of a crisis situation. Critical and politicized discourse enriched public discussion by putting forward confrontational and uncomfortable narratives of recovery which stand in contrast to the tender-hearted and cooperative language the discourse of compassion utilizes.

Ethical boundary work

The discourses of compassion and contestation present different but not necessarily inconsistent storylines by which the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan can be interpreted. After all, moral and political claims are not exclusive categories. Substantively, one can infer that demands for accountability can be appreciated as an extension of appeals for help, such that a citizen can convert one's sense of moral agency to a politicized gaze to ensure that donations reach their intended recipients. Politicized discourses, however, differ from moral appeals to help by interrogating the underlying political reasons why moral appeals have to



Figure 6. Dichotomy of talk versus action. (Translation: Shhh ... Just help.)

be made in the first place, assigning blame to responsible parties and foregrounding the implications of widespread suffering to political practice. The logic behind both categories can be distinguished to this extent. Procedurally, however, both discourses share the same normative commitment to public-spiritedness which, in turn, sets the boundaries of ethical conduct in social media. ‘No selfies and no food pics until everyone in the affected areas get to eat #responsiblesocialmediauser’ is an example of a post which reminds users in the ‘Selfie Capital of the World’ about the insensitivity of posting self-centred content as compatriots continue to live in subhuman conditions. Both discourses have a strong civic orientation, such that mundane social media practices have been censured for failing to adjust to trying circumstances.

The point of contention, however, relates to the appropriateness of contestatory speech in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. Analysis of statements coded under ‘challenge’ reveal that the disagreement between the two discourses lies less in the content of each discourse’s claims but more about the norms of claim-making in trying times. For instance, no post challenged the allegations of corruption the contestatory discourse has put forward, but there are posts that question the temporal appropriateness of raising those issues. The discourse of compassion engaged in ethical boundary work, where the norms of acceptable behaviour are negotiated during the state of humanitarian exception.

Demarcating the scope of acceptable conduct in the digital public sphere is made possible by three discursive strategies.

1. *Overt silencing*. The image in Figure 6 best represents this discursive strategy. The caption ‘Shhh ... just help’ implies an incompatibility between talking and helping, the latter being the priority. The audacity of silencing draws moral force from the fragility of the social context, as represented by the photo of a tattered but waving Philippine flag with rubble in the background. Given the urgency of the situation, discourses that complicate narratives of cooperation are considered counter-productive to relief efforts, and therefore warrant shaming in social media. Silencing, in this sense, is an interruption to the emerging politicized conversation, a way of shifting attention away from the political to the social.¹ Implicitly, the image valorizes the practice of helping quietly – a virtuous form of charity where the donor eschews attention and gives up the right to complain. Critique is considered noise deserving of being shushed, because, as one opinion columnist puts it, such ‘stupid and senseless acts of self-flagellation’ only ‘adds to the confusion, congestion, gridlock, despair and pain’ (Ramos-Aquino, 2013).
2. *Disparaging talk, celebrating action*. Related to the strategy of silencing is the framing of action and critique as mutually exclusive forms of participation, the former being superior to that latter (see Kapoor, 2013). Posts like the statements below create a binary distinction between ‘helping’ and ‘critiquing’.

You just keep posting comments [but] what have you done to help our fellow Filipinos? Wow, you guys are really good. God bless PHILIPPINES. (D’vouyager E. Alarcon, 19 November 2013, Comment on the Restoration of the New Society Facebook page)

I hope we don’t keep on fighting during these times, critiquing the government does not help. Let’s support them. I believe if we have a positive outlook, ACTION we are waiting for will be faster. Let’s just unite by helping. (Peter Saul, 16 November 2013, Comment on the Restoration of the New Society Facebook page)

Both statements censure users posting contestatory comments for failing to help. The first statement turns the tables and holds citizens to account by asking them ‘what have you done to help your fellow Filipinos?’ This confrontational statement implies that (a) critiquing is not doing something and (b) that those who critique should have some charitable credentials before they can justify dissent. The sarcasm in the subsequent sentences (‘Wow, you guys are really good’) serves as a rhetorical device to discredit contestatory action, taunting critical citizens for being ‘really good’ at

doing nothing. The second statement, in contrast, takes a constructive approach by encouraging citizens to support instead of finding blame – or in his words ‘fighting’ – as conflict delays action. Politicizing the disaster instead of giving support to an overstretched government is stigmatized as a moral failure for not extending encouragement to the front-liners of relief operations. The derogation of critique to inaction and callous talk is part of drawing the boundaries of ethical forms of civic participation in a post-disaster scenario.

3. *Respect for the period of mourning.* ‘We haven’t even buried the dead yet’, says several posts, in response to statements that call for investigation and protests against the failure of government to prepare for a mega-disaster. ‘Don’t use the dead, they’re already at peace, stop speculating’, says another Facebook post, appealing to users not to invoke the memory of Haiyan’s casualties for political ends. Of the three discursive strategies used for drawing ethical boundaries, it is the need to respect the period of mourning that provides the most compelling affective reason to suspend contestatory action, albeit temporarily. Contestation is deemed disrespectful to families still grieving the tragic loss of their loved ones. It is unappreciative of humanitarian workers, volunteers and soldiers who engaged in actual care work – those who, for the rest of their lives, have to live with the memory of putting thousands of cadavers in plastic body bags. Like a family in a funeral, the nation is expected to put differences aside, at least for a moment, as collective rituals of mourning are held. While political differences are particular, sorrow about the loss of life is universal. It is collective rituals that ‘affirm the community in the face of tragedy’ (Hawdon and Ryan, 2011: 1367), a form of therapeutic intervention that reduces collective anxieties of distressed communities. The digital public sphere is not exempt from this period of mourning. Facebook pages have been used as memorial sites for public displays of grief and portrayals of friends and family members who passed away. Disrupting mourning in these digital spaces by posting politicized messages is considered tasteless, disrespectful and unsympathetic to the emotional needs of others.

Taken together, these discursive strategies make a case against the politicization of public discourse in fragile social contexts. From silencing to overt expressions of disapproval, the discourse of compassion guards the public sphere from conflictual discourses which clash

with social virtues crucial in the acute phase of a disaster. Such ethical boundary work constructs an image of an idealized citizen: she is one who gets her hands dirty in 'actual' humanitarian work and temporarily brackets political disagreements for the sake of solidarity. While such demarcation is constructive from the perspective of social cohesion, it poses questions from the perspective of democratic theory and practice. Is the discourse of compassion's ethical boundary work democratically justifiable? Does inclusive and authentic discourse have a productive role in crisis situations?

Sequencing discursive contestation

Recent developments in deliberative democracy theory can provide clarity to these questions. By deliberative democracy, I refer to a talk-centric view of democracy where legitimacy is derived from exchanging a variety of contesting views among constituencies affected by a decision or an unresolved issue (see Chambers, 2003; Dryzek, 2009). As a normative theory, deliberative democracy places value on *inclusiveness* or giving voice to range of discourses and *authenticity* or exchanging justifications for one's preferences while also seriously considering other ideas offered. Contemporary versions of deliberative theory, however, recognize that not all deliberative virtues can be realized in any one site, at any one moment. Indeed, it is unreasonable to expect the public or their representatives in government to deliberate with the armed forces before deciding which communities would be first rescued by C-130 aircrafts or insist on inclusive reason-giving about the conduct of relief operations as humanitarian organizations hurriedly set up tent cities and distribute food packs. Deliberation, even in its pure, idealized form, is not ideal all the time.

For this reason, the concept of 'sequencing' deliberative moments has gained traction in democratic theory (Bächtiger et al., 2010; Curato, 2012; Goodin, 2005; McLaverty and Halpin, 2008). It views deliberation as a process that involves the broader polity in various discursive spaces over time (Dryzek, 2010; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). By taking a long and macro view, the application of deliberative virtues is relaxed as it is acknowledged that different contexts warrant different normative expectations. Analytically, the challenge is to map the extent to which episodes of public conversations uphold deliberative virtues and how these sequences are linked together to move the democratic polity in a deliberative direction.

Viewed this way, I argue that the discourse of compassion's boundary work rests on a democratically acceptable normative position only when crisis situations are viewed as

discrete, short-term events. Appreciative forms of speech can stimulate hope, create chains of care and forge a sense of shared purpose of satisfying material and psychological needs of affected communities (see Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). The discourse of compassion plays an important role in bringing together a discursive community necessary to get public deliberation going. The afterglow from rituals of solidarity, however, has a shelf life. As the long-term impact of disasters becomes clear, the discourse of compassion's vocabulary loses its currency. When relief work transitions to debates on recovery and rehabilitation, the vocabulary of critical questioning and accountability becomes necessary as difficult political decisions need to be made. Should families, knowing the risks of rebuilding homes in hazard-prone areas, be allowed to do so? Should administrative cases be filed against mayors who failed to implement ordinances on forced evacuation? Should there be an independent investigation as to why aid has not reached communities known to support the political opposition? Should the Philippines take a stronger policy on climate justice? It is within this longer view where the purpose of inclusive, contestatory deliberation becomes normatively justifiable. While contestation can be called out for being callous and ill-timed during the acute phase of the disaster, such discourse serves three crucial roles even in moments that demand solidarity.

First, contestatory discourse can enforce inclusion by giving voice to those left out in the digital sphere. Data from face-to-face interviews with affected populations in Tacloban reveal that their sentiments during the acute phase of the disaster are consistent with the confrontational tone of contestatory discourse. Confrontation was articulated in various tonalities in temperaments in the field. For elderly respondents, anxieties were expressed with a tentative and inquisitive tenor, asking questions (sometimes rhetorical, sometimes directed at the interviewer) about how much longer they have to wait for their makeshift dwellings to be fixed and who is meant to be responsible for delivering such basic necessities. Young parents, on the other hand, expressed agitation in a forceful manner, directing anger and assigning blame to national government. Compared to the timid language used by the elderly, it is this forceful tone among younger respondents that was more visibly reflected in contestatory posts online.

Yes, DSWD [Department of Social Welfare and Development] gave us relief packs, but they were all expired! I felt so insulted because I felt like we were made to eat food that even pigs would not eat. [It is] so insulting. We just lost everything from Yolanda ... now we lose our dignity ... because our government thinks we [should] eat mouldy rice. (Gilbert, 25)

If no one complains, the government will think everything is okay and will just continue their corruption or choose not to give relief to others ... The poor – us – we're confused because of these selfish politicians. They make us fight each other [because of aid]. (Roy, 35)

Although appreciation for humanitarian organizations and bereavement are also central to their narratives, most respondents expressed dismay at the poor government response.

The discrepancy between the dominance of discourses of compassion online and contestatory discourse offline may be explained not only by the digital divide but also the collapse of communication infrastructure in areas hit by Haiyan. Consequently, contestatory tweets represented excluded voices and contributed to the inclusiveness of the public sphere. The tweet 'The people in Tacloban have great dignity and deserve better than what they have gotten @andersoncooper on #Typhoon #AC360' may transgress the boundaries drawn by the discourses of compassion but can be justified as giving epistemic justice to voices that have been excluded in the digital public sphere (Fricker, 2007). Contestatory discourse can build the deliberative capacity of a polity recovering from a disaster by providing an accurate albeit uncomfortable account of reality and authentic representations of suffering.

Second, contestatory discourses articulated in the acute phase of the disaster ensure that spaces for democratic discourse formation and decision-making are not 'too tightly coupled'. A concept used by Charles Perrow to describe 'normal accidents', tight coupling is a term to describe two parts that have no buffer such that the process only flows in one direction (Perrow, 2011: 89–90). This poses a problem for democratic politics. If the declaration of a state of exception is mechanistically supported by the discourse of humanitarian exception in the public sphere, democratic dangers arise. Similar to pathologies that emerge from extreme nationalism, a tightly coupled polity leaves little room for interrogation and dissent. In Fassin and Vasquez's research, it is observed that the Venezuelan society's communion in the same humanitarian fervour has formed an egalitarian illusion which blurred the distinction between the social and racial origins of victims' suffering. After rescue missions were completed, these illusions easily dissipate to re-socialization of victims along the usual lines of inequality (Fassin and Vasquez, 2005: 397, 402). Therefore, democratic critique is valuable in vulnerable social contexts, as it is a way of ensuring that the discourse of compassion does not become a tool to protect structures of injustice. The immediacy of putting forward critical statements is crucial in setting the agenda for subsequent phases of deliberation, which, if purely defined by humanitarian exception, can only serve to legitimize depoliticized responses to disaster. As

one Twitter user puts it, 'To those who said "just shut up and help," how about no! Thorough investigation, critique and protest' (@VincentVanGold, 25 January 2014).

This relates to the third reason why contestation in necessary is states of humanitarian exception: it ensures that the exception does not become the rule. Central to Agamben's definition is a tendency for the state of exception to become permanent rather than temporary. Agamben (2005) cites the inhumane treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay as paradigmatic of this observation. What used to be an exceptional circumstance where legal protection of prisoners was suspended has now become overt and routine in a period where threats of extremism – imagined or otherwise – have become part of everyday life. While Agamben's claims are not without controversy (see Lemke, 2005; Passavant, 2007), it posits a pertinent theoretical intervention to warn against the emerging tyranny of emergency in a world that increasingly experiences disasters, terrorism and humanitarian crises. Contestatory discourses provide the lens to spot emerging practices of tyranny, identify the dangers of undemocratic decision-making and give voice and visibility to vulnerable others. Critical citizens, in other words, are needed in critical times.

To underscore the importance of contestatory discourse in crisis situations, however, is not to suggest that the discourse of contestation is necessarily superior to the discourse of compassion as far as deliberative politics is concerned. Boltanski's work on moral responses of citizens when observing human misery from a distance is instructive in this regard. These moral responses – denunciation and sentiment – share characteristics with the discourses of contestation and compassion, respectively. Denunciation refers to the position of indignation where spectators identify the perpetrator of the distant sufferers' misery, while sentiment refers to the 'gentle emotion' that generates feelings of tenderheartedness and empathy. Each response has its own moral as well as democratic deficits. Denunciation and contestation raise issues of justice related to misery but these responses tend to generate discourses that place emphasis on the singularity of suffering and are devoid of empathy (Boltanski, 1999: 64). This response, therefore, can force political action but the kind that does little to render the voice and agency of the distant sufferer visible. On the other hand, sentiment or discourses of compassion can forge affective connections between the spectator and sufferer but runs the risk of privileging sentimentalism over confronting the causes of suffering (Boltanski, 1999: 96). Speech communities, therefore, should play host to both responses and fill each other's deficits. Social media as a space for discourse formation can perform an important function here. They can serve as aesthetic intermediary

by visualizing the horror and pain of human misery thereby forging affective communities between spectator and distant sufferer. They can also host spaces for communication where the spectator can bring to fruition one's commitment to speak about one's indignation or emotions aroused by these imageries (Boltanski, 1999: 149). As a polyphonic space with affordances for visibility, spectacle and content creation by various digital citizens, social media have some potential to bridge democracy's aesthetic, affective and indignant dimensions, compared to 'traditional' forms of media such as television where the spaces for spectators to articulate indignation and empathy have to be found elsewhere. To a certain extent the post-Haiyan (digital) public sphere was successful in bridging these dimensions, in spite of others' expressed scepticism about the value of indignation.

Conclusion

Disasters are often viewed as exceptional circumstances where democratic procedures are temporarily suspended to facilitate quick and efficient recovery efforts. This logic is not only limited to the state but also in the public sphere. A state of humanitarian exception emerges as citizens recovering from the shock of a disaster promote norms of solidarity, cooperation and compassion. This article examines the phenomenon of humanitarian exception empirically and normatively. By examining the case of the Philippines in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, I described the contours of the discourse of compassion and its ethical boundary work which places contestatory action outside the scope of acceptable conduct. The discursive strategies of stigmatization, shaming and disapproval of contestatory action are characterized to illustrate the ways in which the norms of (digital) public deliberation are constructed in a crisis situation.

Normatively, however, I argued that this ethical boundary work is democratically justifiable only when one takes a short view of a crisis situation. Drawing on contemporary theories of deliberative democracy, I argue that while discourses of contestation bring about uncomfortable and divisive perspectives in moments that demand comfort and global solidarity, these are crucial contributions in subsequent phases of recovery and rehabilitation. Contestatory action can foster inclusiveness by giving voice to citizens unable to take part in the public conversation, serve as a safeguard for the discourse of compassion not to be used as a tool to legitimize injustice and ensure that the state of exception does not become the rule.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the conference 'Democracy: A Citizen Perspective' in Åbo Akademi University, Finland, the American Political Science Association Annual Meeting in San Francisco, the International and Political Studies Seminar Series at the University of New South Wales in Canberra and the 'Democracy in Transition' conference hosted by the Melbourne School of Government. John Dryzek, Jonathan Corpus Ong, Mirca Madianou and Daniel Aldrich provided helpful comments at various stages in developing the manuscript. Pamela Combinido and Eunice Lalic provided exceptional research support.

Funding

The research projects on which this article is based received funding from the Economic and Social Research Council Urgency Grant (Humanitarian Technologies. An Ethnographic Assessment of Communication Environments in Disaster Recovery and Humanitarian Intervention; ES/M001288/1) and the Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Research Award (Building Back Better: Participatory Governance in a Post-Haiyan World; DE150101866).

Note

1. I am thankful to the reviewer for this suggestion.

References

- Agamben G (2005) *State of Exception*, trans. K Attel. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Andrei A, Elson SB and Zarrella G (2015) Language and emotion in Philippine Twitter use during Typhoon Haiyan. MITRE Technical Report. Mclean, VA.
- Bächtiger A, Niemeyer S, Neblo M et al. (2010) Disentangling diversity in deliberative democracy: Competing theories, their blind spots and complementarities. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18(1): 32–63.
- Bankoff G (2003) *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazards in the Philippines*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Boin A and 't Hart P (2007) The crisis approach. *Handbook of Disaster Research*. New York: Springer, pp. 42–54.
- Boin A, McConnell A and 't Hart P (eds) (2008) *Governing after Crisis: The Politics of Investigation, Accountability and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boltanski L (1999) *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chambers S (2003) Deliberative democratic theory. *Annual Review of Political Science* 6(1): 307–326.
- Cooperrider D and Whitney DD (2005) *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Curato N (2012) A sequential analysis of democratic deliberation. *Acta Politica* 47(4): 423–442.
- Curato N, Niemeyer S and Dryzek J (2013) Appreciative and contestatory inquiry in deliberative forums: Can group hugs be dangerous? *Critical Policy Studies* 7(1): 1–17.
- Dryzek J (2009) Democratization as deliberative capacity building. *Comparative Political Studies* 42(11): 1379–1402.
- Dryzek J (2010) *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dyzenhaus D (2011) Emergency, liberalism, and the state. *Perspectives on Politics* 9(1): 69–78.
- Fassin D and Vasquez P (2005) Humanitarian exception as the rule: The political theology of the 1999 Tragedia in Venezuela. *American Ethnologist* 32(3): 389–405.

- Fricker M (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goodin RE (2005) Sequencing deliberative moments. *Acta Politica* 40(2): 182–196.
- Hawdon J and Ryan J (2011) Social relations that generate and sustain solidarity after a mass tragedy. *Social Forces* 89(4): 1363–1384.
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2013) World Disasters Report 2013: Focus on technology and the future of humanitarian action. Available at: [www.ifrc.org/ PageFiles/134658/WDR%202013%20complete.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/134658/WDR%202013%20complete.pdf).
- Kapoor I (2013) *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Charity*. London: Routledge.
- Lavell A (2007) The Lower Lempa River Valley, El Salvador: Risk reduction and development project. In: Bankoff G, Frerks G and Hilhorst D (eds) *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People*. London: EarthScan.
- Lazar NC (2009) *States of Emergency in Liberal Democracies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lemke T (2005) 'A zone of indistinction': A critique of Giorgio Agamben's concept of biopolitics. *Critical Practice Studies* 7(1): 3–13.
- McLaverty P and Halpin D (2008) Deliberative drift: The emergence of deliberation in the policy process. *International Political Science Review* 29(2): 197–214.
- Madianou M and Miller D (2011) Mobile phone parenting: Reconfiguring relationships between Filipina migrant mothers and their left-behind children. *New Media and Society* 13(3): 457–470.
- Neocleous M (2006) The problem with normality: Taking exception to 'permanent emergency'. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 31(2): 191–213.
- Oliver-Smith A (1996) Anthropological research on hazards and disasters. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25: 303–328.
- Ong JC (2015) *The Poverty of Television: The Mediation of Suffering in Class-divided Philippines*. London: Anthem Press.
- Parkinson J and Mansbridge J (eds) (2012) *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Passavant PA (2007) The contradictory state of Giorgio Agamben. *Political Theory* 35(2): 147–174.

- Perrow C (2011) *Normal Accidents: Living with High Risk Technologies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ramos-Aquino M (2013) Yolanda dividing Filipinos; No thanks to negative people. *The Manila Times*, 15 November. Available at: www.manilatimes.net/yolanda-dividing-filipinos-nothanks-to-negative-people/53204/ (accessed 11 November 2015).
- Shindo R (2015) Enacting citizenship in a post-disaster situation: The response to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. *Citizenship Studies* 19(1): 16–34.
- Takahashi B, Tandoc EC and Carmichael C (2015) Communicating on Twitter during a disaster: An analysis of tweets during Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. *Computers in Human Behavior* 50: 392–398.
- The Economist* (2013) Typhoon Haiyan: Worse than Hell. 16 November. Available at: www.economist.com/news/asia/21589916-one-strongest-storms-ever-recorded-has-devastated-partsphilippines-and-relief (accessed 27 April 2015).
- Tierney K and Bevc C (2007) Disaster as war: Militarism and the social construction of disaster in New Orleans. In: Brunsmas DL, Overfelt D and Picou JS (eds) *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 35–49.
- Tronto JC (1993) *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Hove: Psychology Press.
- We Are Social (2015) Digital, social and mobile in 2015: We are Social's compendium of digital statistics. Available at: wearesocial.sg/tag/philippines/ (accessed 25 November 2015).
- Wuthnow R (2010) *Be Very Afraid: The Cultural Response to Terror, Pandemics, Environmental Devastation, Nuclear Annihilation, and Other Threats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Author biography

Nicole Curato is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra. In 2014, she received the Australian Research Council's Discovery Early Research Award for her research on the prospects of deliberative politics in post-disaster contexts. Her work has been published in *European Political Science Review*, *Policy Sciences*, *Acta Politica* and *Qualitative Inquiry*, among others.

Résumé

Les catastrophes sont souvent présentées comme des moments exceptionnels qui exigent une solidarité internationale. Un « état d'exception humanitaire » apparaît lorsque les citoyens privilégient les normes de compassion et de coopération tout en stigmatisant les discours contestataires visant à dénoncer des coupables et considérés comme des interventions inappropriées dans le contexte des efforts de reconstruction de la société après une situation de crise difficile.

Cet article aborde de manière critique, empirique et normative les représentations de la situation de l'après-catastrophe. Cent jours après le passage du typhon Haiyan, qui a ravagé la région centrale des Philippines, l'analyse des débats publics met en évidence la force morale qui anime les « discours de compassion » et les efforts visant à aménager des pratiques éthiquement responsables (*ethical boundary work*) qui rejettent le « discours de la contestation » en dehors des limites acceptables. Je suggère que *l'ethical boundary work* n'est démocratiquement acceptable que si l'on adopte une vision à court terme de la situation de crise. En m'appuyant sur la théorie de la démocratie délibérative, je défends la thèse selon laquelle le discours contestataire contribue largement à la formation d'un discours inclusif qui évite que l'état d'exception humanitaire ne devienne la règle.

Mots-clés

Catastrophes, démocratie participative, sphère publique, analyse du discours, médias sociaux

Resumen

Los desastres a menudo se describen como momentos excepcionales que exigen la solidaridad global. Un “estado de excepción humanitaria” surge cuando los ciudadanos ponen en primer plano la compasión y la cooperación, mientras que el discurso de impugnación —las formas de discurso belicosas, que buscan culpables y errores— son estigmatizados como intervenciones inapropiadas en una sociedad que busca recuperarse de una situación de crisis. Este artículo devela críticamente estas representaciones de situaciones posteriores a los desastres, empíricamente y normativamente. A partir del examen de los debates en la esfera pública cien días desde que el tifón Haiyan alcanzó el centro de Filipinas, desenvuelvo la fuerza moral detrás del “discurso de la compasión” y su “trabajo de frontera ética” que categoriza el “discurso de impugnación” fuera del alcance de la conducta aceptable. Sostengo

que el discurso de la ética de trabajo sólo es democráticamente aceptable si se observa de cerca la situación de crisis. Sobre la base de la teoría democrática deliberativa, subrayo la importancia del discurso de impugnación en el fomento de la formación del discurso incluyente y asegurar que el estado de excepción humanitaria no se convierta en la regla.

Palabras clave

Desastres, democracia deliberativa, esfera pública, análisis del discurso, redes sociales