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**“*ANG HAGUPIT NI YOLANDA AYON SA MEDIA:* The Significance of the Agenda-Setting function of television news media networks as depicted through the Typhoon Haiyan coverage of ABS-CBN Channel 2”**

***Remember, remember the 8th of November!***

On the fateful day of November 8, 2013, the whole world was taken aback by the immensely terrifying onslaught of typhoon *Yolanda;* leaving most, if not all, Filipinos in utter disbelief and shock at the enormity and extent of one of the greatest tropical cyclones ever documented in the Philippines. As it approached the country at a wind speed of approximately 195 mph, the cyclone first made landfall on Guiuan, Eastern Samar; making its way toward several other parts of Central Visayas, including Cebu (Bantayan Island), Ormoc, Leyte (Tacloban), Surigao, and Capiz, among many other localities. Apart from the torrential rainfall, storm surges of 13 – 19 feet were recorded in different parts of Visayas, causing significant damage to property and extensive loss of life.

In its wake, typhoon *Yolanda* (international name: Haiyan) left at least 6,300 fatalities[[1]](#footnote-1), 28,689 injured, 1,061 missing; totaling to about PHP 89,598,068,634.88 in damages. Its cataclysmic effects not only seized and destroyed the lives and livelihoods of those affected, but paralyzed practically the whole country as it struggled to respond and provide immediate relief to the latter*.[[2]](#footnote-2)* It would appear later on that no one was supposedly *that* prepared to face the aftermath of the super storm, with numerous cadavers and immeasurable debris scattered and spread all over the affected provinces; a horrendous sight that welcomed all who came in to lend their helping hands.

***What was television news media’s role to play in the disaster management of Yolanda?***

On the face of it, nobody seemed to imagine how grave and vast the destruction and damage of the typhoon would be, despite a national address from the national chief executive warning of its severity.[[3]](#footnote-3) Some news reports, particularly by *ABS-CBN Channel 2*, were broadcasted cautioning the public of the storm’s imminence.[[4]](#footnote-4) Most, if not all, of these alerts warned audiences of perilous weather conditions brought about by the natural hazard which, according to them, will plausibly result in torrential rainfall and storm surges.

As cited above, both alerts coming from the government and the media clearly forewarned the public of these impending threats, yet no further coverage and explanation was made to elaborate, define, and demarcate what the aforesaid phenomena would entail. Nobody from this end of the spectrum dared (or cared) to ask, “*What will this super typhoon bring about? What is a storm surge?”* On top of this, the public was preoccupied with a burning political and socio-economic issue, one that distracted the audiences enough to neglect the forthcoming disaster.

It was at this certain point in time that the socio-political milieu was all abuzz on the unraveling of the Priority Development Assistance Fund scam (more commonly known as the *Pork Barrel* scam), with the alleged mastermind Janet Lim-Napoles ultimately testifying in the senate investigation hearings a day before *Yolanda* made landfall in the country (Karen Galarpe, 2013). Amid a couple of notices here and there regarding the looming hazard, mainstream media was brimming with news coverage regarding the said issue, where all reporters and journalistic lenses were focused on the intricacies and controversies that ensued the anomalous pork scam. It was at this moment that crucial and significant attention was needed and was pivotal to the prevention and mitigation of disaster risk, and yet the public eye (and opinion) was turned toward another direction.

Albeit these aforementioned news and advisories, the perspective of mainstream journalists and mainstream media outfits — specifically ABS-CBN, the network in scrutiny through this paper — after the occurrence of this hazard was unpredictably serious and more severe than they had ever foreseen. Even journalists who have supposedly been reporting about the imminent peril brought by typhoon Haiyan declared that this was no ordinary catastrophe, putting a spotlight on their own fears and desperation that made the coverage more of a humanized spectacle of the messenger rather than a news story.

***The Influence of News Media in Communicating Natural Hazards and Risks***

In a growing number of societies across the world, social concern towards disaster prevention and awareness is rapidly approaching the forefront of development concerns, with more parliamentarians and legislators growing concerned about the effects and changes recent natural hazards and disasters have wrought.[[5]](#footnote-5) “Public concern regarding natural hazard events is becoming more prominent in everyday life and the subsequent social construction of “risk‟ and “concern‟ regarding natural hazards has developed as an intrinsic aspect of contemporary society (Blaikie et al. 1994).”

“This has, in part, been attributed to the reported increased media attention of global hazard events (Singer and Endrenny, 1994). The expected increase in both natural hazards and social vulnerability due to, among other factors, global climate change, is likely to lead to an increase in the number of natural hazards occurring and hence reporting in an increasingly responsive news media (Ashlin and Ladle, 2007).” It is important to note that news media reporting has yet to serve its part in the reduction of disaster risk, one role that they are generally equipped to attain by raising the awareness of the public on the latter. Albeit the media’s efforts to depict the reality and aftermath of disasters in recent times, it has forgotten to inform the public and has focused on the harrowing spectacle that shocks and traumatizes rather than one that empowers.

The crucial point about understanding why disasters happen is that it is not only natural events that cause them. They are also the product of social, political and economic environments (as distinct from the natural environment), because of the way these structure the lives of different groups of people (Blaikie, Wisner, Cannon, & Davis, 2005). Thus, the mere social construction of risk, as termed in a scientific perspective, is pivotal to the management of these underlying threats which are deemed interconnected and interrelated in the attainment of social welfare and economic development. Hence, it is only vital to build on the architecture of risk and hazards through the shaping of public opinion.

Of the myriad aspects that can affect people’s perception of risks and hazards, the mass media plays one of the most crucial roles in social construction and influence of public opinion. As Marshall McCombs put it, “Not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news. Newspapers provide a host of cues about the salience of the topics in the daily news – lead story on page one, other front page display, large headlines, etc…In other words, the news media can set the agenda for the public’s attention to that small group of issues around which public opinion forms.”

Essentially, public opinion is molded and shaped through facilities and streams mainly available to the larger population of society, and that in this case is television news media. At times, what may be deemed most relevant by the public are the main topics to stay afloat on various media channels, yet it is still mass media who decides on the agenda that can surface on a given period of time. Based on Walter Lippman’s Public Opinion (1922), “the news media are a primary source of those *pictures in our heads* about the larger world of public affairs, a world that for most citizens is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind.” What we know about the world is largely based on what the media decide to tell us. More specifically, the result of this mediated view of the world is that the priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public. Elements prominent on the media agenda become prominent in the public mind (Lippmann, 1922).”

Thus, it can definitely be concluded that the “pictures in our heads,” as Lippman suggests, are fed and fostered by the media, particularly news media, in our everyday exposure to it. Our knowledge of the world, more often than not, comes from what we see on various media that are widely available to us like television, radio, and the internet. Quintessentially, the crux of the agenda-setting function lies in the innate need for orientation of each person. The need for orientation is defined by two components: relevance and uncertainty; meaning the more a topic is regarded as relevant, the greater the need is for orientation, while the lesser the uncertainty is regarding a subject, the lesser the need for orientation is (McCombs). Basically, in terms of disaster risk communication, those who regard the looming threat relevant and are uncertain about its effects are the most effective recipients of mediated messages by the media.

In this same light, it can be argued that mediated messages are highly delicate and crucial to the way by which audiences may handle a certain situation. People may tend to be more anxious than usual, given a specific event is publicized through the media; yet, it is still important to observe that it is by utilizing these avenues before a disaster that can make all the difference. The media is powerful and its influence on audiences are far stronger than multiple agencies of science or meteorology combined.

1. The casualty count remains unclear, with victims of the disaster estimating at least 10,000 were dead in Tacloban, Leyte alone. (Wikipedia) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Pangco-Panares, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Kathlyn Dela Cruz, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Bettina Magsaysay, 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quoted (non-verbatim) from: Oliver Hall, UN OCHA. (2014). Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network Annual General Meeting. Bangkok, Thailand [↑](#footnote-ref-5)