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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE POPULAR CULTURE  
OF DISASTER

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EIIP Round Table Discussion**

*"Popular Culture of Disaster"*

**Hosted  
by**

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**Amy Sebring:** Welcome to the EIIP Virtual Forum Round Table!

For the benefit of our first-timers, when you see a blue web address, you can click on it and the referenced web page should appear in a browser window. After the first one, the browser window may not automatically come to the top, so you may need to bring it forward by clicking on a button at the status bar at the bottom of your screen. Right before we begin the Q&A portion I will review how to submit questions.

Today we are pleased to host a continuation of the discussion of The Popular Culture of Disasters. If you were with us last October for our Classroom session, you will remember that Gary Webb introduced this topic to us at that time. As a reminder, the background page for that session, with links to transcript and slides can be found at <<http://www.emforum.org/vclass/981021.htm>>.

A lot has gone on since then, and here today to tell us about it is Tricia Wachtendorf, a Graduate Research Assistant at the University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center.

Welcome Tricia, and thank you for joining us today.

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** Hi, Amy, and thanks! Good morning to everyone and welcome to our second round table on the popular culture of disaster.

This is a wonderful opportunity to follow up on some of the points raised in our well attended Oct. 21st virtual conference when Gary Webb led a very interesting discussion regarding what might constitute disaster popular culture.

Before we begin, I would like to first remind everyone about a few items. SLIDE 1, please.

**SLIDE 1**  
**<http://www.emforum.org/vforum/tw1.htm>**

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** First of all, our mailing list is constantly growing. It is very encouraging to see new names added regularly. If you would like to post to the group a question, comment, or announcement about disaster pop culture, you can send it to <discult@kfs009.sozilogie.uni-kiel.de>. The DisCult web site is up and running. If you have not already signed up to be on the mailing list, you can do so at this site. Please check it out at <<http://kfs009.sozilogie.uni-kiel.de/~discult>>.

Finally, there are several upcoming meetings that will have sessions on disaster popular culture:

- 1) The July Natural Hazards Workshop in Boulder, Colorado - proposals from practitioners for presentation at this session are invited, and those interested or with questions should contact Elaine Enarson <(enarson@interchange.ubc.ca)>
- 2) The August American Sociological Association meeting in Chicago - which is sponsored by the ISA Research Committee on Disasters
- 3) and we just heard of a session on the Literature of Natural Disasters at the American Literature Association in Baltimore, May 27-30th.

Now on to the discussion! I would like today's round table to genuinely be a COLLECTIVE discussion of the topic. I will begin with a 10 minutes introduction of today's theme and raise some questions we may want to discuss. However, I then encourage everyone to join in with your own questions, examples, and valuable ideas. At the end of the round table, Gary Webb will provide a brief summary of some the points raised.

In our last session, Elaine Enarson raised an interesting question: What are some of the lessons learned from the popular culture of disaster? I would like to use this question as a starting point for today's discussion.

Whether we are talking about movies, games, products such as t-shirts or quilts, songs, or jokes, it is important to consider what these social products are telling us about specific emergency events, or about disasters in general. Moreover, when we look at these resulting disaster conceptions, how similar (or dissimilar) are they to what others are saying about the event, or to what research tells us about disasters? As an illustration, let's look at three examples.

The slides that accompany each example raise several questions we may wish to discuss. First of all, let's consider what some of the recent disaster movies - such as Armageddon, Dante's Peak, Volcano, and Deep Impact tell us? In all of these movies, government officials hide information about the disaster because they fear panic. Concerned about the disruption of routine activities (e.g.: commuter traffic or tourist activity), officials also delay issuing warnings. These movies also tell us that a lone researcher or lay person will be the one to discover the potential hazard.

The government or responsible agencies will either be completely ignorant of the hazard, or ignore warnings of the threat. Movies present statements about race, class and gender

roles, and differences in the ways these social groups may behave. Some of you may also have noted that many disaster movies include a pet component. Even though it may be stranded in the middle of a large lava flow, the dog always lives!

When I was back home in Manitoba this Christmas, a new Canadian disaster movie was released: "Last Night." Although I did not get a chance to see it, most of the reviews I read juxtaposed this movie with its American counterparts. Instead of the Bruce-Willis-like heroes and the rioters in US movies, these reviewers stated that the characters in "Last Night" were quintessentially Canadian --- polite and apologetic to the end. While one can argue the stereotypical personality traits of Canadians, cross-cultural comparisons of pop culture products tell different stories about what a disaster is like, and how people may behave in it. SLIDE 2, please.

#### **SLIDE 2**

**<http://www.emforum.org/vforum/tw2.htm>**

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** What about disaster graffiti? As research on the Red River Flood by Hagen, Ender, Tiemann, and Hagen shows, a variety of disaster graffiti often emerges following a disaster. For example, messages are sometimes humorous, while others provide sharp criticism of governmental response. Some indicate survival, yet others point to ongoing frustration and victimization. Whether it consists of texts, pictures, or objects, the graffiti tells a story. SLIDE 3, please.

#### **SLIDE 3**

**<http://www.emforum.org/vforum/tw3.htm>**

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** I recently looked through the lyrics of several folk songs with disaster themes. Many songs presented the victims as brave heroes, and included a verse about the grief of surviving friends and loved ones. Less attention was given to placing blame on individuals or organizations for the incident. Most of the songs concentrated on people coming together to help - the disaster myth of panic and disorganization were not prevalent. SLIDE 4, please.

#### **SLIDE 4**

**<http://www.emforum.org/vforum/tw4.htm>**

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** The use of pop culture products are one way to socially construct and present a disaster event. The choice of presentation medium, the message conveyed through the pop culture product, and the consistency or inconsistency of the popular message with other social constructions are just a few of the interesting areas we could explore.

At this time, I would like to open up the discussion. Does anyone have any comments or questions they would like to pose to the rest of the group?

**Amy Sebring:** Thank you, Tricia, and we will now open it up to discussion.

Audience, please enter a question mark (?) to indicate you wish to be recognized, go ahead and compose your comment or question, but wait for recognition before hitting the enter key or clicking on Send. We are ready for your questions or comments.

***Question:***

**Avagene Moore:** I was wondering if anyone knows whether FEMA or other sources are involved in any of the movies mentioned?

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** I haven't heard about FEMA but I heard that the Canadian Red Cross was setting up information booths outside of popular disaster movies. This is a great opportunity for an organization to take advantage of the large audience disaster movies draw.

Disaster movies often do a great job showing the destruction a disaster can cause, however they also perpetuate many myths. On the one hand, such information booths can take advantage of a captive audience to dispel those myths, but can it compete with the big screen?

***Question:***

**Lindsey Burke:** The sad fact about the movie misrepresentation is that in our society, we don't like to see wrong. We go to watch our hero save the day. However, the old China Syndrome movie certainly posed a lot of fear in people in Pennsylvania during the Three Mile Island incident. Why do you think that people see one movie and are glad the hero saves the day, when other movies strike fear?

**Amy Sebring:** Tricia, do you note the difference that Lindsey is referring to?

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** That's an interesting question, Lindsay. Does anyone else in the room have any comments on it?

**David Crews:** I live in Kansas, I have a coffee cup that says "Toto I don't think we're in Kansas anymore" and 2 T-shirts "Toto with a bad hair day" and "Run Toto Run! (Tornado in the background)". Also have a yellow sponge "Follow the Yellow Brick Road". Wizard of Oz is big here!

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** Re: Lindsey's comment, it seems all of these movies exploit people's fear, but part of it is that we, as the audience, can watch from a distance.

**Ryc Lyden:** Comment on be frightened: We spend big money on going to horror movies to be frightened. An emotional response gets people talking about the film. That sells more tickets and makes profit.

***Question:***

**Ken Patterson Sr:** Does the movie industry realize or even care about the image they are portraying to the general public about Emergency Management agencies? We are trying to improve the image and Hollywood is damaging the work that is done.

**Amy Sebring:** Yes, I wonder, Ken, if they have any consultants and I think that was what Ava was getting at with her first question.

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** Back to Ken's point, some movie makers came to the DRC some time back re: a script they were writing.

**Amy Sebring:** My turn, was just thinking about how the movies perpetuate the victim mentality, that the public is helpless in face of disaster; this is a stereotype to overcome if we are to make any progress.

**Lindsey Burke:** Coming from my point, just learning the EM profession, the movies have only boosted my confidence in how people perceive EM. It gives me hope, in a way.

**Question:**

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** Lindsey, I'm curious to hear why and how it gives you hope?

**Lindsey Burke:** I was always fascinated with Disaster and the way they portrayed those in charge. Just opens the doors to what I have seen to be how the job is respected. I never have really seen the aspect that Ken refers to as being needed to change. Does that make sense? I know all about FEMA reorganization, etc., but a lot of civilian people don't know about that.

**Question:**

**Ken Patterson Sr:** Has anyone researched the problem that may be caused by what Americans actually perceive as the government role in disasters? Do they believe what the movies are telling them or what we are telling them?

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** I don't know of any specific research on the topic but I think it's a great question. We should also remember that movies give different takes on government roles. As I pointed out earlier, some movie show the government as the last group to realize the threat while others may show the EM as the hero (Volcano).

**Question:**

**Ryc Lyden:** Just a comment. We may never really know all of the 'why's' that people get into the disaster culture. But, what we should be discussing is looking at what opportunities are now open to us. The comment about having booths open at theaters is a good example or spots on the radio around movies.

**Amy Sebring:** Yes, even FEMA had a trailer on the home version of Tornado!

**David Crews:** The X Files (The Movie) portrayed FEMA as part of a secret government project. It created a lot of problems for the Public Information Officers in the DFO when it was released. It added to the rumor mill of FEMA leading a government conspiracy that has been circulating in Militia groups in recent years.

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** That's a great example, David!

**Amy Sebring:** I was also going to comment on David's remark. I expect the conspiracy theory will only get worse this next year with Y2K!

**Ken Patterson Sr:** That Y2K problem is running rampant here. The rumors are getting pretty bad, people stocking up food and everything else for the end of the world.

**Avagene Moore:** I have a comment too. The emergency managers in the movies (Tommy Lee Jones in Volcano, prime example and laughable) are real 'cowboys'. However, that is Hollywood and sells tickets. Real disasters, if portrayed realistically, wouldn't be especially entertaining. Hard work and traumatic but not entertaining.

***Question:***

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** Does anyone have any ideas how one can counter this misconceptions of government in disaster? Or are some negative portrayals more accurate than we think? I'm not referring to the X-Files movie here.

**Ryc Lyden:** Again, take the opportunity during movies to get out the pamphlets, etc. Red Cross could recruit!

**Ken Patterson Sr:** When the fires struck Florida, the news was very good about showing the actuality of the disaster, taking some of the Hollywood hype out of the community.

**David Crews:** Tricia, FEMA has built a large cadre for Community Relations to address the many misconceptions the public has about government roles and assistance in disasters. They also have a lot of literature in various languages too.

***Question:***

**Amy Sebring:** Tricia, is media being considered as part of the Pop Culture?

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** Well, I think so but that actually goes back to Gary's talk on what pop culture is, popular magazine, commercials. I think it's all open for discussion.

***Question:***

**Avagene Moore:** Tricia, what is the long-term vision for the Pop Culture group that you have gathered as an interest group? Will the group and its deliberations have an impact on the public or the practitioner?

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** Again, Elaine Enarson is trying to make a real effort to attract practitioners to present at the workshop in Boulder. I think that the messages pop culture tell the general public, and EMs influence how we are going to react to a disaster event as well as prepare for it. If victims are wearing flood t-shirts and displaying graffiti saying they are still suffering, the media may pick up on this which could have practical consequences.

***Question:***

**Amy Sebring:** I expect that many adults at least understand the difference between the movies and reality, however, children may be a different thing, and we may be shaping future attitudes. Do children pick up on the Pop Culture possibly or are they pretty much insulated from it?

**Ken Patterson Sr:** Children I have faced feel that the movies are a somewhat honest portrayal of real life. They think the hero will come save them. The only thing I have seen that changes this is the actual living through a disaster.

***Question:***

**Amy Sebring:** I was going to pick up on the lone hero idea as we know it takes many, many folks. I wonder if this pop culture idea does not make some EMs feel they must be the cowboy?

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** To build on that Amy, other players who deal with emergency management may wonder why their important roles are not shown.

**Ken Patterson Sr:** Or some other rescuer out there trying to be the hero, risking everyone else's life!

**David Crews:** The Community Emergency Response Teams and Project Impact (FEMA Initiatives) may actually benefit from the "Cowboy" image, promote volunteerism and personal readiness.

***Question:***

**Amy Sebring:** Gary, are you ready to summarize?

**Gary Webb:** Yes, Amy. Today's session has been very informative and several interesting points and questions have been raised so I will try to summarize some of the major issues raised.

First, we've focused largely on disaster movies but we touched again on the important question of what is the popular culture of disaster? As Tricia pointed out there are other products like graffiti and clothing and buttons, etc. from which we can also learn a great deal.



Second, assuming we know what the popular culture of disaster is, we need to ask the question, why are disaster themes so prominent in our culture? Along with that, several interesting questions were raised. For example: to what extent do people believe the images of disaster and emergency management portrayed in disaster movies?

Another interesting set of issues raised involves the pitfalls and opportunities presented by studying the popular culture of disaster. As an example of an opportunity we talked about the Canadian Red Cross using disaster movies as opportunities to distribute information and thereby capitalize on people's interests. And as an example of a pitfall, we talked about the images of the emergency management profession that are presented in disaster movies. It seems to me that today's session is an excellent building block for more dialogue on this topic.

Thanks to Tricia for talking, and to Avagene and Amy for hosting the session.

**Amy Sebring:** Thank you, Gary, and thank you, Tricia. Before we officially adjourn, Ava, are you ready with some upcoming events?

**Avagene Moore:** Thank you, Amy. Tomorrow, Wednesday Feb 24, 12: 00 Noon EST: Edward Addy will be our speaker in the Tech Arena to tell us about the North American Center for Emergency Communications (NACEC) and DVIS: Disaster Victim Information Exchange System. Background material for the discussion is at <<http://www.emforum.org/varena/990224.htm>>.

Next Tuesday, 3/02/99, 1: 00 PM EST, we start off March with an invitation from an EIIP Partner, the Unit for Sustainable Development and Environment (USDE) of the Organization of American States (OAS), to a follow up discussion to their virtual conference last October that focused on disaster education in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Round Table session will serve as a participatory forum to brainstorm and help establish a dialogue on disaster education and to consolidate the emerging network of professionals working in this area.

Wednesday, March 3, 12: 00 Noon EST, we will be in the Virtual Library. The speaker will be announced this weekend -- watch for it! Back to you, Amy.

**Amy Sebring:** Thanks, Ava, and thank you audience for good comments and questions. We will officially adjourn for now, but you are invited to remain a few minutes longer for some open discussion. Great job Tricia! And thank you again, Gary.

**Tricia Wachtendorf:** Thanks Amy, Avagene and Gary! And thanks to everyone who participated!

# **Popular Culture of Disasters**

**Mailing List:** [discult@kfs009.sozilogie.uni-kiel.de](mailto:discult@kfs009.sozilogie.uni-kiel.de)

**Web Site:** <http://kfs009.sozilogie.uni-kiel.de/~discult/>

## **Meetings:**

- **Natural Hazards Workshop Boulder CO July 1999**
- **American Sociological Association Chicago IL August 1999**
- **American Literature Association in Baltimore, May 1999**

## **Popular Culture of Disasters**

- 1. What are some other examples of what disaster movies tell us?**
- 2. Thinking about these and your own examples, does research on disasters support or contradict the beliefs disaster movies perpetuate?**
- 3. What leads to these differing conceptions of disaster?**

## **Popular Culture of Disasters**

- 1. Does the graffiti ever tell a different story about the recovery process than, for example, newspapers or the government?**
- 2. Are there commonalities between graffiti seen after the same types of disaster (ie: is flood graffiti different that earthquake graffiti)? Do differences in graffiti reflect cultural differences in or between communities?**
- 3. Who is the intended audience of the graffiti?**

# **Popular Culture of Disasters**

- 1. Do different music genres present different disaster themes?**
- 2. Do disaster songs typically perpetuate or contradict disaster myths?**