Dhiraj Murthy

NEW MEDIA AND NATURAL DISASTERS

Blogs and the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami

This article examines the role of blogs during the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Using a blog created by South Asian journalists as a case study, the article argues that new media has the potential to be a democratizing agent in lesser developed countries. The article argues that some tsunami-related blogs give regional, subaltern journalists a medium to transcend exploitative accounts of the tsunami's aftermath. The article is also able to use tsunami-related blogs to help highlight questions surrounding new media and disaster reporting in lesser developed countries in general, including discussions of the digital divide.

Keywords blogs; digital divides; journalism; media representations; natural disasters; new media

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'Alarming volcanic eruption: disastrous tidal wave'; 'Native huts all along beach washed away'; 'There has been enormous loss of life among both Europeans and natives'.[1] On 27 August 1883, a tsunami rocked the Indian Ocean and, that day itself, telegraphs dotted the world with this news. Like the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004, the headlines of national as well as local Western newspapers of the day made sure that it became a recognized global event.[2] Though the former was set off by an erupting volcano rather than an earthquake, one immediate similarity between the tsunamis was near instantaneous global journalistic coverage. Additionally, like coverage in 1883, which referred to the 'native', some coverage in 2004 also placed emphasis on the 'native'. Leach (2005) concludes that this tsunami coverage was ethnocentric and exploitative.[3] This article will make the argument that new media – and specifically blogs – functioned as a democratizing agent in Sri Lanka during the tsunami, which gave 'local' journalists in South Asia new global voices to report on breaking tsunami news from an

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alternative vantage point and to directly challenge tsunami coverage which they found problematic.

The article argues that these journalists who were blogging were able to not only counter the exploitive effect of traditional media which Leach (2005) identifies, but also start conversations regarding media representation. This article uses Chiens Sans Frontiers (CSF), a blog created by South Asian journalists, as a case study to explore this question empirically. Before examining CSF in detail, media representations of the tsunami will be introduced and contextualized.

Traditional media representations of the tsunami

Sri Lankan victims of the tsunami as a whole, as Gunewardena (2008, p. 79) observes, tended to be low caste (*Karave*) and from poor small-scale fishing communities, making them particularly vulnerable to the socio-economic effects of the tsunami.[4] Western tourists stranded in Galle, on the other hand, seemed to get attention first from the Sri Lankan authorities as well as from their own governments. Leach (2005) felt that the marginal position of these victims was generally exploited by the media. Leach notes one Indian columnist's remark that the disaster has been treated as a 'corpse show' and another columnist he refers to equates tsunami coverage with 'disaster porn'. This critique is also represented cinematically in *Tsunami* (Nalluri 2007), which includes a scene in which a British journalist and a Thai journalist argue over coverage of the disaster; the latter argues that taking pictures of the corpses of tsunami victims numbered and lined in rows in Takua Pa in Thailand is not only dehumanizing, but also against prevailing Thai Buddhist customs.

Historical coverage of floods, earthquakes, and other natural disasters in 'third world' locales has fallen prey to similar dehumanizing and exploitative journalism. The disproportionate coverage of white Western victims of the tsunami, despite being a miniscule group relative to Asian victims, also affirms the differential value attributed to whom Spivak (1988) terms 'subaltern' 'others', those who have been rendered marginal and voiceless by Orientalism and post-colonialism. Similarly, coverage of Cyclone Nargis often pejoratively emphasized Myanmar as an Islamist state, playing up to renewed post-9/11 global Islamophobia. Tierney *et al.* (2006, p. 62) argue that journalistic choices 'about what and how much to cover with respect to specific disaster events are often rooted in judgments about the social value of disaster victims'. This, as Tierney *et al.* (2006, p. 62) continue, was reflected in the US coverage of Hurricane Wilma's ravaging of Cancun, which focused on the handful of marooned American tourists rather than the masses of local residents. Disaster reportage has the potential to encourage fissures in the social fabric of these disaster-stricken communities and reinforce age-old social hierarchies.

Reporting on Hurricane Katrina did this with its differential portrayals of African-Americans as 'scary' looters and whites as 'properly' behaving (Lubiano 2008). In this way, the media also exercised their ability to prioritize eye-catching individual victims at the expense of reconstruction efforts. Take this account of Tharesh Liyanage by a CNN correspondent:

> nine-year-old Tharesh Liyanage [. . .] was reading a book when the tsunami roared through his home in Galle, southern Sri Lanka. Within moments, the force of the water had hurled Tharesh out onto the street. His mother fainted and very soon died right in front of his eyes. (Bindra 2005, p. 21)

Unlike the 1883 tsunami (and indeed the other six Indian Ocean tsunamis of the nineteenth century),[5] the account of the 2004 tsunami includes scores of individual stories such as Tharesh's. Though not unique to disaster reporting, the close media attention following the tsunami gave the world glimpses into very individual and personal experiences. Whether it was particular Western tourists who had survived or missing babies, media outlets were scrambling for these rating-boosting personal stories. For example, in the Mozambique floods of March 2000, global airtime was given to the rescue of Carolina Chirindza, who had to give birth to her baby in a tree (Seaton 2005, pp. 274–275). The case of Baby 81 exemplifies this in the context of the tsunami.

Baby 81 was the name given to a four-month-old baby found beneath a pile of garbage and debris in Kalmunai, eastern Sri Lanka. He was given the name as he was the 81st unidentified baby admitted to the Kalmunai hospital. Baby 81's unbelievable survival of the tsunami first prompted local media attention and led to a handful of couples (some from distant cities) claiming Baby 81 as their son. The story spread to the news desks of the BBC, CNN, and most major international newspapers, leading Baby 81 to be considered an 'icon of [the] tsunami' (Silva 2009). Many blogs also followed the story closely and posted updates and pictures with surprising speed. One London-based blogger who runs 'The Daily Rhino'[6] even interviewed Shri Master, the fisherman who found Baby 81 in Galle. By this time, the intense international coverage had made local Sri Lankan authorities wary to turn over the baby to any couple, even the one who neighbours and locals had overwhelmingly confirmed was the baby's biological parents. The coverage of the custody battle and the eventual reuniting of Baby 81 with his biological parents, the Jeyarajahas, involved 24-hour television news channels, blogs, websites, major newspapers, and even an appearance by Baby 81 and his family on the popular US television show, *Good Morning America*. As the case of Baby 81 illustrates, post-disaster 'local' politics had, in some extreme cases, become intensely globally mediated. The transformation of Baby 81 from 'local' missing baby to international media cause célèbre also led to a surge in global aid donations to tsunami reconstruction efforts (Silva 2009). The importance of the shift of Kalmunai from nondescript

'third world backwater' to the site of an international media spectacle led to an increased activity of bloggers reporting from the area as well. The focus of this article is to examine the activity of these bloggers.

Tsunami blogs and subaltern bloggers

In the case of the Indian Ocean tsunami, an army of bloggers both on these sites and others covered the disaster.[7] Most tsunami-related blogs were posted on blogger.com and wordpress.com. The former as of 2006 (when postings regarding the tsunami began a sharp decline) had 375,000 registered blog owners and adding 1,300 more per day (Jenkins 2006, p. 179). Scores of bloggers were based in tsunami-hit areas and were reporting first-hand. Like the Gujarat earthquake in January 2001, Internet coverage of the tsunami began within hours. These forms of disaster reporting in developing countries have now become extended with the social media site Twitter.

As intense and savvy users of the Internet, they created blogs commenting on the tsunami which seamlessly intertwined videos (mainly uploaded to YouTube), text, photographs, and links to other blogs/websites. About 70 blogs on oneindia.in[8] actively commented on the tsunami, disseminating information on everything from how to handle lost children to post-traumatic stress disorder in subcontinental languages, including Tamil. Blogs such as Asha's Tsunami Relief,[9] The South-East Asia Earthquake and Tsunami Blog (SEA-EAT), and CSF provided first-hand accounts from the subcontinent. Though not all of these blogs had a mass of readers or comments, they, as a collection of over a thousand blogs, not only had a substantial audience indeed, but also constituted a constellation of tsunami-related news production and consumption. Jenkins (2006, p. 179) calls bloggers 'the minutemen of the digital revolution', and their involvement in disaster reporting is no exception. SEA-EAT, the 'official' tsunami blog,[10] not only became a clearinghouse for information and resources, but also served as a regularly updated portal to key self-help web forums, digital photo galleries of missing victims, fundraising campaigns, and links to government resources. SEA-EAT came online the day of the disaster and received 100,000 visits within 72 hours (Iyar 2007, p. 139). The blogs provided a free and open space for both professional and citizen journalists in South Asia to not only produce tsunami-related news, but also interact with affected/interested members of the public.

Another key purpose of these blogs was as a space to negotiate the psychosocial aspects of the disaster. Natural disasters provoke an array of emotions. The acute stress that unfolds in their aftermath breeds fear, distrust, anxiety, and even exuberance.[11] Commenting on the 2001 Gujarat earthquake in India, Gupta *et al.* (2002, p. 35) note that the site of decaying corpses and deceased/maimed relatives and friends not only wreaked psychological trauma, but also bred 'a sense of

deep insecurity for the future'. This foreboding sentiment became one echoed by tsunami victims online. The ability to be anonymous on web forums and blogs made them a frontline resource for technology literate victims and their families who were ashamed to seek counselling and support off-line or simply did not have access to these services post-tsunami. Accounts of suicide attempts, deep depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder cropped up repeatedly on web forums such as spot.lk. Volunteer doctors and mental health professionals, fellow victims, and concerned 'web citizens' quickly posted advice and offered support to traumatized web posters. The downside of this anonymity was that some posters intentionally stymied the support process. Other well-intentioned blogs (such as the 'Tsunami help for Sri Lanka: psychosocial issues' blog[12]) sadly became overtaken by spammers after the blogs were publicized on high-profile tsunami-related blogs (e.g. CSF and SEA-EAT).

An excess of spam usually damaged the credibility of a tsunami-related blog and users moved elsewhere. In other instances such as with Asha's Tsunami Relief blog, the spam came long after the initial post was made. For example, a post on 29 December 2004 about the evacuation of the Olcott school in Chennai, India, received 301 comments (all of which were spam), but the first spam comment came almost a year later in October 2005 and the last comment in January 2006. The targeting of blogs perceived to be 'defunct', but still strong in search engine rankings, reveals much about the ways in which spammers have now appropriated spaces which were critical to the public in the tsunami's aftermath. Specifically, because links to their spam sites from high-profile tsunami sites were factored into Google's search engine algorithm, their spamming of tsunami sites improved the placement of their spam sites in Google search results. One conclusion we can reach is that the global reach of these blogs was both their curse and blessing – drawing in both volunteer health professionals and malicious posters/robots. It is worth noting that the new media technologies which provided connectivity in the aftermath of disasters were the same ones used by spammers (Ramos & Piper 2006).

Despite the spam, the regular updates, commentary, and reportage from a collective of subcontinental bloggers functioned as a public discursive space.[13] In my previous work (Murthy 2008), we have discussed how these spaces can be considered a virtual iteration of a public sphere. Civic debates came alive in the deterritorialized space of the blog. Additionally, threads of online-mediated politics, what Bollier (2003) terms 'Netpolitik', focused on post-tsunami cultural identity, public perception, and community regeneration. These vibrant social formations function in what Pieterse (2004, p. 67) in his work on globalization calls 'border zones' – 'the meeting places of different organizational modes'. It is within these virtual border zones that aid workers, regional intellectuals, local university students, and the rest of cyberspace (what Heins (2005, p. 197) terms 'world citizens') could produce and consume news of the tsunami. Examples from CSF will be presented in the next section to make this clear.

Mirroring Pieterse's border zones, tsunami blogs also frequently exhibited a 'blurring and reworking of public and private spaces' (Pieterse 2004, p. 67). Blogs, as I previously found (Murthy 2008), also have the ability to hold journalists, governments, and others accountable through the global public exposure of their corruption, fraud, etc. As Maratea (2008) argues, blogs have certain 'efficiency' to the process of making public claims. In terms of the tsunami disaster, blogs such as 'Camp Steel Wire', '1seythi', and 'The Indo-Eelam Friendship Forum'[14] bypassed government and print media restrictions and bureaucracies, providing them with a streamlined process to publicly question Sri Lankan government statements as well as media representations of the reconstruction efforts (especially with regard to the ways in which the state was blocking reconstruction efforts in areas which could potentially be of use to the Tamil Tigers (LTTE)). Touri (2009) argues that blogs have helped constitute a democratization of global news reporting.

Chiens Sans Frontiers

CSF was a blog run by a collective of South Asian journalists. The blog features contributions by over 50 individuals (most of whom remain anonymous). The blog was not very well known before the tsunami, but quickly gained attention due to its method of generating blog posts by aggregating text messages (SMS) sent in by contributors to a central number which was publicly posted on CSF. Some of these SMS-based posts spawned comment-based discussions. For all practical purposes, their use of text messages functioned similar to the microblogging technology Twitter has popularized today. The short, timely bursts of information in these SMS posts provided vital information to those in need of current information from people on the ground in tsunami-affected South Asia. The text message reporting provided by CSF covered tsunami-affected areas in both India and Sri Lanka. The site can be seen as a means for giving local journalists a platform to report on breaking news of the tsunami. Furthermore, it brought together a diverse group of participants in terms of contributors, and it fostered public discourse in the comment threads.

The qualitative method by which I conducted research on CSF was to employ 'digital ethnography' (Murthy 2008), a technique of utilizing traditional ethnographic research methods in digital spaces. From December 2004 to May 2005, I compiled 'field notes' on nine virtual sites (including two forums, five blogs, one chat room, and one guest book) active during the tsunami's aftermath, noting the number of posts, posters and commenters, subject categories of posts, comments (including spam), number of contributors to the blogs, and common tags (which we created tag clouds from). Posts, comments, and other relevant data were stored and coded in ATLAS.ti in order to discern which keywords had both a high level of frequency and relevancy to my research questions.

Analysis of this, in combination with data from my field notes, led to an indication that two blogs in particular, SEA-EAT and CSF, functioned as the most critical discursive spaces in the tsunami's aftermath. Though web forums, listservs, and other virtual spaces functioned as important spaces, these blogs were focal. This is partly attributable to their timely content, active calls to members of the public, and lively discussions (often in the form of comment threads). We chose to examine CSF in detail because, unlike SEA-EAT, a key purpose of CSF was to foster reporting by locally based journalists, a purpose which was supported in part by collecting text messages from local journalists and posting them on CSF. This section will also explore empirically the implications of CSF as a public space which allowed anonymous contributions. On the one hand, there are cases of anonymous comments which were deemed important to the community. However, the largely open settings of CSF allowed spammers to overrun some common threads on blog posts.

Much of the discursive engagement on CSF was facilitated by comments to blog posts. For example, an entry from 26 December 2004[15] by Morquendi, a 23-year-old TV producer, based in Sri Lanka is illustrative. He includes in his CSF blog entry titled 'Asia Quake: Morquendi in Sri Lanka' a description of the death of two of his friends and how he is trying to find some way to get to the South Coast to identify the bodies. His entry received 21 comments (the last 3 of which were spam). This discussion is indicative of the types of reporting and public discussions with the wider public seen on CSF.

> [. . .]
>
> 2 friends dead. They were on a romantic beach holiday. I like to believe they died holding each other's hands. 2 more missing. Presumed dead. Find a vehicle in about an hour and head off down South to look for them, or identify their bodies.
>
> [. . .]
>
> John said. . .
>
> Hi, I know how bad it must be out there! Our prayers are with you. It's time to do your duty and you are doing fine. File reports and send SMS, which is what you are good at, rather than help with relief! The horror needs to be told to the world rather than kept under wraps. Thanks for the scene-of-tragedy report! Good luck and prayers!
>
> 11:07 AM
>
> Aishwarya said. . .
>
> Most of my family are in TN/Kerela . . . and we're stuck in Delhi. Last night I had to deal with grandparents having panic attacks because they didn't

know whether their friends and siblings were alive. We needed the media last night. Thank you for doing your job despite everything else you were going through. And I'm so sorry for your loss.

11:10 AM

Most global news consumers would not be exposed to his regional journalistic activity. However, via CSF, as John indicates, Morquendi's SMS reports are viewed as critical to conveying to the world the 'horror' taking place in Sri Lanka. Aishwarya, who is located in coastal India, emphasizes the personal importance Morquendi's media contribution has played, citing that her family is desperately following tsunami-related breaking news. In this case, Morquendi, the otherwise regionally restricted journalist, is able to not only report to a global audience, but also meaningfully interact with them.

Other blog posts and ensuing discussions critically examined the ways in which the tsunami was represented by journalists. One regular CSF blogger, Livinghigh, a 23-year-old journalist based in India, posted an entry on 31 December 2004,[16] which directly probed the question Leach (2005) asks about whether the media's coverage of the tsunami is exploitative. Livinghigh quotes a blogger outside of CSF, Patrix, who wrote that '[p]ictures of dead bodies, parents carrying their dead child, and open mass graves were splashed across all national and local newspapers in the US'. Livinghigh wonders whether tsunami coverage should be viewed as 'in-depth reports that hit home hard' or whether they are 'pandering to a perverse voyeuristic streak'. Rather than coming to his own conclusion, he ends his blog post asking CSF readers to post their thoughts. Five comments ensued (none of which was spam). The discussion which emerges in the comments probes this issue and is started by an anonymous poster who discusses how he/she has been following several Indian papers and concludes that even the Indian press is presenting 'glaringly garish' accounts of the disaster. The commenter adds that the Times of India, a major broadsheet, recently had 'somber pictures of a funeral pyre and a car wreckage in Galle', which, for the commenter, made the newspaper's front page resemble a 'horrendous cartoon', a feeling similar to Leach (2005). The second commenter, who goes by 'Saurav', discusses how surprising it is that US coverage of the tsunami was very sparse by 27 December 2004 and that the 'US tv media was [. . .] overfocused [sic.] on the number of (mostly Western) tourists killed [. . .]'. Interestingly, the conclusion after five pages of discussion (in terms of hardcopy text) is that the discussion participants do not accept Patrix's conclusion of US reporting being an exploitative 'corpse show'. Rather, the two key points which emerge are that the US media (especially CNN) is not really covering 'local' loss of life and is instead focusing on Western victims. One anonymous commenter highlights how CNN covered one injured American's

account of his 'dirty' wounds and his lack of antibiotics, while local loss of life in the tens of thousands remained unreported. Of significance, the commenters criticize Indian media more than they criticize US media in terms of exploitative coverage.

Indeed, Annie, a journalist based in India, posted an entry on CSF on 10 January 2005 titled 'Shameful'[17] which gives the account of an Indian aid worker who witnessed an incident of exploitation by Indian media:

> She [the aid worker] had just finished bandaging a child's hand at one relief camp, when an Aaj Tak [a major Indian daily news show] crew landed up. Not finding enough 'interesting' visuals to shoot, the journalist (or cameraman) in question had the child's bandage removed and then put on again, so he could get his footage.

Fadereu, a writer regularly based in Mumbai as well as a core contributor to CSF, added a comment which starkly expresses his view of the incident:

> Annie's observation is about how journalists, and media organisations, are setting aside the priorities of human compassion for interesting footage. Fuck his arm, we want the shot. In fact, they don't immediately associate a wounded arm with pain. It's inhuman.

What emerges from the discussion spawned by Annie's post is some consensus that it is actually traditional South Asian print and broadcast media who are reporting in ways which bolster Leach's (2005) conclusion that tsunami coverage has been exploitative. This is an important conclusion and reveals that the bloggers on CSF are actually trying to combat (via their blog) what they perceive as exploitative coverage by traditional regional media.

Some comments on CSF are explicitly malicious. Most frequent are spam comments. Like any comment, when spam comments appear on an entry, they become part of that discursive space and shape/colour it. However, another finding of this research is that though spam did overrun some pages on CSF, moderators on the site not only began to delete spam comments, but also began to respond to some as well. As mentioned in previous examples, pages as well as whole tsunami blogs including SEA-EAT were stymied by trolls and spammers. However, on CSF, some moderators chose to recognize the elephant in the room, malicious posters, and to not only acknowledge their presence on CSF, but also directly challenge their ability to damage or destroy the efficacy of the blog. Take this comment, for example, to a post titled SMS from Sri Lanka – XIII written on 29 December 2004 which contained nine SMS updates from the Jaffna and Amparai districts:

> 2 COMMENTS:
>
> Anonymous said...
>
> i jacked off in your mouth
>
> 6:43 PM
>
> Fadereu said...
>
> I was earlier going to delete this Anonymous comment above, but I won't. These are the kind of people who, in the middle of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, cut up fingers of corpses and steal their rings.
>
> 8:53 PM

Normally, the reaction to such posts is to mark them as spam. However, Fadereu, a blog moderator, chose to respond to this poster and make a thoughtful commentary on how the troll's actions are insensitive given the acute disaster that the blog is trying to cover. On SEA-EAT, the volume of posts is much higher and the moderators of the blog had more trouble in keeping up with spammers and trolls. The ability of the blog to be an effective subaltern journalistic space can be potentially jeopardized by malicious comments in these spaces if moderators are not able to sift through comments made by spammers and trolls. In CSF's case, public challenges made by Fadereu and other moderators emphasized the blog's ability to remain a rich and meaningful journalistic space despite malicious posters.

CSF had contributors posting on behalf of others and themselves. From 26 December 2004 to 1 January 2005 (the peak of activity on CSF), a total of 120 posts with 227 comments were made on the blog.[18] CSF served as subaltern journalistic space rather than merely an information clearinghouse. The discussion started by Livinghigh about media coverage illustrates this point. This distinction is critical. Though information became globally accessible and methodically organized through CSF (especially its SMS updates), a key component to the power of CSF was that local journalists could break news and individuals in the public could express their opinions, sympathy, ask for help, volunteer to help, etc.

Did tsunami blogs eclipse the digital divide?

The 1883 tsunami mentioned at the start of this article was also an international media event. Bose (2006, p. 2) observes that news of fluctuations in sea level was recorded in Hawaii and the English Channel and made front-page news around the world courtesy of a newly laid telegraph line. News of the 2004 tsunami was also disseminated by the newest technologies of the day – Internet and satellite communication. New media's synchronous applications enabled TV anchors in CNN's Atlanta headquarters to have real-time dialogues with their reporters

on the ground in the subcontinent during the 2004 tsunami. Similarly, local Sri Lankan individuals and aid agencies such as Sarvodaya posted videos on YouTube from Galle shortly after the tsunami and received reply posts almost instantaneously. These videos gave first-hand accounts from the vantage point of locally affected victims (Heimbuch 2010) rather than through the eyes of international mass media sources, a view supported by Pelikonen (2006, p. 80) when she argues that '[i]ndividuals' digital cameras and mobile device recordings became the most authentic reports of the wave's attack'. The synchronicity and instantaneity of communication both during and after the tsunami created what Harvey (1990) refers to as a compression of space and time.

However, this sense of being proximate was built more on a celluloid vision than a representative reality. The reality is that only relatively well-off Sri Lankan and Indian victims had been participating in this digital village with broadband almost non-existent (Fox 2005). Additionally, one's experience of the Internet is not just based on connectivity, but rather the speed of one's connection, information literacy, and English-language ability (Kling 1988; Hargittai 2002; Enteen 2010).

In the case of Sri Lanka, marginalized groups such as women and children have been disproportionately affected due to the country's poor economic state. In tsunami-affected areas, widowed women and displaced young girls have been the targets of rape without the protection of their local communities (de Silva 2006). The country's civil war has only exacerbated the problem. Many victims in Sri Lanka and Aceh were also, as Benight and McFarlane (2007, p. 422) observe, removed from aid operations and protection due to separatist and terrorist activities. Besides the immense loss of life in Sri Lanka alone (over 31,000 or 26 times Hurricane Katrina by the most conservative estimates), a major contributor to the country's GDP, tourism, had been decimated, with two-thirds of Sri Lanka's coastline affected (Domroes 2006, p. x). With many subsistence fishing villages encouraging tourism (including more recent eco-tourist enterprises), the blow to tourism only rubbed salt in their wounds. Those who were vulnerable before became more vulnerable now.

The sad irony is that it is precisely those most in need do not have connectivity. It is these people who would have benefited tremendously from the information contained on CSF (especially SMS updates which warned of dangers, food shortages, and where relief operations were located). Alexander (1997, p. 295) neatly captures this paradox when he argues that 'the people who bear the heaviest burden of disasters, the poor, dispossessed and marginalised, are the least likely to benefit from the information technology revolution'. And to compound matters, even with connectivity, their voices are not likely to be easily understood by the Western world without a cultural (and linguistic) 'translator'. In other words, even if they had computers and connectivity, that does not automatically translate to a 'voice' on a space like CSF or any other blog.

Though many South Asian tsunami victims were not digital haves, Sri Lanka and India both have relatively good Internet infrastructures and select

information came and went freely from disaster-hit sites. Cyclone Nargis in 2008 sadly provides the proof to the negative side of this claim. In Myanmar's case, the country was impoverished and already lacked basic infrastructure before Nargis' arrival, making information flow out of Myanmar extremely limited. The Internet, cellular phones, and other communicative technologies are ubiquitous in affluent countries and are invaluable in disaster situations. However, the less well-off populations of the world (such as the subsistence communities hit by the Indian Ocean tsunami) not only lack new media technology, but also could use it most for disaster survival and reconstruction – a paradox. Though CSF enabled subaltern local journalists to challenge exploitative coverage of the tsunami, it is unclear how much, if any, of CSF's news reporting and discussion threads reached or engaged those who were being exploited by news media in the first place.

Conclusion

This article has explored the role of blogs in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and whether they represent a case wherein South Asian blogs democratized news production in tsunami-affected South Asia. This article introduced the tsunami and explored media representations of it, including what Leach (2005) considers exploitative coverage. By exploring the specific case study of CSF, a blog which was run by South Asian journalists in the aftermath of tsunami, this study has empirically evaluated whether South Asian blogs, which are normally on the periphery (compared to traditional news media organizations both regionally and globally), democratized news production and consumption. Specifically, I examined CSF's role in enabling victims to self-represent disaster experiences and in providing an avenue to critique mass media representations of the tsunami.

There are four key findings which emerge from this research. First, what contributors to CSF reveal is that they see international media as disproportionately focusing coverage on Western victims at the expense of reporting on 'local' loss of life. Second, and a critical finding of this study, is that contributors to CSF found 'local' Indian media to be more exploitative than US-based media in terms of coverage. Contributors singled out the example of an Indian television crew which removed the bandage of an injured child to get more 'interesting' footage. Third, contributors to CSF view the blog as an important platform to combat what they perceive as exploitative coverage by traditional regional media. Fourth, there remains a digital divide in Sri Lanka (and South Asia more generally), which left more marginalized groups, including women and children, with neither connectivity nor computer literacy. Ultimately, only relatively well-off, English-speaking, Sri Lankan and Indian victims were able to participate directly in CSF. Though CSF may not have given much voice to the marginalized poor in tsunami-affected South Asia, what its contributors did do

was craft a space where not only more grassroots information was flowing out of the disaster area, but also these bloggers were able to actively challenge exploitative representations made by mainstream South Asian media. In other words, blogs like CSF presented a check to exploitative news media coverage coming out of South Asia itself (rather than from Western media outlets).

The findings of this research are critical in that they reveal the use of blogs in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as a successful alternative discursive space which supported regional grassroots journalism. When regional broadsheets and broadcast media were considered to be exploitative, CSF was found to be a critical space which challenged traditional media. Additionally, these blogs functioned as 'collective' blogs in which cooperation between the various blog authors was fundamentally important. This conclusion is important in that blogs have historically been viewed as having an individual author (Bruns 2005, p. 96), and the success of the tsunami-related blogs was contingent on collective authorship (e.g. authors in the field sending SMS updates to authors at their PCs who collated SMS and added their own commentary). From a practical organizational perspective, this was critical in that the collective sharing of editorial and authorial work enabled them to keep the blog updated and running, despite their day jobs.

Indeed, the pooling of editorial resources enabled editors to collectively examine comments for spam and to post non-spam comments. This collectivity made poring through the deluge of spam, which tsunami-related blogs received, a feasible task. This ability to collectively sift through comments was critical in that comments to posts are much of what facilitated the vibrancy of tsunami-related blogs like CSF as a discursive space. Additionally, the collectivity of these blogs also gave them a plurality of voices, which was key to the role of CSF and similar blogs as democratizing agents. Rather than a homogenizing media space, these blogs stressed the importance of plural discourse (e.g. in discussions of exploitation by regional media on CSF, posters were quick to voice divergent opinions).

CSF and similar blogs also democratized news consumption in that they met users' individualized news needs, which included requesting information on highly specific disaster-affected zones. CSF, for example, tried to meet these requests and to deliver original localized journalistic content to tsunami victims (through a means which was much faster than the time it took for the traditional daily newspapers and even the websites of traditional media organizations to report on the same area). This is in itself highly important in that the literature finds the opposite: that blogs most often lack original journalistic content (Papacharissi 2007) and on-the-ground reporting (Scott 2007). However, CSF demonstrates the opposite case in that journalists were deliberately using the blog medium to circumvent traditional media and to ultimately make significant journalistic contributions.

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Notes

1 Headlines and article text from The Pall Mall Gazette (1883) and Daily News (1883).
2 For example, on 27 August 1883, Reuters News Agency sent a telegraph of the news and a Lloyds agent at Batavia (what is now North Jakarta, Indonesia) also telegraphed London of the news. On August 28, 'local' British newspapers such as the Aberdeen Weekly Journal and Bristol Mercury and Daily Post ran the story. Over the next couple of days, Reuter's telegraphs updated journalists in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere.
3 As Amarasiri de Silva (2009) notes, international non-governmental organizations have also been found to be ethnocentric in aid efforts.
4 Victims of the 2001 Gujarat earthquake in Northern India, as Gupta *et al.* (2002) observe, were similarly poor. Vaux (2002) also discusses how caste and poverty in the area affected by the Gujarat earthquake factored into reconstruction efforts.
5 See Rajamanickam and Prithviraj (2006) for a table of historical Indian Ocean tsunamis.
6 See http://dailyrhino.blogspot.com/.
7 A search on Blogger.com showed 5257 blogs with 'tsunami' in their title as of 26 December 2005. Though not all of these are related to the Indian Ocean tsunami, many of them are.
8 See http://blogs.oneindia.in/tsunami/1/showtags.com.
9 See http://ashatsunamirelief.blogspot.com.
10 See http://tsunamihelp.blogspot.com.
11 See Welsh Assembly Government (2005), Lack and Sullivan (2008), and Fischer (1998).
12 See http://tsunamihelpsrilanka.blogspot.com/2005/01/psp-guidelines-to-provide-psychosocial.html for an example of a blog overrun by malicious automated posts.
13 Hoffman (2004) argues that the 'decentralized and cross-border nature' of new information technologies has transformed constructions of the public sphere itself.
14 See http://lrrp.wordpress.com, http://1seythi.wordpress.com, and http://allindiateso.wordpress.com, respectively.
15 See http://desimediabitch.blogspot.com/2004/12/asia-quake-morquendi-in-sri-lanka.html (15 January 2005).

16 See http://desimediabitch.blogspot.com/2004/12/tsunami-reports-in-us-blogger-report.html (15 January 2005).
17 See http://desimediabitch.blogspot.com/2005/01/shameful.html (15 January 2005).
18 SEA-EAT had 14 unique posters (writing 49 posts) from 26 December 2004 to 1 January 2005 and a volume of 510 comments during the same period.

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Dhiraj Murthy is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Bowdoin College, USA. His research interests include social media, virtual organizations, online communities, and digital ethnography. He has recently published his work in *Sociology, Ethnic and Racial Studies*, the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Media, Culture, and Society*. He has a book under contract with Polity Press titled *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age*. *Address*: Sociology and Anthropology, Bowdoin College, 7000 College Station, Brunswick, ME 04011, USA. [email: dmurthy@bowdoin.edu]