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HAITI

The Face of Disaster

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HAITI: THE FACE OF DISASTER

A DESPERATE BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL
IN THE RUINS OF A SHATTERED CITY

Soon after almost every disaster the crimes begin: ruthless, selfish, indifferent to human suffering, and generating far more suffering. The perpetrators go unpunished and live to commit further crimes against humanity. They care less for human life than for property.

They act without regard for consequences.

I'm talking, of course, about those members of the mass media whose misrepresentation of what goes on in disaster often abets and justifies a second wave of disaster. I'm talking about the treatment of sufferers as criminals, both on the ground and in the news, and the endorsement of a shift of resources from rescue to property patrol. They still have blood on their hands from Hurricane Katrina, and they are staining themselves anew in Haiti.

Within days of the Haitian earthquake, for example, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a series of photographs with captions that kept deploying the word "looting." One was of a man lying face down on the ground with this caption: "A Haitian police officer ties up a suspected looter who was carrying a bag of evaporated milk." The man's sweaty face looks up at

the camera, beseeching, anguished.

Another photo was labeled: "Looting continued in Haiti on the third day after the earthquake, although there were more police in downtown Port-au-Prince." It showed a somber crowd wandering amid shattered piles of concrete in a landscape where, visibly, there could be little worth taking anyway.

A third image was captioned: "A looter makes off with rolls of fabric from an earthquake-wrecked store." Yet another: "The body of a police officer lies in a Port-au-Prince street. He was accidentally shot by fellow police who mistook him for a looter."

People were then still trapped alive in the rubble. A translator for Australian TV dug out a toddler who'd survived 68 hours without food or water, orphaned but claimed by an uncle who had lost his pregnant wife. Others were hideously wounded and awaiting medical attention that wasn't arriving. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, needed, and still need, water, food, shelter, and first aid. The media in disaster bifurcates. Some step out of their usual "objective" roles to respond with kindness and practical aid. Others bring out the arsenal of clichés and pernicious myths and begin to assault the survivors all over again.

Essay:
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Photos:
Jess Hurd



A Nepalese UN soldier stands guard as earthquake survivors await distribution of emergency supplies.

AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

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Looting or salvage? Haitians search burning buildings for food and goods.

The “looter” in the first photo might well have been taking that milk to starving children and babies, but for the news media that wasn’t the most urgent problem. The “looter” stooped under the weight of two big bolts of fabric might well have been bringing it to now homeless people trying to shelter from a fierce tropical sun under improvised tents.

The pictures do convey desperation, but they don’t convey crime. Except perhaps for that shooting of a fellow police officer – his colleagues were so focused on property that they were reckless when it came to human life, and a man died for no good reason in a landscape already saturated with death.

In recent days, there have been scattered accounts of confrontations involving weapons, and these may be a different matter. But the man with the powdered milk? Is he really a criminal? There may be more to know, but with what I’ve seen I’m not convinced.

What Would You Do?

Imagine, reader, that your city is shattered by a di-

saster. Your home no longer exists, and you spent what cash was in your pockets days ago. Your credit cards are meaningless because there is no longer any power to run credit-card charges. Actually, there are no longer any storekeepers, any banks, any commerce, or much of anything to buy. The economy has ceased to exist.

By day three, you’re pretty hungry and the water you grabbed on your way out of your house is gone. The thirst is far worse than the hunger. You can go for days without food, but not water. And in the improvised encampment you settle in, there is an old man who seems on the edge of death. He no longer responds when you try to reassure him that this ordeal will surely end. Toddlers are now crying constantly, and their mothers infinitely stressed and distressed.

So you go out to see if any relief organization has finally arrived to distribute anything, only to realize that there are a million others like you stranded with nothing, and there isn’t likely to be anywhere near enough aid anytime soon. The guy with the cor-



Young men scour destroyed buildings for anything that will help them survive the earthquake's aftermath.

ner store has already given away all his goods to the neighbors. That supply's long gone by now. No wonder, when you see the chain pharmacy with the shattered windows or the supermarket, you don't think twice before grabbing a box of PowerBars and a few gallons of water that might keep you alive and help you save a few lives as well.

The old man might not die, the babies might stop squalling, and the mothers might lose that look on their faces. Other people are wandering in and helping themselves, too. Maybe they're people like you, and that gallon of milk the fellow near you has taken is going to spoil soon anyway. You haven't shoplifted since you were 14, and you have plenty of money to your name. But it doesn't mean anything now.

If you grab that stuff are you a criminal? Should you end up lying in the dirt on your stomach with a cop tying your hands behind your back? Should you end up labeled a looter in the international media? Should you be shot down in the street, since the over-reaction in disaster, almost any disaster, often includes

the imposition of the death penalty without benefit of trial for suspected minor property crimes?

Or are you a rescuer? Is the survival of disaster victims more important than the preservation of everyday property relations? Is that chain pharmacy more vulnerable, more a victim, more in need of help from the National Guard than you are, or those crying kids, or the thousands still trapped in buildings and soon to die?

It's pretty obvious what my answers to these questions are, but it isn't obvious to the mass media. And in disaster after disaster, at least since the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, those in power, those with guns and the force of law behind them, are too often more concerned for property than human life. In an emergency, people can, and do, die from those priorities. Or they get gunned down for minor thefts or imagined thefts.

The media not only endorses such outcomes, but regularly, repeatedly, helps prepare the way for, and then eggs on, such a reaction.

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Everything has been destroyed, even the funeral homes.

If Words Could Kill

We need to banish the word “looting” from our language. It incites madness and obscures realities.

“Loot,” the noun and the verb, is a word of Hindi origin meaning the spoils of war or other goods seized roughly. As historian Peter Linebaugh points out, “At one time loot was the soldier’s pay.” It entered the English language as a good deal of loot from India entered the English economy, both in soldiers’ pockets and as imperial seizures.

After years of interviewing survivors of disasters, and reading first-hand accounts and sociological studies from such disasters as the London Blitz and the Mexico City earthquake of 1985, I don’t believe in looting. Two things go on in disasters. The great majority of what happens you could call emergency requisitioning. Someone who could be you, someone in the kind of desperate circumstances I outlined above, takes necessary supplies to sustain human life in the absence of any alternative. Not only would I not call that looting, I wouldn’t even call that theft.

Necessity is a defense for breaking the law in the United States and other countries, though it’s usually applied more to, say, confiscating the car keys of a drunk driver than feeding hungry children. Taking things you don’t need is theft under any circumstances. It is, says the disaster sociologist Enrico Quarantelli, who has been studying the subject for more than half a century, vanishingly rare in most disasters.

Personal gain is the last thing most people are thinking about in the aftermath of a disaster. In that phase, the survivors are almost invariably more altruistic and less attached to their own property, less concerned with the long-term questions of acquisition, status, wealth, and security, than just about anyone not in such situations imagines possible. (The best accounts from Haiti of how people with next to nothing have patiently tried to share the little they have and support those in even worse shape than them only emphasize this disaster reality.) Crime often drops in the wake of a disaster.

The media are another matter. They tend to ar-



Dead bodies piled in the streets awaiting their final journey to a mass grave.

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What next? A desperate survivor sits in his destroyed home.

rive obsessed with property (and the headlines that assaults on property can make). Media outlets often call everything looting and thereby incite hostility toward the sufferers as well as a hysterical overreaction on the part of the armed authorities. Or sometimes the journalists on the ground do a good job and the editors back in their safe offices cook up the crazy photo captions and the wrongheaded interpretations and emphases.

They also deploy the word ‘panic’ wrongly. Panic among ordinary people in crisis is profoundly uncommon. The media will call a crowd of people running from certain death a panicking mob, even though running is the only sensible thing to do. In Haiti, they continue to report that food is being withheld from distribution for fear of “stampedes.” Do they think Haitians are cattle?

The belief that people in disaster (particularly poor and nonwhite people) are cattle or animals or just crazy and untrustworthy regularly justifies spending far too much energy and far too many resources on control – the American military calls it “security”

– rather than relief. A British-accented voiceover on CNN calls people sprinting to where supplies are being dumped from a helicopter a “stampede” and adds that this delivery “risks sparking chaos.” The chaos already exists, and you can’t blame it on these people desperate for food and water. Or you can, and in doing so help convince your audience that they’re unworthy and untrustworthy.

Back to looting: of course you can consider Haiti’s dire poverty and failed institutions a long-term disaster that changes the rules of the game. There might be people who are not only interested in taking the things they need to survive in the next few days, but things they’ve never been entitled to own or things they may need next month. Technically that’s theft, but I’m not particularly surprised or distressed by it; the distressing thing is that even before the terrible quake they led lives of deprivation and desperation.

In ordinary times, minor theft is often considered a misdemeanor. No one is harmed. Unchecked, minor thefts could perhaps lead to an environment in which there were more thefts and so forth, and a good argu-



Sign language: Prisoners in an overcrowded cell at Jimani prison on the Haiti/Dominican Republic border.

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Jordy Cox, an American surgeon and volunteer for Medicine Sans Frontiere, performs an outdoor operation.

ment can be made that, in such a case, the tide needs to be stemmed. But it's not particularly significant in a landscape of terrible suffering and mass death.

A number of radio hosts and other media personnel are still upset that people apparently took TVs after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in August 2005. Since I started thinking about, and talking to people about, disaster aftermaths I've heard a lot about those damned TVs. Now, which matters more to you, televisions or human life? People were dying on rooftops and in overheated attics and freeway overpasses, they were stranded in all kinds of hideous circumstances on the Gulf Coast in 2005 when the mainstream media began to obsess about looting, and the mayor of New Orleans and the governor of Louisiana made the decision to focus on protecting property, not human life.

A gang of white men on the other side of the river from New Orleans got so worked up about property crimes that they decided to take the law into their own hands and began shooting. They seem to have considered all black men criminals and thieves

and shot a number of them. Some apparently died; there were bodies bloating in the September sun far from the region of the floods; one good man trying to evacuate the ruined city barely survived; and the media looked away. It took me months of nagging to even get the story covered.

This vigilante gang claimed to be protecting property, though its members never demonstrated that their property was threatened. They boasted of killing black men. And they shared values with the mainstream media and the Louisiana powers that be.

Somehow, when the Bush administration subcontracted emergency services – like providing evacuation buses in Hurricane Katrina – to cronies who profited even while providing incompetent, overpriced, and much delayed service at the moment of greatest urgency, we didn't label that looting.

Or when a lot of wealthy Wall Street brokers decide to tinker with a basic human need like housing.... Well, you catch my drift.

Woody Guthrie once sang that "some will rob you with a six-gun, and some with a fountain pen." The



Bewildered child sits beneath a tarpaulin after being treated at an outdoor hospital at Port-au-Prince.

guys with the six guns (or machetes or sharpened sticks) make for better photographs, and the guys with the fountain pens not only don't end up in jail, they end up in McMansions with four-car garages and, sometimes, in elected – or appointed – office.

Learning to See in Crises

Last Christmas a priest, Father Tim Jones of York, started a ruckus in Britain when he said in a sermon that shoplifting by the desperate from chain stores might be acceptable behavior. Naturally, there was an uproar. Jones told the Associated Press: “The point I'm making is that when we shut down every socially acceptable avenue for people in need, then the only avenue left is the socially unacceptable one.”

The response focused almost entirely on why shoplifting is wrong, but the claim was also repeatedly made that it doesn't help. In fact, food helps the hungry, a fact so bald it's bizarre to even have to state it. The means by which it arrives is a separate matter.

The focus remained on shoplifting, rather than on

why there might be people so desperate in England's green and pleasant land that shoplifting might be their only option, and whether unnecessary human suffering is itself a crime of sorts.

Right now, the point is that people in Haiti need food, and for all the publicity, the international delivery system has, so far, been a visible dud. Under such circumstances, breaking into a U.N. food warehouse – food assumedly meant for the poor of Haiti in a catastrophic moment – might not be “violence,” or “looting,” or “law-breaking.” It might be logic. It might be the most effective way of meeting a desperate need.

Why were so many people in Haiti hungry before the earthquake? Why do we have a planet that produces enough food for all and a distribution system that ensures more than a billion of us don't have a decent share of that bounty? Those are not questions whose answers should be long delayed.

Even more urgently, we need compassion for the sufferers in Haiti and media that tell the truth about them. I'd like to propose alternative captions for

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Once this was a hotel, now it's a tomb.

those *Los Angeles Times* photographs as models for all future disasters:

Let's start with the picture of the policeman hog-tying the figure whose face is so anguished: "Ignoring thousands still trapped in rubble, a policeman accosts a sufferer who took evaporated milk. No adequate food distribution exists for Haiti's starving millions."

And the guy with the bolt of fabric? "As with every disaster, ordinary people show extraordinary powers of improvisation, and fabrics such as these are being used to make sun shelters around Haiti."

For the murdered policeman: "Institutional over-zealousness about protecting property leads to a gratuitous murder, as often happens in crises. Meanwhile countless people remain trapped beneath crushed buildings."

And the crowd in the rubble labeled looters? How about: "Resourceful survivors salvage the means of sustaining life from the ruins of their world."

That one might not be totally accurate, but it's likely to be more accurate than the existing label.

And what is absolutely accurate, in Haiti right now, and on Earth always, is that human life matters more than property, that the survivors of a catastrophe deserve our compassion and our understanding of their plight, and that we live and die by words and ideas, and it matters desperately that we get them right.

REBECCA SOLNIT is the author of the new book *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*, which explores questions of solidarity, altruism, emergent communities and media distortion and elite panic at far greater length. The author of eleven other books, she lives in San Francisco with her earthquake kit. Her essay originally appeared at tomdispatch.com

JESS HURD is a photographer with the British photo library Reportdigital.co.uk. Her award-winning photographs are widely published in newspapers, magazines and books, and her work has been shown in a number of exhibitions in the UK and abroad.



A crucifix stands sentinel amid the suffering.

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