

The Philippines Aid Issue

Typhoon Haiyan left a wake of human misery and destitution but it also impacted politics and intersected with some of the great issues of our time. It and illustrates many of the communication factors shaping our perceptions, and the choices facing campaigners.

A Disaster Looking for Its Scandal

Most of us are aware of the Typhoon through the news media, and whether that's online or 'broadcast' makes little difference because the new generation of channels (see 'C' in CAMPCAT in [How to Win Campaigns](#)) have made little difference to how 'news' gets constructed.

Today (19 November), 11 days after the Typhoon struck on 8 November, news reports focus not just on the impact and aid efforts but on the blame game. Like Hurricane Katrina before it (see [Campaign Strategy Newsletter 16](#)) in 2005, and the Gulf Oil Spill (see [Campaign Strategy Newsletter 61](#)) in 2010, news coverage of Haiyan has faithfully followed the dynamics of the '[Scandal Equation](#)'.

First there is awfulness. Just how bad is it? Bodies are counted, the injured are tallied up, and comparisons are made with previous events. At this stage it is simply a tragedy. Next comes the questions 'what can be done', and 'what is being done'? The media start to assemble the components of a scandal. If everything that could be done, is done, then there is no scandal and the 'story' will die. The news crews will pack up, attention will move elsewhere.

It is, by the way, an almost infallible rule that any news source, has only got 'space' for one big threat at a time, a reflex that it also imposes on 'issues', so the threat of Armageddon can only be represented by 'the biggest issue' or the biggest bogeyman of the moment. This largely reflects how individuals treat threats: we most avoid whatever the most compelling threat is, and then rationalize our behaviours when we 'ignore' the rest. It's a perceptual process of risk mitigation, not a mathematical assimilation of hazard and risk, and is why if a terrorist bomb goes off in a city street, locals avoid the street in the following days, nationals avoid the city, and foreigners avoid the entire country.

The news media, like individuals, have only limited 'mental space' for attention to issues, threats and disasters. But if not everything that could be done, is being done, then we have an avoidable problem, and someone can be blamed, so the story is personalized, which makes it easier to tell and identify with. In the case of the Philippines, foreign governments with *capacity* to deliver aid, began to move quickly to assign assets as soon as the scale of the disaster became apparent. Not only for humanitarian reasons but also to stay ahead of the curve in terms of 'what could be done'. [China](#), not adroit in the empathy politics of soft-power projection, gave miserly aid and got criticized for it, whereas the US deployed an impressive Hollywood epic raft of navy vessels and minor players such as the UK, scrambled to join in.

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Now the Philippines President and Regional politicians have exchanged blame over the delivery of aid and organization of relief. Questions such as “could, should ‘we’ (then you and you and you) have been better prepared?”, begin to raise their heads. Yet to develop into a real scandal, the story needs another element: immoral profit. Did someone or some institution fail in an immoral or unethical way? If so a long-lasting and more intense scandal will develop.

Connecting to the Bigger Picture: Yeb Sano

As a rule, a disaster is no place for advocates or politicians to try and make the connection to a ‘bigger picture issue’. The dilemma of course is that the window of attention will soon close, and we can’t know when, so their opportunity may be lost but for the most part it is a mistake to start pitching rational analysis of underlying factors at a time when reactions are visceral, human lives are at stake and raw personal tragedies abound.

Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines was an exception because it intersected with another latent scandal, which already had media attention, a cast of actors, a context, an audience, a channel and, above all, it got an empathetic messenger. The Typhoon struck just as the UN climate talks in Warsaw were about to begin. Chief Philippines delegate Yeb Sano stood up and made a tearful, moving speech, explicitly linking the Typhoon, which had devastated his own community and family, to climate change (see blog [Yeb Sano Should Become Famous](#) from 11 November). Everyone at the talks knew that fundamentally he was right and that governments could do far more to stop the problem but normally, a scandal was avoidable by being able to blame each other for not agreeing on quite how, when and why to act. The dysfunctional dynamic of the negotiations usually enabled all governments to share in deferring serious action by spreading the blame, and so avoiding any scandal.

Sano’s intervention (he had made similar ones before but without the context of the Typhoon disaster) resonated because he personified the problem, making it easy to tell, and he connected two salient stories: climate and Philippines disaster. Famously, the main reason given in a survey of US news editors for why important stories don’t get told, is that they are “too difficult”. This was personalised (Sano also commenced a fast in protest at lack of progress), was encapsulated (his moment of tears), had pictures (in Warsaw and the Pacific), and was dramatic (unknown outcomes).

So Sano’s story appeared in media worldwide. In a roundabout way it probably did more to shore up progress on the climate issue than all the science and all the prior lobbying efforts of campaigners put together. It would have had little impact on the climate-hostile Polish government, which in an act of bravado had scheduled a Warsaw conference on the virtues of coal up against the climate talks but it must have deterred back-sliding by others. For example on tv, UK politicians trotted out their usual line about it being impossible to attribute any single event to climate change but looked very uncomfortable doing so, as the most empathetic figure in the story, had already done the opposite.

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Consequently UK Prime Minister David Cameron whose party had been trying to [bury](#) its past green claims, then [carefully sided](#) with climate action rather than denial: “the evidence seems to me to be growing”. To say otherwise could have pitted him against Sano and the sympathy for the Philippines. It also enabled the 14 DEC charities (the [UK's Disasters Emergency Committee](#)) to [call](#) for urgent action at the climate talks in Poland, and be reported. In short, Sano had changed the ‘political weather’.

What Next ?

The current climate talks will close on 22 November, and cameras, delegates and NGOs will go home. At some point, media resources will be gradually reassigned from the Philippines, with some risk that ‘happy ending’ wrap up packages will be created.

Has much changed ? Sano’s intervention might indeed mark the moment where a threshold was crossed. Right now the media are sensitized to extreme weather events: a [cyclone in Sardinia](#) for example. In the US, long the disproportionate focus of polling studies purporting (often wrongly) to show climate scepticism was significant problem for action, a recent [survey](#) failed to find a single State where sceptics were a majority, and even most Republicans favour action.

Probably the most effective campaign follow-ups to Haiyan would stay within the frame of relief aid. The US task force is impressive and only the United States military has the power to project aid logistics on the scale required in devastated areas. Yet what if this is required every year, or every six months, or every three months ? This question converts the almost ‘academic’ ‘science of climate change’ into an acute political issue of action responsibility, and economics.

The US Aircraft carrier *George Washington*, prominent in the relief effort, is undoubtedly awe inspiring. As CNN reported:

“As an expression of hard power, they don't come bigger or more fearsome than the USS George Washington.

The U.S. Navy's nuclear-powered aircraft carrier can base as many as [75 warplanes, has a combat load of 97,000 tons and is manned by 6,250 battle-ready crew](#)”

Capable though it is, an aircraft carrier equipped to fight World War Three is stacked with stuff that’s not much use in delivering aid. The 75 warplanes for example. A ship custom-designed to best deliver aid logistics would be very different.

The question that climate-literate aid charities might pursue, is how governments plan to deliver such aid to climate disasters in future. The *USS George Washington* might provide a suitable conference venue – it is surely well equipped for communications, has unlimited range, and has even hosted a [Rihanna press conference](#). They should of course avoid the idea that the UN ought to do it, because governments are never going to assign enough resources to the UN to do so.

Lastly - please sign my Philippines petition:

Christies and Sotheby's: donate 10% of commission to Philippine aid for Christmas

Please sign here: <https://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/christies-and-sothebys-donate-10-of-commission-to-philippine-aid-for-christmas#share>

Petition by [Chris Rose](#) Wells Next the Sea, United Kingdom

The people of the Philippines desperately need help and ordinary people are donating to charities. For example the UK public donated £13m to the DEC charities appeal in its first 24 hours after Typhoon Haiyan hit on 8 Nov. In the next days, billionaire art-buyers paid over \$140m for a Bacon painting at Sotheby's in London and over \$105m for a Warhol at Christies in New York. Then a single diamond was sold for \$83m in Geneva. These super rich could contribute to the aid effort but they are mostly anonymous, so we can't ask them. Sotheby's and Christies could help make it happen because they charge commission ('buyers premium' - at about 25% for the first \$100,000 of the sale price then 20% up to \$2m and then 12% from \$2m upwards). Sotheby's and Christies got a windfall from the super-rich and are doing well: let's hope they will share this with the people of the Philippines who got hit by a super-Typhoon. Let's ask them to make them a Christmas Present to the Philippines people by donating 10% of their fees from the time the typhoon hit (Nov 8) up to 24th December, to aid charities.

Thank you

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Books By Chris Rose: *How to Win Campaigns: Communications For Change* (edn 2) Earthscan/Taylor and Francis 2010,

What Makes People Tick: The Three Hidden Worlds of Settlers, Prospectors, and Pioneers, Troubador (2011) at <http://www.campaignstrategy.org/threeworlds/> post and packaging free in the UK (contact me for costs outside the UK), or UK Amazon or in Kindle, itunes or from the publisher