



## REPORT



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# RISKING RESOURCES RECKONING RISK

## THE 2014 UP TWSC PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES ON NATURAL DISASTERS

SEPTEMBER 3

**COMMUNICATING RISKS, RISKING MISCOMMUNICATION**  
Mass media and the science of natural disasters

SEPTEMBER 25

**A TRADITION OF RESILIENCE, THE RESILIENCY OF TRADITION**  
Local knowledges and sense-making of natural disasters

NOVEMBER 7

**IMPROVISING NORMALCY, THE NORMALCY OF IMPROVISATIONS**  
Policy and practice in post-disaster governance

NOVEMBER 25

**CHAOTIC NETWORKS, NETWORKED CHAOS**  
Crowdsourcing in the new media on natural disasters

JANUARY 2015

**IMPERILED HERITAGE, A HERITAGE OF PERIL**  
History and legacy of natural disasters



The 2014 University of the Philippines (UP) Third World Studies Center public lecture series on natural disasters, “Risking Resources, Reckoning Risk,” featured five lectures from five disciplinary vantage points.

The first lecture, “Communicating Risks, Risking Miscommunication: Mass Media and the Science of Natural Disasters,” focused on how super typhoon Yolanda’s devastating force could have been communicated more effectively and accurately to the people. In Yolanda’s aftermath, government agencies had great difficulties defending their accurate forecasts over the lack of a clear explanation the public can understand. The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical, and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), the country’s weather agency, was quoted saying “more could have been done in explaining to the public the magnitude and gravity of a storm surge.” Malacañang admitted that “perhaps [the government] could’ve communicated the danger better . . . [we could’ve said] tsunami-like effect.” Be they warnings of a “storm surge” or a “tsunami,” the institutions the public turns to during natural disasters seem to have failed to reach out to an already wary and confused public. The surge in scale and occurrence of unprecedented risk from natural disasters points to the increasing importance of science communication, an emergent domain in the study and practice of development communication in the country. In describing the phenomena of natural disasters, science communication or the process of making science concepts popular and more comprehensible to various people through different media is gradually gaining currency. The Center for Community Journalism and Development in the Philippines, however, reveals a still inchoate field of science communication in the country, particularly among the mass media. A quick Google search on the key words “typhoon Yolanda” would generate reports that mostly focus on casualties, destruction of properties, and foreign aid or donations. There are minimal reports on the science of disaster.

The second lecture, “A Tradition of Resilience, the Resiliency of Tradition: Local Knowledges and Sense-Making of Natural Disasters,” started from the premise that Filipinos are not unfamiliar with natural disasters. Typhoons, landslides, floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions have all been part of a history—mostly unwritten—that has informed traditional knowledge on disasters. However, lamentably sparse are local scholarly scrutiny on these and similar concepts and practices that Filipinos use to explain the suddenness and the devastation

that natural disasters leave in their wake. This may be due in part to the perceived banality of traditional knowledge in contemporary societies. Often, indigenous or traditional knowledge is dismissed as superstitions. Disaster anthropologists, however, value traditional knowledge as warning signs that people make use of to temper the potentially devastating effects of disasters. For over three decades, anthropology and disaster research have consistently underscored the community as disaster research's basic unit of analysis. As argued in 1978 by William Torry, "theories about disasters are inherently theories about communities, that is community continuity and change." As anthropologists account for how disruption, brought about by disasters, are dealt with by communities, "outsiders" such as the government and international aid agencies also affect a traditional community's social fabric. Some have done more harm than good—upsetting, even further marginalizing, indigenous resilience systems that have been developed over generations.

The third lecture, "Improvising Normalcy, the Normalcy of Improvisations: Policy and Practice in Post-Disaster Governance" examined Republic Act 10121 or the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act. In 2010, Republic Act 10121 superseded Presidential Decree 1566 as the controlling law on disaster preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery in the Philippines. Among the new law's provisions are definitions of disaster, risk, and related terms. Notably, most of these definitions were taken wholesale from the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. However, it seems that the legislators behind Republic Act 10121 hardly went beyond designing a law that features the apropos buzzwords and is in line with other post-1987 legislation. The Local Government Code of 1991 set 5 percent of estimated revenues from regular sources to serve as a local government unit's calamity fund. RA 10121 hardly alters this by stating that the said percentage is a local government unit's minimum "disaster risk reduction and management fund" allocation. If the law is truly in line with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's definitions of disaster-related concepts—which highlight community specificity and grounded assessments—why does it still mandate arbitrary allocations for disaster risk reduction and management funds? Why does it fail to order local government units to empirically determine the basis for disaster preparedness expenses? In view of increasing unprecedented risks from natural disasters, and possibly the requisite flexibility in disaster policy and governance, it is

imperative to give thought to what local government units will do moving forward.

The fourth lecture, “Chaotic Networks, Networked Chaos: Crowdsourcing in the New Media on Natural Disasters” qualified new media’s designation as the “ultimate game changer” in dealing with natural disasters. Declared as having made possible “a real first for humanitarian response in the 21st century,” the new media, spanning social networking sites, Web 2.0 platforms, and mobile applications, have been the “go-to tools” in mapping out real-time information during natural disasters. They provide a bird’s eye view on the unravelling of the disaster, directing help to where it is needed in unprecedented fashion. There seems to be no dispute to what the country can gain from what the new media makes possible in terms of disaster prevention and relief. Yet the new media also has its share of flak—“slacktivism,” where political engagement has been limited to a click of a button arguably reducing its merit; “trolling,” where racist comments have proliferated in the wake of natural disasters in an attempt to pull down efforts to rise above the disaster; as well as “information overload,” where netizens become saturated and rewired only to absorb not more than 140 characters of information. The backlash is they end up relying on other people to act and leave it at that. The end result is a virtual community where netizens find themselves “alone, together” in its collective action and shared responsibility.

The fifth lecture, “Imperiled Heritage, a Heritage of Peril: History and Legacy of Natural Disasters” discussed how catastrophic calamities devastate not only the tangible present but also the reminders of the fading past. When the heritage churches of Bohol, among the oldest in Asia, crumbled in the 2013 earthquake, many lamented that “national cultural treasures” were reduced to rubble. Earthquakes tamper with topography and disrupt the rhythm of local lives as these break belfries and bury to the ground a culture’s material achievements. Floods and storm surges drown bodies and reshape the margins of habitable earth as these submerge histories that anchor identities and inundate and break the tenuous link between generations and its heritage. Spaces that both honor society’s loss and pain are the very same spaces that herald society’s unyielding quest for permanence and remembrance. Heritage must not only be conserved but reclaimed. But between the hunger pangs of the survivors and the elite’s penchant to preserve their own legacy, is there a formulary for prioritization to

address in humane and timely manner the need of the body and the need of the soul? Is there a point and value in giving up and just letting nature take its course on the material legacies of the past?

As a whole, the public lecture series asked the following: What is the role of the mass media in the intrinsic relationship of science communication and natural disasters? How do local knowledge practices inform the public's practices and beliefs during natural disasters? With the Philippines recently tagged as "the world's most sociable online race," how does this impact on the country's precarious status as "the world's most disaster-hit country"? How does the Philippine government grapple with the requisite flexibilities and improvisations in a time of unprecedented risks? Finally, how does heritage function not solely as a physical penchant for the past but as a reminder of the staggering toll that natural disasters inflict on our history and identity? In a time when risk looms as the currency and its mediations the product put forward on the pretext of trust and accountability, there is a need to reflect on how these create, maintain, and transform knowledge practices, in anticipation of more frequent and stronger disaster threats. It is hoped that in broadening the discussion on how symbolic and material resources are paired up with unprecedented risks, there arises both the opportunity and the means for shared accountability in a country with limited resources and increasing vulnerability, where the government, as principal duty bearer, has chosen to merely scrimp and beg just to be able to secure its constituents.

The public lecture series was organized by the Third World Studies Center under its training and advocacy program. It was co-sponsored by the UP Office of the Vice President for Public Affairs, UP Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, UP Diliman Office of the Chancellor, and the UP Diliman College of Social Sciences and Philosophy.

## The public lecture series at a glance

Title	Lecturer	Reactors	Venue
Communicating Risks, Risking	Garry Jay Montemayor Assistant Professor, Department of Science	Nathaniel "Mang Tani" Cruz GMA Network Resident Meteorologist	Pulungang Claro M. Recto, Bulwagang Rizal (Faculty Center), UPD, Quezon City
Miscommunication: Mass Media and the Science of Natural Disasters	Communication, College of Development Communication, University of the Philippines (UP) Los Baños	Shaira Panela Freelance Science Journalist	
A Tradition of Resilience, the Resiliency of Tradition: Local Knowledges and Sense-Making of Natural Disasters	Soledad Dalisay Professor, Department of Anthropology, CSSP, UPD	Maria Luisa Bolinao Professor, Department of History, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy (CSSP), UP Diliman (UPD)	Room 400, Palma Hall, CSSP, UPD, Quezon City
Improvising Normalcy, the Normalcy of Improvisations: Policy and Practice in Post-Disaster Governance	Perlita Frago-Marasigan Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, CSSP, UPD	Jake Rom Cadag Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, CSSP, UPD	
		Emmanuel Luna Professor, College of Social Work and Community Development, UPD	
		Kristoffer Berse Assistant Professor, National College of Public Administration and Governance, UPD	National College of Public Administration and Governance, UPD, Quezon City
		Fouad Bendimerad Chairman and Executive Director, Earthquakes and Megacities Initiative	
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The public lecture (*continued*)

	Val Barcinal Department Head, Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office, Marikina City		College of Mass Communication Auditorium, UPD, Quezon City
Chaotic Networks, Networked Chaos: Crowdsourcing in the New Media on Natural Disasters	Maria Ressa Chief Executive Officer <i>Rappler</i>	Susan Pancho-Festin Associate Professor, Department of Computer Science, College of Science, UPD	
	Daniilo Arao Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism, College of Mass Communication, UPD		
Imperiled Heritage, A Heritage of Peril: History and Legacy of Natural Disasters	Rose Beatrix Cruz-Angeles Legal Consultant National Commission for Culture and the Arts	Carlo A. Arcilla Professor, National Institute of Geological Sciences, College of Science, UPD	Pulungang Claro M. Recto, Bulwagang Rizal (Faculty Center), UPD, Quezon City
	Patrick D. Flores Professor, Department of Art Studies, College of Arts and Letters, UPD		

