“I don’t want trouble”
Freedom of expression and use of backchannels in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan

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Abstract
Purpose – Studies which look at disaster affected people’s use of communications technologies often fail to take into account people’s communication rights in their analyses, particularly their right to freedom of expression. The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to this issue by exploring the link between freedom of expression, community participation and disaster risk reduction in the use of digital feedback channels offered by aid and government agencies in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan.

Design/methodology/approach – Ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken in the Philippines between 2014 and 2015 in Tacloban City and Sabay Island, both in the Visayas, which have been affected by Typhoon Haiyan. A total of 101 in-depth interviews were conducted with affected people, local and national officials, community leaders, civil society groups, telecommunications companies and humanitarian agencies.

Findings – The interviews reveal that majority of disaster-affected Filipinos chose not to engage with formal feedback platforms offered by government and aid agencies out of fear of giving critical feedback to those in authority. They were concerned about the possibility of losing their entitlement to aid, of being reprimanded by government officers, and of the threat to their lives and of their loved ones if they expressed criticism to the government’s recovery efforts. Nonetheless, 15 per cent used backchannels while 10 per cent availed of the formal means to express their views about the recovery.

Research limitations/implications – The paper sought to draw links between people’s lack of engagement with the formal feedback mechanisms offered by government and aid agencies in the wake of Haiyan and the restrictive sociopolitical environment in the Philippines. Further research could be undertaken to examine how freedom of expression plays a role in disaster prevention and mitigation. Research into this area could potentially provide concrete steps to help prevent the occurrence of disasters and mitigate their impacts.

Originality/value – Freedom of expression and its place in disaster risk reduction is rarely explored in disaster studies. The paper addresses this oversight by examining the lack of engagement by communities affected by Haiyan with digital feedback channels provided by aid agencies and government. The findings suggest that despite the provisions for community participation in DRR under the Philippine Disaster Law, people are prevented to express criticism and dissent which puts into question the spirit and purpose of the law.

Keywords Disasters, Participatory communication, Backchannels, Freedom of expression, ICT for disasters

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Within the last 20 years, developments in communication technology have enabled people to participate more actively in disaster response, whether as distant observers or as survivors and victims. Focusing on disaster-affected people, technology has afforded them speed, scale, reach and visibility (Cottle, 2014) enabling them to share information among themselves, their peers, first responders, a global audience, and the media. The participatory potential of communication technology has led to the assertion that technology has enabled affected communities to be “engaged participants and not merely as witnesses or recipients of aid” (World Disasters Report (WDR), 2013, p. 9). Such assertion is particularly salient when looking at the Philippines, one of the world’s most disaster-prone countries (Kreft et al., 2014) and a leader in social media use (GSMA Intelligence, 2014, p. 1). In recent years, Filipinos’ advanced mobile and social media use has taken centre stage in the way they have used these platforms to respond to disasters. During Typhoon Ketsana (local name: Ondoy) in 2009, people took to Twitter and Facebook to post information about flooded relatives...
and friends and raise funds for affected communities (Morales, 2010). During Typhoon Bopha (local name: Pablo), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) was able to create for the first time a crisis map entirely based on Twitter photos and videos sent by digital volunteers (Meier, 2012). During Haiyan, Filipinos once again took to social media to ask or share information about family and friends, offer prayers and support and give updates on disaster response (Andrei et al., 2016; David et al., 2016).

Overall, disaster-affected Filipinos' active mobile and social media engagement during disasters are focused on the response phase when vital information is needed for coordinating rescue and relief distribution, crisis mapping and monitoring. Such engagement, however, was very low during the Haiyan recovery phase, “a social process that […] encompasses decision-making concerning restoration and reconstruction activities” (Nigg, 1995, p. 5). This paper builds on earlier work undertaken by the author as part of a team that examined the links between digital technologies to voice among disaster-affected people (Madianou et al., 2015) and accountability within the humanitarian sector (Madianou et al., 2016), both in the context of Haiyan recovery. While their previous published works have analysed the broad sociocultural factors that facilitated or hindered voice among those affected by Haiyan (Madianou et al., 2015) and the narrow interpretation of humanitarian accountability as feedback (Madianou et al., 2016), this paper looks at the sociopolitical and historical barriers to voice in disaster recovery and disaster risk reduction more generally. More specifically, it explores people's fears about expressing their views in the wake of the typhoon. There is an implicit assumption that communities affected by disasters have and are able to exercise the right to freely express themselves when looking at their use of technology in the aftermath of disasters. This paper argues that existing sociopolitical conditions which restrict freedom of expression is one of the factors which prevent affected communities from participating more fully during disaster recovery, and in wider disaster risk reduction efforts.

Methodology

On November 8, 2013, Typhoon Haiyan (local name: Yolanda) made landfall in the Philippines. It affected some 16 million people and left at least 7,000 dead, with an estimated loss to the economy placed at USD10 billion (Kreft et al., 2014). This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tacloban City, Leyte and Sabay Island in the Visayas between April 2014 and January 2015 in the aftermath of Haiyan. Ethnography is a suitable approach for exploring the experiences of vulnerable populations such as disaster-affected people (Adams, 2013) in order to gain insights in what they find meaningful and important (Emerson et al., 2011), something often overlooked in disaster literature. Using snowball sampling, participant-observation and interviews were conducted with 101 participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. In all, 63 (62 per cent) informants were from low or very low income households, while 38 (38 per cent) come from the middle class. As to gender, 54 (53 per cent) were women, while 46 (46 per cent) were men. Part of the data also included 38 in-depth interviews with humanitarian managers and local aid staff, government executives, politicians, activists, NGO workers, representatives from telecommunications companies, as well as online ethnographic data.

Tacloban City and Sabay, both island communities, were selected as field sites for several reasons. Tacloban, as the regional administrative centre of Eastern Visayas, suffered the greatest losses in terms of casualties and material damage. Haiyan's 195 kph windspeed at landfall caused catastrophic storm surge waves reaching up to 13 feet which submerged most parts of the city and destroyed several neighbourhoods. Sabay, meanwhile, is a middle income coastal municipality in the Visayas where fishing, agriculture and tourism are the main industries. While few people died in Sabay compared with Tacloban as the former was not affected by storm surge, Sabay had nonetheless suffered substantial structural damage with many houses and buildings partially or completely destroyed.
Broadly, the study sought to examine how different communication platforms – digital as well as non-digital – enabled disaster affected populations to participate in decision-making processes after the typhoon. They were also asked if they had expressed their views about the recovery through platforms made available to them by humanitarian and government agencies, or through other channels. Informants were visited at their homes at least once and were asked questions about their experience of the typhoon and their access to, ownership and use of different media devises and platforms before and after Haiyan. For the online ethnography, some key informants were asked if they could share their mediated interactions such as SMS and instant messaging (IM) conversations, and if they could be added as friends on Facebook. The main ethical consideration for the study was to maintain the anonymity of the informants and the confidentiality of the interviews, heightened by the tensions at the village, municipal and national levels concerning aid distribution. Except for Tacloban City, all information regarding field sites and informants’ personal details have been anonymised.

Disasters and freedom of expression

There is very limited research looking at disaster affected people and their right to freedom of expression. While their right to information is recognised, information being seen as a form of aid (Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network (CDAC), 2014; Hartmann et al., 2014), freedom of expression is rarely, if ever, taken into account in humanitarian efforts at all. Although it is both “a right and a developmental objective and condition”, freedom of expression is generally taken for granted in disaster contexts because the focus is on urgent structural, material and psychosocial needs of affected communities (Article 19, 2005, p. 7). This is a serious oversight particularly in newer democracies where fundamental freedoms are often weakly protected and are constantly under threat. It was Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen (1989) who were the first to suggest the critical role of freedom of expression in the prevention of famines in Asia and Africa. The authors observed that criticism and dissent from political opposition, the public and the media served as an effective early warning system that encouraged the concerned governments in Africa and India to prevent the famines (Dreze and Sen, 1989, p. 189, 212-214). Indeed, disasters are inherently political as they accentuate and intensify inequalities in society (Cuny, 1983). Focusing on the Philippines, this paper seeks to broaden the discussion around this area by analysing how populations affected by Typhoon Haiyan preferred backchannels to express their views about the recovery rather than through formal government and humanitarian mechanisms. More importantly, it unpacks the reasons why most affected communities opted not to engage with formal feedback channels within the context of Philippine history and its contemporary sociopolitical environment.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations (UN), 1949) states that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Freedom of expression is both an individual and collective right to participate in the cultural and political life of society (Balkin, 2004, pp. 4-5). Understood in this way, freedom of expression is inherent in the concept of community-based disaster risk reduction which sees local people as active agents, rather than passive victims of disasters (Morrow, 2008; WDR, 2013). People’s right to participate, not only during the recovery but in DRR more broadly, is guaranteed in the guiding principles of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction which emphasises empowerment and inclusive participation among disaster affected people (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
Having said that, community participation needs to be understood within specific contexts and history as it is about power, control and voice (see Cornwall, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014).

Backchannels and participatory communication

The study explored, among other themes, if affected residents used any of the feedback platforms offered by government and aid agencies to share their views about the recovery. Interviews would reveal that the majority chose not to use these mechanisms and preferred to keep their views to themselves. For those who voiced their concerns, they resorted to backchannels rather than the formal platforms that were made available to them at that time. “Backchannel” as broadly used in public policy, politics and media refers to unofficial, or informal means of communication, such as the use of intermediaries, online community message boards or social media. This is as opposed to “frontchannel,” official or formal communication avenues (McCarthy and Boyd, 2005; Palen, 2008; Sutton et al., 2008), such as dedicated hotlines run by government agencies or NGOs. In disaster contexts, backchannel communication is often used in information gathering, monitoring and coordinating during disasters and emergencies (Palen, 2008; Sutton et al., 2008). Having said that, backchannel communication is a useful analytical concept in understanding how power shapes the communication environment and its consequences for community participation in disaster risk reduction. It captures both the sociopolitical and socio-technical dimension of participation. On the one hand, it is attentive to communication processes and platforms through which people affected by disaster engage with government, humanitarian actors, local leaders and community members. On the other hand, it historicizes and contextualises digital and non-digital communication processes and platforms that facilitate or hinder participatory, inclusive and open communication. It is often the marginalised and vulnerable who are negatively impacted by disasters (Bankoff, 2007, p. 328) and are the main beneficiaries of government and NGO recovery programmes. Their precarious position as victims and aid beneficiaries under these circumstances, however, restricts the exercise of their right to free expression and to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes during the recovery period. It is within this context that backchannel communication, as the succeeding sections will elaborate, highlights the importance of public criticism in disaster recovery.

Freedom of expression and disasters: Philippine context

The Philippines’ poor record in disaster management has been linked to colonial policies, patronage politics, corruption, incompetence, and weak governance (Bankoff, 2002; Bawagan, 2015; Opulencia-Calub et al., 2017). Cultural traits have also been cited as a factor, among them Filipinos’ sense of risk-taking and courage conveyed by the expression bahala na (come what may) which both serve to hinder them from minimising their risks and to give them confidence that things will be alright (Bautista, 2000 in Bankoff, 2002, p. 167). Their culture of gratefulness has also been identified as a value that has prevented a more critical engagement by the public in disaster recovery efforts (Ong et al., 2015).

One key factor that has been overlooked in these discussions is the Philippines’ problematic experience with freedom of expression. Although the country is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which protects free expression and guarantees this right under its 1987 Constitution (Section 4, Article III), free expression remains to be fully enjoyed by Filipinos. The country is currently described as “partly free” by Freedom House (2017) because of disappearances and killings of activists, journalists, and those suspected to be involved in the drug trade, as well as the weak and selective application of laws that favour elites. Threats to free expression run deep in the country’s history, beginning in the colonial period when Spain and America implemented strict censorship laws as part of their colonial policies. It could be argued that laws related to censorship, libel, sedition, brigandage, reconcentration, and a ban on the use of the Philippine flag
(Cano, 2011; Cullinane, 2009; McCoy, 2009) have stifled Filipinos’ voice over four centuries of colonial rule. Nonetheless, these restrictive policies were adopted by Filipino leaders themselves, notably Ferdinand Marcos who imposed Martial Law in 1972 (Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) and Article 19, 2014). The Martial Law period has been cited for creating a culture of silence in the country, a time marked by censorship, intimidation and killings of journalists, activists and human rights workers (Ables, 2003; Coronel, 2001). A “culture of silence” describes the totality of values and practices that stifle any form of dissent and grievance relating to social, economic and political issues in society. This culture of silence thus ranges from physical and verbal threats to the imposition of laws and policies that devalue or prevent free expression. As the study’s data suggest, they also include self-censorship engendered by an environment of fear.

Digital media use after Haiyan
At the time the fieldwork began in April 2014, UNOCHA had set up Communicating with Communities (CwC) and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) technical working groups. Through the CwC/AAP, aid agencies put in place an extensive feedback campaign to enable affected communities to give their views about the various projects they were implementing at that time. The formal and highly visible feedback efforts consisted mainly of SMS/text hotlines and Frontline SMS, an open-source software used to collect and disseminate information via SMS. Different aid agencies had posters and tarpaulins (canvas banners) asking people to “text” their feedback plastered on barangay (village) bulletin boards, corner stores, and even trees, in Tacloban and Sabay. They also provided non-digital feedback platforms, among them were suggestion boxes, community consultations, and face-to-face meetings. The author and her colleagues have analysed humanitarian accountability and the work of CwC/AAP in relation to Haiyan in a separate article (Madianou et al., 2016) and will not be dealt here. In contrast to the humanitarian sector which set up an elaborate campaign to reach out to affected communities, the national government’s efforts were chiefly in the form of internet-based websites specifically designed for information dissemination, reporting and monitoring (Opulencia-Calub et al., 2017, p. 18). Similarly, devolved national agencies such as the social welfare department, also did not actively seek people’s views about their various recovery programmes. Local governments, meanwhile, engaged with the public mainly through public consultations. On the ground, aid agencies and government worked in close partnership so that feedback sent to aid agencies also covered issues relating to government projects and policies about the recovery (see CDAC, 2014, p. 13; Madianou et al., 2015).

Out of 101 participants, 92 (91 per cent) had access to either a feature phone or smartphone, as well as TV, radio and internet. Only nine (9 per cent) informants had neither mobile phones nor access to the internet but had some access to traditional media. Despite a high level of ownership and access to digital media, and the extensive campaign by the humanitarian sector to get people’s feedback, only 11 (10 per cent) informants used the formal feedback channels offered to them by aid agencies. The majority (n = 90, 90 per cent) of informants did not use any of these formal platforms and preferred to keep their views among family, friends and close networks. A few also opted for backchannels which the succeeding sections will elaborate. These findings were firmed up by evaluation studies undertaken by the humanitarian sector of their Haiyan communication campaign where they found that only 1 out of 342 respondents had actually given them some feedback (Hartmann et al., 2014, pp. 20-22; see also CDAC, 2014).

How does one explain disaster-affected people’s high access to digital media yet low engagement with feedback platforms?

The problem with expressing critical views in the Philippines
Cardina (2013) perceptively points out that silence is complex and is not necessarily the result of “external coercion that erases subjects and communities” (p. 257). Silence may also
be an individual or societal choice as a consequence of trauma, conflict or existing conditions which repress particular narratives (Passerini, 2003). The accounts of informants in Tacloban and Sabay reveal that their widespread disengagement stemmed from fears of offending government authorities by giving critical feedback. Indeed, criticism of politicians is particularly dangerous in the Philippines; human rights activists and journalists have been killed with impunity in the past several years (Orante, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2017). Closely related to this is they feared the possible consequences of making critical statements about the recovery to local officials. Many spoke about their concern of being reprimanded (pagalitan) by village officials and Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) staff and most crucially, of losing their aid entitlement if they complained. The DSWD is the lead government agency for disaster response.

Of the 90 informants who chose not to give their views through formal feedback mechanisms, data indicated that five (5 per cent) were discouraged from expressing their views about the recovery while four (4 per cent) were threatened or discouraged from participating in protests. Ten (10 per cent) expressed fears about the possible consequences of speaking critically about the recovery, while 12 (12 per cent) felt they were ignored or not listened to by government and aid actors. Although the majority of informants preferred to keep their opinions to themselves, informal conversations and interview data showed that people actually do have something critical to say about government agencies, public officials and to a lesser extent, aid agencies. They made keen observations and suggestions about the way the recovery was being undertaken, particularly related to aid: the form (cash, food, housing materials, boats, etc.) of aid being given, the criteria set by the government and humanitarian agencies to qualify for aid, the process of selecting beneficiaries and the distribution of aid among different villages and municipalities. Many recognised aid agencies’ work but they also expressed dissatisfaction with some of their projects and how they had selected beneficiaries (Ong et al., 2015, p. 8; Opulencia-Calub et al., 2017). Nevertheless, informants were more critical of government compared with humanitarian agencies (Social Weather Station, 2014), describing the recovery process as “slow”, “unfair”, and “politicised”. Informants’ sentiments reflect similar findings where people felt “there is no effective mechanism to challenge local officials who violate procedures or fail to deliver promised services” (Opulencia-Calub et al., 2017, p. 20).

Edgar, 26, and his family was one of the hundreds of families who live in Tabacao, a community of informal settlers and one of the worst-affected coastal villages in Tacloban. He lost his job as a waiter for a local restaurant by the beach, the restaurant having been completely destroyed by Haiyan. Before the typhoon, Edgar boasted of owning diverse media devices and could even describe the technical details (internal memory, operating system, etc.) of his smartphone. Despite his small income, he had an i-Pod, a digicam, DVD player, speakers and amplifiers. Haiyan, however, swallowed his home and practically everything he owned. With his “cash-for-work” earnings from clearing debris in his neighbourhood, Edgar bought a Jade, a Philippine-made smartphone by Cherry Mobile which he showed to the author. Yet Edgar saw his phone mainly as tools for sociality and recreation, before and after the typhoon. When probed if he had given any feedback to humanitarian and government agencies through any means, he expressed a sense of frustration, saying “It seems it’s of no use. Mama had sent a text before but their reply was ‘Thank you for texting, we will consider it.’” Edgar’s distrust that people’s concern would be acted upon have some basis as Minda’s story below illustrate.

**Ignored and not listened to**

Of those who chose to not give feedback through formal channels, 12 (12 per cent) felt they were ignored by authorities anyway. Such sentiments were expressed not only by lower class informants like Edgar above but also by middle class informants. Minda was also
made redundant when the company she worked for closed after Haiyan. An accountancy graduate, she lived with her parents and younger brother in a two-storey house in the outskirts of Tacloban. Her mother’s poor health and the dire conditions in the city made the family decide to go to Manila until conditions improved in Tacloban. When they came back after two months, Minda’s family were told that they were no longer entitled to aid because they were away when the beneficiary list had been drawn up. Her mother pointed out their leaky roof to the author as they had coffee and biscuits in their house one Saturday afternoon. “My husband and I are both retired while Minda lost her job. We also need help not just those in the coastal areas”, she explained looking teary-eyed. Despite Minda’s university education, she admitted that she had a limited understanding of how the aid money was being spent but had not tried speaking with local officials or getting in touch with aid agencies. She said, “If you are just an ordinary person, you won’t be given any attention, especially by politicians, even when there’s many of you (raising an issue)”.  

Fear of offending authorities
Informants’ sense of frustration that their views are ignored by those in power could be linked to the observation that Filipinos have very few opportunities to engage directly with politicians and government leaders except during elections. It had been noted that discussions and debates are seen more as the domain of “politicians, preachers and pundits” who shape the country’s public sphere (Celdran, 2002, p. 92), where ordinary people are excluded from these democratic exercises. A more disturbing reason, however, is that when given the chance to express their views, people feel constrained because of their fear of offending authorities. Carmela, a long-time activist, spoke about the “culture of silence” in the wake of Yolanda. She is one of the organisers of People Surge which describes itself as an alliance of victims fighting for the rights of those who have been affected by Yolanda. She criticised the restrictive political space in the country:

For a long time, if you say you’re an activist, it’s automatic that you are a communist, that you’re bad […] But you know in this culture of silence – how many times have we been colonised and how many years have we been under Martial Law? If you say you are an activist, people will not join you because they (government employees) think they will lose their jobs. That is the culture that we have in this country. (Carmela, 55, Tacloban)

Carmela’s view about the dangers of being critical of government was substantiated by Oscar, an official from one of the lead government agencies working on the recovery. He explained that people affected by Haiyan should not complain because “they used to live in shanties”. He also cautioned that “some of them (those who complain) are being pushed by the leftists”. Labelling people for giving critical views as “leftist” or anti-government is problematic as it delegitimises people’s concerns. Such “red-tagging” of those who join protests or speak out against government policies frames the issues they raise in ideological terms rather than as legitimate matters that require an effective response or a solution. One of the most contentious issues identified by informants was the seemingly arbitrary criteria set by the government and aid agencies in choosing households who were entitled to aid. Second and closely related to this was the selection of beneficiaries at the village level by local officials. Informants who were denied aid generally described the selection process as “unfair” and “not uniform” yet informants like Grace in Sabay preferred not to give feedback through formal channels.

Grace is a single mother who owns a corner store in a village in Sabay. While she and her son received food packs from the DSWD, she lamented the fact that they were excluded from housing assistance apparently because she has a small business and that her son was employed. When asked if she had expressed her sentiments to local officials or aid agencies,
she said “It’s difficult to comment because you are going against the government”. She said that she and her siblings preferred to talk among themselves rather than speak to local officials. She explained:

People are nice here. They don’t want any trouble […] Here, if you can hear, make your ears deaf. If you can see, make your eyes blind so there won’t be any trouble. (Grace, 56, Sabay)

It is worthy of note that Grace equates expressing one’s opinion as “going against the government” and “causing trouble”. She said she dreaded being reprimanded by the social welfare department if she complained, a sentiment shared by Raffy, a youth leader in one of the poorest villages in Tacloban. He was hesitant to directly get in touch with the social welfare office and when asked if using Facebook would be easier for him to voice his concerns, he said, “I don’t want to be scolded”.

Fear of the consequences of giving critical feedback

Mark, a 36-year-old engineer, said he was dissatisfied with the quality of the relief goods distributed by the social welfare office. Yet when asked if he had discussed this with barangay officials, he emphatically said “No”, saying he may be “tracked down” because of his professional title. Professionals like him are registered with the Professional Regulations Commission, a government body. He spoke about his concern for his family’s safety especially that he was often away on fieldwork. For Mark, his professional status as engineer appeared to be a source of vulnerability rather than a source of social capital that he can tap to participate in public discussions about the recovery.

Apart from fears for their safety, informants’ apprehensions about joining protests or offering critical comments to government and aid agencies were also linked to their fear of losing entitlement to aid – livelihood, food, shelter and/or cash. That groups affected by Haiyan valued anonymity in giving feedback out of concern for losing access to aid had been recognised by the humanitarian sector in their own evaluation report (CDAC, 2014). This is particularly telling for poorer informants both in Tacloban and Sabay. Maria in Sabay is a single mother who used to work as a domestic helper in Hong Kong. She said she would like to organise a protest in her village but feared being identified and losing the assistance she and her children desperately needed:

I can do it but here, everyone knows me. And instead of help being offered to us, they’ll block it and say, “She’s a thorn in our necks, let’s not help her”. (Maria, 43, Sabay)

Although Grace, Mark and Maria belong to different socio-economic backgrounds, all three of them share the same concern that voicing critical views could threaten their entitlement to aid and personal safety. If people hesitate to express criticism and dissent out of apprehension that these are not welcome and that they will be penalised, then these are manifestations of the narrow spaces for participation among people affected by disaster. It must be acknowledged, however, that despite their limitations, the formal feedback mechanisms introduced by aid agencies have somehow opened up spaces (Hartmann et al., 2014) for communities to participate in discussions that mattered to them.

Backchannel communication after Haiyan

Informants’ fear for their safety, of being reprimanded by authorities and the possibility of being denied aid have pushed people to keep their criticisms in the confidence of their family, friends and neighbours (see Hartmann et al., 2014, p. 13; Madianou et al., 2015) as the earlier discussions elaborated. Despite such widespread self-exclusion, 15 (15 per cent) out of 101 informants who chose not to give their feedback through formal means opted to express their concerns through backchannels, 4 (4 per cent) more than those who used formal channels. Backchannels here refer people’s use of informal channels such as television,
radio, social media and face-to-face conversations to convey their concerns to government and humanitarian staff. The paper does not attempt to make a systematic comparison between formal and backchannel use among informants but the data suggest that informants took advantage of backchannels more than the formal platforms made available to them. Lower and middle class informants used backchannels to reach out to government and aid agencies to question policies and what they perceived as slow progress in rebuilding their communities through a variety of platforms.

Some informants took to Facebook, SMS, radio and television to express their views. Facebook, as an informal feedback platform, was particularly useful for middle class informants. Mia in Tacloban decided to go on to the Facebook page of the social welfare department to ask officials where the relief was going. She said she did not get any reply from moderators, adding that the site was “flooded with bad comments”. The lack of response from the agency shows that Facebook was only a platform for information dissemination and not as a space for engagement with the public. Walter, an unemployed university graduate in Sabay, posted comments on Facebook complaining about the slow arrival of aid from the government and the “unfair” selection of beneficiaries by aid agencies. He observed that before, he would only comment about friends’ personal posts but not write about social or community issues. Haiyan has, however, changed his Facebook use as he felt impelled to speak about the recovery.

Television and radio were also useful channels for the more confident informants. Clara, a parish worker in Tacloban, said she complained on TV about why those whose houses have survived were the ones being given help and not those who had nothing at all. When asked what gave her the confidence to speak out on national TV, she said “I am used to speaking to people because I am a parish worker”. Frank, an officer of a community association, went on a local radio station in Sabay to complain about what he perceived as a “wrong approach” by an aid agency in giving aid only to those whose houses have been totally damaged. Of particular interest was people’s use of backchannels to complement formal feedback channels or to clarify policies by aid and government agencies. Out of the 11 informants, 5 who chose to use formal channels have resorted to backchannels to reach out to authorities. When using backchannels to follow through complaints, informants preferred informal face-to-face conversations with government and aid workers. Take the case of Aurea in Sabay who was denied farming assistance by an aid agency despite having lost her poultry business after Haiyan. She used an aid agency’s feedback hotline to ask why she had been denied aid but she only received an acknowledgement of her message. Wanting more answers, she decided to visit the house of a local agency worker who explained the agency’s policies.

Interviews suggest that those who used backchannels, as in the case of formal channels, were mainly middle class informants who had the confidence, communication skills and personal networks to participate in meaningful discussions post-Haiyan. The handful of lower class informants who used backchannels carried out leadership roles in the community which has given them the confidence to share their views openly. Having access to and knowledge of digital technology was only a secondary precondition to informants’ participation in public discussions about the recovery. Overall, data suggest that people preferred to use backchannels rather than formal channels when expressing critical views about the recovery.

Conclusion
One factor which has shaped people’s participation in the recovery efforts after Haiyan was the Philippines’ culture of silence which stems from repressive policies from the colonial era but which continue up to the present times. The widespread self-censorship practised by disaster-affected communities puts into question one of the stated policies of the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction Management Act which is to promote the participation of local communities in DRRR efforts. Such policy recognises that everyone has the potential to
contribute something to improve the way communities prepare themselves for and respond to disasters. Such policy also rests on the fundamental right to freedom of expression. Although formal feedback platforms were offered by aid and government agencies to affected people in Tacloban and Sabay, 90 per cent of informants preferred not to engage with these mechanisms and to keep their views to themselves. People’s silence was not an indication of apathy or lack of opinion but rather of the deep-seated apprehension they felt about speaking out and its possible negative consequences. The findings highlight that disaster-affected communities feel that there is no room for dissent and criticism within the recovery process. Many lower class and some middle class informants expressed fears of offending authorities and of the prospect of losing entitlement to aid in the process. Some informants had also been threatened or discouraged by local leaders if they joined protests or expressed critical views while the majority felt their voices were not being listened to by those in power. Notwithstanding the value placed on community participation under the Philippine disaster law, government officials disregarded these provisions by delegitimising people’s criticisms, labelling them as “leftist” or anti-government. By framing public criticism in ideological terms, affected people are assumed to be unable to reflect on their own situation and are merely being led by leaders on the political left, which is contrary to the idea of community participation.

Hence, more people preferred backchannels more than formal channels to express their dissatisfaction with both government and aid agencies. The relative lack of restrictive rules on having informal chats with aid workers, posting and speaking on the radio, TV and Facebook have made them effective alternative avenues of engagement for affected people. Data indicate that access to and knowledge of digital technology had a limited impact on people’s engagement with government and humanitarian agencies in the wake of Haiyan. Overall, formal and backchannel platforms may have facilitated two-way communication between affected communities and those in authority but the minority (10 per cent) who used them possessed confidence, good communication skills and the support of networks to bring their views within the public sphere.

Policy and research implications
The study’s findings bring to the fore the importance of strengthening people’s fundamental freedoms in societies vulnerable to disasters such as the Philippines. What appears to be more critical in efforts to involve affected communities, not only during the recovery phase but in disaster risk reduction more broadly, is an open and free environment which encourages public criticism and debate. Preventing new disaster risks and reducing existing disaster risks require people’s capacity to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. This can only be made possible when people are free to express their views without fear of being reprimanded by authorities or of losing their entitlement to aid.

The humanitarian sector has made some important gains in its extensive efforts to promote transparency and accountability by engaging with communities affected by Haiyan. For the first time, Filipinos affected by a disaster have been made aware that their views are important. To a very limited extent, they have expressed their views to government and aid agencies but have not participated in decision-making processes envisioned by provisions on community participation for disaster risk reduction at the national and international levels. The study’s findings, confirmed by related research, suggest that more work needs to be done towards this goal. At the policy level, the study highlights the importance of longer-term capacity-building initiatives for vulnerable communities. The Office of Civil Defense (OCD), the lead government agency in disaster risk reduction and management, together with the humanitarian sector, need to invest in programmes to educate and raise people’s awareness not only about their right to information but also of their right to free expression. Awareness of these complementary rights could enable them to participate more meaningfully in DRR efforts. Lastly, more
research could be done to analyse more closely the links between free expression and
disaster prevention and mitigation. Findings from the study’s limited remit on the use of
feedback mechanisms during the response could be explored further to develop concrete
steps to prevent the occurrence of disasters and mitigate their impacts.

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Further reading


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