

Trčková, Dita

## Representations of people

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## 8 Representations of people

This chapter examines the way people and society in general are represented in the newspaper discourse on natural catastrophes, comparing the representation with the portrayal of the natural phenomenon. The main focus is on the depiction of victims and their suffering, with the aim to investigate whether the discursive portrayal enables a “reflexive identification” (Chouliaraki 2006, 157) between the readers and the sufferers. Among the necessary requirements for the construal of the relationship of reflexive identification are a representation of sufferers as “sovereign agents,” an evocation of the readers’ sharing the same humanity with the victims, and an engagement with the suffering of victims on both an emotional and a rational, impersonal level, allowing for both empathy and contemplation (Chouliaraki 2006). In other words, to make it possible for the reader to reflexively identify with the victims, discourse needs to evoke not only pity for, but also empathy with and respect towards the victims, and, at the same time, allow for detachment and an analytical account of the suffering.

This chapter first applies van Leeuwen’s categorization system to investigate naming and categorization strategies employed by the newspapers to depict people. Then, it examines the employment of the ideological square US versus THEM in the newspaper discourse on the Haiti earthquake. Finally, it analyzes victim accounts of the events, paying attention to recurrent features of victim stories.

### 8.1 Representations of people in terms of van Leeuwen’s categorization

Concerning the category of inclusion/exclusion, one of the main research questions is whether people are included in or excluded from the representation of the causes of the natural disaster. As noted, there is a different degree of inclusion of man-made factors in the discourse on each catastrophe, with all three newspapers being unified in their portrayal.

Apart from mentioning the civil war in Sri Lanka, the articles on the Indian Ocean tsunami avoid a discussion of social, political and economic conditions that determined the vulnerability of people affected by the disaster and are silent on the issue of people having been destroying protective environmental features provided by nature. The society is portrayed as void of responsibility for the catastrophe. The fact that the consequences of the disaster could have been mitigated if a warning system had existed in the Indian Ocean is revealed in all three newspapers, yet, it

is not given prominence. *The Globe and Mail* provides rather isolated references to the non-existent warning system, which are placed at the end of the articles, a place for the least important information according to the ‘newspaper triangle’ (i.e., the most important information is placed at the beginning, “followed by information in a descending hierarchy of importance to the background material” (Conboy 2007, 18)). The issue of the non-existence of a warning system is mentioned only in one article in *The Guardian* and two articles in *The New York Times*. Even though these articles explicitly state that many lives could have been saved if there had been a warning system, the following sentences, which discursively represent the natural phenomenon as the one that is responsible for not giving a warning, are included in the newspapers as well: *it [the earthquake] sent tsunamis across the Indian Ocean without warning on Boxing Day (Guardian, 28 December 2004); then, without warning, the sea turned ferocious (New York Times, 27 December 2004).*

The newspaper discourse on Hurricane Katrina omits social and historical factors in the first phase of reporting but foregrounds them later. The shift seems to be a reaction to protests and criticism of the government springing up in the society, rather than the newspapers employing a critical stance from their own initiative (see subchapter 6.5). In the last phases of reporting, the articles reveal the complexity of human failure contributing to the consequences of the catastrophe, pointing out that the disaster was to a large extent human-made, as illustrated in Examples 44, 45 and 46. The focus is on a discussion of the failure of the government and bureaucracy, and historical factors, mainly racial and class inequalities in New Orleans, which were at the root of the disaster.

Example 44: *Terry Ebbert, homeland security director for New Orleans, called it a “hamstrung” bureaucracy – others say any blame should be more widely spread. Local, state and federal officials, for example, have cooperated on disaster planning. (New York Times, 2 September 2005)*

Example 45: *At the heart of the failure seems to be a breakdown in the relationship between national and local agencies. (Guardian, 3 September 2005)*

Example 46: *In New Orleans, the disaster’s impact underscores the intersection of race and class in a city where fully two-thirds of its residents are black and more than a quarter of the city lives in poverty. (New York Times, 2 September 2005)*

As revealed in subchapters 6.5 and 7.1.8, the articles on the Haiti earthquake foreground poor socio-economic conditions in Haiti from the very beginning, portraying the disaster as an outcome not only of the natural phenomenon but also man-made factors: *the earthquake’s devastating effect is magnified by the notoriously abysmal infrastructure in much of the country (Globe and Mail, 13 January 2010); in Haiti, the last five centuries have combined to produce a people so poor, an infrastructure so nonexistent*

*and a state so hopelessly ineffectual that whatever natural disaster chooses to strike next, its impact will be magnified many, many times over* (*Guardian*, 14 January 2010). Yet, the discourse excludes reference to the policies of foreign governments and international economic actors that partly contributed to the poor living conditions in Haiti, by leading to the exploitation of Haiti as a site of cheap labor and resulting in a neglect of agriculture and local industries and a massive migration of Haitians to the capital city, making it overpopulated (see subchapter 5.4). Rather, the newspapers represent Haiti itself as deserving blame for its socio-economic problems.

From the beginning of reporting, the articles on the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami emphasize those man-made factors that mitigated the impact of the natural disaster, with an appraisal of the country embedded in such a representation, as shown in Examples 47 and 48. Furthermore, the preparedness of Japan is contrasted with conditions in Haiti, employing hyperbolic devices, such as ‘vastly’ and superlatives (see Example 49), with the effect of drawing a sharp boundary between the First World and the Third World.

Example 47: *The Japanese are noted for their diligent approach to possible natural disasters, including preparing the population to participate in the response or evacuate quickly when necessary.* (*Globe and Mail*, 16 March 2011)

Example 48: *Hidden inside the skeletons of high-rise towers, extra steel bracing, giant rubber pads and embedded hydraulic shock absorbers make modern Japanese buildings among the sturdiest in the world during a major earthquake. And all along the Japanese coast, tsunami warning signs, towering seawalls and well-marked escape routes offer some protection from walls of water.* (*New York Times*, 11 March 2011)

Example 49: *Unlike Haiti, where shoddy construction vastly increased the death toll last year, [...] Japan enforces some of the world’s most stringent building codes.* (*New York Times*, 11 March 2011)

Concerning the representation of the nuclear disaster, man-made factors are included in the newspaper discourse as deserving partial blame for the catastrophe (e.g., *the nuclear industry uses a “defence in depth” approach – having backups for your backup systems – but cascading disasters and **human error** have overwhelmed those safety systems in Japan and pushed the country to the brink of a nuclear meltdown* (*Globe and Mail*, 16 Mar 2011)), as revealed in subchapter 6.6.2.

As far as foregrounding is concerned, the analysis reveals that a group of victims that is to a large extent foregrounded in the discourse on the Indian Ocean tsunami, mainly in *The Guardian* and *The Globe and Mail*, is tourists from Western countries. Their experiences constitute the main topic of three out of fifteen articles under study in both *The Guardian* and *The Globe and Mail* as revealed in the following headlines: *Holiday Dream Turns to Scenes of Horror* (*Guardian*, 27 Decem-

ber 2004); *Tourists Return after Holiday Nightmare* (*Guardian*, 28 December 2004); *Tourists Tell of Luck, Bravery and Despair* (*Guardian*, 29 December 2004); *Swept Out to Sea on Giant Wave, Canadian Survives* (*Globe and Mail*, 27 December 2004); *3 Canadians Dead, 18 Listed as Missing* (*Globe and Mail*, 28 December 2004) and *Just a Terminal for the Dead, the Injured and the Exhausted* (referring to tourists at the Phuket airport in *The Globe and Mail*, 29 December 2004). Furthermore, the newspaper discourse gives a disproportionate space to the voices of tourists in comparison with the voices of native inhabitants. Although tourists represented barely 1 percent of those killed in the tsunami (see subchapter 5.2), more than half of the victims directly quoted in *The Guardian* and *The Globe and Mail* are tourists, with the numbers lower in *The New York Times* (see Table 2). The experience of the event is thus largely provided from the deictic center of Western tourists, which increases the degree of cultural proximity and relevance of the events and thus makes the articles more newsworthy. Yet, such a portrayal is ideologically biased, pointing to ethnocentrism of the West, representing the experience of those who belong to US (i.e., the First World) as more important than the experience of those who belong to THEM (i.e., the Third World).

	Number of directly quoted tourists	Number of directly quoted native people	Number of all directly quoted victims
<i>Guardian</i>	14 (52%)	13 (48%)	27
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	8 (53%)	7 (47%)	15
<i>New York Times</i>	3 (14%)	18 (86%)	21

Table 2: The proportion of voices of tourists and voices of native people

The magnitude of tourists' suffering from the Indian Ocean tsunami is discursively intensified in all three newspapers by emphasizing the contrast between tourists' expectations (they have come on a vacation, to relax in a place considered as paradise and to escape winter) and their actual plight, as illustrated in Examples 50, 51 and 52. The emotive appeal of Examples 50 and 51 is based on a contrast of polar counterparts.

Example 50: *Holiday Dream Turns to Scenes of Horror* (headline in *Guardian*, 27 December 2004)

Example 51: *Vancouver schoolteacher Michael Lang refused yesterday to leave what was once a Thai tourist paradise and is now a scene of horror and devastation.* (*Globe and Mail*, 28 December 2004)

Example 52: *It was just after breakfast time on Ngai Island, one of the many resorts on Thailand's west coast that welcome Asians and Europeans seeking to escape winter's cold.* (*New York Times*, 27 December 2004)

The discourse on the other three disasters under study lacks such a foregrounding of Western experience, mainly because the catastrophes happened in areas not constituting tourist destinations; yet, the articles nevertheless tend to include at least one direct quotation of a victim from the West, such as *Neil Coffey, 35, a tourist from Britain* (discourse on Hurricane Katrina); *Christa Brelsford, 25, a graduate student from Arizona State University* (discourse on the Haiti earthquake); *another Canadian, Sister Therèse Lagrange* (discourse on the Haiti earthquake); and *William M. Tsutsui, a professor of Japanese business and economic history at Southern Methodist University in Dallas* (discourse on the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami).

Another discursive strategy pointing to the ethnocentrism of the West is a foregrounding of the aid provided by Americans, the United Nations and Canadians in the discourse on the natural disasters that happened in developing countries (i.e., the Indian Ocean tsunami and the Haiti earthquake). In *The New York Times*, the main topic of seven out of fifteen articles (47 percent) concerns international aid in Haiti and three out of fifteen articles (20 percent) on international aid during the Indian Ocean tsunami, e.g., *U.S. troops patrol Haiti, filling a void* (20 January 2010); *Aid groups focus on Haiti's homeless* (22 January 2010); and *World Leaders Vow Aid as Toll Continues to Climb* (30 December 2004). The number of the articles that mention aid from the West is even higher: fourteen articles (93 percent) on the Haiti earthquake and eight articles (53 percent) on the Indian Ocean tsunami. In *The Globe and Mail*, the number of articles the global meaning of which concerns aid from the West is eight (53 percent) in discourse on the Haiti earthquake and four (27 percent) in discourse on the Indian Ocean tsunami, e.g., *Once Slammed for Sluggish Response, Canada Swiftly Sends in the Troops* (14 January 2010); *Pledges Pour in as Toll Exceeds 120,000* (31 December 2004); and *Global Aid Push 'Incredible'* (6 January 2005). The number of the articles that mention Western aid in Haiti is thirteen (87 percent), and those that mention Western aid in the Indian Ocean tsunami is nine (60 percent). The numbers in *The Guardian* are overall a bit lower, as can be seen in Tables 3 and 4. Significantly, the tables reveal that an emphasis on aid from the West is not present in the reports on natural catastrophes in developed countries, namely the United States and Japan, to such an extent as in the discourse on the catastrophes in developing countries.

	the Haiti earthquake	the Indian Ocean tsunami	Hurricane Katrina	the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	8 (53%)	4 (27%)	3 (20%)	2 (13%)
<i>Guardian</i>	5 (33%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	1 (7%)
<i>New York Times</i>	7 (47%)	3 (20%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Table 3: The number of articles the main topic of which is aid from the West

	the Haiti earthquake	the Indian Ocean tsunami	Hurricane Katrina	the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	13 (87%)	9 (60%)	5 (33%)	4 (27%)
<i>Guardian</i>	8 (53%)	11 (73%)	0 (0%)	4 (27%)
<i>New York Times</i>	14 (93%)	8 (53%)	0 (0%)	5 (33%)

Table 4: The number of articles that mention aid from the West

The foregrounding of aid from the West provides the articles with a high degree of cultural proximity, fulfilling the criterion of meaningfulness and making the reports newsworthy. It also functions to encourage readers towards humanitarian actions and donations. Yet, the fact that the emphasis is mainly on aid provided to developing countries points to traces of colonial ideology in the newspaper discourse, with the First World portrayed as a hero helping to save the Third World (more on this in subchapter 8.2).

A typical characteristic of the representation of victims in all three newspapers is a lack of agency ascribed to them. The newspaper discourse tends to employ passivation in reference to victims, portraying them as undergoing activities and being passive recipients rather than active forces, as revealed in the transitivity pattern of sentences in Examples 53, 54 and 55, where people fulfill the role of a patient of material processes.

Example 53: *Snorkellers were dragged across coral, sunbathers were swept off their beaches, divers trapped in caves, fishermen swept out to sea.* (*Guardian*, 27 December 2004)

Example 54: *Raging waters swept villagers out to sea and tore children from their parents' arms.* (*Globe and Mail*, 27 December 2004)

Example 55: *Many had been driven to return home because of the impossibility of finding accommodation elsewhere.* (*Guardian*, 30 August 2005)

The newspaper discourse includes sentences in which victims serve the function of actors of material processes; yet, in contrast to the material processes carried out by the natural phenomenon, the processes performed by victims usually demand no force, such as *float*, or involve dependence on something, including *cling to the body of a dead fisherman*; *hold on to a coconut tree*; and *grab onto catamarans for life support*, or it is implied/explicitly stated that the processes are brought about by another social actor, as in *flee*; *run away*; and *tsunami tidal waves send residents rushing to high ground*. The absence of agency in the representation deprives victims of any power and hinders their portrayal as sovereign beings worth readers' respect, which is one of the prerequisites for a construal of a reflexive identification between the readers and the sufferers.

Another discursive strategy that impedes a reflexive identification between the readers and the victims is an employment of impersonalization in the depiction of victims. It is realized in a frequent use of the nominal group *death toll* and numbers in reference to victims: *sending thousands fleeing in panic; New Orleans orders 3m to flee as hurricane nears; tens of thousands feared dead; search for the thousands still missing*. The portrayal of victims as homogenous masses makes the evocation of the readers' feeling of sharing the same humanity with victims difficult.

A metaphorical portrayal involving impersonalization is employed in reference to the people displaced by Hurricane Katrina, who are depicted as WATER, namely FLOOD: *Louisiana's state capital [...] is being inundated by the human wave coming from the submerged city of New Orleans; instead of water flooding in, we've got people flooding in; the people levee has broken*. Instead of depicting the internally-displaced people as victims of a disaster, the metaphor, containing negative connotations, represents the victims as causing a disaster and establishes them as a problem.

A dehumanizing portrayal is generally embedded in the representation of the dead. The newspaper discourse tends to provide a naturalistic, graphic depiction of dead people, with the focus on materialistic aspects of death, such as a body position, rather than spiritual ones, as shown in the following examples: *limbs protruded from disintegrated concrete; a dead schoolgirl lies against a fallen metal gate with her arms spread wide; the occasional limb sticking up through the foetid mud; from one mound a man's legs protrude upwards; her eyes were bulging; her body grossly bloated and pale*. Such depictions convey the shock and horror of the situation, but, at the same time, are devoid of humanity, disallowing identification with the victims.

The newspaper discourse also adopts individualization in reference to victims, which stands in contrast to impersonalization, as when an eyewitness's personal experience is reproduced in the articles. By individualizing the victims, the newspapers bring human interest and personal aspects into the reports, which heightens readers' involvement. The victims are generally named, functionalized by their occupation and identified by their age, as revealed in Examples 56 and 57. The inclusion of age and occupation functions as a categorizing device, portraying the victims as ordinary people and rendering readers' identification with them easier. As Langer (1992, 118) reveals, "the very particularities around which this ordinarieness is established also stand in for a series of generalities: [the victim's] age could be any age and [the victim's] job any job [...], in the normal course of events."

Example 56: *Mohammed Firdus, 36, a telephone operator from Bireuen, Aceh province, was sitting on the porch of his house, about 200 metres from the sea, when the earthquake struck. (Guardian, 27 December 2004)*

Example 57: *"I never experienced such a strong earthquake in my life," said Toshiaki Takahashi, 49, an official at Sendai City Hall. (New York Times, 11 March 2011)*



## 8.2 Ideological square of the 'First World' versus the 'Third World' in discourse on the Haiti earthquake

The analysis reveals that the newspaper discourse on the Haiti earthquake employs the 'ideological square' of US versus THEM (van Dijk 1996a) to portray the First World (the West) versus the Third World (Haiti). The Ideological Square is a strategy based on a construction of two different groups – insiders and outsiders – and involves four maxims:

1. emphasize OUR good things
2. emphasize THEIR bad things
3. de-emphasize OUR bad things
4. de-emphasize THEIR good things

(van Dijk 1996a, 37).

US is represented positively, while THEM is portrayed negatively. Previous studies have revealed that the ideological square is characteristic for, e.g., discourse on racism (van Dijk 1996a; Richardson 2004), immigration (Santa Ana 1999; El Refaie 2001) and the Iraq war (Becker 2007, Chovanec 2010).

In the articles on the Haiti earthquake, the Western developed countries are portrayed in a positive light. As stated in subchapter 8.1, emphasis is placed on their aid to Haiti. Any negative features or actions of the West, such as the fact that their economic policies implemented in Haiti contributed to the poor living conditions there, which magnified the impact of the earthquake, are omitted in the newspapers.

The emphasis placed on the helpfulness of Western rich countries is contrasted with a foregrounding of the helplessness of Haitians. As noted previously, from the very beginning of reporting, the newspapers focus on the poor political, economic and social conditions of Haiti prior the disaster. Furthermore, a focus is placed on the portrayal of Haiti as chaotic after the earthquake, with a number of references to violence (see Examples 58, 59 and 60). Although the depiction of the aftermath of the catastrophe as chaotic is present in the articles on the other three catastrophes as well (mainly Hurricane Katrina), it is not as prominent as in the discourse on the Haiti earthquake (see Table 5).

Example 58: *Inside Haiti the situation was still more **chaotic**, with thousands of people sitting in roads to stay clear of quake-damaged buildings, and **widespread reports of looting**.* (Guardian, 15 January 2010)

Example 59: *[...] the scene in its densely populated capital was one of **chaos** and devastation that completely overwhelmed the country's threadbare emergency resources. **Gunshots rang out as night fell and widespread looting was reported**.* (Globe and Mail, 14 January 2010)

Example 60: *Looting of houses and shops increased Friday, and anger boiled over in unpredictable ways.* (*New York Times*, 16 January 2010)

	New York Times	Guardian	Globe and Mail	Total
<i>Indian Ocean tsunami</i>	6	0	0	6
<i>Hurricane Katrina</i>	5	7	4	16
<i>Haiti earthquake</i>	10	9	10	29
<i>Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami</i>	2	0	0	2

Table 5: The number of references to chaos in the studied articles

Haitians are depicted as welcoming aid from the West and being dependent on it, as shown in Examples 61, 62 and 63. The foregrounding of helpfulness of Western rich countries and the portrayal of Haiti as dependent on it suggests an adult-child hierarchy (Murali 2011), also revealed by the choice of the word ‘cry’ in Example 63, which implicitly portrays Haiti as childlike. This depiction is embedded in one of the major stereotypes of people of African origin, known as Sambo, which has existed in the West since the colonization efforts in the seventeenth century (Boskin 1986). Sambo is a portrayal of adult blacks as overgrown children, whose foolishness serves as entertainment for whites. As Boskins (1986, 14) notes, the Sambo construct has been a potent tool of oppression. The representation of the relationship between the West and Haitians as adult-child in the newspaper discourse on the Haiti earthquake results in a construction of a power asymmetry between the two groups of social actors, with the First World fulfilling a role of a savior of a vulnerable nation. Moreover, the relationship is presented as hegemonic, i.e. as achieved not simply through dominating but through the consent of the controlled (Fairclough 1992, 58).

Example 61: *“Help, Ayuda, Aide” read one [a sign] in three languages, with arrows pointing to a yard filled with survivors.* (*Globe and Mail*, 18 January 2010)

Example 62: *A sign on one fallen building in Nazon [...] read: “Welcome U.S. Marines. We need help. Dead Bodies Inside!”* (*New York Times*, 17 January 2010)

Example 63: *A nation in ruins, crying for help* (headline in *Globe and Mail*, 14 January 2010)

In contrast to the discourse on the other three disasters, the newspaper articles on the Haiti earthquake rarely give a voice to and rarely individualize the victims, which hinders readers’ involvement and their identification with the sufferers. The newspapers omit directly-quoted personalized narratives of the experience of the earthquake itself: there is only one such narrative in *The Guardian*, which is told by an American visitor, one in *The Globe and Mail*, told by a Canadian visitor, and three in *The New*

*York Times*, two of which are told by American visitors and one by a Haitian. The newspapers choose to quote Haitians who foreground their helplessness, weakness and dependence on aid from outside, such as victims who describe themselves as *completely destitute* and ask for help – *please save my baby; please take me out; we need outsiders to come*. These quotes help mobilize readers to humanitarian action but also arouse feelings of pity, which imply subtle power asymmetry (cf., Balaji 2011).

The portrayal of Haitians as THEM, as the OTHER, is also revealed in the words of the United Nations secretary general published on 19 January 2010 in *The New York Times*: when *their* [Haitians'] *patience level becomes thinner* – that is when *we* have to be concerned. Such a statement makes a connection between the readers from the West and the Haitian victims problematic. The newspaper discourse broadens the gap between the First World and the Third World.

### 8.3 Victim stories

Except for the discourse on the Haiti earthquake (see the previous subchapter), the three newspapers abound in individualized, personal stories of people affected by the natural catastrophe. The high number of these stories proves a tendency towards the personal in the media, which, as pointed out by Fairclough (1995b), increases audience appeal. Fulfilling the news value of *reference to persons*, victim stories render the articles newsworthy. This subchapter investigates the recurrent features and narrative elements of victim stories in the three newspapers.

One of the features of the victim stories that solicit readers' involvement and help to make readers identify with the people affected by the disaster is a discursive establishment of the victims as ordinary people leading ordinary lives. This is achieved by an inclusion of background information about the victim, including their name, age, occupation and details about the activity in which they were engaged just before the natural catastrophe, as shown in Examples 64 and 65. Many narratives about victims contain seemingly unimportant details, as illustrated in Example 66 listing all the things that the victim carried in his bag, which root the story in ordinary experience and thus establish its relevance to the everyday lives of readers. As Fairclough (1995b, 164) reveals, the "relevance of stories to everyday life is a vital factor in their appeal to audience" and the evocation of the "it could happen to me" feeling.

Example 64: *As a separate set of mammoth waves hurtled across the Indian Ocean in the opposite direction, due west, Amir Khan, a strapping 30-year-old off-duty police officer, relaxed in his home in the town of Kalmunai on the east coast of Sri Lanka. (New York Times, 31 December 2004)*

Example 65: *It was 3:45 and time to call the boss: Dr. Charles McCreery stood in*

*a friend's living room a few miles away, delivering a gift after a brunch at his sister-in-law's. His 4-year-old twin daughters were hoping that he would soon assemble their new bicycles. (New York Times, 31 December 2004)*

Example 66: *"I just didn't want to take a chance," said Mr. Paulin, who like many arrived [at the Superdome] with hastily packed possessions. He was carrying a small plastic bag containing his eyeglasses, medication and a paperback book, the Tony Hillerman novel "First Eagle". (New York Times, 29 August 2005)*

Another strategy that helps readers to enter into the relationship of identification with the victims is a construction of a 'good victim' (Langer 1992, 116). The newspaper discourse tends to portray the victims in a positive light, foregrounding their good characteristics and actions: *his father said Mr. Lewis is **tough-minded** and has a **strong spirit**; luck and the **courage** of local people and fellow tourists was credited with preventing hundreds of other fatalities; Mr. Takahashi was remarkably **composed** and **optimistic**; they [Haitians] are far more **resilient** than most.* Such a depiction elicits readers' sympathy with the sufferers.

The victims' narratives adopt several schematic strategies that draw upon mythical and fairy-tale motifs. One of them is 'the ruined fairy tale' (Radford 2003, 79), which establishes an idyllic state of people's lives immediately before the catastrophe only to reverse it by the horror of what comes after. The strategy can be summarized by the motto "build it up, then tear it down" (Radford 2003, 79). The focus is put on the portrayal of the victims as being engaged in peaceful and relaxing activities before the catastrophe, such as *watching television; sitting down to a wedding party; holidaying; sunbathing; and enjoying a day off.* These are then suddenly and unexpectedly disrupted. A sharp contrast between 'the before' and 'the after' is constructed, resulting in dramatization.

Another schematic strategy employed in the newspapers is the WARRIOR iconography, which consists of three images: a victim, a villain, and a hero (Hawkins 2001, 35). As pointed out by Hawkins (2001, 32), an iconographic reference functions to "establish a powerful conceptual link between the referent and a particular value judgement." The referent is metaphorically represented by a schematically conventionalized semantic unit (=an iconographic image), such as a VICTIM, a VILLAIN, and a HERO, which is conceptually related to a strong positive or negative value (Hawkins 2001, 32). Importantly, the WARRIOR iconographic reference is connected with investment of power. Hawkins (2001, 36) reveals:

The highest value within the WARRIOR iconography is associated with the HERO, who is an agent of life because s/he protects us from harm at the hands of the VILLAIN. The VILLAIN bears the lowest value within the WARRIOR iconography because s/he is seen by us as an agent of death and destruction. The VICTIM is

one of us whose life we honour precisely because s/he carries scars which provide evidence of the wrongful ways of the VILLAIN.

The role of a VILLAIN tends to be ascribed to the natural phenomenon in the newspaper discourse, as illustrated in Example 67, in which the cruelty of the storm is emphasized by a foregrounding of the VICTIM's happiness and excitement prior the disaster.

Example 67: *We are still trying to understand how **this storm could have taken him**. He was so excited to see the ocean and to swim in it. He was so happy. Then he was gone.* (eyewitness account in *The New York Times*, 31 December 2004)

The role of a VILLAIN is also performed by some of the victims of the natural disaster, as when they are designated as looters: *there are reports of **widespread looting*** (*Guardian*, 29 December 2004); *the chaotic scenes in New Orleans were exacerbated by **outbreaks of looting*** (*Guardian*, 1 September 2005); *widespread looting was reported* (*Globe and Mail*, 14 January 2010). Taking goods from stores during natural disasters is rather a complex issue, especially in the areas where people have not been rescued and given food and water for several days. Yet, those who take goods from stores do not get much sympathy in the press and are labeled as criminals. In discourse on Hurricane Katrina, some of the people affected by the disaster are labeled as rapists: *Superintendent Compass said that [...] rapes and assaults were occurring unimpeded* (*New York Times*, 2 September 2005); *the city's police chief warned that storm victims were being raped and beaten on the streets* (*Guardian*, 2 September 2005); *Cary Andrews, a 31-year-old hotel employee, said that a five-year-old girl was raped* (*Globe and Mail*, 2 September 2005). Although the newspaper articles point out that the stories of rape could not be confirmed (*but the story could not be confirmed* (*Globe and Mail*, 2 September 2005)), they choose to spread the rumor nevertheless, mainly for the sake of adding a drama and shock value to the reports. Most of the atrocity stories disseminated by the newspapers were exposed to be false in the end (McNair 2006, 4). Since the majority of the victims of the hurricane were blacks, the newspaper reports contributed to the reproduction of a racist stereotype of blacks and their sexuality as wild, uncontrollable and criminal (see Davis 1988).

The newspaper discourse also includes an appearance of a HERO on the scene, who does something admirable and generally functions to represent triumph. He/she thus plays a counterpart to the discursively constructed VILLAIN. The role of a HERO is occupied either by some of the victims, as when a mechanic and a fisherman use *their boats for several days to save 300 friends and neighbors, plucking them from floodwaters and the roofs of homes and cars* (*New York Times*, 5 September

2005), or tourists, as in *there were also many acts of **bravery** by tourists, including a Birmingham firefighter, Roy Phillips, who repeatedly ran into the sea at Phuket to drag others out* (*Guardian*, 29 December 2004), or Western countries, as in *U.S. Troops Patrol Haiti, Filling a Void* (headline in *New York Times*, 20 January 2010). The role of HEROES in the narratives about the catastrophe is significant since they bring a resolution and a necessary positive element into the negative accounts. As Pearse (2010, 171) argues, “only the human interest stories, of triumph over disaster, for example, provide some “closure,” which reassures audiences that “happy endings” are possible.”

A play on emotions is embedded in a frequent alternation between victim stories with a tragic ending and a happy ending. After enumerating tragic losses of life in the catastrophe, the newspapers tend to present a story of a lucky escape and a survival, usually a miraculous one (which enhances the newsworthiness of the articles), such as a rescue of a *7-year-old girl who survived more than four days eating dried fruit rolls in the supermarket that collapsed around her* (*New York Times*, 18 January 2010). The function of the positive victim stories corresponds to the function of the HERO accounts – in the middle of the tragedy and grief, they bring hope and reassurance that happy endings exist. Examples 68, 69 and 70 illustrate an appeal to readers’ emotions, alternating between an evocation of feelings of reassurance and anxiety. The accounts in Examples 68 and 70 both offer hope by pointing out that not all stories are tragic, only to contradict it a few lines later by revealing that the number of stories with a happy ending is insignificant in comparison with negative stories. Similarly, the account in Example 69 first anticipates a tragic ending, then offers a happy resolution and concludes with a contradiction of a happy ending. As revealed by Kvakova (2009), the oscillation between stories with a happy and a tragic ending has an addictive potential, making readers want to read more to be reassured again.

Example 68: *At least three other Canadians have been confirmed dead, although their names have not been released; another 60 are missing.*

***Amidst the tragedy yesterday were some incredible stories of random survival.***

*In Malaysia, a 20-day-old baby was found alive floating on a mattress. She was later reunited with her family. [...]*

***But for every glimmer of hope there were a thousand tales of loss.***

*(Globe and Mail, 29 December 2004)*

Example 69: *“She said, ‘I love you,’” said Mrs Medley, struggling to hold back the tears. “And then she said, ‘We’re going to die.’”*

*At 6pm, the sisters managed to contact the National Guard who agreed to send a boat. **They were going to be saved.***

***Many others were not so lucky.*** (*Guardian*, 31 August 2005)

Example 70: *The United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, described another “small miracle during a night which brought few other miracles.” [...] But hope was fading for perhaps tens of thousands of others.* (New York Times, 15 January 2010)

A typical feature of the victim stories that the newspapers select to reproduce is a high emotive load. One of the recurrent topics present in the discourse on all four catastrophes is parents’ loss of their children in the disaster, with the focus on parents trying to save their children and their attempts failing: “*I feel that I should have died with the kids,*” said Thanaranjani, whose 4-year-old daughter was snatched out of her arms by the waves (New York Times, 7 January 2005); “*I grabbed my daughter’s hand but I lost my grip when I was swept away by the debris and water,*” she said. “*I managed to survive but my daughter was washed away*” (Guardian, 14 March 2011).

The emotional appeal is heightened in stories of parents who have to make a Sophie’s choice over which of their children to save: *One Mother’s Choice...Which Child to Save* (headline in Guardian, 31 December 2004). Generally, the focus is put on stories about a loss of a close family member, as illustrated in an emotionally-charged account in Example 71 conveying feelings of anxiety and despair. The way the story is framed, mainly the use of a repetition and the provision of hope and reassurance followed by a tragic ending, intensifies the emotional appeal and the dramatic effect.

Example 71: “*Every day she called him and said, ‘Are you coming, son? Is somebody coming?’ Mr. Broussard said.*” And he said, “*Yeah, Mama, somebody’s coming to get you.*” *Somebody’s coming to get you on Tuesday. Somebody’s coming to get you on Wednesday. Somebody’s coming to get you on Thursday. Somebody’s coming to get you on Friday. And she drowned Friday night. She drowned Friday night.*” (New York Times, 5 September 2005)

Another type of victims that are foregrounded in the newspaper discourse is ‘highly undeserved victims,’ such as people who had to cope with a hard fate prior to the disaster (Example 72) or people who have come to the country to help (Example 73). When representing the situation in the Superdome in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the newspapers choose to quote mainly those who were, because of their conditions, the most vulnerable, such as a mother and her handicapped child, a wife and her husband who has cancer, and a man with asthma. The emphasis placed on such stories to a certain degree exploits readers’ emotions.

Example 72: *Last night, it emerged that one of the families hit by the tsunami included a survivor of the Paddington rail disaster five years ago. Janette Orr, from Swindon, was in the Patong resort in Phuket, Thailand, for a break follow-*

*ing the stress of five years of legal wrangling over the train crash. (Guardian, 27 December 2004)*

Example 73: *She Came to Help the People She Loved – Then Disaster Struck (Globe and Mail, 14 January 2010)*

The employment of mythical and fairy-tale schemes, such as the ruined fairy tale and the WARRIOR iconography, and the emphasis on highly emotionally-loaded victim stories verge on the brink of sentimentalism, the danger of which inheres in the possibility of readers falling into what Butler (2004, 30) calls a “narcistic preoccupation with melancholia,” obstructing readers’ orientation to others and reflexive identification with the victims. The tendencies to dramatize and sensationalize the catastrophe are likely to impede an analytical response.

## 8.4 Summary

Drawing upon Chouliaraki (2006), this chapter investigated whether the newspapers portray the victims of the natural catastrophes in a way that allows for a reflexive identification between readers and the sufferers. The importance of a construal of the relationship of reflexive identification lies in its function to call forth solidarity and humanitarian help (Chouliaraki 2006). To evoke such a relationship, the newspaper discourse needs to employ a right balance between an emotional and a rational appeal, soliciting readers’ involvement, sympathy, connectivity with the sufferers, and contemplation. The analysis reveals that the newspapers adopt strategies that both help and hinder a construal of such a relationship.

One of the ways to provide a rational, impersonal portrayal of the suffering is to contextualize it, i.e., to provide “the historicity of the suffering,” which requires “that each instance of suffering is placed in a meaningful [...] context of explanation” (Chouliaraki 2006, 43). This necessitates the inclusion of a discussion of historic, socio-economic and political factors that contributed to the suffering. The analysis has revealed that the extent to which such factors are included in the reports differs in the discourse on each catastrophe. They are omitted in the articles on the Indian Ocean tsunami and the initial reports on Hurricane Katrina while being foregrounded in the discourse on the Haiti earthquake and in the second phase of reporting on Hurricane Katrina. Man-made factors are also included in the articles on the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, with the focus on their function as mitigators of the suffering in the natural disaster, and intensifiers of the suffering in the nuclear disaster.

Discursive strategies that hinder the establishment of the victims as sovereign agents and thus prevent a construction of the reflexive identification between readers and the victims have been found in the articles on all four catastrophes.



They include the employment of passivation and impersonalization in reference to the sufferers. The absence of a portrayal of the sufferers as sovereign beings is intensified in the discourse on the Haiti earthquake, in which Haitians are rarely given a voice to share their experience and tend to be depicted as helpless children.

Among the discursive strategies that contribute to a construal of the identification between readers and the victims on an emotional level and that are frequently employed in all three newspapers are individualization of the victims, a focus on ordinary aspects of the victims' lives, an establishment of a good victim and a choice of dramatic personal narratives of the sufferers, which tend to be highly emotionally charged. The abundance of emotional elements in the discourse on the natural disasters is not surprising with regard to the nature of the events. It fulfills an important function of encouraging a humanitarian action and help. Nevertheless, the overuse of emotions and drama and the lack of explanatory information as a counterpart to them run the risk of readers' being fully absorbed in their own emotions, unable to move beyond them.