

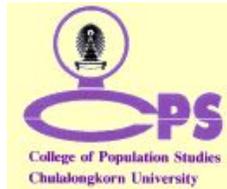
# Representations of the 'Asian Tsunami' in the British Media

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ASIAN METACENTRE  
FOR POPULATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  
ANALYSIS



HEADQUARTERS AT ASIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
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## Introduction

On Boxing Day in 2004, news of a terrible ‘natural disaster’ was broadcast into British homes through television and radio. A huge tsunami wave, triggered by a massive earthquake under the Indian Ocean off the coast of Indonesia, had hit large areas of coast throughout the region. The UK television news that evening showed tourist videos taken from hotel balconies that showed a huge wave washing through with boats, people and debris swirling amidst the powerful waters. Photographs from the beaches frequented by tourists were shown. Thousands of people were feared dead, many of them tourists, we were told. The damage was immense.

As the days went by, the media showed more and more of the loss of lives, talked of the ‘lost’ people, devastated communities and livelihoods. The fundraising began almost immediately and the British public were praised for their generosity and compassion for the ‘distant’ people. The sheer scale of the tsunami was shocking. The death toll rose each day by thousands rather than hundreds. Ten countries had been affected and there was concern about how the relief effort could be best coordinated.

As I watched and listened to the news something began to nag at my mind. I wasn’t comfortable with the over-concentration on ‘Western tourists’. I wondered how UK embassy officials could identify who was ‘British’ to issue them with replacement passports. What happened if you were British Indian? Was it as easy to get a passport as someone who was white and British? Would we see as many bodies and mass graves if this was a disaster in Hungary or France? What was happening to ordinary people living in the region who had survived? Why were the local state governments apparently doing so little? I decided that I wanted to delve into this tragedy and the representations around it further and a visiting senior research fellowship at ARI allowed me the time and thinking space to be able to begin this project.

As part of my research into the volcanic hazard and subsequent disaster on the tiny Caribbean island of Montserrat, I was exploring the so-called hazards and disasters literature (mostly located within the disciplines of geography and anthropology). Through this literature I was introduced to debates about ‘vulnerability’ and a particular critical engagement with ‘vulnerability’ as a continuation of Western discourses of tropicality and development (Bankoff, 2001, 2003, 2004). I decided to utilise this engagement as a framework for a discourse analysis of the British print media’s coverage of the Indian Ocean Tsunami (IOT). As a significant ‘voice’ of the ‘West’, the British media play an important part in the construction of representations of, and discourses about, ‘other’ places and peoples. Hence analysis of the *Guardian* newspaper coverage of the IOT provides a window through which to view particularly discourses about Asia. In this working paper I use the *Guardian* newspaper coverage as it was presented from December 27 to December 31, 2004 (5 days in total).

I plan to pursue this research further and there are two possible directions in which it can flow. One will be to do a comparison of the same dates of coverage – the immediate aftermath of the disaster – between the *Guardian* (Britain), *The Straits Times* (Singapore) and the *Hindu* (India). This would allow a critical comparison of the representations and

discourses written and read within different cultural and geographical contexts. The second future work possibility is to continue the discourse analysis through all the *Guardian* coverage up until it began to peter out in February 2005. Hence, this working paper is a first insight into the print media coverage of the IOT and has a specific focus on the ‘vulnerability’ discourses of the West proposed by Greg Bankoff.

### *The Guardian newspaper*

The *Guardian* is a major British national broadsheet newspaper (although it has recently been converted to tabloid size). It has a circulation of about 390,000 and its editorial policy favours left of centre politics. *Guardian* readers tend to be well-qualified middle class professionals who are often employed by the government, especially local, health, education, or welfare-based occupations (Gold and Revill, 2004, 21). The paper was founded in 1821.

All of the *Guardian* articles were saved for the duration of the coverage, from December 27, 2004 until coverage began to peter out around February 22, 2005. There has been subsequent coverage occasionally, mostly around the one year anniversary, but these have not yet been processed.

## Definitions and Parameters

In this section the terms used in this paper are defined. Terms like ‘natural hazard’, ‘natural disaster’ and so forth are contested and it is important that they not be taken for granted. This section also stresses that the Western naming of places ought to be examined. Finally, it provides a breakdown of the ‘items’ in the *Guardian* under study for this presentation.

### *‘Hazard’ versus ‘Natural Disaster’*

There is a great deal of debate about these terms and the key elements are outlined here. Put simply, hazards are natural, disasters are not (Cannon, 1994). Indeed hazards do not always lead to disasters, and disasters do not always have a hazard trigger. However, not all hazards are natural because they can be the dangerous products of some human activity: nuclear reactor fall out (Chernobyl), chemical explosions (Bhopal).

A ‘hazard’ can be (to a large extent) placed into one of four categories:

1. Geophysical hazards: earthquakes, landslides, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions.
2. Climatic hazards: droughts, floods, hurricanes/cyclones, torrential rain, wind (tornadoes), hail and lightning storms.
3. Biological hazards: crop disease, epidemics, epizootics, locusts.
4. Social hazards: insurrection, repression, large fires, collapsing political structures, warfare.

Many hazards arise from compound causes – in the case of the Indian Ocean tsunami, an earthquake caused the tsunami. Sometimes hazards are further distinguished by ‘time’ – sudden impact hazards versus slow onset ones (Alexander, 1993; Bankoff 2001).

A disaster is the effect of a hazard on ‘human societies when it causes immiseration, morbidity or death’ (Bankoff, 2001)<sup>1</sup>. Therefore there is a real problem with the term ‘natural’ disaster, but its widespread use is an example of the globalized perspective on these particular events.

In *The Angry Earth* (1999) anthropologists provide their distinctive perspectives on disasters. Disasters can be immediate or have a slow build-up but they are all-encompassing and sweep across every aspect of human life. Hoffman and Oliver-Smith argue that ‘Disasters spring from the nexus whereby environment, society and technology come together – the point where place, people, and human construction of both the material and the non-material meet’ (1999, 1).

The 1970s and 1980s have been identified as key eras when critical interrogation of disasters really began (Bankoff, 2001, 2003; Blaikie *et al* 1994; Cannon, 1994; Oliver-Smith, 1999; Pelling, 2003; Quarantelli, 1995; Varley, 1994). There was a questioning of the problematic linkage between natural hazards and so-called ‘natural’ disasters. This was partly due to the recognition that there had been a significant rise in human and material

losses from disasters without a concomitant increase in extreme ‘natural’ hazard events. It became apparent too, that hazards of similar severity could produce very different effects in different places; for example while hurricanes occur over Cuba and Haiti, the effects are experienced much more severely in the latter. There was a growing realisation among social scientists that catastrophes could not be understood nor mitigated by focusing solely on physical events and the environment, and that social factors were equally relevant. In addition, while physical hazards cannot necessarily be prevented, social change can be implemented to save lives and livelihoods. These researchers wanted to take the ‘natural’ out of disaster to lay emphasis on both the social impacts *and* the social factors at play.

Bankoff (2001, 24) argues that ‘natural disaster’ is not a conceptual term in the same way that tropicality and development are. However, I argue that it is a concept because the two words ‘natural’ and ‘disaster’ have been welded together in the popular imaginary, in public discourse, and in international and global frameworks for hazard management and mitigation planning, such as in the UN declaration of the 1990s as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. The concept of a ‘natural disaster’ implies unpredictability and a sense of inevitability, and lays the blame at nature’s door rather than on humanity. As with all concepts ‘natural disaster’ has developed from a particular standpoint which takes the above assumptions as real and focuses on the physical risks. Such a perspective is ‘unrealistically optimistic about the role natural science and engineering knowledge and practice can play’ (Varley, 1994, 2).

Hence in keeping with practices of deconstruction, this paper uses the terms ‘hazard’ and ‘disaster’ in a more critical fashion, even though the *Guardian* tends to use the term ‘natural hazard’. Nevertheless, it is important to remember the attempts to unhinge the ‘taken for grantedness’ of the term.

### *The Western naming of places*

In the *Guardian* the disaster of December 26, 2004 was headlined generally as a ‘tsunami disaster’ but in the text it was referred to as the ‘Indian Ocean tsunami’, which is probably the most geographically correct description. On the TV coverage and in some articles it became known as the ‘Asian tsunami’. This latter term means several things. First, the impact of the tsunami on the African countries, most particularly Somalia and Kenya, is lost in this naming. Secondly, ‘Asia’ is a huge and diverse continent and the vast majority of Asia was totally unaffected by the tsunami. Thirdly, the generic catch-all term of ‘Asia’ takes away the emphasis from the places where the impacts were most severely experienced – coastal and island communities. Their specific geography matters enormously in understanding the impact of the tsunami and it is a feature of their socio-economic context. Islands like the Maldives and coastal communities of Thailand are excessively dependent on largely Western tourism and the cultural obsession with the ‘beach holiday’. The Maldives earns 20% of their GDP from tourism, while for Thailand this figure is 6%<sup>2</sup>. These tourist economies are part and parcel of why so many people were residing in or visiting these islands and coastlines – their specific geography is significant and should be recognized in the naming.

Consequently throughout this paper the term ‘Indian Ocean Tsunami’ is used and,

as above, is shortened to IOT.

*Parameters of the Guardian analysis*

As stated above, the complete data set, which will form the basis of future research, consists of coverage in the *Guardian* from December 27 to February 22 – almost two months. There are about 300 written articles and commentaries and about 150-200 images within this collection. This paper provides a close reading of and an analysis of the discourses within the newspaper’s coverage from December 27 – 31.

These 5 days provide 61 articles, 53 images, 6 maps, 3 cartoons and 5 appeal advertisements for analysis, a total of 128 items. Many of the articles are full pages of the broadsheet and were located on the front and next few pages of the paper each day. While there are a range of discourses and tropes threaded through the coverage of these five days, the analysis on which this paper is based is framed by Bankoff’s work on Western discourses of ‘vulnerability’ (2001, 2003, 2004).

Table 1 Distribution of ‘Tsunami Reporting’ in the *Guardian*, December 2004

<b>Date</b>	<b>Articles</b>	<b>Photos</b>	<b>Maps</b>	<b>Cartoons</b>	<b>Appeal Adverts</b>
27/12/04	6	8	1	0	0
28/12/04	13	14	1	0	0
29/12/04	13	10	2	1	1
30/12/04	14	11	2	1	1
31/12/04	15	10	0	1	3
Total for 5 days of Dec’ 04	61	53	6	3	5
Total Tsunami related articles	128				

Here, I want to briefly outline the methodology of the discourse analysis (Waitt 2005; Rose, 2001). The articles, images and other related pieces were all identified and labelled to indicate their identifier code, date and page number (D04-21, 28/12/04, pp.6 indicates December 2004, article number 21, followed by the date and page number). All the ‘pieces’ for December were read (or viewed for images) in a first reading to get a sense of the ‘stories’ told and images selected to present the situation to the reader. The second reading was for coding. Notes were taken on each piece and organised according to key headings that emerged from the texts and in some cases from the academic literature. These included: technological ‘solutions; ‘Asianness’/ tropicality/ ‘Third Worldness’; evidence of (non)coping; tourists and ‘others’; vulnerability; bodies, disease, heat; ‘Western’ superiority/ capabilities; victims versus heroes and survivors. Images were analysed for their impact and for what they showed and did not show. Missing elements of the discussion were also noted. A great deal can be learned about the meaning and powerfulness of a discourse by what is *not* said or shown as well as by what *is* said or shown.

There was a noticeable amount of repetition across pages and days of the newspaper. There was considerable evidence of uncritical elements within the reporting

which was highly Western-centric and contributed to the ‘inevitability’ discourse related to assumptions about ‘natural disaster’. As we shall see below this is manifest in several ways. Journalists would argue that this is about getting the story out to the waiting public as fast as possible. However, the initial coverage is what readers remember, not the more sophisticated and reflective analyses of the later articles. It is therefore important that the early pieces be as accurate about their facts and as balanced in their content as possible. One exception to the ‘uncritical’ discussion is an opinion piece by Jeremy Seabrook on December 31 under the title: *In death, imperialism lives on* (on page 20) and with a sub-heading ‘For the western media, it is clear that a tourist’s tragedy is more important than that of the ‘locals’ (2004).

## Discourses of ‘Vulnerability’

Vulnerability as a concept and as a framework for analysis and planning related to hazard preparedness and disaster mitigation began as a critical discourse and commentary. It really began to gain prominence in the 1980s among researchers and practitioners who strongly critiqued the dominant paradigm in disaster research and management. This dominant perspective tended to view so-called ‘natural disasters’ as the result of extreme hazard events and held a technocratic belief that the only way to deal with such disasters was by the policy and practical application of geophysical and engineering knowledge (Cannon, 1994; Hewitt, 1983; Hilhorst and Bankoff, 2004; Varley, 1994).

There are different factors related to vulnerability:

1. The degree of resilience of a livelihood system of an individual or group, and the capacity to resist hazard, often called ‘livelihood resistance’
2. The health component which includes the robustness of individuals
3. The degree of preparedness of an individual or group

Number 3 is perhaps most pertinent to disaster planning and can connect with technical interventions for disaster avoidance such as early warning systems. Terry Cannon (1994) argues that ‘the number of people at a level of vulnerability to a hazard of a given intensity will be a measure of the disastrous or non-disastrous impact of that hazard’ (pp. 20). However, later some have argued that vulnerability is also about people’s perceptions and knowledge (Hilhorst and Bankoff, 2004, 4). Though, such ‘local knowledge’ is often subsumed under a more universal and implicitly Western knowledge system – local knowledge remains at the level of the community and may even be lost or wiped out over time.

There are problems with the vulnerability framework/ analysis. One of the specific and quite widely published critiques is that offered by Greg Bankoff (2001, 2003, 2004). This particular critical commentary is summarised and hence partly frames the *Guardian* analysis which is also examined through the author’s critical discourse analysis.

## A Critical Commentary:

**Greg Bankoff (2001) 'Rendering the World Unsafe: 'Vulnerability' as Western Discourse' in *Disasters*, 25, 1, 19-35**

**B**ankoff argues that there will be considerable academic enquiry into disasters because they are linked with issues related to the environment, the depletion of resources and migration patterns. Disasters are increasingly recognised as significant global processes. Indeed, I suggest that the Indian Ocean tsunami was perhaps the first genuinely globalized disaster caused by a natural hazard because it affected so many countries and so many people, and drew world attention and action in an unprecedented way.

Bankoff is concerned that the discursive framework within which hazards are presented and analysed, that of vulnerability, has problematic historical roots. He argues that its use might affect parts of the world which are imagined and represented in negative ways. 'Tropicality, development and vulnerability form part of one and the same essentialising and generalising cultural discourse that denigrates large regions of the world as disease-ridden, poverty-stricken and disaster-prone' (pp. 19). He argues that it is a new version of an old story that is about 'two worlds called *them* and *us*, where the 'us' is the West (particularly Europe and North America) and the 'them' is 'everywhere else, most especially the equatorial zone' (pp. 20). This is the well-established version of the story but there is also a new facet to the tale described as being about:

Western societies that are unable to escape from the cultural constraints that continue to depict large parts of the world as dangerous places for *us* and *ours*, and that provide further justification for Western interference and interventions in others' affairs for *our* and *their* sakes (pp. 20).

Some of the commentary in the *Guardian* about European tourists being in the tsunami-affected countries was very much couched in terms of them expecting to be safe and to be able to enjoy well-deserved holidays but ending up being struck by disaster that threatens them.

### *Tropicality*

Bankoff goes back in time (to around the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries) to consider the ways in which Europe's representation of the 'tropics' was based upon dangers to human health, the pathology of 'warm' climates. The 'heat and humidity were increasingly held responsible for the high death rate of Europeans' (pp. 21). 'Disease, putrefaction and decay ran rampant in the moist warm air of the tropics' (pp. 21). This was all recorded and produced a discourse that Arnold (1996) calls *tropicality*. This established a sense of 'otherness' in relation to the tropical environment and, I argue, to the people who lived there. The equatorial zone was seen as dangerous because of disease and the threat to health (see the later discourse analysis).

However, with the increased understanding of infection and the role of germs there

were significant developments in Western medicine which could therefore ‘cure’ the regions that were dangerous for Europeans.

### *Development*

After the Second World War, a new discursive framework developed which built upon *tropicality*, but did not totally replace it, and this was *development*. There was a drive to replicate the key socio-economic features and practices of the West: industrialisation, urbanisation, growth rates, improved living standards and education. The West ‘invested’ and set up aid policies and divided the world into two: donor and recipient nations, developed and underdeveloped countries. This donor and recipient binary is something we will return to below. The ‘Third World’ became an ‘homogenised, culturally undifferentiated mass of humanity variously associated with powerlessness, passivity, ignorance, hunger, illiteracy, neediness, oppression and inertia’ (Escobar, 1995a, 9, cited in Bankoff, 2001, 23). Sadly aspects of these representations are evident in the *Guardian* coverage.

### *Vulnerability*

Between 1963 and 1992, 93% of all major global hazards happened outside of North America and Europe. During the 1990s, 99% of the annual average of persons killed or affected by hazards resided outside of Canada, USA and Europe (Bankoff, 2001, 24). It is not just about geography but also about demographic difference combined with problems resulting from years of unequal terms in international trade which means that people in ‘less developed’ countries are more likely to die from hazard than those in the ‘developed’ nations. This connects back to what has been said above about the features of a society’s vulnerability to hazard.

Bankoff engages the debates outlined above which are highly critical of a technocratic approach to hazards. The latter proposes technical and engineering ‘solutions’ which can be easily used to blame populations and their governments for their lack of adequate knowledge and their failure to be better prepared to face hazards. While there have been critiques of the technocratic approach, it remains extremely pervasive. This is demonstrated below in relation to discussions, repeated, about the so-called ‘Early Warning System’.

Bankoff takes time in his article to engage key elements of the vulnerability analysis framework. While he recognises its value in critically engaging the technocratic approach, he argues that it has inherent problems. He is particularly concerned with how so-called ‘vulnerable’ populations are conceptualised and represented. Vulnerable populations are those most at risk because of a marginality which makes their lives one of permanent emergency. Populations are rendered powerless by particular social orders. Vulnerability denies people the means of coping with hazard.

However, this reflects a particular understanding of ‘those’ parts of the world, that they are unsafe because of hazards and because people do not have the capacity to cope and survive. These are dangerous places, just as they were constructed under the discourse of

‘tropicality’. The vulnerability of these places to ‘danger’ is likewise a given under the discourse of ‘development’. The ‘danger’ faced was first disease, then poverty, and now, hazard. The geography of these places is *defenceless spaces*, frail and without protection; the people are in *spaces of vulnerability* without entitlement, enfranchisement and empowerment. These places are often *regions of misrule* because of despotic or illegitimate (and I would add disorganised, ill-equipped) governments. As we will see below, the early *Guardian* coverage represented the Indian Ocean tsunami-affected area as all of these ‘spaces’ – defenceless, vulnerable and misruled.

Hence large parts of the world become represented as vulnerable to the effect of hazards and so they are threats to Western health and assets<sup>3</sup>. This representation of the ‘vulnerable’ parts of the world has another result:

The popularisation of this representation through the mass media also generates a moral obligation on behalf of Western nations to employ their good offices to ‘save’ these vulnerable populations from themselves and render the regions they inhabit safer for investment and tourism. (pp 27)

Bankoff argues that the emergence of ‘natural’ disasters as a primary discourse in the 1990s was due to the environment which remained a potent aspect in conditions of danger posed by the ‘other’ world. Also hazards provide a scapegoat as they can be blamed for poverty and unequal distribution – that these are all nature’s fault. He states:

Natural disasters form part of a wider historical discourse about imperialism, dominance and hegemony through which the West has been able to exert its ascendancy over most peoples and regions of the globe. (pp28).

Vulnerability does have its value – indeed Bankoff elsewhere (2003) contributes to its usefulness in the context of understanding the relationships amongst disasters, development and people. Nevertheless he is anxious (and I share this unease) about the fact that ‘the concept of vulnerability still encourages a sense of ‘societies and people as weak, passive and pathetic’ (pp 29).

Table 2 Discourses, Western Interventions and Depictions of ‘Spaces’

<b>Period/ Era</b>	<b>Discourse</b>	<b>Western Intervention</b>	<b>Depiction of the ‘Space’</b>
Between 17 <sup>th</sup> and early 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Tropicality	Colonialism and medical cure	Disease-ridden (climatic)
Post-1945	Development	Aid	Poverty-stricken (political)
1990s onwards	Vulnerability	Relief, rescue, scientific and technological expertise	Disaster-prone (environmental)

Source: Adapted from Bankoff, 2001, pp. 27.

The discourse of vulnerability is part of a knowledge system formed within a

Western liberal consciousness (just as tropicality and development were) and it reflects (and prioritises) the values and principles of western culture. Newspaper media play a significant role in such cultures and hence an analysis of the *Guardian* allows us an insight into whether the discourse on 'vulnerability' has an impact on and affects the ways things are reported and indeed what gets reported; how it contributes to Western discourses about 'the other' (Said, 1978 and 1994).

## Brief Points about Representation

Representation is a cultural process and indeed, any representation is an expression of both power and culture (Gold and Reville, 2004, 9). A representation contains important insights into those who create it and those for whom it is intended. We can learn a great deal about dominant perceptions, views and presumptions of validity as well as about what is, and whose interests are, marginalised. This is why both presence and absence are important in the analysis of representations.

Representations can be read in many different ways – and someone else reading these same articles and images in the *Guardian* may have a different interpretation to the one I have. The meaning varies according to how we read the representations. There are dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings. My earlier reading (December 2004) was probably negotiated (as an academic you can never take everything for granted in total) but for the ARI/ Geography research seminar and this paper it has definitely been oppositional and critical.

The *Guardian* is a powerful part of the British media and as such it has the following specific powers which are produced by its authors, photographers and editors: the power to name, the power to represent commonsense, the power to create ‘official versions’, and the power to represent the legitimate social world. My disquiet is that, despite its left of centre political stance, the *Guardian* offers very little critical commentary of the kind put forward by Jeremy Seabrook - one article from a different perspective out of a total of 61!

As we shall see, the *Guardian*'s discursive practice is very much framed by hegemonic representations of *us* and *them*, and weaves aspects of the discourses of tropicality, development *and* vulnerability through its pages.

# The *Guardian's* Coverage of the Indian Ocean Tsunami, December 2004

This analysis proved to be much more complex than expected, and also very rich in terms of its 'connectivity' with the problematic aspects of 'vulnerability' discourse, as well as providing echoes of tropicality and development.

Throughout the articles and images there were a series of discourses and tropes that emerged often and repeatedly. They cannot all be covered in the space remaining so there is a focus on the ones which apparently lock into discourses of vulnerability, and in some cases overlap with discourses of tropicality and/or development. For this paper I draw upon three significant tropes within the *Guardian's* coverage which demonstrate predominant discourses around natural hazards and disasters and which illustrate Bankoff's critical engagement as well.

## *Technocratic and Vulnerability Discourse: The Trope of the Early Warning System*

Where to begin? Let us firstly look at the first page of the first coverage in print of the tsunami, on December 27, 2004. This article was written by John Aglionby, Patrick Barkham and John Vidal (the citations from this and other articles are all referenced by their discourse analysis codes rather than citing the authors. Full author details, where shown in the newspaper, are given in the reference list).

Clearly there is an intention to blame in this headline. The presumption is that a warning system would have saved thousands. Who are the calls coming from? From the local populations or from elsewhere? We need to read the whole article to see the full extent of the vulnerability and technocratic discourses at play, but we get a strong sense of what is being represented in the first line:

An early warning system that could have saved thousands of lives lost in the devastating tsunamis that swept around the rim of the Indian Ocean yesterday was talked about but not acted upon by governments in the region, it was revealed last night. (D04-1, 27.12.04, pp.1)

These governments therefore had been informed of the EWS (presumably by the West) but had chosen not to take the option and are consequently reckless when it comes to the protection of their own people. To back up the authors we read of the opinions of Western scientists:

The US Geological Survey said last night that most of the victims could have been saved if a tsunami warning system or tide gauges like those which warn countries around the Pacific Ocean had been in place.

Governments around the Indian Ocean did not act on discussions last year about introducing an early warning system, according to Robert Bradnock of Kings College, London. "Last year the Governments of South East Asia were discussing having an early warning system but because tsunamis are so rare there did not seem to be the energy behind it" Dr. Bradnock said. (D04-1, 27.12.04, pp. 1)

This technocratic perspective and discourse of 'uncaring' governments who created intense vulnerability and risk for their own populations is a recurring trope throughout the December coverage.

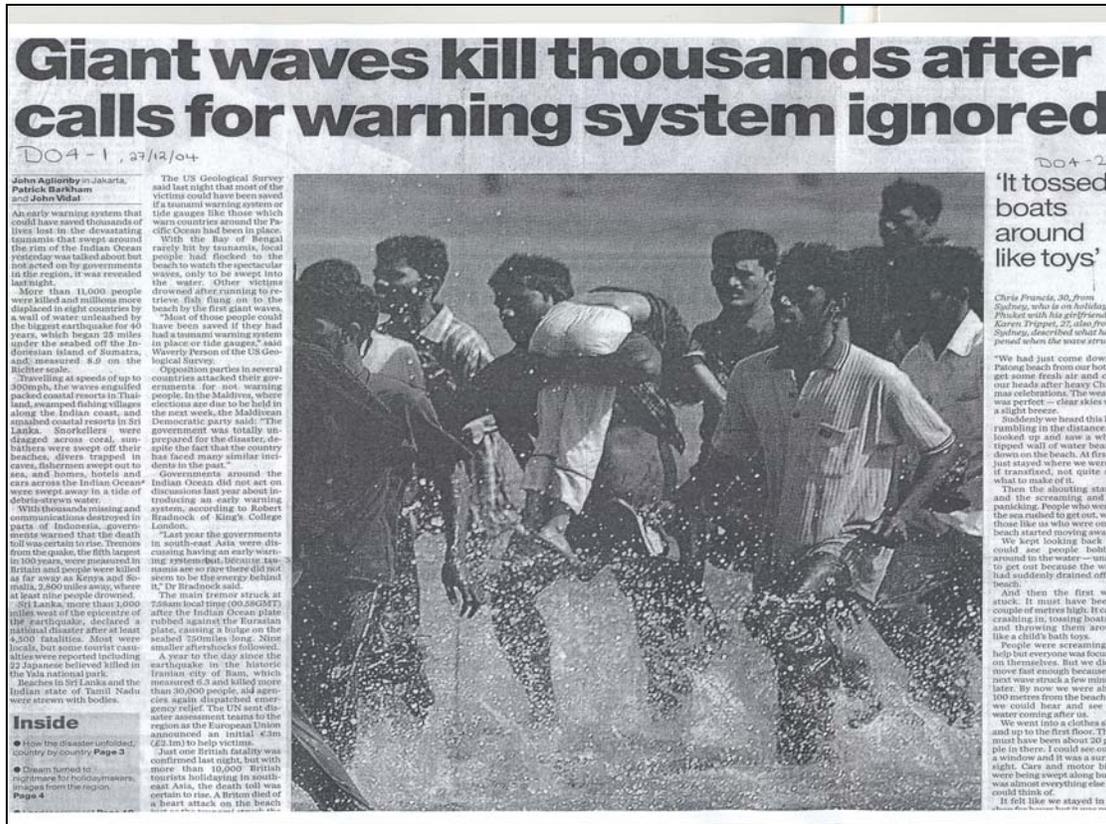


Figure 1 The Trope of the Early Warning system  
 Source: *Guardian*, analysis reference D04-1, 29/12/05, pp.1.

In the editorial comment column there was:

One issue which the international community must take up [...](:) whether a warning system, similar to that which is already in operation in the Pacific, would have been of any help. (D04-7, 27/12/04, pp. 19)

On December 28, the main article on the first page announced that:

Don Mckinnon, the Secretary General of the Commonwealth, called for talks on creating a global early warning system to issue alerts about tsunamis. There was little awareness of the potential danger from tsunamis in the region; the last big one in the Indian Ocean was in 1833. “At least two thirds of the people who died should not have died” a natural disaster expert, Bill McGuire of University College London, told the *Guardian*. “They could have had an hour or so to get a kilometre or two inland or to reach high ground”. (D04-8, 28/12/04, pp.1)

On page 6 of the same issue, this article ‘*How gigantic quakes occur*’ is sub-headed ‘Science’, with several quotes from Prof. Bill McGuire of University College London:

I’m not surprised by this [the tsunami] but *they’ve* never experienced one so *they* think one is never going to happen. There is a window of opportunity now to get a warning system set up because in a few years people will have forgotten about this. (D04-20, 28/12/04, pp.6, my emphasis)

The assumption that people will have forgotten is shocking – perhaps he means the West will have forgotten – people in the region affected will probably never forget. The article was followed by a very short one entitled, *Coastal communities: is it time to move?*, in which John Vidal (who writes a lot of articles on the tsunami) states:

The evidence is growing that a tsunami on this scale forces people to rethink how and where they live. (D04-21, 28/12/04, pp.6)

There is absolutely no mention in this piece of the responsibility of tourism development for pulling people to live and work on the coastal areas in some of the affected countries. One also has to wonder where fisher folk would reside. The assumption of ‘choice’ must be rethought as choices are often not freely open to everyone.

On the front page of the December 29 paper, we are given a specific group to ‘blame’ but there is no critical comment about the fact that Thailand has become so dependent on tourism.

In Thailand...government meteorology officials admitted that they deliberately played down the expected impact of the earthquake to protect the country’s tourist industry. (D04-22, 29/12/04, pp.1)

In the editorial comment entitled ‘*Learning from the disaster*’ we are told:

Too many of the victims are still unidentified and unburied, but it is already clear that a tsunami early warning system, like the one that has existed for almost 40 years in the Pacific, where seabed earthquakes are more common, could have helped save thousands, except perhaps in the areas closest to the epicentre...It beggars belief that the Government of Thailand, which had up to an hour to issue a warning, failed to do

so – partly for fear of the effect on the country’s lucrative tourism industry, which is of course now in ruins. (D04-34, 29/12/04, pp. 19)

On December 30, in a short article by Bill McGuire about how Britain needs a warning system too because we could be swamped by a tsunami while not being prepared, we find out about knowledge held in the West that could not be ‘transmitted’ because of a lack of structure:

Scientists at the United States Geological Survey tried *frantically* to get a warning message to the emergency authorities in countries in the path of the waves, but to no avail. In the absence of any established warning network, this is *hardly unexpected*.

[...]

Consequently while recognising that there was a tsunami threat, a recent *regional* disaster planning meeting determined that the relatively low risk of such events was outweighed by the cost of a warning system. In the last few days *Australian*, *Japanese* and Indian governments have all announced their intentions to help develop an Indian Ocean warning system. (D04-52, 30/12/04, pp. 18, my emphasis)

By 31<sup>st</sup> December, the function of an EWS has become a way of stopping the needless panics that have been triggered in India because of false warnings issued by the Government. This is by David Adam, the *Guardian’s* science correspondent:

A tsunami early warning system in the Indian Ocean could reduce the number of false alarms that triggered the panic in India yesterday.

[...]

Several countries around the Indian Ocean had discussed linking their tidal gauges with high speed broadband cables before the disaster. Establishing and maintaining such systems is crucial. A seismograph on the Indonesian island of Java failed to warn officials in Jakarta before the recent disaster because it was disconnected during an office move in 2000. (D04-64, 31/12/04, pp. 5)

Within the article there is the recognition that the sensors, which cost US\$2,000 each, have to be very carefully placed because they could miss a wave thus resulting in no warning. Hence the technological solution is not as efficient as we have been led to believe. But the implication is that even with technology *‘these’* governments/ scientists cannot utilise the equipment properly.

At the close of December coverage we have the following editorial comment. It follows a paragraph about the intense generosity of the British public which notes that some have argued that natural disasters inculcate greater generosity than those that are human-made such as war or corruption:

The fact that no one can be blamed for an unstoppable wall of water sent surging by the grinding of subterranean tectonic plates may explain why there had been

relatively little finger pointing, for example about the absence of a Pacific-style tsunami warning that could have saved thousands of lives. (D04-71, 31/12/04, pp. 21)

This statement elides the finger-pointing that took place in the coverage of the previous days, and begs the question of what *would* constitute a ‘discourse of blame’.<sup>4</sup>

Wider reading about the tsunami revealed an article by academic Richard Oloruntoba. At the very outset of his research which began on the day the tsunami hit, Oloruntoba discovered the following from websites accessed on December 30 which provides a different representation of the ‘early warning’ process:

There is already evidence that the US government had ample warning of the earthquake-driven tsunami, but did not communicate the information to the countries involved. US press reports indicate that the Pacific Warning Centre in Hawaii, a facility of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, detected the earthquake when it occurred and immediately warned of the likelihood of tidal waves generated by one of the largest tremors ever recorded.

Charles McCreery, director of the centre, confirmed that his team had transmitted warnings to the US Navy, the US State Department and the Government of Australia. The State Department claimed to have notified India, but the Indian government said it received no such warning in the two hours that elapsed between the quake off Sumatra and the tidal wave that hit the Indian coastline in the Southern province of Tamil Nadu. Nor did the Sri Lankan government receive a warning.

But one Indian Ocean island was promptly warned – the US military base on the British-controlled island of Diego Garcia...The US base about 1,000 miles south of India, directly in the path of the tsunami, reportedly suffered no damage. (2005, pp. 511)

Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore are members of the Pacific tsunami early warning system, which can detect events in the Indian Ocean, but it appears that membership does not mean automatic access to information. Hence, we must ask why the material was not shared and delivered.

So what does the repeated trope, we might even say obsession, of the early warning system show us? It is evidence of the pervasive and consistent belief in technological solutions and of the quickness to blame Third World governments for either failure or for not having structured systems to enable them to act effectively. There is just one short sentence by Bill McGuire which indicates that costs might be an issue of whether countries can establish such a system. The one other mention of the economic context of the hazard effectively accuses the Thai government of sacrificing people’s lives by not warning them in favour of the ‘lucrative’ tourist dollar. The scientific knowledge of the West is writ large; its problematic ‘use’ of this information is not discussed in the *Guardian* even though the details were available from December 30 onwards. The trope of the EWS represents a

hegemonic perspective about hazards and firmly re-inscribes the technocratic presumptions about hazard management. It also divides the world into *us* and *them*: *we* represent the scientific, knowledgeable and structured part of the world who try in vain to warn and encourage the other parts of the world (particularly the countries of the Indian Ocean) to use technology and protect their people.

*Vulnerability and Development Discourses: The Trope of Western Aid, Relief and Expertise*

From December 28 onwards there emerge commentaries and details of the ‘relief’ operation. It was extremely western-centric, and details the donations of ‘wealthy’ nations and the activities of international (but largely western based) NGOs and relief organisations. We heard from organisations such as OCHA, the UN body that co-ordinates emergency relief, Care International, Médecin Sans Frontières, Oxfam, and Red Cross/Crescent. I want to focus here on two representations delivered as annotated maps.

On December 29 there appeared to be sufficient knowledge of the aid and pledges made by the ‘wealthy’ nations of the world and parts of the UN. It is represented for us on a world map under the heading ‘Who is giving what’.

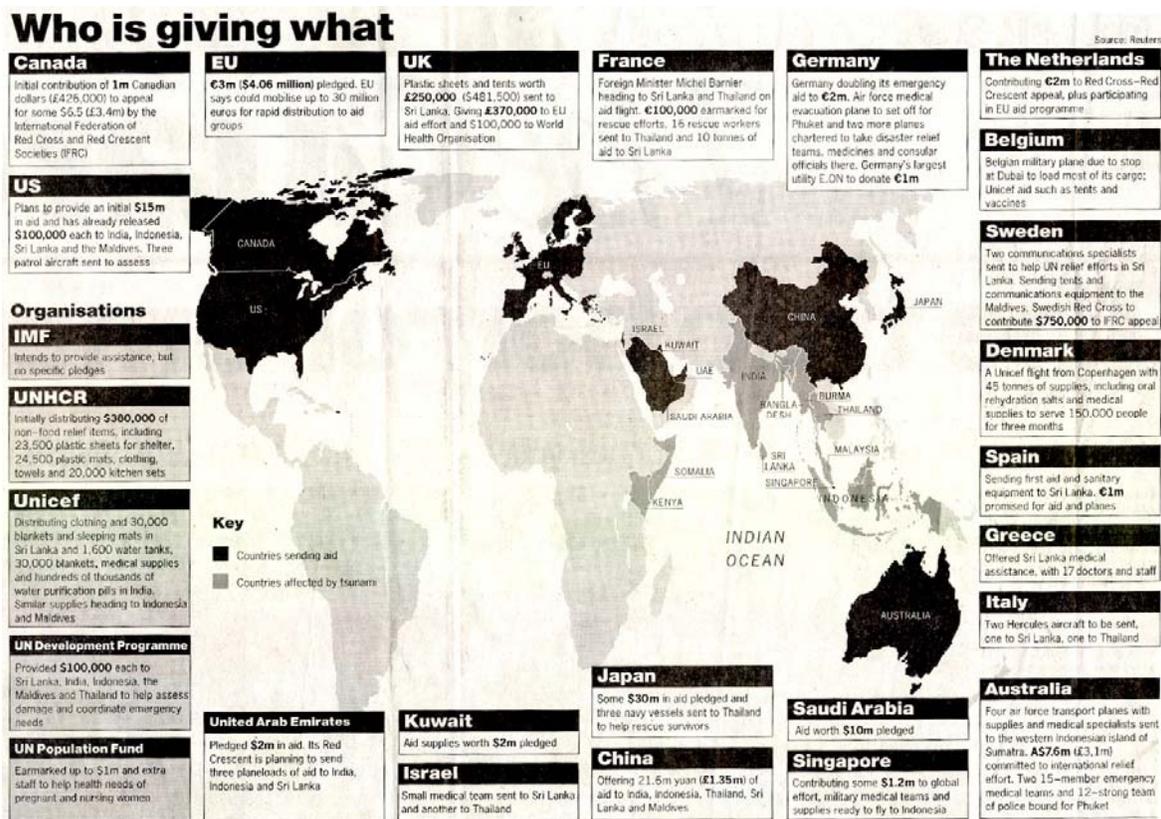


Figure 2 The Trope of Donors and Recipients  
Source: *Guardian*, analysis reference D04-24, 29/12/05, pp. 2.

The nations sending aid are shown in black and thus are clearly visible; the countries affected by the tsunami are shaded in grey; the 'rest of the world' is shown in an even paler grey. Visually the world is divided into donors and recipients. What is not shown here - indeed it is hardly mentioned at all (I have found two sentences about this so far) - is what the countries that have been affected are giving or doing. They are shown as passive, unable to cope, dependent on external and largely 'western aid'. The following photograph is of women and children being evacuated from the Andaman and Nicobar islands. They are in an Indian Air Force plane – one of the few mentions of countries showing some degree of action and participation in the rescue operation.

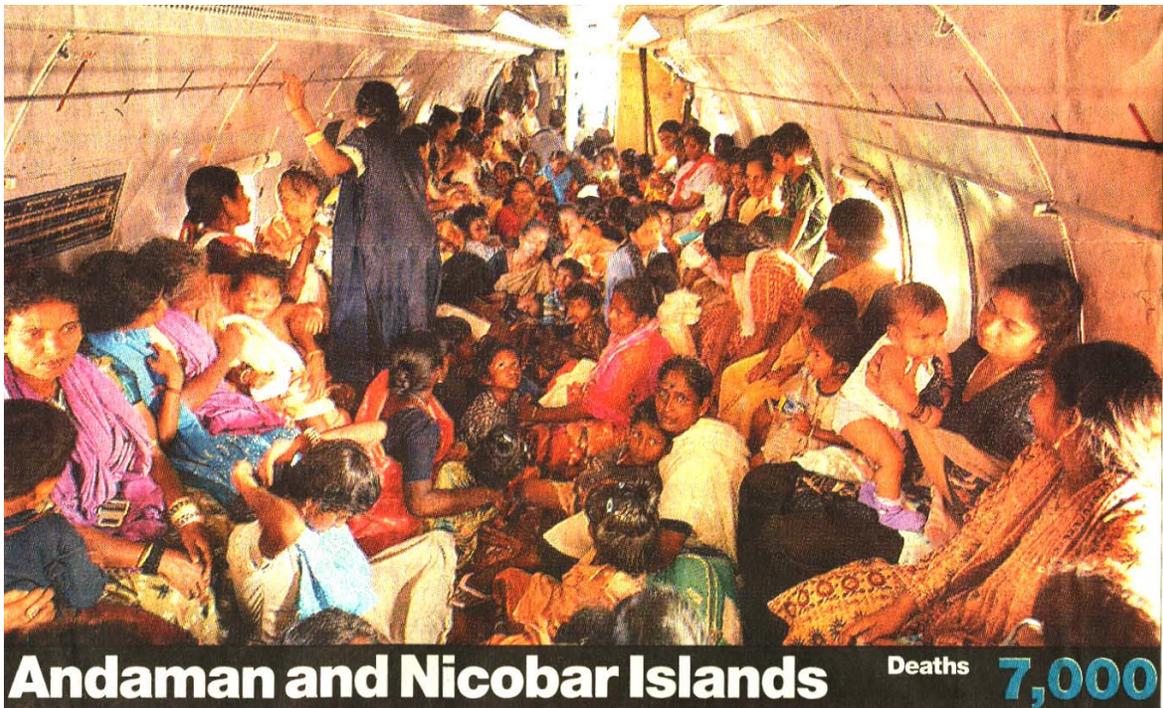


Figure 3 Women and Children Being Evacuated from the Nicobar Islands by an Indian Airforce Plane

Source: *Guardian*, analysis reference D04-30, 29/12/04, pp. 5.

The article connected with this map (figure 2) shows much concern about there needing to be co-ordination because '*experts warn disorganisation could cost lives*'. There are reports of calls from aid experts that the UN should co-ordinate the relief effort. Interestingly the USA, we learn later, has decided to by-pass the UN and work directly with India in conjunction with Australia and Japan. Indeed this 'group of 4' crop up in discussions quite regularly and of course Australia, Japan and India have already been reported as working together for an EWS.

On December 30 we encounter another map on page 4. That one charts the death tolls so far in some of the worst affected countries, as well as who has received what and from which organization.

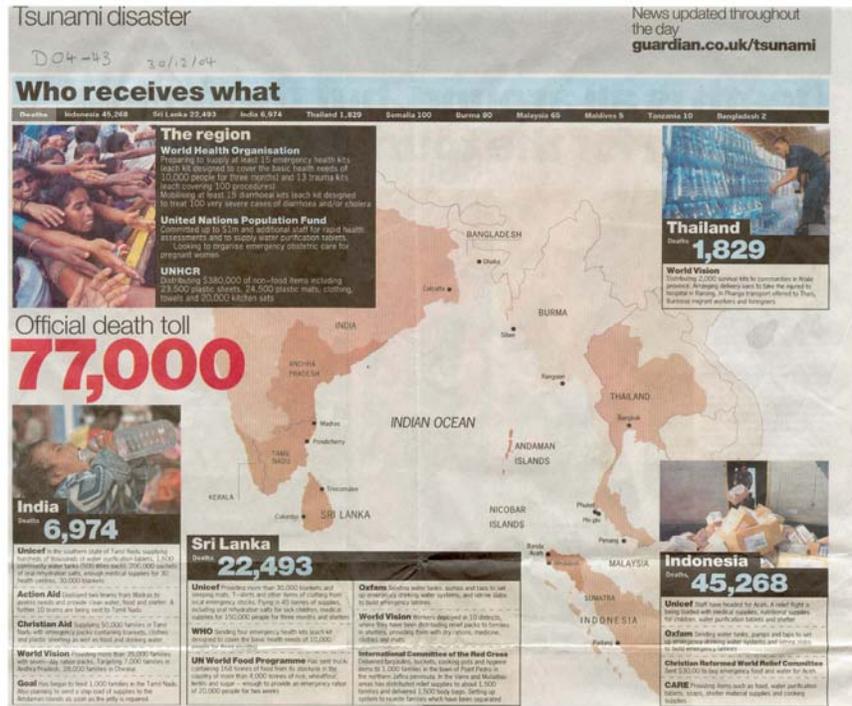


Figure 4 Geographical Representation of Receipts from Donors  
 Source: *Guardian*, analysis reference D04-43, 30/12/04, pp. 4.

What is striking here is the language. The organisations are constructed as givers and the countries, by default as the receivers. The verbs associated with the actions of ‘giver’ organisations are:

*Preparing to send; mobilising; distributing; supplying; deploying; providing; targeting; beginning to feed; planning; flying in; sending; delivering; setting up; arranging.*

The external aid and relief agencies are all active, agentic and ‘doing’ something; the tsunami affected countries are all in receipt, accepting and passive.

In the discussions of who gives what and who receives what there are no Indian Ocean affected countries listed as givers - they are all represented as recipients<sup>5</sup>. There is also no discussion of what people are doing within the affected communities – they are by implication passive victims, totally reliant on the largesse of the wealthier nations and populations.

Embedded within the discourse of giving/ aid/ relief there is also the notion of western expertise arriving in the affected countries. Implicit in much of the discussion is that the aid agencies from outside the region know best and they are fearful that local contexts will not make the best use of the resources sent in. There are also implied assumptions of chaos and a lack of systematic structures within the affected countries and not because these have been so badly affected by the tsunami but because such a lack of structures has always existed.

One of the biggest, costliest and most complex international relief efforts ever mounted got under way yesterday, with governments and aid organisations *sending money* and *aid teams* to bring *relief* to survivors of the Indian Ocean earthquake. (D04-15, 28/12/04, pp. 3, my emphasis)

British disaster assessment *experts* were on standby to fly there [the Maldives] last night. (D04-22, 29/12/04, pp. 1, my emphasis)

Assessing needs in areas with disrupted communications and on isolated islands is a formidable challenge, as are the logistical complexities of delivering aid. (Jan Egeland, chief UN relief co-ordinator, D04-15, 28/12/04, pp.3)

Aid agencies are right to avoid rushing in until they can be confident that *their* resources will be put to the most effective use. (D04-34, 29/12/04, pp.19, my emphasis)

“The necessary distribution systems are not in place,” a foreign aid worker said. “The co-ordination needs to be improved and quickly.” (D04-37, 30/12/04, pp. 2)

[In Thailand] work was being hampered by a shortage of equipment, heat and the fear of aftershocks. German, Swedish and Taiwanese specialist teams have now arrived. (D04-41, 30/12/04, pp 3)

These commentaries reinforce the notion of dependency and victimhood; countries affected by the tsunami are constructed as being unable to help themselves. The discussions which include interviews with aid agencies represent the situation as one of immediate need but also of long term commitment to *intervention* so that effective rebuilding and redevelopment can be put into place. However this is always couched in the context of external aid and support and there is little acknowledgement of locally-based practices or knowledge – something that proponents of the vulnerability analysis and Bankoff himself present as highly problematic.

### *Vulnerability and Tropicality: Tropes of Decay, Heat and Disease*

One of the most repeated tropes through language and imagery is that of bodies. I cannot go into all the configurations of aspects of the representations here but I want to pull out the elements that demonstrate that the ‘old story’, as Bankoff calls it, of tropicality is apparently alive and well. It is also connected with vulnerability because of the assumed risk of disease which threatens the survivors; and of course the notion of deadly tropical diseases echoes tropicality and the problems associated with the ‘warm climates’.

Throughout the five days of the December coverage by the *Guardian* we are often shown bodies. These are also referred to as corpses. In the very first photograph of the first day on the first page the body of a young girl is shown being carried out of the water (see figure one).<sup>6</sup>

On the 4<sup>th</sup> page of this first day there is a photograph of two rescued white men – assumed to be tourists – travelling in the back of a truck with the bodies of two victims (Thailand). We know nothing about the bodies.

One of the constructions around these bodies is their sheer number. While specific figures for the death toll are not known in the early reports because of the problems of communication, we are told that there are bodies everywhere. In tourist areas there are bodies on the beach – something we might expect but these are not sunbathers, they are corpses. In other non-tourist places such as Banda Aceh the bodies are always described and shown as being on the streets. The authorities cannot cope with the number.

On December 28, on the front page, Jonathan Steele reports from a mortuary in Panadura, Sri Lanka under the heading ‘*Another body another wail*’

The Panadura hospital has only eight refrigerated chambers, and bodies were spilling out into the open yesterday, some laid out on the grass, several on the concrete floor of the mortuary, and a few on battered trolleys in the sun. (D04-9, 28/12/04, pp. 1)

On December 29 the following was the front page picture with the caption: *unidentified bodies laid out at a military hospital in Banda Aceh, where more than 7,000 are thought to have died, and where there are critical shortages of body bags and disinfectant.*



Figure 5 Tropes of Bodies, Decay and Disease  
Source: *Guardian*, analysis reference, D04-22, 29/12/04, pp. 1.

The main headline above these bodies is ‘*The true horror emerges*’. This is meant to depict the horror of the number of deaths, but without contextualisation, it could also be read as the horror of what all these bodies might mean. They might mean infection, disease, decay and consequently a threat to survivors of the region but also beyond that in the form of some kind of a wide-spread contamination.

Articles from December 28 onwards are ridden with references to bodies and

corpses. These bodies are *bloated, contorted, beyond recognition, unidentified, left hanging from trees, being washed up by the tide, buried under rubble, slammed into trees, uncollected, putrefying, smelling, mangled, rotting in the open, falling apart in the sun, decomposing in the tropical heat, unburied*. They are photographed and their images are posted outside mortuaries and temples in the hope that someone recognises them and can identify them.

These bodies then become a risk; they are identified as a potential cause of disease which threatens the survivors. They are also a threat to the hospitals and health services which are already overwhelmed.

It is also a race against time to prevent more deaths from *disease*, hunger and thirst. (D04-15, 28/12/04, pp. 3)

Hospitals and health services were already overwhelmed and may not be able to cope with people who fall ill with disease' (D04-22, 29/12/04, pp.1)

The UN has warned that as many people could be killed by diseases as perished in Sunday's disaster. (D04-38, 30/12/04, pp. 1)

Headline: *Cholera, typhoid and malaria: the deadly threats facing survivors* (D04-44, 30/12/04, pp. 4)

Under the heading *Deaths, new dangers and relief efforts* (D04-46, 30/12/04, pp. 5) there are snapshot reports from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, India, Maldives, East Africa and these are mentions of disease:

*Indonesia*: Relief workers warned of the imminent risk of disease

*Sri Lanka*: disease prevention, providing shelter or the rapid burial of bodies were the top priority in the unprecedented emergency.

*Thailand*: Andre Stulz, a German aid worker in Phuket, said the danger of epidemics was growing by the hour.

*India*: Yesterday, 56 teams of paramedics began vaccinating more than 65,000 people in districts of Tamil Nadu state in a bid to prevent epidemics.

Doctors reported that disease was beginning to take hold in some of the relief camps set up in Sri Lanka. (D04-53, 31/12/04, pp. 1)

Bill Sheehan, an American volunteer helping register the dead [so probably not a medical expert, my intervention] said there was a high risk of cholera and other diseases unless the Thais acted quickly, "The bodies are simply falling apart now. Some of them have been out in the sun for five days". (D04-62, 31/12/04, pp. 4)

The threat of dead bodies to the living is that they will spread disease, especially as they decompose in the tropical heat. The response to this threat is to bury or burn the corpses as

quickly as possible even if they have not been identified. Western expertise comes to the fore again:

British forensic experts flew into Thailand yesterday to support increasingly desperate efforts to identify hundreds of victims of last Sunday's tsunami before authorities are forced to burn or bury bodies to prevent an outbreak of disease. (D04-62, 31/12/04, pp. 4)

However, the *Guardian*, in the midst of this repeated discourse of dead bodies causing disease reported on the following, quoted here at length because it demonstrates the internal contradictions held in tension by the newspaper. Here we have scientific expert research discounting a particular myth that contributes to the discourses of tropicality and vulnerability. However, the *Guardian* unquestioningly persists with the myth of dead bodies cause disease in several articles (as reported above) after this date, 30/12/04.

The idea that dead bodies are a hazard is "one of the biggest myths of disease", said Gregory Hartl, spokesman for the World Health Organisation. "Bodies themselves do not cause disease. Most viruses can only survive at temperatures of 38C." Within an hour or so of death, he said, there is little danger of infection even if the person has died of an infectious disease.

'Somebody handling a body immediately after death should take the precaution of wearing gloves, but they are not a public health hazard,' he said.

A study carried out this year by Oliver Morgan of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine found that, in natural disasters, people usually die of their injuries and are unlikely to have infections that cause epidemics. (D04-44, 30/12/04, pp. 4)

The report goes on to discuss the fact that contaminated water supplies are the most dangerous and diarrhoeal disease was likely to be the most common problems, and of course this is particularly dangerous for children. Safe water is therefore the key priority, not the disposal of bodies, if the central concern is the health of the survivors.

## Some Tentative Conclusions

This working paper has shown that even parts of the media, which are respected for their critical investigations and incisive journalism, can perpetuate hegemonic discourses. The *Guardian* is well-respected for its critical voice in the UK, especially in relation to British politics and practices of injustice. However, in its coverage of the Indian Ocean tsunami, in the five days that have been analysed here, it has managed to establish key tropes which construct and represent the affected parts of the world in ways which echo Bankoff's discourses of tropicality, development and vulnerability. The Western discourses of technological and engineering solutions to so-called natural disaster, the constructed binaries of a world of donors and recipients and the mythologizing, and perhaps even fetishising, of dead bodies serve particular Western cultural and political hegemonies. They construct the West as expert, the holders of life-saving knowledge, providers and saviours. They also represent the Indian Ocean countries as chaotic, foolish, and as recipients and victims.

Many people in the UK felt some attachment to the places affected because so many had been there, had met people or knew people who had been to these particular geographical spaces and consequently donated record-breaking sums of money to the emergency appeals. However, the *Guardian's* coverage of the tsunami has done nothing to contradict commonsensical understandings, to counter widely held 'official versions' of the poorer parts of the world or to disrupt and critique western constructions of so-called poorer geographies. This is an opportunity missed. At a time of sympathetic senses of connectivity between people across time and space, something challenging in the name of social justice should have happened, in this newspaper in particular.

While the readers are hungry for information it is essential that the information is accurate and balanced. The early narratives of any headlined story are the ones that embed in the collective memory. The early images are the ones seen again and again in the mind's eye. Hence, it is essential that there is a critical interrogation of what is told and how it is told. This analysis has shown that the *Guardian's* December 2004 reportage connected with 'old stories' of tropicality, development and vulnerability. The tsunami-affected countries are represented as defenceless, vulnerable and misruled. There is evidence that aspects of these representations are accurate, especially in the context of Indonesia and the government's treatment of Aceh. However, the factors relating to defencelessness, vulnerability and misrule are also linked to the position of these nations and their citizens in the global economy. The devastation of the affected 'Indian Ocean' countries has a great deal to do with the West. That is a story that should also have been told.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There can also be disasters when a hazard impacts upon the environment, such as oil spills, which might not kill people but have a dreadful impact on environments and ecology.
- <sup>2</sup> It is important to note that many of Thailand's tourists come from south east Asia, 5.8 million of them in 2003. This of course forces us to ask questions about the notion of 'foreign' and/or 'Western' tourists which prevailed as terms in the press. Many non-westerners also lost their lives simply because they too were somewhere on holiday.
- <sup>3</sup> The *Guardian* carries several articles about the insurance losses that European companies may or may not have to bear as a result of the tsunami. A spokesperson for the reinsurance giant SwissRe spoke with relief about the fact that most people in the poorer countries will have not been insured or will have insured with local firms.
- <sup>4</sup> I am not arguing here that the Governments of the region are blameless. Clearly this is not the case. Indeed the criticism of the region's governments by the Western press was welcomed by many citizens of the affected regions because it was stating what those actually resident in the countries often could not. It created an important space in which other critical debates could be raised. However, a discourse analysis of these internal commentaries is beyond the scope of this paper but I am grateful to Prof. Phil Kelly and Dr. Tim Bunnell for these important insights.
- <sup>5</sup> Thanks to the comments made by Kanchan Gandhi after the ARI/ Geography seminar, it was made clear that India decided upon and carried out its own relief effort in a very effective way. This was reported in *The Hindu* but none of this was discussed in the December coverage of *The Guardian*. India's self sufficiency does not fit with the donor/recipient discourse.
- <sup>6</sup> The image of the men running from the water with the central male figure wrapping a strong arm around the girl's body is particularly poignant in the context of the personal stories reported in the *Guardian*. In so many of the narratives fathers and mothers talk of how they could not keep hold of their children as the waves swept by and so they lost them completely.

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