

Liza Potts, *Social Media in Disaster Response: How Experience Architects Can Build for Participation*. NY & Oxon: Routledge, 2014. 143pp. ISBN-13: 978-0415817417 US\$ 40.27 (pbk)
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In *Social Media in Disaster Response*, Liza Potts pens an ambitious manifesto for a more participatory media ecosystem, inviting both academics and industry specialists to work collaboratively and become 'experience architects' in the digital age. Potts defines experience architects as leaders who can 'coordinate if not guide the activities of design and development teams' to address gaps in existing communications infrastructures. Using recent events of disaster and conflict as her case studies, she illustrates failures of existing platforms—news websites, photo-sharing pages, and Google documents—to actualize the potentials of technology for information dissemination and collective mobilization in disaster response. This book proposes a toolkit that an interdisciplinary audience of communications researchers, professional and technical communicators, and systems designers can then use to learn from participants using social networks in disasters to more effectively collect data, authenticate information, and share knowledge in the future.

Potts, with her infectiously enthusiastic prose, is convincing to an extent. The passion by which she argues for both humanists and technologists to champion 'participant-centered research methods' and become 'active participants in the communities for which they design' (p. 3) immediately appeals to scholars working on digital media as 'practice' (Couldry 2012) and technologists celebrating an age of people-centered 'digital humanitarianism' (Meier 2015). Her approach to media as holistic ecosystems rather than discrete texts or platforms resonates with recent trends to analyze media as an environment (Silverstone 2007), 'polymedia' (Madianou & Miller 2012), and 'media-manifold' (Couldry 2012).

However, in the book's dual interests to on one hand sensitively describe the diverse media uses in disasters, and on the other hand prescribe frameworks for administrative organization and leadership, some nuance and complexity are lost in the analysis. For instance, while she gestures towards the need to 'understand the frustrations of participants who must often negotiate often-broken systems... in high-stakes situations' (p. 5), the voices of participants are entirely absent in the book despite her spending 'nearly a decade studying the use of social web tools in the wake of mass shootings, hurricanes, earthquakes, acts of terrorism, and other disasters' (p. 9). In addition, while she argues the need to *design* social media as holistic 'experiences', her *analyses* of the CNN's Safe List in Hurricane Katrina, Flickr photo-sharing in the 7/7 London bombings, and Google spreadsheets in the Mumbai terror attacks end up being critiques of discrete texts and individual platforms. Potts' consistent tirade throughout the book is against the 'walled gardens of closed systems' (pp 84-86), which she finds evident in non-interactive news websites or social media platforms with strong gatekeepers. Yet, it is hard to share her vexation with this particular feature of the media ecosystem as they apply during disasters: how indeed can increased user participation be a foundational principle of a media architecture when it elides the inherent inequalities of media ownership and access in a competitive and profit-driven environment? And where is the evidence that tagging photos to their correct site of disaster corresponds with addressing the actual needs and improving the wellbeing of disaster-affected populations (Ong & Madianou 2015)?

As such, critical ethnographers (of digital media or disasters) may find the book's descriptive sections as detached and uncommitted, while solutionists in technology and humanitarian sectors may consider the toolkit for action as seductive in rhetoric yet lacking in specifics given its silence about the messy processes of regulation and implementation. It is best then to approach *Social Media in Disaster Response* as a manifesto of principles by which to begin a long difficult

discussion rather than a handy practitioner blueprint or a deep disaster narrative. The book is most useful for technical and professional communicators and students eager for greater interdisciplinarity in their work and curious to find how they contribute to other areas of research.

References

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