

INTRODUCTION

A DECADE OF DISASTER

The World Trade Center towers burned and crumbled to the ground on live television as millions watched in awe, horror, and anguish. They watched alone or with loved ones, at home or at work, on television or online. Some stayed online and shared their thoughts, recollections, and fears with anonymous others. Some donated money, gave blood, volunteered their time. Some bought American flags, patriotic bumper stickers, memorial T-shirts and trinkets. Some bought bigger, safer cars; home security systems; even parachutes designed to save executives in skyscrapers from similar attacks in the future. And some made speeches, pushed policies, passed legislation that steered the country's recovery and shifted the national character in the new, post-9/11 reality.

So, too, did millions watch as New Orleans was flooded four years later, its poorest neighborhoods destroyed, its poorest residents stranded on rooftops and in a poorly organized mass shelter at the Superdome. They were, once again, horrified, saddened, angered. Again, these distant spectators sat glued to the television, or went online, or donated time or money, or bought music or T-shirts to benefit Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. Some even purchased rooftop escape hatches to help them avoid the fates of those who were trapped in attics and consumed by floodwaters, should a similar disaster occur

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in the future. And again the government responded, though belatedly and ineffectively, as the country struggled to come to terms with the destruction of one of its major cities and cultural centers.

A year and a half later, millions again tuned in to breaking news coverage as an alienated and unstable student at Virginia Tech shot and killed thirty-two of his fellow students, and himself. They watched shaken and shocked students stagger out of classrooms into a pool of cameras and microphones. They watched two days later as portions of the shooter's deranged and violent multimedia manifesto were broadcast on major television news programs. They gave money to scholarship funds, bought the school's athletic apparel as a show of solidarity, and checked in on social networking sites with students at Tech and other universities. And Virginia politicians began a massive inquiry into what went wrong and what could have been prevented, while broader national debates about gun control and mental health were reflected in the speeches of pundits and politicians, though never in any subsequent federal legislation.

A year and a half after that, the sudden collapse of venerable investment bank Lehman Brothers signaled the beginning of another disaster, a massive global recession erasing billions in wealth and causing waves of evictions and unemployment across the country. Millions watched the less spectacular but frequently ominous footage of white-collar workers carrying boxes out of their emptying offices or heard the fearful pronouncements from news anchors and politicians about a potential meltdown of the global economy. Even the normal, twenty-four-hour-a-day coverage of the presidential race between John McCain and Barack Obama was superseded by a series of revelations about the insolvency of large financial institutions. This disaster ultimately resulted in the passage of highly controversial bank bailout legislation and other, smaller economic stimulus measures, none of which successfully reignited the American economy in the ways their creators had hoped. Meanwhile, Americans began to radically change their spending habits, out of either fear or necessity, as companies attempted to shift their marketing and advertising strategies to match the new frugality of panicked, economically insecure consumers.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Americans watched as mass media, consumer culture, big business, and national politics

both shaped and were shaped by the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, and the financial crisis of 2008. Although each of these disasters was the focus of extensive news coverage, political debate, and popular culture, efforts to rebuild have been slow, at best, and often ineffective, particularly at instituting the safeguards necessary to prevent similar calamities in the future. The financial crisis has not resulted in meaningful prosecution of bankers or strong legislation to prevent future financial collapse. The shootings at Virginia Tech did not spur new gun control laws. Hurricane Katrina has only exacerbated the racial and class inequality that made the government's poor response so problematic in the first place. Even the massive post-9/11 security and surveillance apparatus has not seemed to decrease the sense of threat posed by terrorism. Although such failures have not gone unnoticed, they also have not sustained the high levels of concern that these disasters initially generated. Why is this? Why do we care so much about the live broadcasting of mass tragedies and give so much money to disaster relief efforts, only to quickly accept that the work is done, that the problem is over? Why, despite so many admonitions to *never forget*, do we seem to do just that—at least when it comes to the big, long-term solutions that disaster prevention tends to require?

Part of the explanation certainly lies in the narrow and formulaic ways that we engage with disasters and tragedies today and the kinds of outcomes that such engagement both constrains and enables. Although these were all very different disasters with vastly different death tolls, economic costs, cultural effects, and political ramifications, they followed surprisingly similar paths through public consciousness. These paths included an initial flurry of attention in which they dominated the media landscape in a highly spectacular and emotional fashion; followed by a broad response from a wide range of producers, advertisers, entrepreneurs, and politicians; then a slow tapering off of public attention and emotional investment, coupled with a backlash over the media coverage or mass consumption of the events themselves.

The January 26, 2011, issue of the satirical newspaper *The Onion* captured the backlash concerning September 11 in an article entitled “Congress Honors 9/11 First Capitalizers.” It described the passage of

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a fictional “9/11 First Capitalizers Act,” designed to honor those “who sensed the direness of the moment and immediately sprang into action on that terrible day, exploiting it for personal profit” (“Congress Honors 9/11 First Capitalizers” 2011, 1). Included in this group were “not only those who rushed to Ground Zero immediately to sell merchandise, participate in photo ops, or advance an ideological agenda, but also those who profited from afar by producing jingoistic songs and TV specials, or mentioning 9/11 in stump speeches as a way of scaring people into voting for them” (“Congress Honors 9/11 First Capitalizers” 2011, 7). Although the article singled out some real-life “capitalizers” such as the country musician Toby Keith, the filmmaker Oliver Stone, Halliburton’s chief executive David Lesar, and George W. Bush, it also described a forty-eight-year-old woman named Linda Banks “who continues to trot out her maudlin, self-serving story of where she was on 9/11 every single time she sees an opportunity” (“Congress Honors 9/11 First Capitalizers” 2011, 7). The article closed by stating that a special plaque would be erected on the National Mall “containing the names of all 12,554,310 Americans who eventually capitalized on the tragedy” through “advertising, partisan rhetoric, forgettable novels, defense contracts, and all-around cheap, manipulative sentimentalism” (“Congress Honors 9/11 First Capitalizers” 2011, 7).

Although the “9/11 First Capitalizers Act” is a fabrication, the criticism behind this satire is quite real. Many commentators have been bothered by the roles of mass media and consumer culture in the American public’s response to the September 11 attacks, and the political uses to which that response was ultimately put. Some, such as social theorist Frederic Jameson, argued that the public’s emotional reaction to 9/11 constituted a kind of “utterly insincere” hysteria (Jameson 2002, 297). Others, such as the film critic Anthony Lane, were troubled by the degree to which viewers’ responses to the spectacle of the attacks mimicked everyday forms of cinema spectatorship. He asked, “Where have you heard those expressions most recently—the wows, the whoohs, the holy shits—if not in movie theatres, and even on your own blaspheming tongue” (Lane 2001, para. 2)?

Whether aimed at the news media, real estate developers, Hollywood producers, souvenir vendors, government officials, or American consumers, these types of ethical, aesthetic, and political condemna-

tions formed a countercurrent to the tide of mainstream public opinion immediately after September 11. As the decade continued, subsequent disasters generated similar processes of mediation, consumption, and, some would say, exploitation, which were often the subject of similar rebukes. Just as many held that tourism at the Ground Zero site was a morally dubious activity, so, too, did people come to perceive travel to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina as a potentially ghoulish act. As one disaster recovery volunteer with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recalled on a website devoted to the storm, “It was not without reservation that I went to St. Bernard parish. I felt like—I was a voyeur in their neighborhood.” This charge of voyeurism, this unease about viewing intimate details of others’ suffering from a safe distance, appeared again in 2007 after the shootings at Virginia Tech. NBC News was flooded with criticism online and in print after it decided to air parts of the shooter Seung-Hui Cho’s digital manifesto, and some victims and their families canceled their scheduled television appearances on the network as a result (A. Johnson 2007). Writing in *Advertising Age*, the media columnist Simon Dumenco assailed the news networks for their crass “Massacre at Virginia Tech” graphics, arguing, “We’ve come to the point at which murderous psychopaths and TV news executives are of the same mind when it comes to human tragedy: It’s a branding opportunity” (Dumenco 2007, 34). It seems that when otherwise normal forms of commerce, entertainment, politics, or mass communication take disasters as their subjects or inspiration, they often rankle the sensibilities of many Americans.

Yet many more engage in precisely these types of activities each time a disaster strikes. Even *The Onion* recognized this situation by asserting that more than twelve million people had “capitalized” on the events of 9/11 in some fashion and thus deserved the sarcastic inclusion of their names on an honorific plaque. If watching a disaster on television or visiting a disaster site makes one a voyeur, if reacting to a disaster emotionally is insincere, if using a disaster to make a political point is exploitative, and if creating a product, service, or work of art that responds to a disaster is simply a way to capitalize on tragedy, then very few Americans have escaped the past decade ethically untarnished. The simple fact is that most Americans, and many others across the globe, rely on mass media and consumer culture to

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provide the resources through which we experience, understand, and respond to pain, tragedy, and loss—even, or perhaps especially, when they occur on such a massive scale.

In the wake of this decade of disaster, each of us has had to negotiate a stunning variety of images, texts, products, and services that address the harrowing realities of multiple crises and catastrophes. These negotiations, and the moral condemnations that sometimes accompany them, suggest that the norms concerning appropriate personal, commercial, and political responses to disasters are in the process of shifting and that a consensus on these matters is only beginning to emerge. Norms are the codes of conduct that delineate culturally acceptable behavior and that mark certain ways of seeing the world as legitimate or appropriate. “Just as sets of mutually consistent norms help regulate behavior, so sets of inconsistent or rapidly shifting norms . . . are often regarded as a symptom, if not a cause, of social unrest” (Hechter and Opp 2001, xi). Such unrest—or, at least, widespread unease—was evident almost immediately after September 11: one poll taken two weeks after the attacks found that 53 percent of Americans were very or somewhat worried that they or someone in their family “might become a victim of a terrorist attack” (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2001c). Two years later, 75 percent of Americans felt that the world had become a more dangerous place (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2003). In 2009, 58 percent of Americans still felt that way (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2009). By the end of the decade, in addition to these fears about terrorism, Americans’ financial security had also been shaken: a full 70 percent of Americans had experienced a problem related to their job or personal finances (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2010b). It makes sense, then, that a period in which Americans from all walks of life had their sense of personal safety and economic security shaken would expose rifts and fractures in normative structures concerning not only disasters but also the larger role of mass media and consumer culture in American life.

This work explores the interwoven fabric of news, entertainment, advertising, commodities, and other services through which Americans came to experience disasters in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Within this fabric are threaded several important norms

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concerning the appropriate emotional, commercial, and political responses to disasters. These are often complementary, though occasionally contradictory, but taken together they explain the contemporary appeal of disaster consumption. Although many Americans are bothered by the consumption of catastrophe, many more actively participate in it—and, perhaps more accurately, those two groups need not be seen as mutually exclusive. Instead, individuals today are tasked with navigating the shifting cultural standards concerning forms of disaster spectatorship and consumerism that they may experience as morally appropriate, personally therapeutic, or, in extreme cases, ethically repugnant.

This book argues that disasters stand out from the rest of mass media and consumer culture because of their connection, however tenuous, to *the real* and because of the emotional power that such a connection generates. Typical elements of mass culture get disrupted by disasters, as do the cynical and ironic perspectives of audiences and consumers. Instead, the texts, products, websites, and other mediated experiences that stem from disasters are marked as different from the rest of popular culture by the traces of real loss and real pain that they signify. These traces, when clearly identifiable via certain aesthetic and performative cues, signal to audiences and consumers that it is OK, and even laudable, to be moved emotionally. In fact, this has become a norm or obligation—to allow oneself to empathize with distant victims of disasters and tragedies.

For instance, five days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the *New York Times* discussed the details about the lives of the victims that had begun to emerge. “We are just now getting to know these people, the missing and the dead. Their stories carry a weight no one expected because they are such ordinary stories” (“The Faces Emerge” 2001). One sees in this ordinariness an important marker of authenticity, one that allows readers to forge a specific kind of emotional connection to these victims. As the *Times* put it:

No person is interchangeable with another, but we all understand how interchangeable these . . . stories might have been if the timing of the attacks and the ultimate collapse of the towers had been different. The dividing line between those who made

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it out and those who didn't is inexplicable. We are also learning how to recognize in the tales the obituaries tell, and in the profiles of the victims we see on television, how interchangeable we might have been with those who died. Their lives resembled ours more closely than we can let ourselves imagine. ("The Faces Emerge" 2001)

Despite the rhetorical flourish that this is all "more than we can let ourselves imagine," such imagination is precisely what the quote encourages from its readers. Indeed, the passage makes the case that these victims' stories are valuable because of the sort of personal, empathetic reflection they engender. While such engagement with the suffering of others is not necessarily, as some critics would have it, insincere or voyeuristic, the irony of disaster consumption resides in the fact that the catastrophes and crises experienced as the most real, the most harrowing, the most authentic contain the greatest potential for steering or manipulating public opinion. Indeed, the most seemingly authentic disasters ultimately can have the most inauthentic political ends. At the very least, the harrowing spectacle of mass-mediated disaster provides no guarantee that institutions will take the appropriate measures to safeguard us from future calamities. Far from it.

Instead, the assumption that consuming catastrophe allows us to learn from these tragedies and improve ourselves and our society as a result is often shattered when the next disaster strikes. For example, another *New York Times* editorial took the occasion of the four-year anniversary of the September 11 attacks to ponder Hurricane Katrina's recent devastation. "It took a day or two after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast to understand that it could affect our feelings about what happened at the World Trade Center, at the Pentagon and in rural Pennsylvania" ("Revising 9/11" 2005). Lamenting the fact that "everyone did not behave well" and "the federal government was less prepared than it had been" before 9/11, the authors were forced to revise the "tidy story arc" about 9/11 in which "mistakes were made, but we would learn from them, and wind up stronger and better prepared" ("Revising 9/11" 2005).

This shock at the repetition of disasters, this disappointment at the lack of lessons learned, is a common feature of disaster media.

After the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007, comparisons to the mass shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 were, of course, commonplace. As the *Times* once again exclaimed, “Sympathy was not enough at the time of Columbine, and eight years later, it is not enough” (“Eight Years after Columbine” 2007). Yet sympathy and empathy are often all that we, as distant spectators of others’ misfortune, have to give.

The book thus tells the story of how authenticity came to be a crucial element in the mass-mediation of disaster; how the authenticity of disasters works in tandem with the rise of empathy as a cultural norm; how empathy is connected to other emotions, such as fear and trust; how this focus on empathy for suffering others gets channeled toward the individualistic rather than the communal; and how this individualism makes disasters amenable to the manipulation of elites and reactionary forces. Ultimately, it argues that the *ineffability* of disasters—their stubborn refusal to provide a full understanding, or a complete catharsis, to their distant spectators—makes them a particularly powerful force in contemporary American mass culture. In fact, this quality encourages a kind of *empathetic hedonism*, in which the desire to understand the suffering of others is pursued doggedly, though always necessarily unsatisfactorily. But how did we arrive at this point?

The contemporary consumption of disaster is itself the product of a history of shifts in ways of knowing and responding to the suffering of others. The invention of the printing press first made tales of misfortunes suffered by distant others available to mass audiences, and discourse on the appropriate moral and political responses to such suffering has been a feature of social life since at least the Enlightenment. But the speed, frequency, and intimacy of our exposure to others’ suffering has increased exponentially with the growth of consumer culture and the rapid development of a host of mass-media technologies. Today, audiences and consumers engage with disasters and tragedies through television news programs, reality television shows, documentary films, and digital archives, as well as the myriad other commodities that cater to some aspect of disasters—comic books with patriotic themes, T-shirts or records that benefit disaster-related charities, home and office security devices designed to protect against

future disasters, and social networking sites devoted to sharing one's grief over a mass tragedy, to name a few examples. Thus, to fully understand the consumption and mediation of recent disasters such as September 11, Hurricane Katrina, the Virginia Tech shootings, and the 2008 financial crisis, one must explore the very development of the modern public sphere, as well as its recent transformations.

Disaster sociologists might find the grouping together of these events problematic inasmuch as the social disruption and social changes in communities affected by these disparate events have varied greatly (see Quarantelli and Dynes 1977). But the farther one moves away from victimized communities, or the more distant and mediated one's experience of a disaster becomes, then the more likely it becomes that these events will be experienced through similar cultural frameworks. Although the processes by which communities respond to and cope with disasters have been expertly investigated by sociologists such as Kai Erikson (1976, 1994), Eric Klinenberg (2002), Thomas Drabek (2010), and many others, the effects of disasters on national audiences who experience them only through media images and mass commodities remain less thoroughly explored within this sociological subdiscipline.

Scholars outside the traditions of disaster sociology have debated the effects of disasters as generators of media, consumption, and capitalism. Mike Davis (1999) has critiqued the denials about real disasters and inequality that are embedded in fantastic disaster-themed media, focusing on the especially disaster-prone city of Los Angeles. Marita Sturken (2007) has examined the ways in which kitsch consumerism helped construct a "culture of comfort" that depoliticized the national traumas of the Oklahoma City bombing and the September 11 attacks. E. Ann Kaplan (2005) has coined the term "empty empathy" to describe the emotions generated by harrowing images of war and disaster when the news media fails to adequately contextualize them. Kevin Rozario (2007) has highlighted the historical development of an American perspective on disasters in which they are seen as opportunities for both spiritual renewal and capitalist expansion. And the current neoliberal manifestation of this perspective may be the "shock doctrine" described by Naomi Klein (2007), in which elites in business and government depend on, and in some

cases engineer, crises and catastrophes to shock the public into accepting aggressive and exploitative privatization schemes. Yet her account neglects the fact that, rather than shocked public acquiescence to elite schemes and frameworks, disasters often trigger spontaneous outpourings of nationalist sentiment, expressed through diverse forms of mass media and mass consumption, in support of many expansions of neoliberal governance.

One form of mass media has long been a focal point for these types of debates: the photograph. A deep discomfort with photographs of suffering emerged as early as 1945, when images of World War II and the Holocaust began to be labeled “pornographic” (Dean 2004). The effects of such so-called pornographic imagery were often believed to be a kind of deadening or flattening of audience engagement. John Berger has suggested that photographs of conflicts such as those in Vietnam or Northern Ireland became commonplace only once newspaper editors realized that their supposed radicalizing effect was “not what it was once presumed to be” (Berger 1991, 38). But if their effects on audiences were limited, such photographs nonetheless left their producers and consumers open to charges of exploitation. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag argued that to photograph a moment of pain or trauma was “to be in complicity with . . . another person’s pain or misfortune” (Sontag 1990, 12). Later, Arthur and Joan Kleinman reminded readers that “images of trauma are part of our political economy. Papers are sold, television programs gain audience share, careers are advanced, jobs are created, and prizes awarded through the appropriation of images of suffering” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996, 8).

These arguments certainly present a moral dilemma for the consumers of such images, who may be sympathetic to others’ suffering but wary of exacerbating or exploiting it. Yet these critiques of photography, and the larger media culture in which it is embedded, may be overestimating the ill effects of mass-mediated pain. Sontag herself came to revise her position on these matters, writing that “such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn” (Sontag 2003, 117). She went on to provide an interesting rationale for criticisms such as her earlier ones: “The frustration of not being able to do anything about what the images show may be translated into an accusation of the indecency of regarding such images, or

the indecencies of the way such images are disseminated—flanked, as they may well be, by advertising for emollients, pain relievers, and SUVs. If we could do something about what the images show, we might not care so much about these issues” (Sontag 2003, 117). These remarks offer an alternative take on consumer culture’s relation to suffering and disaster and the ethical condemnations surrounding them. Seen in this light, the consumption of catastrophe signifies less of a flattening of interest or emotion than a frustration with distant audiences’ fundamentally limited possibilities for understanding and action. No matter how intimate their images, or how spectacular their broadcasts, disasters remain immeasurably complex, and others’ suffering remains, in a way, inscrutable to its distant observers.

Nonetheless, as the phrase “consuming catastrophe” suggests, I believe that *consumption* is an appropriate rubric with which to assess and understand the predominant ways of experiencing crisis and catastrophe today. Raymond Williams (1985, 78) has pointed out that the earliest English uses of the word “consume” came with negative connotations of destruction, using up, or wasting. In this sense, the consumption of disaster refers not only to the fact that disaster-related products, services, and media are increasingly available for purchase but also to the fact that the heavily mediated experience of disaster in a consumer society involves using up the raw material of human tragedy, devouring the spectacular, tragic, and even the mundane aspects of catastrophes. Although the suffering they caused may persist, and the work of rebuilding may remain undone, once disasters lose their novelty or their resonance, one can expect to see fewer reminders of them on the evening news, in TV or magazine advertisements, and on the shelves of stores.

The raw material that gets consumed in this process of covering, packaging, and consuming a disaster is its authenticity. The contemporary usage of authenticity is generally fraught with contradictory interpretations, but I take authenticity to refer to the *perceived* quality of being unique, genuine, or, for lack of a better term, real. Although the difference between authentic and inauthentic sometimes seems natural—a home-cooked meal with locally produced ingredients seems more authentic than a meal at a fast-food chain, just as live news footage of a flooded New Orleans seems more authentic than

a Hollywood disaster film—authenticity ultimately refers to subjective, aesthetic distinctions rather than to any quality intrinsic to commodities, texts, or images. It is a social construct, but one that reveals much about American values, desires, and fears. Disasters tend to attract large numbers of viewers and consumers based on the perception that they are much more real than the rest of what is available in contemporary media culture. Each disaster strikes us as new and immediate, creative in its unique pattern of destruction. Yet each also strikes primal emotional chords and reminds us of ancient calamities. What is more, we know that disasters affect real people and real communities and that ‘but for the grace of God’ we could be victims of a similar fate.

In consumer culture today, such perceived authenticity is incredibly valuable and highly sought after by all sorts of companies precisely because it can inspire powerful emotional responses from otherwise jaded or detached audiences. For instance, the management consultants Jim Gilmore and Joe Pine have published a widely read guide entitled *Authenticity: What Consumers Really Want* that teaches companies how to “manage the perceptions of real and fake held by the consumers of your enterprise’s output—because people increasingly make purchase decisions based on how real or fake they perceive various offerings” (Gilmore and Pine 2007, xi). Scholars such as Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) have tracked the results of this increasing commercial focus on the somewhat nebulous notion of authenticity. Her research confirms that “in the US, the 21st Century is an age that hungers for anything that *feels* authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity, that we are governed by superficiality” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 3).

How, then, to study such consumption of authenticity? This book focuses on the texts that are consumed during and after disasters, especially those associated with factual media, including news, documentary films, reality television programs, and digital archives. At times throughout the book, these sources will be supplemented with discussions of other products, services, and experiences associated with disasters, but the main analytic focus of each chapter is on a small sample of media texts. After an initial chapter focusing on the history of disaster-related media, each subsequent chapter compares texts from

two different disasters in the hope of drawing out the common themes between them and highlighting the differences among them.

The aim of this approach is to identify the larger meanings and prevailing cultural norms at work in disaster-related mass culture. Certainly, any particular text will generate some alternative readings as individual audience members decode it in oppositional or idiosyncratic ways (see S. Hall 1980). Still, at a minimum, one can say that media texts reflect the ideas, norms, and values at work in the culture that produced them. The fact that a number of news broadcasts, films, advertisements, television shows, and websites reflect the same small set of norms and values across a variety of different disasters tells us at least that these ideas were meaningful influences on the lives of many viewers and consumers. As such, analyzing the texts through which Americans experienced the disasters of the past decade can tell us about the norms that guided these experiences.

Of course, too many texts were produced around the four major disasters covered here to allow for a comprehensive sampling of them. Even a single disaster such as September 11 generated so much media that a vast array of scholarship has been devoted just to analyzing the mass media and popular culture around it (see, e.g., Chermak, Bailey, and Brown 2003; Heller 2005; Izard and Perkins 2011). But focusing only on September 11 has the potential to reinforce some flawed conventional wisdom about the uniqueness of that disaster relative to any other tragic or catastrophic events; this is often expressed as the idea that September 11 “changed everything.” By contrast, situating September 11 in a long history of mass-mediated disasters, then comparing it with the disasters that immediately preceded it, exposes the larger normative structures at work around many different instances of mass mediated suffering, and the continuities between these cases.

This book uses several text-based methods of inquiry to uncover these continuities. Chapter 2 employs close reading of the narratives at work in four different texts—two news broadcasts, a documentary film, and a reality television program. “Narrative texts are packed with sociological information” (Franzosi 1998, 517), and a close reading of these four texts shows how narratives about suffering, misfortune, and violence get told in ways that are meaningful but also problematic. Chapters 3 and 4 use the methods of discourse analysis

to investigate television news broadcasts and users' submissions to digital archives, respectively. In both cases, my analysis focuses on the ways the texts offer "cues in the process of interpretation" (Fairclough 1989, 24). What scholars engaged in the somewhat overlapping practices of content analysis, discourse analysis, or "ethnographic content analysis" (Altheide 1996) all have in common is the use of documents to systematically "understand the process and meaning of social activities" (Altheide 1996, 10). The study of texts and discourses can reveal "how ways of talking in a society simultaneously reflect, constitute, and reproduce social organization . . . cultural beliefs . . . and norms about everyday living" (Grimshaw 2001, 752). It can even expose the ways "more powerful groups in society can influence less powerful groups through cultural models" (Gee 1999, 66). These are the central concerns of this book.

As mentioned, the wide variety of disasters covered here, and the incredible number of texts representing these disasters that might be studied, mean that any sampling of texts will necessarily be quite partial. There is no scientific way to ensure that the sample analyzed here is representative of the whole. However, in this book, as is common with discourse analytic methods, I have attempted to keep my interpretations closely aligned with those of the texts' authors. I have also attempted to present to the reader many direct quotations from the texts being analyzed. Both of these elements serve as checks on the reliability of discourse analytic work such as this (see Potter 1996). Still, rather than traditional social science notions of generalizability based on random sampling and large sample sizes, the types of qualitative and textual interpretation in this book might best be understood as aiming for "transferability." The term "implies that the results of the research can be transferred to other contexts and situations beyond the scope of the study" (Jensen 2008, 887). The way researchers typically establish transferability is to "describe the context of the case/situation in sufficient detail, so that the receiver has an appropriate base to make a judgment" (Hellström 2008, 327). Indeed, "it is the responsibility of the inquirer to provide sufficient base to permit a person contemplating application in another receiving situation to make a judgment of similarity" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 360). My approach, then, has been to provide a chapter's worth of historical

context in order to situate the present cases. Within each chapter, I have aimed to provide enough background information on the disasters and the texts analyzed to convince readers that the themes and meanings I uncover are present across these cases and even potentially in cases that have not been studied here.

Such attention to historical context helps reveal that the public appetite for mass-mediated disasters, and the taste for disaster representations that are both undeniably real and spectacularly unfamiliar, are important if somewhat overlooked elements of modernity itself. For instance, although the ancient destruction of Pompeii left behind only a single eyewitness account, the rediscovery and excavation of the city in the eighteenth century helped inspire a host of commodities, from silverware and pottery mimicking ancient styles to novels dramatizing Pompeii's last days. Coupled with a devastating earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1755, these disasters helped steer Enlightenment thought toward new understandings of natural disasters that were secular, scientific, and even occasionally romantic. Subsequent technological developments in mass production and communication continued to stoke public appetites for tales and artifacts of disaster, but the twentieth-century critique of modern culture as conformist and inauthentic really set the stage for disasters to achieve their contemporary status as uniquely valuable carriers of authenticity. Walter Benjamin believed that new forms of mass-producible media, such as photography and film, had eliminated the authentic existence in a particular time and place characteristic of the "aura" of older forms of art (Benjamin 1969), while other members of the Frankfurt school assailed the mass deceptions of the burgeoning "culture industry" of the 1940s (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 2002). But Benjamin's earlier writings on the topic portrayed the aura as a sort of specter of reality that haunted its photographic reproductions (Duttlinger 2008; see also Benjamin 1999). Thus, one may understand the aura of disaster as the haunting traces of the real still captured in its many representations. These traces attract a consumer culture in thrall to such authenticity yet are also always already in decay as media coverage and mass commodification begin to transform the disaster into spectacle, kitsch, morality play, or political platform.

Much of mass-media spectatorship and mass consumption today involves an exercise in determining the authenticity or genuineness of people, products, or experiences—be they reality television stars (Andrejevic 2004; Rose and Wood 2005), tourist sites (Grayson and Martinec 2004), automobiles (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006), ethnic handicrafts (Wherry 2006), jeans and sneakers (Botterill 2007), or urban neighborhoods (Zukin 2008, 2010). In this same sense, audiences and consumers are tasked with assessing the authenticity of disaster-related texts and commodities and balancing potentially inauthentic aspects, such as their mass-produced, for-profit nature, against the seemingly undeniable kernel of real loss and pain with which they have been imbued. The results of those assessments of authenticity tend to determine the level of socially acceptable economic, emotional, or political investment in these texts and products. Judging from the sheer amount of disaster-related media and consumption that is discussed in this book, it appears that although there are a variety of competing standards concerning the authenticity of disaster-related media and products, there is certainly no blanket, normative prohibition against the consumption of catastrophe. For instance, watching the digital videos created by the Virginia Tech killer Seung-Hui Cho on network television news offered an authentic, uncensored glimpse into the mind of an alienated young killer for some viewers or, perhaps, a chance to understand and prevent future school shootings, while for others the broadcast smacked of a sensationalist ratings grab that resulted in the glorification of a murderer. In any case, such ethical debates concerning disaster mediation tend to coalesce today around the theme of authenticity and the appropriate emotional responses to such authentic depictions of suffering and pain.

This process of assessing the authenticity and trustworthiness of media texts also helps audiences and consumers determine their levels of apprehension over looming risks and future threats. The “risk society” first envisioned by Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991) appears to operate affectively as much as rationally and often in a kind of retrospective fashion. Rather than being informed of potential disasters and then acting preventatively, governments, media, and consumers often seem to only really appreciate a threat that has already materialized as a spectacular catastrophe.

Social responses to such disasters thus tend to look backward, in an almost nostalgic panic, with the aim of preventing a recurrence of the same disaster rather than proactively anticipating new and different ones. The deployment of media frames—persistent discursive principles that structure social reality and create shared cultural meanings (Reese 2003)—can inspire widespread public acceptance of government risk claims in the wake of a disaster or engender fierce political opposition to official policy proposals. In either case, public understandings of risks and their possible prevention in the future both rely on and shape normative codes concerning the spectacles of real suffering generated by mass-mediated disasters. Trust in the risk assessments of government officials, technical experts, media icons, and other authority figures is thus a heavily mediated and highly emotional process.

This affective component of disaster representation, mediation, and consumption has been somewhat neglected by mainstream sociology. For instance, sociologists who study disasters have long disputed the conventional wisdom that mass panic is the usual public response to disasters, especially on the ground in affected communities (Quarantelli 2001; Tierney 2007). But while it is true that disaster-struck communities tend to exhibit a whole host of positive, pro-social responses, it does not mean that mass-media accounts of disaster may not inspire panic in distant spectators who are less directly affected. Divorced from the kinds of sustaining, ad hoc, local communities that maintain order and provide support during and in the immediate aftermath of disasters (see Solnit 2009), those who merely consume distressing stories and images at a distance may be more likely to take drastic measures or respond with overwrought emotional displays. Of course, mass media today tend to operate in crisis mode at all times, even over seemingly trivial matters (McRobbie and Thornton 1995), making the shock and immediacy of disaster-related stories an overly familiar style of communication, and thus potentially contributing to the onset of what has come to be known as “compassion fatigue” (Moeller 1999). However, American audiences of disasters have demonstrated over the past decade that distant or unaffected spectators are likely to feel that they too have been vicariously traumatized and thus enfranchised to participate in mass-mediated rituals of com-

memoration, or to claim the social and political status of victim (see Kaplan 2005; Savage 2006).

Such vicarious emotional connections to disasters and their distant victims are increasingly common today, and one of the most powerful, emergent norms in this regard is the obligation to show empathy toward those directly affected. Media texts have particular ways to present the suffering of others, designed to draw out these reactions, which engender a kind of *empathetic gaze* rooted in reality television but now transcending that genre. This stylized or idealized empathy for the suffering of distant others is rehearsed today even in non-disaster-related media programming, but it is particularly prevalent when large-scale tragedies result not only in live television news broadcasts but also in the many commemorative events and product sales that are supposed to benefit those distant others. Consuming such experiences and products marks one as a moral person with the capacity to understand the pain of others. Unlike classical forms of Enlightenment sympathy, however, in which detached spectators sought to actually alleviate the suffering of unfortunate others whose causes they found worthy, the empathy on display when one buys a Virginia Tech T-shirt or a record that benefits New Orleans musicians, or when one watches television programs devoted to these disasters, seems to be as much about self-improvement as about the improvement of the conditions of those who are less fortunate. This can be thought of as a kind of *empathetic hedonism* inasmuch as there is pleasure to be gained in attempting to imagine what others are feeling—even if those feelings are painful. This is not to say that such consumption is not driven by sincere concern for disaster victims, but simply that mass culture tends to direct such concern toward viewing habits and consumption practices that help the self-image of the viewer or purchaser at least as much as they help any disaster-stricken communities.

The consumption of disaster thus encourages a kind of “political anesthesia” (Szasz 2007) that reduces one’s ability to recognize the collective solutions to problems, as well as one’s willingness to work toward them. As Andrew Szasz (2007, 4) puts it, “A person who buys some products because those products promise to shield them from trouble is not at that moment a *political* actor. He or she is, instead, in

the modality of a *consumer*.” While that distinction may be too sharp, the authentically threatening quality of disasters does often nurture a paradoxically fantastic desire to secure the safety of oneself and one’s family through private acts of consumerism. These fantasies are often backward-looking; they envision the next disaster as a similar chain of events that, having recently happened, is actually unlikely to happen again due either to officialdom’s new awareness of the problem or simply to the remote odds of two similar disasters happening in such close succession. Of course, in the current American political moment of ascendant neoliberal governance, such individualistic strategies of preventative consumption may constitute the only measures being taken on one’s behalf.

These atomizing tendencies of consumerism have even fed back into norms surrounding creative new forms of online experience. Rather than promoting a simple one-way consumption of information, the Internet increasingly encourages various types of digital content co-creation, which are often referred to as *prosumption* because they blur traditional distinctions between producers and consumers. New forms of media witnessing that rely on raw, incidentally recorded footage of disasters and tragedies may at times disrupt elite news framing strategies (Frosh and Pinchevski 2014; McCosker 2013). And new sites of collective memory such as digital archives and online memorials similarly empower consumers to become active, creative collaborators in the process of memorializing disasters. Yet despite the communal nature of many online efforts at commemoration, the messages collected there are frequently exercises in therapeutic self-help, in which the act of reading or writing a message serves as a form of psychic healing for oneself rather than for the community of other contributors. Such digital forms of commemoration can also end up encouraging a kind of nationalistic pride concerning the nostalgic or heroic aspects of disaster responses, while abetting a national forgetting of a disaster’s more shameful elements and the persistent social inequalities that such disasters often magnify.

This book seeks, then, to develop a model of disaster consumption that holds true across diverse types of contemporary crises or catastrophes. In this model, a disaster and the texts and commodities it generates stand out from the normal flow of mass media and popular

culture because they are generally perceived as more authentic. This authenticity allows otherwise skeptical consumers to invest genuine emotion in the media coverage of the disaster, as well as in subsequent acts of consumption devoted to displaying patriotism, securing one's home, expressing empathy, enacting therapeutic self-help, or any of the other goals and motivations of disaster consumerism. It also encourages many of the kinds of economic or political "capitalizing" described earlier in this Introduction. As time passes and images and commodities from the disaster become increasingly commonplace, one sees a disaster's authenticity itself become increasingly consumed or used up. In this period, with its aura of sacredness diminished, critical, oppositional, or ironic responses to the disaster become more socially acceptable, and the risk claims and emotional reactions that the disaster had inspired become subject to retrospective scrutiny. This has certainly been the case with September 11—writers at *Time* and *Vanity Fair* declared an end to the "age of irony" in the weeks following the attacks (Nunberg 2001), but less than a decade later, satirical pieces such as *The Onion's* were fairly commonplace. Still, a trace of that reality, an aura, tends to haunt disaster texts and commodities long after those tragic events have dulled in our memories.

That is not to say, however, that all disasters are perceived as equally authentic. Implicit in the very act of witnessing others' suffering—or, at least, in the use of the term "witnessing" to describe some kind of direct or mediated experience of suffering—is a value judgment on what kinds of experiences, media, and rhetoric are more truthful, objective, or genuine (J. D. Peters 2001). Although there is always a degree of uncertainty about the veracity of any testimony, John Durham Peters reminds us that society tends to privilege "being there" over simply watching an event unfold via live media transmission or visiting the site where an event transpired in the past. When one merely watches the recording of an already transpired event, he argues, "the attitude of witnessing is hardest to sustain" (J. D. Peters 2001, 720). While the description of a hierarchy of witnessing and spectatorship is a useful starting point, the research in this book suggests that even recordings of disaster or disaster-related souvenirs can be weighted with much the same historicity as actual disaster sites and genuine artifacts. Such a connection to real human suffering, in fact, is another way to

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understand what makes disaster-related media and commodities appear genuine in the first place. For this reason, our understandings of these phenomena need to move beyond the assumption that a spectator's spatial or temporal distance from an event necessarily limits the authenticity of his or her experiences and emotions.

The geographical distance of spectators is, after all, largely immaterial when they are subject to the kinds of “disaster marathon” (Blondheim and Liebes 2002; Liebes 1998) television coverage in which normal routines and programming are dropped in favor of a spontaneous focus on calamitous events across multiple channels and platforms. The communication scholars Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes argue that media coverage of disasters and accidents has become more influential today than coverage of staged “media events” such as coronation ceremonies and athletic contests. However, they suggest that these newly ascendant disasters are “disruptive” forces, “out of the reach of establishment control” (Katz and Liebes 2007, 164), in contrast to the “integrative” influence of staged and ceremonial media events. This book suggests otherwise. At least as far as distant audiences and consumers are concerned, the most seemingly disruptive, destructive, shocking, and unprecedented disasters may exert the most integrative, unifying influence, and provide the most leverage for elites looking to profit from the apparent chaos. And that fact makes them all the more dangerous.