My talk today is focused on media and communications technologies in the wake of Typhoon Yolanda. Drawing from traditions in media sociology and media studies, I examine media today first at the level of content—how Typhoon Yolanda is represented in global and local media, how social media and photographs help construct what I call disaster imaginaries, which I define today as ways of thinking, feeling and acting in relation to disasters, expanding on the definition of Lilie Chouliaraki. I also discuss media at the level of practice and use—how affected communities themselves make use of media and communications technologies in the process of disaster recovery. To give focus to my talk, I explore today people’s diverse and creative uses of Facebook, and as suggested in my title is an important platform in disaster recovery, but not only for the obvious reasons that we think.
First, an overview of the project, since April of this year, my colleagues and I in the Humanitarian Technologies Project have been conducting ethnographic work on the uses of communications technologies in the disaster recovery phase of Typhoon Haiyan / not the emergency phase / We have been very much interested in the various ways that technologies can help (or perhaps hinder) in disaster relief. In recent years, the term "humanitarian technologies" has been taken up—including by the United Nations—to refer to how new digital technologies help in disaster response, as anyone can become a Good Digital Samaritan by helping people through a click of the mouse from the comfort of their homes (in the words of Patrick Meier, head of the UN digital humanitarian network). And at the same time, “humanitarian technologies” refers to the uses of media by affected people themselves, where people can organize and respond to their own problems, quoted from the Red Cross World Disasters Report.

Our project attempts to dialogue with this very optimistic discourse about technologies using the tools of ethnography and by comparing and contrasting what humanitarians and government people say about technologies, and how affected people themselves use them. Our critical approach does not predetermine the usefulness, or empowering nature, of technologies, and hope to recognize both opportunities and risks in their adoption. I guess this is where I also share that the background of the team is very diverse and interdisciplinary: Mirca, Liezel and I straddle media sociology and media studies, Nicole Curato in political sociology, and Jayeel Cornelio in sociology of religion. While our project has these central questions to explore for our grant, we also pursue different related projects — Jayeel hopes to look at the fundraising videos of religious organizations and Nicole is interested in mediated protest. We as a team are not experts in disaster management or disaster risk reduction or even ICT4D and welcome suggestions from scholars in these areas. What the team shares is an ethnographic approach that puts the voice of victims at the heart of our analysis.
We have interviewed government officials and aid workers in international and local NGOs, media personnel, tech experts, and telecoms firms. They have told us about their innovative uses of SMS feedback platforms, they have told us about the dirty politics of aid distribution.
At the same time, we have also tried to get a cross-section of respondents across gender, age, and class in two field sites — Tacloban and Bantayan Island in North Cebu. We have spent time with people in the so-called tent cities in the outskirts of downtown Tacloban and also fisherfolk communities in Bantayan island. We interviewed also middle-class people who were much quicker in rebuilding their lives after Haiyan and starting new business ventures from the disaster.
So before we get to the data, in the next slides I try to reflect on a central concept of our study, which is voice.

Voice has been an important concept in media sociology in recent years in thinking about how self-expression, creativity, and also political protest and claims-making are enacted in digital networked environments that are geared towards what the sociologist Manuel Castells calls “the mass communication of the self”. In an increasingly competitive and cacophonous media environment, enacting voice is also political, it has effects of power, such that the capacity to give an account of oneself is also very much constrained by broader structures, organizations or resources that value voice or deny voice — in the helpful definition of Nick Couldry.

Traditional media such as television, with their powers of selection and edit, are nevertheless important in their abilities to amplify voice or silence voice. In understanding conventions of media representation, we reveal underlying hierarchies of human life in how for example news media draw attention and recognition to, for example, the suffering of Ebola patients in the United States, over that of Ebola patients in Africa. Analyzing voice in the context of disaster prompts us to pay attention to who is able to tell stories of the disaster, and the hidden injuries of being ignored by the media.
We can also interrogate assumptions of the consequences of technologies on voice, as revealed for instance in official discourse of humanitarians. In the words of Patrick Meier of the UN, “the magic of technology makes the invisible visible, enabling people to tell their own story, bypassing the official narrative”. Are technologies truly enhancing of storytelling, feedback and protest? Are there positive outcomes to technologized voice?

At the same time, we borrow from feminist anthropologist Veena Das that one might think of voice in its quieter, more modest tonalities: that perhaps victims of violence cope with their pain in less overtly political ways — that keeping silent and being patient are NOT signs of passivity among poor women in India suffering the Partition riots but as potentially agentic. Wearing dirty clothes and dirtying up public space are expressions of agency for Veena Das. Everyday life practices of caring for the self and seeking out ordinary things are political for Veena Das — and I find this relevant in how we analyze poor people in Tacloban and Bantayan and their everyday practices of coping from Yolanda through creative media practice.
main arguments

1. local Filipino disaster imaginary contests global media representations of the disaster
2. prevailing local disaster imaginary is middle-class Manila’s disaster imaginary, silencing alternative ways of thinking/feeling/acting on disaster
3. poor disaster victims are ambivalent and estranged about representations made about them
4. poor disaster victims’ uses of social media as i. failures of voice and ii. achievements of “voice”

So today my presentation will attempt four moves. First I try to show that local Filipino voices attempt to challenge global media representations of the disaster. I argue that a distinct local disaster imaginary that romanticizes resilience is actively constructed and reproduced. By contesting global media representations of showing suffering at its worst, local disaster imaginaries recast sufferers as survivors rather than victims, and are occasions where middle-class Manila speaks for suffering others. In this second move, I argue that the disaster imaginary of Yolanda is expressive of Filipino middle-class moralities of dignity and agency, which also advances discourses of social and economic progress in light of shameful disaster. I argue that middle-class Manila’s disaster imaginary prevails over other ways of imagining the disaster.

The third move I take shifts that analysis from the level of representations to an ethnographic perspective of what disaster victims themselves have to say about representations made about them. Here, I identify that there is a stark disconnect between victims’ feelings and experiences and media representations. Disaster victims are not familiar about the Happy in Tacloban YouTube video nor are they familiar with the #PHThankYou Tourism campaign and express skepticism about Facebook fundraising campaigns.

Finally, the fourth move tries to explore disaster victims’ creative uses of social media, particularly of Facebook. I try to understand here how Facebook can be used on one hand as a humanitarian technology in its ideal form: as a tool for self-help, for fundraising and collective problem-solving. But at the same, I also retell unexpected uses of Facebook for what might be seen as trivial, personal and intimate uses as being significant occasions for voice, for taking control and getting back to routines and imagining possible futures at a time of anxiety and rupture.
So let me begin with global media representations of the disaster. Typhoon Haiyan and its massive scale of death and destruction fits the usual tropes of non-Western disasters, as 8000 people were killed, thousands recorded as still missing, four million people forced from their homes (Oxfam 2013), and almost 15,000 people living in tents to this day. Western media circulated images of the disaster in this tableau vivant image—a long-shot of the site of disaster capturing human actions of drinking water in the most inhuman and inhabitable setting in Anibong, where massive ships had washed onto the shore and tearing through seaside homes.
Another key site of global media representations are humanitarian appeals, such as in this photo I took in London in December 2013—an animated billboard of a child with raindrop animation in classic ideal victim imagery of a starving innocent child, humanized here through eye contact. This image was used by the UK’s Disaster Emergency Committee— their appeal was successful in raising over 95 million pounds to date and helped nearly 1,000,000 people through their partner agencies. DEC claims that the Philippines typhoon appeal is among the top fundraising projects, following the Haiti appeal.
In our own Twitter analysis of conversations that carried the hashtag of Haiyan, we identified that celebrity was also a key medium in which Haiyan was communicated to global publics. Here I was surprised to discover the name of Harry Styles as among the most repeated and retweeted words in this word cloud from Twitter in the two week aftermath of Haiyan.
Haiyan in celebrity advocacy
November 2013
Not to be outdone, one month after the disaster, Justin Bieber not only tweets about Haiyan but also visits an elementary school in Tacloban, where he performs a concert for the children and the nearby community. It must be said here that Bieber’s advocacy has been criticized as “purely PR” because he had been photographed by paparazzi as exiting a brother in Brazil three weeks before his visit to the Philippines.
local disaster imaginaries negotiate/contest global representations

1 middle-class disaster imaginary is “comfort zone communication”, focusing on positive imagery
2 poor disaster victims ambivalent about representations made about them, rarely use digital media for public expression but for more local and intimate uses

So moving on now from the global imaginaries of Haiyan, I want to highlight now using material from both our digital ethnography and our ethnographic interviews, how these global representations might be negotiated and contested in local imaginaries.

I call this positive emotional regime of picturing the disaster as comfort zone communication.
(What makes the study of media and disasters in Philippines interesting: social media capital of the world / 103% mobile penetration rate / communications breakdown in disaster unlike Haiti, where user-generated content was produced post-earthquake)

Here, I begin by identifying that the middle-class disaster imaginary follows a positive emotional regime involving playful acts of performative resilience directed to a global public, other Filipinos, and to their very own selves. I approach nationalistic imagery here as a strategy of performative resilience, as an invitation of solidarity to fellow Filipinos.

In contrast to the disaster imaginary of Western photojournalism, which bring about transnational shame (a term I borrow from Filomeno Aguilar), these disaster memes articulate patriotic pride. These memes repackage resilience, once a property or traditional value of the Filipino poor, into a therapeutic discourse to be shared by an entire nation—Facebook shared, Facebook liked, instagreammmed to friends and hashtag communities.

Nationalistic imagery depends on memes that use graphic animation and photoshop.

performative resilience in the sense that they perform to a global audience (we are resilient and dignified and respectable people worthy of global attention and visitation), to each other (in calling for togetherness and community in such a fractured country), and also to perform for themselves (in reminding them to be resilient themselves in times of disaster – coz disaster can affect them in both material and symbolic terms)
Another instantiation of the middle-class disaster imaginary captures activities around volunteerism and charity. This genre of images captures activities of doing good to others but foregrounding the experience of volunteers rather than that of the victims.

This iconography of self-reflexivity, most popularly called the selfie, portrays the smiling faces of volunteers in their act of ‘giving back’, and shares a very instrumental narrative of the disaster, usually focusing on what I gain from the experience of volunteering or giving, rather than testifying to the plight of sufferers themselves.

In this photograph, the selfie is pretty much even decontextualized, the background image of a disaster zone nonexistent, and it is only upon reading the caption that you realize it was shot in touristic Malapascua island, which, along with Bantayan Island, a field site of the project, experienced a rise of voluntourist groups and activities, also even arranged by beach resort owners themselves.

We also found high incidence of middle-class taclobanons returning because of new opportunities for employment/new markets catering to humanitarians etc...
Typhoon Yolanda also witnessed a lot of middle-class intervention organized outside the state – we interviewed middle-class mobilizers who used Facebook to organize fundraising and ethical consumption campaigns. (Facebook groups example)

In these initiatives, suffering is usually erased from the communicative exchange, and the focus is on objects being sold on behalf of victims.

Facebook is used as an accountability mechanism. But accountability here is upwards accountability rather than downwards accountability– Accountable to donors rather than victims. Facebook platform usually donor– rather than victim-oriented.
Middle-class Philippines engagement: 
ipit-from-a-distance through comfort zone communication

-distancing: middle-class public life is about “flying over” the squalor of poverty (Tadiar 2004)

-pity (maulung) connects people of different social classes. Assistance and aid offered to lower-class especially during crisis (Cannell, 1999; Johnson, 2010)
Aid are experienced as spectral. They are absent presents in a mediated phantom zone. They are presents from donors formally and officially received by the state and fundraisers, but are actually really not received by victims themselves. They treat photographs and news images as indexical: seeing them as evidence and proof of donations. But their actual material experience of donations is disconnected from the visual evidence.

(This is not to say that the they have not received donations)
photography as transactional activity

“Pumunta kami sa [religious group] ng ten ng gabi, at umalis ten ng umaga na. Sabi nila mamimigay sila ng relief goods. Pero wala naman kaming natanggap. So iniisip namin pinapunta lang kami para sa mga picture.” (Heidi, 19, tent city Tacloban)

- disaster zone functions as photographic pilgrimage site, with children as hospitable tour guides expecting tips. There is knowledge of the language of visual media and photo cultures, where kids approach you and invite you to be taken to the most visually exciting spot for an Instagram picture.
- "gamitan" (making use of each other) in contemporary visual economy
Justin Bieber’s pledge of donations not received as of August. Only his guitar with celebrity aura (used by teachers in their jamming sessions) was left behind.
positive imagery becomes official discourse
the government “wasted no time” in responding and quickly distributed food packs, cleared debris, and restored electricity to “all municipalities affected by the calamity” by Christmas Day 2013 (President Aquino, State of the Nation Address, July 2014)
# PHThankYou Tourism campaign directed at foreign publics

State-sponsored crowdsourced campaign fuses humanitarian and tourism discourse. ‘thank you’ as strategy of establishing parity with foreign donors/publics

The #Phthankyou campaign is an official tourism campaign but had middle-class roots. The campaign began as part of social media conversations of middle-class hashtag communities and spearheaded by key figures of middle-class politics and charity (Gang Badoy + Jim Paredes). Then Department of Tourism adopted the idea. This is one way in which middle-class discourse became official discourse: middle-class speaking for the sufferers.

The campaign sparks a conversation between Filipino recipients and Western donors:

* adopts glossy sheen of advertising imagery
* informed by professionalization of humanitarianism as well as tourism vocabulary.

* Thank you as performance of agency rather than victimhood of a suffering nation. Interrogation of Western publics as partners and even guests rather than distant donors that country is completely dependent on.

* Thank you as a recognition of a debt of gratitude. That act of recognition is not purely an acknowledgment of deference or dependence but an agentic act: that simultaneously humanizes and dignifies the recipient of help – and even goes so far as to extend hospitality and perform the role of host to Western visitors (where the asymmetrical relationship may even be reversed)
video of campaign shows rehabilitation.

initial mise-en-scène is disaster zone

BUT quickly intercuts with urban development, middle-class adventure (ziplining), middle-class leisure, and exotic imagery of tropical Asian paradise.

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expresses that we are deserving sufferers. deserving of your continued global attention.

colonial anxiety embedded in middle-class politics: the desire to demonstrate to colonial masters that we are civilized natives just like you? (see Filomeno Aguilar’s presentation on ilustrado discourse)

campaign recuperates agency by foregrounding hopes for economic development and challenging dehumanized portrayals in global media.
media practices of disaster victims

1 failure to achieve imagined potentials of “humanitarian” technologies
2 mundane media practice as an achievement, following idea that everyday life is an achievement (Das 2011)
Facebook as humanitarian technology

While I have been rather critical so far of the uses of middle-class people and their uses of social media for comfort zone communication in representing disaster, I acknowledge that their self-centered aesthetics is tempered by nevertheless an other-centered orientation to fundraising and organizing. They raise funds and organize on behalf of others. They collect toys for others, they sell bags for others, they raise funds to rebuild the elementary school to be enjoyed by their children and others. The data we gathered on Facebook fundraising for the community suggests that these initiatives, which also depend on social capital, entrepreneurial skills, media literacy and skills in content production, were started by middle-class people.

However, we found cases where low-income people were able to use Facebook for fundraising. In Bantayan Island, we met a bartender of an upscale beach resort with a clientele of foreigners and wealthier Filipinos. In the past two years of working for the beach resort, this extroverted bartender had friended many clients on Facebook. And you can tell from his friendly demeanor and manner of storytelling not to mention his expert mixing of cocktails (he makes good pina coladas) that he is the type to leave an impression on guests and visitors. So after the disaster he had posted pictures on Facebook of the destroyed resort, the collapsed dormitory housing for staff, and the destroyed home of his parents on Facebook. Within hours, he was contacted by a German guest he had not spoken to in months and after chatting sent him 15,000 pesos via money transfer.
Facebook groups for digital protest and storytelling

- Protest memes expose suffering at its worst and failure of government response
- Online survivor groups on Facebook designed as spaces for emotional public expression

Jonathan: Nilalagyan mo ng picture?

Lorna: Hindi - kasi hindi ako makapagpicture dito kasi ang pangit ng cellphone na ito. Ito iyong profile ko oh. [shows picture of woman taken from a distance]

Jonathan: Ayan… Oh maganda naman yan ah.

Lorna: Pero hindi ako ‘to


...
Jonathan: So sa mga chatroom sa Yolanda, sinong unang nagmessage?


Jonathan: Ok. Ano pang masasabi mo sa ano, sa Facebook. Parang, if you have once sentence about Facebook, ano'ng masasabi mo?

disaster dating

Jon: So, ano'ng difference n'on sa buhay mo kung ma-access mo na ulit ang AsianCupid?


Jonathan: Gusto mo ng mga taga-ibang-bansa? Bakit?

Lorna: Kasi makakatulong iyon sa buhay ko.
middle-class disaster imaginary is a fantasy production designed to escape shameful histories of ‘culture of disaster’ and ‘Asia’s sick man’ in spite of the proliferation of digital media, poor affected peoples are unable to overcome structural impediments to voice the expansion of platforms for self-expression casts an illusion of voice
RECONCEPTUALIZING ‘VOICE’?

media practices circumscribed in cultures of disaster ‘gamitan’ in new
digital visual economies as coping mechanism

‘mundane’ media practices such as disaster dating must be seen as both
failure and achievement

disaster dating demonstrates capacities to dream, aspire, plan, and play in
context of rupture and disorder

media in everyday life as restoring order and routine necessary for more
agentic expressions of voice
WAYS FORWARD

how do people enact voice in barangay consolations and SMS feedback platforms?

how do face-to-face gossip networks endure as spaces for self-expression, collective problem-solving?
Communications in Disaster Recovery
Why Facebook Matters for Yolanda Survivors
But Not (Only) for the Reasons You Think

@jonathan_c_ong
HUMANITARIAN TECHNOLOGIES PROJECT
STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOP

REFLECTING ON ICTs FOR DISASTER RECOVERY
ONE YEAR AFTER TYPHOOON YOLANDA

10AM - 4PM
5 NOVEMBER 2014
MATTEO BICCI HALL
ATENEo DE MANILA UNIVERSITY

FOR FURTHER DETAILS DR. JONATHAN ONG (jung@ateneo.edu)
analytics of voice

our working definition: voice as inclusion and participation in social, political and economic processes, meaning-making, and expression in the context of disaster recovery

disaster imaginary: ways of thinking, feeling and acting in relation to disaster (cf Chouliaraki 2012; Orgad 2013)

media in everyday life: critical readings of media representation as “resistance”

media practice: creative uses of media as coping mechanisms in “culture of disaster”