

Communicating Disaster

Leitung: Jörg Bergmann (Bielefeld), Heike Egner (Klagenfurt) und Volker Wulf (Siegen)

1. November 2010 – 31. Juli 2011

Learning from Calamities?

Reflexions and evaluations of the outcomes of our research year

Leitung: Heike Egner (Klagenfurt) und Marén Schorch (Bielefeld)

28.–29. Juli 2011

The last internal workshop of the research group was dedicated to looking back on nine months of intense working together as well as to looking into the future. Thus, the workshop was productive in two ways: Firstly, in reflecting what we did throughout the research year, what happened to our research topic and how this changed our perspective on it. And secondly in looking ahead into the future, pondering about the next steps in refining our cooperation, our closing conference and the forthcoming publications. Consequently, the first day of the workshop dealt with the past. We asked three of our fellows, Dieter Neubert, Stephan Habscheid and Michael Bründl to reflect their research phase (according to our basic, first temporal heuristic that structured the research year), Jörg Bergmann and one of our two long-time-fellows, Wolf Dombrowsky, to give a report about their time at the ZiF.

Looking back from the end of the year, it became clear that some basic ideas, questions as well as paradigmatic disputes already occurred right in the beginning. One basic line can be found in an epistemological aspect: While interdisciplinary disaster research in large seems to be dominated by natural scientists, engineers and management experts representing mostly positivist approaches, the sociologists that dominated the research group as well as the majority of the other members of the group were linked by a general statement against 'naturalism', following a notion which is based on a variety of constructivist approaches. However, the question of the relation between materiality and construction was an on-going topic for discussion over the time; especially during the last research phase when the perspective of engineering confronted the group with this question in more detail. The second basic line was concerned with questions of definitions that pervaded the whole research year: "What is a disaster?" or "Do we have to find *one* common definition as the basis of our cooperation?" In this respect, the positivist definition with its idea of standard definitions of disaster management via the amount of damage, number of victims etc. found on of its grounds. On the one hand, standardization as well as clear and elementary definitions allow comparative research and are quite prominent in insurance companies and classical disaster research. On the other hand, its emphasis on costs of damage ignores different levels of wealth and socio-cultural differences of assessment. Although this conception was regarded as important as a point of reference, most members of the working group finally rejected the approach. Alternatively, they suggested to use more general contextualized definitions such as 'a disaster as a break down of ordinary expected

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 Greg Bankoff (Hull)
 Jörg Bergmann (Bielefeld)
 Michael Bründl (Davos)
 Monika Büscher (Lancaster)
 Andrew Collins (Newcastle-upon-Tyne)
 Wolf Dombrowsky (Berlin)
 Carsten Felgentreff (Osnabrück)
 Stephan Habscheid (Siegen)
 Stefan Kaufmann (Freiburg i. Br.)
 Thomas Ley (Meiningen)
 Andreas Metzner-Szigeth (Münster)
 Stephen Mosley (Leeds)
 Dieter Neubert (Bayreuth)
 Volkmär Pipek (Siegen)
 Jörg Pothast (Berlin)
 Volker Wulf (Siegen)



management' that allows contextualized research, that refers to everyday-life understanding of a disaster and which can be directly connected to the life world of the people affected. Of course, the inherent problem is that the terminology may differ from local understanding and interpretation and that comparative research is restricted. To make a long story short: We did agree on to not agree on the level of conceptions and definitions because it did not make sense to ignore the variety of disasters the fellows deal with and the variety of disciplinary perspectives and paradigms standing behind. But we did come to the agreement that the research concepts should follow the research question and that the basics as well as the consequences of specific concepts and definitions necessarily have to be reflected.

Throughout the research year, it was striking to observe how research topics create perspectives: For instance, the fellows that are prominent in conversational analysis of disaster communication such as alarm calls (e.g. Ilkka Arminen, Jörg Bergmann, Giolo Fele, Thomas Ley) are not interested in the disaster itself (an airplane crash, fire etc.), but in 'patterns of conversation'. Thus, the relations to materiality are only important when they are part of the conversation. This relation is even more direct and obvious in the research field of CSCW (computer supported cooperative work), for instance the use of social media and other information and communication technology, but also the influence of classical media on communicational processes in disasters (represented in the works of—amongst others—Monika Büscher, Ruth Ayaß, Volkmar Pipek and Gebhard Rusch). Fellows with a background from a space-related science such as geography (like Heike Egner, Andreas Pott, Michael Bründl) are not just interested in space, but

in the relation between disaster (or risk) and space. Here, materiality as place and/or ecological materiality functions as reference point for social constructions. To understand how these constructions 'work' and how they are constituted, second-order-observation seems to be a profound method. Thus, *second-order-observation* became an important aspect of the shared understanding of the group. Although this reference to observation theory might seem to be alternative to some sort of 'objective' definitions of disasters, we did agree about some fundamental characteristics: Firstly, disasters are always socially defined, i.e. there is no such thing as a 'natural disaster', it is rather the social perceptions, interpretations and societal communications which make a disaster to a disaster. Secondly, a disaster is an extreme event that leads usually to the breakdown of all normally expectable options of coping and dealing.

One constant of our research approach were the *temporal* dimensions of disasters: On one side the differentiation between types of disasters like rapid, real-time-disasters, slow-motion- or fast-forward-disasters and on the other side the different stages of extreme events that are known from the risk management circle: the phases of alarming, coping, evaluation and defining/constructing risks on that basis. Additional to this temporal dimension, *spatial* dimensions of risks and disasters play also a major role: for instance in the localisation of dangers and risks that easily provides new social inequalities, in the distinction between safe and unsettled areas in situ as well as within the process of the construction of new risk maps, the development of topographies for evacuations, refugee movements, geo-semiotic structures etc.

On the level of networking, the context of the research group's meetings and discussions laid not only the ground for new cooperation between single fellows or groups of them from quite heterogeneous disciplines such as sociology, history, geography, computer science and engineering science (to name just a few of them), but also with institutions like the Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK, Bonn), different organisations from practical fields of disaster management and other universities. One outcome of the research year will be the establishment of the Master's program 'Safety Management and Engineering' at the University of Siegen with the disciplines computer sciences, media studies, engineering sciences and sociology involved.

The cooperation will also be continued via publications, especially in three major book projects in progress respectively in the planning phase (all collected volumes) that we discussed during the second day of the workshop:

- Heike Egner/Marén Schorch/Martin Voss (Eds.): *Learning from Calamities. Interpretative Patterns and Practices of Communication on Disasters and Catastrophes.*
- Lorenza Mondada/Jörg Bergmann/Giolo Fele (Eds.): *Emergency Calls.*
- Martina Merz/Jörg Bergmann (Eds.): *Multiple Perspectives on Communicating Disaster.*

The last core topic of the workshop was the purpose and structure of the closing conference of our research group that will take place on January, 26-28, 2012 titled 'Dealing with the disasters of others'. The central intention will be the presentation of the outcomes of the research year as well as open questions stimulating further research. Summarizing the common threads of the past months, the conference will be divided into four sessions covering the major fields of research and discussions within the research year: 'Communicating disaster in space and time', 'Media and the micro order of disaster', 'Technologies and social media for dealing with disasters' and 'Organisation and management of disaster communication'. The keynotes will be held by Valerie November (Lausanne) and Nalaka Gunawardene (Sri Lanka).

Anfragen contact

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**links**

Workshopszene im Tagungsraum
Long Table

unten

Wolf Dombrowsky, Michael Bründl
und Greg Bankoff (v. l. n. r.)

Tagungsbeiträge Contributions**Reports from Phase 1 (Nov.–Dec. 2010)**

Dieter Neubert Notions of Disasters

Reports from Phase 2 (Jan.–Febr. 2011)

Jörg Bergmann Alarm Communication and Mobilizing Help

Reports from Phase 3 (March–May 2011)

Stephan Habscheid Focussing on Disaster: Fighting and Coping

Reports from Phase 4 (June–July 2011)

Michael Bründl Evaluation and Risk Communication

Wolf Dombrowsky Reflexion of the research year by a long-term fellow

Past Events and Future Activities

Marén Schorch Activities of the past research year and closing conference

Heike Egner Outline about ongoing publication projects

Jörg Bergmann, Volker Wulf Establishment of a Master's program 'Safety Management and Engineering' at the University of Siegen

Informationen Further Information

zur Forschungsgruppe *Communicating Disaster*

→ www.uni-bielefeld.de/ZiF/FG/2010CommunicatingDisaster/

