

"Shock doctrine" demolition and economic exploitation of disaster-stricken societies

February 28 2014, by Laura Byerley

In the wake of a natural disaster or global crisis, TV talk shows often advocate for relief efforts by enlisting "celebrity humanitarians" to raise awareness. However, rather than focusing on the individuals affected by the disaster and surrounding social circumstances, TV talk shows tend to focus on the individual experiences of celebrities, in a sense providing on-air "therapy" sessions for the celebrities.

This is according to a new study by a University of Texas at Austin Moody College of Communication researcher that examines coverage by "The Oprah Winfrey Show" of the 2010 Haiti earthquake. "Shock Therapy: Oprah Winfrey, Celebrity Philanthropy, and Disaster 'Relief' in Haiti" by Associate Professor Dana Cloud appears this month in *Critical Studies in Media Communication*.

Cloud said talk shows use therapeutic conversations to argue for what journalist Naomi Klein calls the "shock doctrine"—the demolition and economic exploitation of disaster-stricken societies and states.

"Shock therapy has always been central to the talk show treatment of crisis, with Oprah being the most extreme case," Cloud said. "In many ways, TV talk shows were invented to translate social trauma into personal coping and healing."

The study examines episodes of the show in which Winfrey interviews musician Wyclef Jean and celebrity physician Sanjay Gupta after they have visited Haiti following the earthquake, and pop star Lady Gaga, and

featured performances by Rihanna and Maxwell.

Cloud first examines how the show's language of self-help and personal responsibility supports economic and political intervention in Haiti. Second, Cloud discusses therapeutic discourse in celebrity culture generally and in Winfrey's show in particular. Third, Cloud examines how celebrities destabilized Winfrey's therapeutic responses.

The study finds that Winfrey focused her interviews on the most shocking, traumatic details that the celebrities experienced, and often steered discussions away from larger social, historical and political considerations brought up by the guests.

Cloud said this approach serves to decontextualize a crisis from historical and political realities and called for talk shows to focus on the broader context rather than a celebrity's individual experience.

"Therapeutic discourse damages the public's ability to think through the meanings of and responses to disaster because it focuses so narrowly on individual feelings," Cloud said. "Media fail to train us as citizens of a collective. Because of this personal focus, media atomize and isolate people who care about the suffering of people around the world."

More information: "Shock Therapy: Oprah Winfrey, Celebrity Philanthropy, and Disaster 'Relief' in Haiti." Dana L. Cloud. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. Vol. 31, Iss. 1, 2014. [DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2013.864047](https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2013.864047)

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