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THE POPULAR CULTURE OF DISASTER: WHAT IS  
IT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

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## **The Popular Culture of Disaster: What is It and Why is It Important?**

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Thanks, Avagene. Good morning and welcome again to our roundtable discussion.

Today, we're going to talk about the popular culture of disaster, an area which I think is very interesting and important, but not well-understood. In fact, I'm not even sure what exactly the popular culture of disaster is, but hopefully by the end of today's session we'll all have a clearer sense of what it means.

Let me begin by talking very briefly about how today's session will be organized.

Basically, I'll talk for about fifteen minutes, providing a fairly broad overview of the topic, then I'd like to open the room for a lively discussion. During the discussion portion of today's session, please feel free to ask me (or others) questions about the topic, offer any thoughts you have on it, or share some of your experiences with the popular culture of disaster. Because very little has been done on this topic, at this stage we're simply trying to get a handle on what all is out there. Therefore, any experiences you can share will help us do that.

Now, I'd like to tell you a little bit about how I'm going to organize my remarks today.

Slide 1, please As you can see on slide 1, I'll cover four areas in today's discussion. First, I'll talk generally about what the popular culture of disaster is. Although I won't offer a precise

definition, I will give you some sense of what's thought (tentatively) to be included under the term. Then, I'll discuss some of the reasons why the popular culture of disaster exists. As we'll see, however, explaining why it exists depends to a great extent on how we define it. Third, I'll talk very briefly about why I think this is an important topic to consider. And finally, I'll briefly describe some of the things we're doing to generate interest and solicit input on the topic-- this discussion being one of those activities.

What is the popular culture of disaster? On the surface, this might seem like a fairly simple or straightforward question, but as with most things, it's not quite that simple. First, by answering this question, we're assuming we know the answers to two related questions: 1) what is popular culture? and 2) what is a disaster? In terms of the latter, at a recent conference twelve researchers from six different countries were asked to respond to the question, what is a disaster? The diversity of answers given was quite interesting and quite confusing!

Although we're not completely sure at this point what all falls under the popular culture of disaster, I think many of us have had enough experience with it to have at least a general understanding of what it means. For example, some of you may have seen, in the field or in the media, the slogans that people in disaster-stricken communities spray paint on their homes or businesses, which convey messages of hope or promises to eliminate looters! Slides 2 and 3, please As another illustration, take a look at the cartoons in slides 2 and 3. Notice how each cartoon blends images of disasters with other popular themes. As a youngster growing up in Texas, I remember wearing a T-shirt that proclaimed proudly, "I survived the Texas heat wave!" And I'm sure that many of you have seen at least some of those classic (and recent) disaster movies-- Earthquake, Twister, Volcano, Dante's Peak, Deep Impact, etc. (For a list and reviews

of some of these cinema not-so-greats, check out the links on the background page for this session.)

While we can't define precisely what the popular culture of disaster is, we can say with some confidence that certain things are included in it. Slide 4, please Slide 4 provides a preliminary list of things that should be considered under the popular culture of disaster, at least for now. As you can see, the list of items ranges from disaster jokes and humor to on-site graffiti to disaster movies. The next step is to begin exploring the similarities and differences between these various cultural products, and trying to develop explanations for why they exist.

Let's turn now for a minute to this last question-- why is there a popular culture of disaster? Slide 5, please Slide 5 presents some potential explanations, but it seems to me that the answer to this question will largely depend on how we define the topic. For example, if we focus narrowly on jokes, some research suggests that emergency response workers often use humor as a coping strategy. T-shirts and on-site graffiti may serve to enhance solidarity and morale among emergency responders and the broader disaster-impacted community. Recently, a psychologist interviewed on a local news channel suggested that disaster movies are flourishing because we're all a bunch of thrill-seekers living vicariously through spectacular Hollywood special effects. (Remember the cow flying across the road in Twister!) Finally, let's not forget that there is a profit motive for at least some aspects of the popular culture of disaster.

Having talked generally about what the popular culture of disaster is and why it exists, let's talk briefly about why it's an important topic to consider. It's interesting that disasters are commonly thought to be unusual and extremely disruptive events, yet images of disaster figure prominently into popular culture. (Though I should underscore here the crucial importance of

## **Overview of Today's Discussion:**

- 1. What is the Popular Culture of Disaster?**
- 2. Why does it exist?**
- 3. Why is it important?**
- 4. Where do we go from here?**

cross-cultural comparisons as we begin to explore this topic.) To some extent, then, popular images of disaster are likely to shape our knowledge about disasters and how we respond to them. It is extremely important, therefore, that we understand how disasters are represented in popular culture and the effects this representation has on people's knowledge and response.

Let me close by saying a few words about what we're doing to generate and sustain interest in this topic. Today's session is an important first step in that direction, so I'd like to thank Avagene and Amy at EHP for providing us the time and space to talk about this topic. Also, we've created a Popular Culture of Disaster electronic mailing list. Let me know if you'd like to be included on it (my email is [gwebb@udel.edu](mailto:gwebb@udel.edu)). Wolf Dombrowsky, a sociologist in Germany, has offered to create a popular culture of disaster web site-- details forthcoming. And finally, we're trying to get research sessions at upcoming professional meetings like next summer's Hazards Research and Applications Workshop.

On that note, I'd like to open the room to discussion. Do you have any questions about what I've presented? Do you have any suggestions for additional things we might consider under this topic? Have you had any experiences with the popular culture of disaster that you'd like to share?

## **The Popular Culture of Disaster includes:**

- **Disaster jokes and humor**
- **Board games and puzzles with disaster themes**
- **Folk legends and beliefs about disasters**
- **Disaster calendars**
- **Songs and poems created at times of disaster**
- **Disaster novels and films (and spoofs of them!)**
- **Anniversary newspaper issues**
- **On-site graffiti**
- **Survivor buttons and T-shirts**
- **Cartoons and comic strips with disaster themes**
- **What else?**

## **Some Reasons Why the Popular Culture of Disaster Exists:**

- **As a coping mechanism**
- **To enhance solidarity and morale**
- **For entertainment and excitement**
- **Profits**