

## **An Alternative Chronicle of Natural Disaster: Social Justice Journalism in Taiwan**

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In 2009, Taiwan experienced a catastrophic natural disaster, Typhoon Morakot, which killed 700 people and caused \$4.7 billion in economic losses. While mainstream media spent a month covering this event and focused only on the ravaged landscape, political tensions, and public sentiment, an alternative news platform, 88news, dedicated four years to investigating the disaster relief efforts of both the government and the NGOs, and their impact on the lives of indigenous victims. Focusing on the content of 88news and its production process, this article examines an alternative disaster story told by a group of independent journalists to make political interventions in times of crisis. It argues that disasters present not only a disruption of the normal social life, but also an intervention of mainstream news production and representation that opens an alternative space for marginal voices, both journalistically and ethnically, to question the dominant world view.

*Keywords: alternative journalism, indigenous culture, social justice, natural disaster, environmental refugees*

In the age of extreme weather, human suffering is on the rise as natural disasters increase in frequency and intensity. In 2009, Taiwan experienced a catastrophe of historic proportions when Typhoon Morakot pummeled the island on August 8. Over 48 hours, the storm dumped a record-breaking 2,777 mm of rain in Southern Taiwan, triggering major landslides, killing nearly 700 people, and causing more than \$4.7 billion in economic losses (Ge, Li, Zhang, & Peng, 2010).

As one of the worst natural disasters in Taiwan's history, Typhoon Morakot dominated mainstream media for about a month. Various news outlets covered the ravaged landscape, political tensions, and public sentiment. However, they rarely addressed the indigenous people who were Morakot's primary victims. Indigenous groups not only lost their homes to the typhoon, but also their traditional lifestyle after forced relocation (J. Lin & Lin, 2016). The natural disaster exacerbated the long-existing ethnic inequalities between the Han Chinese (the dominant ethnic group in Taiwan) and the Taiwanese Aborigines. Immigrating from China 400 years ago, the Han Chinese arrived from Southern China and were followed in World War II by so-called Mainlanders. In contrast to the Han, Taiwanese indigenous people are of Austronesian descent (Harrison, 2003). Although they inhabited the island for 7,000 years before Han migration, demographics

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have seen them become an ethnic minority and cultural other; the indigenous population is currently about 567,000, or just 2% of the total national population (Council of Indigenous People, 2010). As Lan (2006) noted, "Taiwanese Aborigines have long been the objects of the colonial gaze" (p. 61). In Taiwan, the indigenous people have become the "others within."

Such othering continues. One of the ways manifested 3 weeks after the typhoon. Without any deliberative public discussions, the government abruptly announced that the Tzu Chi Foundation would start construction on the permanent resettlement community named the Great Love Village. The official Reconstruction Council praised the housing project as an exemplary model of postdisaster governance achieved through public-private sector partnership (Fan, 2015). However, cultural tensions quickly emerged as the indigenous people's cultural heritage and Christian beliefs conflicted with the Han Chinese and Buddhist-affiliated Tzu Chi organization that heavily influenced the initiative. The cultural injustice added another layer of loss for communities already struggling in the post-Morakot recovery.

A month after Typhoon Morakot (September 27, 2009), a group of independent journalists launched 88news.org, a website designed to respond to the mainstream media's neglect of and silence on postdisaster reconstruction. Funded by reader donations, this nonprofit news site aimed to be a mouthpiece for marginalized voices in the national discourse, a bridge to foster understanding between affected indigenous communities and the institutional sectors (i.e., government, NGOs, and religious organizations), and a source to inform government response to future disasters.

Nearing its 10th anniversary in 2019, *Morakot* remains a controversial word in Taiwan and one that represents the emergence of a risk society, the rupture of the social contract, and the distrust in political authority. As the first alternative media platform in Taiwan to take a longitudinal lens to a single event, 88news demonstrated the social calamities resulting from or exposed through natural disasters, a lesson much needed in a time of climate change. Focusing on the content of 88news and its production process, this article examines an alternative disaster story told by a group of independent journalists to make political interventions in times of crisis. It argues that disasters present not only a disruption of the normal social life, but also an intervention of mainstream news production and representation that opens an alternative space for marginal voices, both journalistically and racially, to question the dominant world view.

### **Alternative Media and Active Citizenship**

Journalism provides citizens with the information necessary to realize and maintain freedom and self-governance (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Deuze (2005) suggests that journalists are the "representative watchdog of the status quo" (p. 447) and thereby serve the public good. The public can benefit from journalistic information because journalists are "trained observers" who believe in the "virtues of restraint, of confirmation, of accuracy, balance and fairness" (Gup, 1999, p. 35). Professional journalists strive to refrain from allowing personal prejudices to influence their reporting in order to maintain objectivity and nonpartisanship. These values not only function to legitimize journalistic scrutiny of the inclusion of a particular news item, a practice known as gatekeeping (Lewis, 2012), but also to establish the cultural authority of journalists as accountable truth-tellers (Deuze, 2005). In short, citizens rely on news writers to produce and disseminate "independent, reliable, accurate and comprehensive information that [they]

require to be free" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 3). By doing so, news writers fulfill their duty as journalists.

### ***Distinguishing Alternative Media From Mainstream Media***

The contemporary reality is that most news outlets are owned by media conglomerates. Journalists often perform double duty providing the news but also performing public relations on behalf of their conglomerate parents. (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). The increasing dissatisfaction with mainstream media has caused both academics and the general public to look beyond them for a different solution to realize democracy and political participation. Various terms have emerged to refer to these media, including *community journalism*, *citizen journalism*, and *alternative media*. A great deal of overlap exists in the literature among these three categories. All three may address the issue-centered character of news. However, *alternative media* was selected because it is a more encompassing term, neither limited to a single community (community journalism) nor driven by the identity of the journalists (citizen journalism).

According to Hass (2004), "alternative media [can] be defined as media devoted to providing presentations of issues and events which oppose those offered in the mainstream media and to advocating social and political reform" (p. 115). Jankowski (2003) identified several features that differentiate alternative media from their commercial counterparts, including (1) objectives (i.e., empowerment of the politically disenfranchised), (2) ownership and control (i.e., shared, community-based ownership), (3) content (i.e., locally oriented content), (4) production and distribution (i.e., amateur producers who develop and disseminate content electronically), (5) audience (i.e., a relatively small, geographically situated community), and (6) financing (i.e., noncommercial financial structure, although sponsorship and advertising might be used). Consequently, alternative media, which serve as another possibility juxtaposed with the established media and professionalized journalistic practices, imply innovations of deinstitutionalization, decapitalization, and deprofessionalization (Hamilton, 2000).

Examining both product and production, scholars argue that alternative media simultaneously perform the two functions of being "counterinformation institutions" and "agents of developmental power" (Downing, 2001, p. 45). The concept of counterinformation here is defined not only by alternative journalists' critique of mainstream media, but also by the different values and frameworks they employ in their coverage (Atton, 2002). As Atton (2003) notes, "Alternative media privilege a journalism that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of 'objectivity' with overt advocacy and oppositional practices" (p. 267). In a newsroom where political agendas and personal perspectives are valued above nonpartisanship, alternative news writers can let their distinctive motives, biases, and judgments enter news reporting. They thus create a "discernible human voice" and establish media platforms that are something other than mere information portals (Lennon, 2003). In integrating this human voice, alternative journalists should be forthcoming and transparent, thereby encouraging readers to reach their own conclusions. Transparency thus is crucial for alternative news writers in establishing their accountability and authority.

The sourcing practices of alternative journalists and their proximity to sources also differ from those of mainstream media. Whereas commercial media rely on official and institutional figures as their primary sources, alternative media invert this convention by offering a voice to ordinary people whose opinions

mainstream media often relegate to human interest stories (Atton, 2009). New Zealand's *City Voice* is a prominent example of an alternative newspaper that allows "voiceless" and "marginalized" ordinary people to use their everyday knowledge to represent themselves directly. As two of its reporters stated,

We aimed to report on the views and life experiences of ordinary people. If we were writing about schools, we aimed to interview the students; if the subject was prisons, we would interview the prisoners; if it was drugs, we would interview the drug addicts. (Collins & Rose, 2004, p. 34)

By placing "the voice from below" at the top of the information hierarchy (Atton, 2009, p. 269), this populist approach to reporting constructs a people-first reality that differs from the mainstream media representation. Furthermore, it empowers ordinary people to become reporters of their own life struggles and mobilizes them to participate in social movements (Hass, 2004). As Rodriguez (2001) noted, "what is most important about [alternative] media is not what citizens do with them but how participation in these media experiments affects citizens and their communities" (p. 160). She continued, "By participating in these media experiences, reshaping their identities, reformulating established social definitions, and legitimizing local cultures and lifestyles on the personal as well as the local level, communities are actively enacting citizenship" (Rodriguez, 2001, p. 158). Consequently, the participatory culture encouraged by alternative media transforms an informed citizenry into an active one capable of promoting social change.

As with most efforts aiming for social change, the reality of the execution is often far from the ideal of theory. Alternative media face an array of external challenges regarding financial resources, manpower, and access to official sources. They are also susceptible to internal struggles of one-sidedness and lack of journalistic procedures, and thus often blur the line between advocacy and objectivity or produce extreme polarization. However, an ideal not achieved is not grounds for abandoning alternative media as a means to social justice.

### ***Alternative Media in Taiwan***

Alternative media follow a unique course of development in each society. In Taiwan, scholars coined the term *guerrilla media* to describe these "outlawed, resource-poor, low-cost, small-scale, and technologically crude channels of communication" that activists have integrated into social movements for decades to produce counterhegemonic narratives (Lee, 2003, p. 163). Taiwan's alternative media first appeared in the late 1970s in the form of Dangwai ("outside the party") magazines—periodicals published by political activists to challenge the authoritarian KMT regime and to mobilize specific segments of the local population (i.e., the Hoklo and Hakka) to pursue political and cultural liberation (Lee, 2003). An illegal cable television station, informally known as "Channel Four" to set it apart from the three government-owned television channels, and underground radio stations entered the alternative media landscape after martial law ended in 1987 (Ke, 2000; Lee, 2003). Following in the footsteps of Dangwai magazines, these television and radio programs broadcast vociferous and unrestrained anti-KMT rhetoric with an emphasis on ethnic and class differences. Through phone-in talk shows, these new media offered marginalized members of society a voice (their loyal audience was heavily dominated by working-class people and taxi drivers) and

also encouraged inflammatory and abusive language that stoked “polarizing ethnic hatred”—an issue that remains unresolved despite Taiwanese society’s liberalization (Lee, 2003).

The emergence of guerrilla media in Taiwan reflected the nation’s political transition and contributed to democratization. These media provided a forum for alternative political ideologies to be heard and discussed during a time of repression. However, the opening of Taiwanese society caused alternative media to lose their common cause and gradually become fragmented, commercialized, and sensationalistic. The late 1990s saw the emergence of online alternative media in Taiwan. In contrast to their predecessors, which focused on macro political transformation, these online media either address specific social issues, such as migrant workers’ rights and representation of the LGBT community, or hyperlocal concerns. Because of its low financial and technological barrier of entry, the Internet has provided a new medium for grassroots organizations and social activists to produce “a ‘heteroglossic (multiple-voiced) text’ that gives full, heterogeneous voice to all those Others” (Atton, 2002, p. 9). Following this trend, the independent 88news website was established to investigate social problems triggered by Typhoon Morakot. Dedicated to a single event, the website aimed to engender critical public discussion of the government’s recovery efforts during and after the disaster, especially on the evacuation and relocation of the indigenous victims. Focusing on the news content and production process of 88news, this article asks two co-constitutive questions:

*RQ1: What kind of news narratives were produced by 88news writers, and what perspectives did they represent?*

*RQ2: What goal and mission did 88news writers hold when working for an alternative news outlet? How did upholding these ideals influence their work and redefine the epistemological assumptions of journalism?*

### **A Case Study of 88news: An Alternative Chronicle of Chaos**

The empirical data collected to answer these research questions came from two methodological endeavors. First, all 1,545 news articles on the 88news site were examined by the author to understand the master narrative of this alternative disaster chronicle. 88news organized its coverage in 13 categories, which can be further narrowed to the larger categories of everyday life, geography, reconstruction, policy, permanent housing, and civic engagement. Out of the 13 categories, permanent housing was selected because it best revealed the tension between the government, the religious foundation, and the affected community. Thus, the author performed a close textual analysis of the 35 articles in this section produced over four years from February 25, 2010, to March 24, 2013. The analysis paid specific attention to the news narrative elements: what (context/plot), when (timeline), where (physical setting), who (characters), why (motivation), and how (solution/action) (Robinson, 2009). A close reading of these 35 articles revealed the undiluted experiences of the displaced and the use of law and charity to strengthen the supremacy of Han Chinese in Taiwan. This alternative disaster story told by 88news thus portrayed Typhoon Morakot as a “racial event,” as it renewed a national discourse regarding issues of race, racism, and racial inequality (Doane, 2007).

Second, seven informants involved with 88news, including the editor in chief, staff reporters, contributors, and external consultants, were individually interviewed between August 2013 and August 2014. They requested to stay anonymous except the editor in chief. Using face-to-face interviews and email follow-ups, informants were asked to describe their motivation to establish 88news and comment on their roles as journalists. This process is an "in-depth contextual analysis of ordinary experiences" (Buzzanell, 1995, p. 344), which seeks to understand the production process of disaster news and the meaning 88news reporters made from their reporting assignments. A semistructured questionnaire was used to "focus [the] discussion, yet also allowed flexibility to explore new ideas as they emerged" (Berkowitz & TerKeurst, 1999, p. 130). These partially structured interviews were guided by such primary questions as: Why did you join 88news? What is the news-writing process on a weekly basis? Who is your major source? Informants were also asked to describe their perception of mainstream news coverage of Typhoon Morakot and the different angles they offered. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and then translated from Chinese to English by the author. The resulting texts were analyzed using "open coding" to search for high-level concepts (i.e., thematic patterns) and dominant categories and subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first step was to closely read all transcripts to gain a feel for what their experiences were about (i.e., the essence of the raw data). After this initial reading, conceptualization was performed through line-by-line analysis to break the raw data into discrete incidents that could be searched for high-level concepts (i.e., repetitive thematic patterns). The findings illuminate how 88news journalists defined themselves, how their professional and personal ideology influenced their journalistic practices, how they incorporated both traditional and alternative journalistic norms, and how these elements shaped the news narratives they produced.

### **A Disaster Story Untold: 88news Stories on the Great Love Village**

In most disasters, the government handles housing issues in three stages: (1) emergency shelters are initially established near the evacuees' permanent homes so they have a safe place to await the passing of the external threat; (2) temporary housing then offers victims interim or long-term living arrangements that allow them to resume their household responsibilities and activities; and finally, (3) permanent housing provides residential facilities that victims can use to reestablish their life routines over an indefinite time horizon (Quarantelli, 1982). Temporary housing thus serves an important intermediary function for victims, allowing them to adapt to environmental pressures and discuss their permanent living situation as a community (Quarantelli, 1982). However, this usual housing option was not provided in the wake of Typhoon Morakot. According to Du Ming-Han, executive director of World Vision Taiwan, the government was reluctant to provide temporary housing after Morakot because of lessons from the 921 Earthquake. As Du noted, "Some evacuees were still living in what had originally been defined as temporary housing years after the earthquake. This type of illegal occupation became a thorny issue for the government to handle" (Liang, 2009, para. 13). Therefore, when the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation proposed building permanent houses for the evacuees, the government was more than happy to "outsource" its responsibility for the matter to a prestigious religious group (Hsieh, 2010, para. 22).

As the most influential humanitarian organization in Taiwan, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation was established by Dharma Master Cheng Yen in 1966 to promote the Buddhist value of "Great Love"—unselfish love that embraces all humanity—and the humanitarian spirit of Chinese culture, particularly the idea that "when others hurt, we feel their pain; when others suffer, we feel their sorrow" (Tzu Chi Foundation, 2009).

Operating under these core values, this foundation is devoted to “spreading Great Love through its work in the fields of charity, medicine, education, and culture,” especially in times of disasters (S. Lin, Shu, & Chen, 2010, p. 6). For example, as described in its introductory pamphlet, when a typhoon warning is issued by the government, the foundation immediately sends volunteers to local communities and disadvantaged families to promote and assist in disaster preparedness. If the typhoon causes a disaster, Tzu Chi volunteers rush to the site to distribute “hot meals, emergency cash, material supplies, and medical treatment” (S. Lin et al., 2010, p. 15). They also participate in efforts to clean up the aftermath and create jobs so that victims’ lives can return to normal.

For years, Taiwanese expressed their appreciation by calling Tzu Chi volunteers “angels in blue”—a play on their blue uniforms. In their eyes, the foundation is a moral guide that enriches the spiritual life of Taiwanese. Local admiration motivated the foundation to extend its work into international disaster relief efforts. In 2003, Tzu Chi became the first non-government-organized charity group in Taiwan to attain association status with the United Nations (Tzu Chi Foundation, 2009). The founder, Master Cheng Yen, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 and earned “a reputation as the Mother Teresa of Taiwan” (C. Chen, 2007, p. 186). Started with only 30 members, Tzu Chi quickly grew into a global humanitarian institution with numerous volunteers in 50 countries and 502 offices worldwide; it also became a business conglomerate, owning a university, hospital, and television network. However, 88news’s investigative reporting on the Great Love Village project caused many to start questioning the integrity of Tzu Chi and to see the foundation as “a new hegemony disguised as a charity” (Hu, 2010, para. 19).

### ***You Are Blessed to Be a Typhoon Victim***

On August 28, 2009, immediately after the Legislative Yuan passed the Morakot Post-Disaster Reconstruction Law, Tzu Chi held its first press conference introducing the Great Love Village project to the affected communities. During the meeting, Tzu Chi representatives described the planned housing in glowing terms and announced building costs of around US\$83,000 per unit. Typhoon victims would be provided units for free on two conditions: (1) they give up their rights to return to and rebuild their damaged communities in the mountains, and (2) while the houses could be passed to their children, they could not be sold for monetary profit. A third condition, which only became clear in retrospect, was that residents would be expected to follow Han Chinese and Buddhist cultural and religious customs—both of which sometimes conflicted with the cultural heritage and Christian beliefs of the indigenous people (Ho, 2013).

Whether to accept permanent housing or return to their damaged native tribal communities became the ultimate quandary for most indigenous victims after Typhoon Morakot. As the mayor of Namasia Township put it,

We thank the government and Tzu Chi for their willingness to help us [Aborigines]. However, the thought of living in the permanent houses only makes us anxious. It makes us feel like we will never be able to return to our mountain tribal areas. Why can’t we live in the temporary houses for five or ten years until the mountain areas are safe again? Why don’t we have that option? If we stay in the permanent houses, we will be assimilated into Han Chinese culture and eventually lose our indigenous roots. (Ho, 2011, para. 26)

The dilemma even caused internal division and mistrust within indigenous tribes because a uniform decision was impossible. For those who wanted to return to their tribal lands in the mountains, accepting a housing unit from Tzu Chi would be a betrayal of their identities and ancestors. However, others wanted to live in the permanent housing and insisted that return to the tribal lands was selfish "because not every Aborigine wants to remain marginalized in the mountains" (Ho, 2011, para. 16). For several months, tensions existed among the victims, the government, and the Tzu Chi Foundation.

On February 10, 2010, at the inauguration ceremony of the Great Love Village, the executive vice president of Tzu Chi gave a speech to mark a new beginning for those impacted by Typhoon Morakot. She stated,

Those [Aborigines] moving into the permanent houses today are not victims but truly blessed individuals. After settling into Great Love Village, they will have the opportunity to transform themselves from a minority to one of the elite Han Chinese. . . . Guiding them according to the notion of "do the right thing, take the right path, have the right thoughts," Tzu-Chi will be involved in this transformation to ensure inhabitants become better fathers and mothers so their children will be moral and upright. (Chung, 2011, para. 5)

The key message here was the reiteration of a racial hierarchy between the Han Chinese and the indigenous peoples and of a power differential between resource givers and takers. This depiction positioned the victims as a doubly disadvantaged minority—both racially and financially—thus further dismissing their right to agency.

### ***The Price You Pay for Charity***

The first group of typhoon victims (55 affected households) moved into Great Love Village in February 2010. After moving in, they began to experience Tzu Chi's "beneficent intervention" in their everyday lives, from the organization of their physical environment to the regulation of their daily conduct.

A collection of inscribed stones dotting Great Love Village formed an very eye-catching but controversial piece of landscape architecture (Bernstein, 2010). Each stone was inscribed with a message written by a victim and chosen by Tzu Chi to represent victims' experiences during the disaster and its aftermath. As Choi (2008) suggests, "narratives are functional devices that efficiently politicize past events to accommodate present power relations" (p. 371). These stone texts thus are instructional because they demonstrate the proper ways of remembering Typhoon Morakot.

Two themes were woven into the texts chosen for the stones. The first theme, the reenactment of the disaster, problematized the past and provided a constant reminder of the victim status attached to the displaced indigenous peoples. The first type of disaster reenactment messages were first-person testimonies that gave readers a sensory experience with a visual form. For example, two messages read, "I saw a dead body on the road in the early morning" (Figure 1); "I saw someone being buried alive, swept away by the mudslide." These messages presented visuals that let readers understand how individuals had battled to

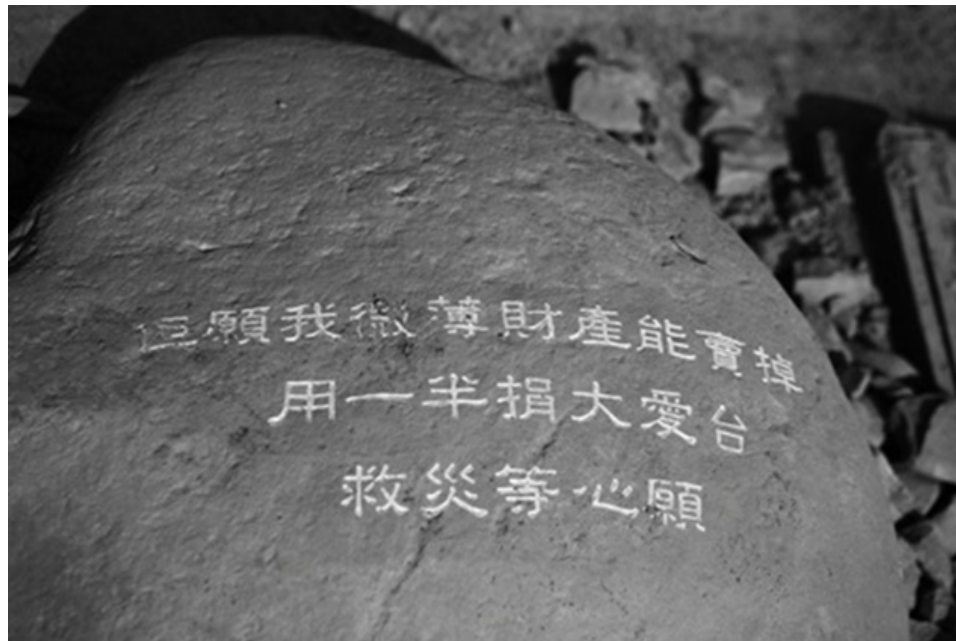


survive during the disaster. Another type of disaster reenactment message shifted the focus to the larger community and the macro impact—for instance, “More than 200 Xiaolin Villagers died, including my brothers, aunts, and uncles,” and “My classmates and our beautiful mountain tribal community were taken away by the disaster.” According to 88news, the emphasis on these negative memories within the new landscape of this community forced them to relive traumas and worked to further detach them from their mountain landscape and cultural roots, a void then vulnerable to being filled with Tzu Chi's ideology.



**Figure 1. Great Love Village stone inscription: "I saw a dead body on the road in the early morning." (Source: Bernstein, 2010)**

The second theme, which accentuated humanitarianism and benevolence, addressed the idea that Tzu Chi was doing a great deal for the victims, who in return should be grateful. Examples included, “I’m grateful, because wherever there is a disaster, there is Tzu Chi,” and “Tzu Chi provides my parents with a permanent house, so I don’t have to worry about them in their later years.” These types of messages also emphasized appreciative actions, including “Everyone should watch Great Love TV to learn to appreciate all life’s blessings,” and “I wish I could sell what little I have and donate half of it to Great Love TV” (Figure 2). With these messages, Tzu Chi implied that charity is not free. They encouraged and expected a return on their charitable investment, via a financial or spiritual commitment from the recipients of their largesse.



**Figure 2. Great Love Village stone inscription: "I wish I could sell what little I have and donate half of it to Great Love TV." (Source: Bernstein, 2010)**

Furthermore, Tzu Chi strongly suggested that residents of the village to follow four guidelines: no drinking, no smoking, no betel nut chewing, and no consumption of meat. 88news reported that Tzu Chi volunteers continually patrolled the village to ensure that the rules were observed (Cheng, 2010). However, both meat consumption, especially of pork, and betel nut chewing have a long history in indigenous communities and serve cultural and even ritual purposes. The indigenous people invest significant resources to raise a single pig. As such, the slaughter of pigs is used symbolically to mark significant life events, including weddings, births, and the building of homes. The process of killing pigs is also a way to enhance social ties because it requires the family to come together to slaughter the pig and process its meat. This act entails important negotiations of power relationships within the extended family in terms of who receives which cuts, and it ends with communal bonding forged through the shared consumption of the slaughtered pig (Rudolph, 2008). Betel nuts are also used in indigenous communities to delineate insiders and outsiders. When a bride enters a family, the groom's family presents her family with betel nuts to symbolize union and fertility. Similarly, when a friend visits, betel nuts are presented to show acceptance of the friendship. Judging and restricting these practices from the Han Chinese perspective involves denial of the indigenous people's cultural roots (Wang, 2008, para. 8).

Consequently, the 88news stories on the Great Love Village revealed how the law and charity were used to colonize Taiwan's original inhabitants in times of crisis. Positioning the indigenous peoples as the responsibility of Han Chinese is a rhetorical maneuver similar to "the White man's burden"—a discourse embraced by White supremacists in the colonial era to justify their domination over non-Whites (Clymer,

1976, p. 498). This discourse gave the government, and especially Tzu Chi, an excuse to intervene, educate, uplift, and convert the indigenous victims along the cultural and religious lines of the Han Chinese, all framed in terms of responsibly shouldering the Han Chinese Burden.

### **Producing the Alternative Voice: The Ideology and Practices of 88news Writers**

As powerful as the 88news stories on the Great Love Village were, they were almost invisible in the mainstream media discourse. To understand how this untold disaster story was forged, it is important to understand the self-positioning of 88news writers and the way they challenged the conventional journalistic epistemology.

#### ***We Are Part of the Affected Community***

The operation of 88news was primarily dependent on citizen support and trust. As indicated in its mission statement, it was important for 88news to be funded exclusively by its readership, rather than government or corporate monies, to ensure that its coverage remained untainted. Therefore, unlike websites that rely on commercial ads or sponsorship, 88news had an extremely clean layout, featuring only news and comments. Reader donations were enough to fund an editor in chief and three full-time journalists at any given time (a total of 12 journalists served 88news over the course of its four years of operation). The editor in chief, Feng Xiao-fei, a legendary figure in Taiwan's news industry, gave up a well-paying mainstream journalist position to start a nonprofit community newspaper (Jhongliao Community Newspaper) in the wake of the 921 Earthquake in 1999. The 88news website thus was her second endeavor to cover a major natural disaster from an alternative perspective. Only three of the journalists who wrote for 88news majored in journalism and thus had reporting experience before covering Morakot. The other news writers were grassroots activists without institutional journalistic training. At least two reporters were from the affected community, and several of them engaged in political protests on behalf of the indigenous community. 88news aligned with the journalism departments of Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei and Chi-Mei Community College in Kaohsiung to recruit students to work as volunteer journalists.

88news writers had three aims in creating the site: (1) to provide a space where the voices of the indigenous victims of Morakot could be heard, (2) to forge a dialogue between the affected population and society as a whole, especially during the process of rebuilding communities, and (3) to act as a source informing governmental response to future disasters (Feng, 2013). According to the editor-in-chief,

After Typhoon Morakot, I witnessed waves of mainstream journalists rushing into affected areas to get first-hand disaster coverage, but almost all of their news stories were written from the macro, national, or Taipei [i.e., capital city] perspectives. The everyday lives of the victims during and after the disaster seemed too run-of-the-mill and trivial to be included . . . I wanted to create a platform for those affected, so they could speak for themselves and communicate their true needs with outside groups and the government. (personal communication, August 9, 2013)

The 88news writers employed their writing to fill the information vacuum left by the mainstream media and to create an alternative public sphere in which the culture of indigenous communities could be shared and maintained. 88news thus should not be seen as simply a news outlet offering counterhegemonic information. Rather, it should be considered a "process of cultural empowerment" through which local community members can "mak[e] sense of the world and [their] place in it" (Forde, Foxwell, & Meadows, 2003, p. 317). These communication practices are vital to permit social change. The editor in chief concluded, "I think civic dialogue is the key to fostering community thinking and to driving any future reform of disaster governance" (personal communication, August 9, 2013).

Despite all the effort they poured into the site, the 88news writers did not see themselves as having sole ownership over its content. They considered themselves "charged by the community with the task of recording the aftermath of the disaster. As such, the website and its content belonged to the public" (personal communication, August 1, 2013). As stated in their last article on August 27, 2013,

Community rebuilding is a public endeavor, not the achievement of individuals or an individual organization. It is our responsibility and obligation to record what we have seen in the affected areas and share our feelings with the outside world. We have simply been walking around affected areas on behalf of the victims. We cannot claim any of the happenings there, whether tears or laughter, as our own. (Feng, 2013, para. 4)

Just like every other reporter, 88news writers regarded their role as one of bearing witness to the unexpected disaster. However, unlike most reporters who covered the ruin using an external gaze, 88news writers adopted an inside-out perspective to tell the story. In other words, they were part of the affected community, and writing was the primary way to help the rebuilding process. What really counts to 88news writers is not the story, the epitome of their cultural authority, but the change brought about by the stories.

The ethos of each news organization impacts its story framing and source selection and thus produces news stories with different voices (Harcup, 2003). For 88news, indigenous victims' daily recovery from typhoon Morakot were deemed most "newsworthy"—news that the affected community needed to know. The news appetite of the website paralleled the practice of community journalists who place hyperlocal information at the core and rely on "the trivial and the routine [to] provide observable clues on community life" (Reader, 2012, p. 15). As one 88news writer recalled, whenever she had insufficient material for a news story, the editor in chief would instruct her to see "what the typhoon victims have for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, where they go to chat with friends, what they pass on their way back home" (personal communication, August 3, 2013). This advice initially struck her as bizarre, but gradually she was able to see the "unusual beneath the usual of community life" and "discover serious news in the banal" (personal communication, August 3, 2013). 88news writers thus became the "chroniclers of local minutiae and the concerns of everyday life" (Reader, 2012, p. 16).

Unlike traditional journalists who mostly worked their assigned beats, 88news writers looked for, investigated, reported, and followed up on any topics related to Typhoon Morakot that interested them. One reporter described her experience as follows:

My daily routine starts with searching for a topic to write about. Sometimes, I type keywords into Google to see what comes up, or I read mainstream newspapers to see what they are covering, or I chat with friends [i.e., victims] to see if anything new is happening. (personal communication, August 1, 2013)

Each 88news writer produced an average of two to three articles per week. The writers also coordinated to cover specific unfolding events (e.g., new typhoons threatening Taiwan) or at specific times (e.g., anniversaries). After completing an article, they would send it to the editor in chief for layout and visual design and upload to the website. The editor in chief, however, did not alter, verify, or revise the content. In other words, the 88news writers enjoyed full autonomy in their news production and served simultaneously as "information gatherers, synthesizers, gatekeepers, and distributors" (Robinson & DeShano, 2011, p. 971).

### ***The Clash Between Traditional and New Journalistic Values***

Despite seeing themselves more as independent journalists working for an alternative media, most 88news writers still followed the traditional journalistic norms either rigidly or loosely. The differences among their perceptions on the concepts of objectivity and critical distance reflect their various levels of journalistic training. For example, the editor in chief, professionally trained and socialized according to the values and routines of conventional journalism, believed that "news differs from personal opinion." She continued,

as a professional journalist, you must verify the facts to maintain the objectivity, accuracy, and credibility of your reporting. I saw many independent/alternative journalists who lacked objectivity, because they were so absorbed by their own views, causing them to lose their professionalism. (personal communication, August 9, 2013)

Therefore, the editor in chief asked 88news writers to employ fact-checking to set their biases aside, especially when covering stories containing material that conflicted with their personal values. This could be seen in a series of stories about the Great Love Village. Even though several 88news writers had serious reservations about the project, they provided the same interview opportunities to both perceived victims (e.g., indigenous peoples) and perceived "villains" (e.g., government officials and Tzu Chi representatives). For example, on October 12, 2009, the editor in chief held an exclusive interview with Lin Bi-Yu, the executive vice president of Tzu Chi, so she could explain their vision regarding the permanent housing and clarify some misunderstandings. The interview was transcribed verbatim and posted on the site, where it has to date received 12,878 views.

However, despite the editor in chief's insistence, it was difficult for 88news writers to maintain nonpartisan presentation of information for both external and internal reasons. After 88news ran a series of stories criticizing the Great Love Village, Tzu Chi declared it a nonneutral, radical organization with biased views and refused further contact. As one 88news writer recalled,

I admit that I strongly disagreed with the way Tzu Chi managed the permanent housing; however, I still called and asked them to explain their stance every time I wrote something about them. In the beginning, they assigned a PR representative to take my questions,

but after about a month, the rep began refusing to take my calls, or would promise to get back to me on questions but never do so. (personal communication, August 1, 2013)

Being ignored in this way made it difficult for 88news to provide balanced coverage that included accounts from both sides.

The emotional proximity that the 88news writers felt toward the indigenous community also impeded their ability to remain neutral in their coverage. "I see myself as a human first, an [indigenous] community member second, and a reporter last," said one 88news writer; "If my story was not going to improve their living situation, I saw no point in writing it" (personal communication, August 1, 2013). Focusing on the close ties between community journalists and local community members, Lauterer asked whether this "community connection" would make the journalists "too timid to do the difficult stories" and "too familiar to recognize the emerging trend" (cited in Reader, 2012, p. ix). Lauterer's concern that the interview would become an "inner-view" (Lauterer, 2006, p. 162) was shared by the editor in chief, who lamented,

Our journalists became too invested emotionally in the situation and started to see themselves not as news workers, but as members of the affected communities. As a result, 88news became increasingly like a community newspaper in the last year of its operation. Our journalists stopped their fact-gathering and verification work and began writing stories based on their personal views. I think it was my fault for not demanding high standards. As a journalist, your reporting must follow journalistic procedures. (personal communication, August 9, 2013)

The 88news writers, who had minimal institutional training, incorporated a different set of values in their news production, such as "disclosure transparency" and "participatory transparency" (Karlsson, 2010). This ethos was translated into their journalistic practices. For example, 88news journalists strived to achieve "disclosure transparency" by revealing in detail the behind-the-scenes information about their work (e.g., their choice of sources) to demystify the news production process. They also relinquished their authority in news interpretation and published raw materials (e.g., official government documents or lengthy meeting minutes) on the website. By doing so, they believed they were providing readers "a reference to hold the government accountable for its community rebuilding efforts" (personal communication, August 3, 2013).

Furthermore, 88news writers realized "participatory transparency" by inviting both online and offline readers to participate in the news production process. As described in a news article entitled "Let the Tribe Tell Its Own Story," the 88news writers went to a rural Bunun tribal community to help typhoon victims develop their authentic postdisaster narratives. Reluctant at first, these indigenous people gradually embraced the idea of "searching for the one thing that makes them unique, special, or that requires the most public attention, and further developing that one thing into a news story" (Su, 2013, para. 1). The news articles written by the indigenous community were later published unaltered on 88news. As Atton (2002) noted, this process of transforming the news source into a native reporter is empowering. It demonstrates the democratic power of alternative media that alter individuals' self-perception and further mobilize them to "exercise their own agency in re-shaping their own lives, future, and cultures" (Rodriguez, 2002, p. 79).

### Conclusion

According to McChesney (2000), “professional journalism tends to demand ‘news hooks’—some sort of news event—to justify publication” (p. 49). Each news event experiences an “issue-attention cycle” in which the attention the public gives to a fresh news event fades over time (Downs, 1972). Meanwhile, media emphasize different aspects of the event at different points in time (Chyi & McComb, 2004). This explains why long-term public issues, such as racism and drought, tend to fall outside journalistic boundaries, because a clear life cycle is impossible to define (McChesney, 2000). As riveting as a natural disaster can be, it still has a limited media life span. Based on news coverage of major American natural disasters over the past decade (2000–2010), Houston, Pfefferbaum, and Rosenholtz (2012) found that mass media covered natural disasters for shorter periods of time than other issues and focused only on the “current impact” of the disasters (i.e., what is happening now). That 88news launched a month after Typhoon Morakot struck allowed its writers to “bypass the event-driven routines of mainstream news practice” (Atton, 2009, p. 269) and produce an issue-privileged story.

In contrast to the mainstream media, which constructed Typhoon Morakot as a primarily physical event by documenting flood levels, estimating causalities, and emphasizing economic losses, 88news writers dedicated four years to investigating the disaster relief efforts of both the government and the NGOs, and their impact on the lives of indigenous victims. As shown in the stories of 88news, Typhoon Morakot started as a natural disaster, but soon transformed into a social disaster because of government choices concerning relocation and reconstruction. In this process, the indigenous victims were first stripped of their material capital by the typhoon, then stripped of their cultural identity by the government and Tzu Chi. Specifically, while Great Love Village was supposed to provide affected communities a sense of security and help them adapt to postdisaster life, it became a moral facade for Han Chinese to impose their cultural and religious values on the indigenous peoples through physical architecture and social norms.

Assessing 88news in terms of its impact on mainstream media, one might conclude that the project was a failure. However, 88news fares much more favorably when evaluated by alternative criteria focused on the community: the construction of a public sphere, the modeling of an alternative media practice, and the preservation of an archive. First, 88news garnered more than 500,000 unique visitors, more than 1,300,000 views, and more than 8,000 comments (S. Chen, 2012). These quantitative numbers attest to the fact that 88news became a public sphere for political participation and deliberation. Second, although the major issues advocated by 88news, such as permanent housing, were not followed by mainstream media, the website was repeatedly mentioned by mainstream media as a model of alternative journalism. Also speaking to 88news’s quality and pioneering role, several of their reporters received journalistic awards (S. Chen, 2012), thereby giving hope to others regarding the potential of alternative media moving forward. For example, the editor in chief received the Excellence in Journalism Award (i.e., the Taiwanese equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize) for her long-term contribution to alternative news reporting for social change. In the meantime, 88news has been discussed as an extension of mainstream media and a necessary outlet for dissonant voices in journalistic scholarship in Taiwan (Fu & Li, 2015; Liu, 2015). Finally, 88news produced more than 1,500 stories and 2,700,000 words on a single typhoon (S. Chen, 2012), revealing the transformation of a natural disaster into a social discourse negotiated between political, religious, and local forces. This process was not only documented on the website, but also later published as a book, *Missing*

*Our Home in Permanent House* (Ho, 2013). 88news reporters were not just writing news, they were writing history. Through their work, they were able to produce an alternative archive for a single event, a first for Taiwanese alternative media.

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