

Foreword

That moment I knew I had to study how people communicate during times of disaster. It hit me like a ton of bricks, knowing I had to do something, understand the phenomenon, collect that data, and eventually share whatever knowledge surfaces. That need to connect, to support, to help, to learn, to share. The decisions we make to build these careers and spend our lives learning from others and aiming to show our societies ways to move forward more productively, that is the stuff of technical communication.

So back to that moment. It was the photo of a missing child posted to Flickr, a boy the same age as my now 22-year-old daughter, that spurred me on to studying how people communicate in these moments of crisis. Ripped from the arms of his mother during a tsunami, the post about him became the center of my world as I set out to understand how people were coordinating across time and space to reunite him with his family. How did a Flickr post become the central hub for coordinating information? Twenty years ago, Flickr was a popular photo sharing website, not a site set up to manage posts about missing persons. How did this intersect with translation across Red Cross and Red Crescent sites? Participants, mostly women, repeatedly searched other websites for clues, reporting back on the Flickr post. How could we design these user experiences to make this work easier, faster, more efficient? And, to quote my dissertation co-chair Dr. June Deery, “why are we only hearing about the white people?”

The ways in which we break barriers in society and especially academia is often a slow, plodding, excruciating exercise. My weaksaucy answer to June was “well, that’s who is using Flickr,” and while definitely ham-fisted, it speaks to that digital, political, social, and economic divide. As Dr. Allegra Smith stated to me so eloquently, the whiteness of Flickr in the midst of a decidedly nonwhite disaster zone speaks to the need for intersectional analyses of the coordination of information in times of crisis. What Dr. Sweta Baniya has done with this book is to walk through this next step. While I can easily write about my own experiences during disasters, I cannot do what Sweta

has done here, through her transnational and local lens, her understanding of her own time and place. That space we make to step forward, the space all of us must build, nurture, respect, and get out of the way of is critical to our understanding as rhetoricians, technical communicators, scholars, and people sharing this small blue planet of ours.

It helps me to recall this quote from Carl Sagan, one that helps me guide my work: “Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.” And there it is—the reason why we study how people coordinate, communicate, and survive in the worst possible moments any of us could experience.

There is something particularly special for me in writing this foreword for Sweta, knowing that this work will continue. When Hurricane Maria slammed into the awesome island where my grandmother was born, my only thoughts were about the safety of my cousins, aunts, and uncles. As my mother and I tried to check in on them, I recalled so many other massive storms I had lived through while growing up in south Florida. Something I am certain that Sweta herself felt even more pressing, having to experience the earthquake in Nepal at a distance. That pale blue dot, that vastness, and that need to help each other.

It continues to be an honor to support Sweta’s research, to watch her launch this book into a universe that desperately needs all of us working toward the goal of minimizing the impact of disasters on our most vulnerable populations. I have no doubt that Sweta has a lifetime of work ahead of her because of our never-ending wars, famines, and climate change. And now we have the gift of her book, one that will create space for further research and teaching about marginalized spaces.

Thank you for doing this work, Sweta. And thank you to everyone who comes after Sweta to continue this work. We must walk humbly as scholars, communicators, and people if we are to help build the world we hope to live in.

– Liza Potts, PhD, Michigan State University