Disasters, queer narratives and the news: How are LGBTI disaster experiences reported by the mainstream and LGBTI media?

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Abstract:
The media plays a significant role in constructing the public meanings of disasters and influencing disaster management policy. In this paper, we investigate how the mainstream and LGBTI media reported – or failed to report – the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) populations during disasters in Brisbane, Australia and Christchurch, New Zealand. The implications of our work lie within recent disasters research suggesting that marginalised populations – including LGBTI peoples – may experience a range of specific vulnerabilities during disasters on the basis of their social marginality. In this paper, we argue that LGBTI experiences were largely absent from mainstream media reporting of the Brisbane floods and Christchurch earthquake of 2011. Media produced by and about the LGBTI community did take steps to redress this imbalance, although with uneven results in terms of inclusivity across that community. We conclude by raising the possibility that the exclusion or absence of queer disaster narratives may contribute to marginality through the media’s construction of disasters as exclusively experienced by heterosexual family groups.

Keywords: disasters; media; sexuality; vulnerability; resilience; Australia; New Zealand

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1: Introduction

Disasters may cause significant material, social and psychological damage, destroy homes and infrastructure, cause loss of life and/or serious injury and inflict trauma and disruption at multiple scales and levels across society (UNISDR, 2009). The damage caused by a disaster may not, however, be experienced equally. Marginalised populations may be more vulnerable to the impacts of a disaster and may be less resilient in their capacity to recover (Cianfarani, 2012). In this paper, we investigate ways in which the news media reported the experiences of disaster for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) populations in Australia and New Zealand. Specifically, we investigate mainstream and LGBTI reporting of the Brisbane floods of January 2011 in Australia and the Christchurch earthquake of February 2011 in New Zealand. We contemplate how this reporting may have reduced and/or exacerbated the marginalisation of LGBTI people.

The media has the ability to construct and report experiences of disasters in a number of ways (Ploughman, 1995). During and after disasters, critical information is supplied by the media, who are therefore capable of enhancing individual and community capacities for survival and recovery. By making choices on how to report on disasters and which experiences to highlight as newsworthy, the media also constructs and shapes public perceptions of a disaster. The inadvertent or deliberate absence, or silencing, of particular narratives in media reporting may result in a broader lack of understanding of how disasters are experienced differently by a range of marginalised groups. Research into how the media has reported disasters – and which voices are included or excluded in media reporting – is critical to understanding how the media positions particular populations in disasters, thereby contributing to either the vulnerability or resilience of such groups.

Our data include local mainstream newspapers as well as online LGBTI media publications. Using quantitative and qualitative analysis, we have reviewed a broad selection of news articles in order to better understand the role of the media in constructing public perceptions and LGBTI experiences of these disasters. Such an analysis is novel, and contributes to scholarship by examining the ways in which LGBTI communities and their needs are framed and reported in – or excluded from – the media.
The related concepts of vulnerability and resilience are critical to understanding experiences of disaster impacts and frame the arguments of this paper. Although definitions remain contested, vulnerability can be broadly defined as the physical, social, cultural, economic and political conditions that affect the ability of individuals and groups to prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters (McEntire, 2001; Ariyubandu and Wickramasinghe, 2003). The interconnected concept of resilience denotes the ability of individuals or groups (ranging from the family, to communities, to countries) to maintain stable social and psychological functioning and to recover in a timely manner (Bonnano et al., 2007; UNISDR, 2009).

The research for this paper straddles three areas of scholarship that include: (1) the construction of natural disasters in and by media reporting; (2) the place of LGBTI populations in media discourses, including both the LGBTI and mainstream media; and (3) research into vulnerability and resilience as experienced by LGBTI populations in disasters. Here, we position this paper in scholarly contexts by outlining some of the relevant recent research in each of these areas.

**Media Constructions of Disasters**

The ways in which disasters are discussed and understood are largely determined by the media (Dominey-Howes, 2013; Miles and Morse, 2006; Ploughman, 1995). The choices of what to report; the prominence given to various populations impacted by the event, the informants chosen as authoritative voices, and the types and locations of damage to highlight are decisions made by the media which form and frame the place and vision of a disaster in the public imagination.

In its reporting of disasters, the news media encourages specific readings of disaster events which may leave other readings invisible or precluded from public discussion. Miles and Morse (2006), for example, have argued that the news media emphasises the impacts of natural hazards on built, human and social environments, de-emphasising impacts on the natural environment. Linked to this are arguments made by Ploughman (1995) that the media emphasise the causes of disaster as “natural”, an emphasis which elides the importance of human or social factors in creating disasters. This may lead to refusal to consider factors such as human-induced climate change in increasing the frequency and
intensity of weather-related disasters, as well as the role of social marginality and inequality in
determining disaster impacts.

Public understandings of disaster are also framed by the informants selected as sources for disaster-
related stories. Sood, Stockdale and Rogers (1987) have argued that the sources from which the media
seeks its information are generally “authoritative sources” providing an “official view”, including
emergency management organisations (Sood et al., 1987: 34). Disaster narratives of individuals living
in disaster affected areas may remain invisible or limited in such reporting. Ploughman has
encouraged the news media to draw on sources beyond “official and established newsmakers” in order
to draw a more complete picture of disaster causes and impacts (Ploughman, 1997: 134).

For those impacted by a disaster, the media can play an important role, including pre-event community
education and awareness raising; during-event preparation and action, status updates, evacuation
warning and notice; and post-event response and recovery actions to follow including advice on where
to gain aid and support (Dominey-Howes, 2013). News reporting may also encourage a sense of
community and shared experience, removing or ameliorating feelings of isolation or abandonment.
Perez-Lugo argues that during the impact of a hurricane, “the media-audience relationship was
motivated more by the people’s need for emotional support, companionship, and community ties, than
for their need for official information” (Perez-Lugo, 2004: 219). Listening to the radio or watching
television while a hurricane was in progress allowed individuals to feel a continued connection to
community, reducing feelings of fear and isolation.

In the days and months following a disaster, the media also provides a forum for debate and post-event
analysis and reflection, and acts as a mechanism to hold decision-makers to account (Dominey-
Howes, 2013). This may include examination of who – if anyone – might be to blame for losses
sustained during catastrophes, potentially operating as a powerful conduit for driving socio-cultural,
behavioural and policy change.
LGBTI Populations in Media Discourses

Critical to the position of LGBTI populations in the mainstream news media are the issues of, firstly, inclusion and, secondly, representation (Gross, 2001). LGBTI marginality is potentially exacerbated by either the failure to include LGBTI informants or narratives within media reporting or by inclusion which represents LGBTI people only in discriminatory or pejorative ways. The critical importance of these factors is due to the capacity of the media to shape public understanding of an event (such as a disaster) or a minority group (such as LGBTI populations).

As argued by Kelly, “News journalism remains the primary, if imperfect, source of information for most people about the public sphere and spotlights issues for political debate and further action” (Kelly, 2011: 185). The news media performs a public policy pedagogical role which is critically influential in determining the “public’s sense of self and other” (Kelly, 2011: 185). An absence of news media reports that highlight the specific needs of LGBTI populations may, therefore, mean that the broader public is unaware that these needs exist, or may position the LGBTI community as an unknown ‘other’ that does not require consideration in the development of public policy.

Media reporting is critical to LGBTI resilience, therefore, because it has the potential to contribute to social equality and enable political power by increasing visibility and reversing what Gross (1994) has labelled the “symbolic annihilation” of media exclusion. The gay and lesbian movement has specifically targeted media organisations because of an awareness that exclusion will prevent LGBTI groups from achieving equality (Landau, 2009). In Australia, the success of this movement has seen media representation of LGBTI lives increase to the point where reporting of an event such as the annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Street Parade now receives more coverage over the course of a month than did all reporting of LGBTI life in any year of the 1950s (Willett, 1992).

This value of media inclusion in improving social equality is determined, however, by the forms of representation in media reports (Gross, 2001). Homophobic or transphobic reporting of LGBTI lives may lead to the assumption that non-heterosexual and non-cisgendered groups do not deserve or have no right to consideration in public policy. Opinion columns in the print media may be used to push
back against increasing LGBTI visibility and to assert heterosexuality and cisgender identity as normative (Brickell, 2000).

Equally critical is whether or not LGBTI voices are included in stories that are not specifically about LGBTI life. Heteronormative reporting, which assumes the heterosexuality of both media subjects and readership, positions LGBTI lives as the absent or marginalised ‘other’. An event like the Mardi Gras may draw significant, and largely positive, coverage in Australia, however this is an event to which the centrality of homosexual life is obvious. How then, if at all, do the media seek out non-heterosexual or non-cisgendered informants in stories where the significance of LGBTI issues is less obvious?

Heterosexist reporting may lead to exclusion of LGBTI voices from such reports or to the reading of LGBTI lives through a heteronormative or cisnormative lens. Media representations of same-sex parents and their children in the American print media, for example, often assess the ability of LGBTI parents to mimic a limited imagination of the heteronormative family, rather than focussing on the specific needs of those parents (Landau, 2009). Heterosexism has also played a role in the reporting of HIV/AIDS-related news, with informants drawn from ‘official’ sources, rather than HIV-positive individuals themselves (Hallett and Cannella, 2008).

Content analysis of reporting about gay and lesbian lives in American newspaper lifestyle sections has shown that, while a surprising number of stories may be present, these tend to relate to gay or lesbian characters in popular entertainment, with little or no reporting of “lifestyle issues of concern specifically to gays or lesbians” (Gibson, 2004: 93). The mainstream media may increase LGBTI marginality by failing to seek out LGBTI informants; by failing to examine the specific concerns of LGBTI people in issues not directly or predominantly concerned with homosexuality or minority gender status; or by only ever reporting on LGBTI lives in ways which place heterosexuality as the norm.

The research described above concentrates specifically on representations in the mainstream media. Equally important to our research is reporting in the LGBTI media. The LGBTI media plays a
potentially important role in creating a sense of community for LGBTI people; framing and forming identities; and providing visibility. In the words of Rob Cover, “through the process of reading the community press the reader recognises that he or she is being ‘hailed’ and comes to negotiate his or her self-identity (in process towards a sexual self) as a component of group identity” (Cover, 2005: 124). The LGBTI media may create a sense of community by providing a media space which reverses heteronormativity and assumes the minority sexual or gender identity of the reader (Cover, 2005; Robinson, 2007). However, analysis of the LGBTI media in Queensland has found a range of inequities in the forms of representation included in these publications, which focus “on gay men, to the detriment of lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer readers” (Robinson, 2007: 65).

**LGBTI Vulnerability and Resilience in Disasters**

In many ways, the term ‘natural disasters’ is misleading. Although used to describe events such as earthquakes, floods and hurricanes, which originate with meteorological or earth systems events, the human impacts of disasters are largely determined by social, rather than ‘natural’, factors. An individual’s or group’s social position as defined by issues such as race, class, gender or sexual identity will impact on or define their experiences of disasters (Finch et al, 2010; Seager, 2006). Socioeconomic status, for example, may leave individuals without adequate shelter or without the necessary resources to recover from disaster impacts (Wisner, 1998). Equally, the social marginality of racial or ethnic minorities may increase their vulnerability during disaster events and limit their capacity to recover (Enarson et al, 2009).

The impacts of disasters on LGBTI populations remain under-explored (Dominey-Howes et al., 2013; Gorman-Murray et al., 2014a). Investigations into disaster impacts on specific populations have, however, highlighted some of the needs and vulnerabilities of these populations, while pointing towards the need for further research and policy development. Below, we review the current literature in this field, including both scholarly research and policy work commissioned by human rights NGOs. We do not aim to provide extensive details of the relevant disaster events, but rather to highlight the most significant issues for sexual and gender minorities in each case.
Specifically noted by research to date have been disaster impacts on non-normative or ‘third gender’ minorities in several regions. The aravanis of Tamil Nadu, India (Pincha, 2008), warias of Indonesia (Balgos, Gaillard and Sanz, 2012) and baklas of the Philippines (Gaillard, 2011) are groups which identify as neither male nor female, generally dress in ‘feminine’ clothing and experience significant discrimination and stigmatisation. Disaster management policies that cater only for binary gender populations have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of each of these groups during disasters. Some aravanis, for example, were denied disaster-related shelter and aid because they could not be officially recorded as either ‘male’ or ‘female’ (Pincha, 2008). Many who did access shelters experienced harassment and abuse, including physical and sexual abuse. Official policy guidelines which listed evacuees as ‘women, men, boys or girls’ similarly left warias invisible during the impact of a volcanic eruption in 2010 (Balgos, Gaillard and Sanz, 2012), while baklas also reported discrimination and abuse in emergency shelters during a disaster (Gaillard, 2011). Thus, socially marginalised groups were made more vulnerable by agencies charged with providing assistance. Spaces designated as providing safety were experienced as spaces of vulnerability and risk.

The LGBTI populations of New Orleans during and in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 have also been the subject of significant investigation. D’Ooge (2008), for example, has noted that rebuilding efforts in the city have been most heavily concentrated in areas likely to draw tourists and that, ‘although lesbians, trans women, and queer women of colour were disparately affected by the flooding, this fact is often ignored as New Orleans tries to reclaim its gay tourist industry’ (D’ooge, 2008: 23). This research highlights the need to consider issues of ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status and gender as intersecting with sexual and gender identity to exacerbate the vulnerabilities of LGBTI populations. The lack of legal recognition for same-sex relationships also placed an added burden on same-sex couples struggling with insurance claims and applications for government assistance (D’Ooge, 2008). Without such recognition, same-sex couples were excluded from accessing support provided to heterosexual couples.

Research by human rights organisations has highlighted the impact of the January 2010 earthquake on the LGBTI people of Haiti (IGHLRC and SEROvie, 2011). Although the impacts on some
marginalised groups were at least partially addressed by the Haitian government, UN officials and local NGOs, the incorrect assumption that LGBTI populations face no greater vulnerabilities than other members of Haitian society, or that these populations are undeserving of specific attention, greatly exacerbated the vulnerabilities of already vulnerable individuals. For example, lesbians, bisexual women and transgender and intersex people were subject to gender-based violence and ‘corrective rape’ in emergency shelters, while gay and bisexual men were reportedly forced into sexual relations with straight-identified men in order to obtain food and money.

In Australia, everyday experiences of marginalisation or peripheralisation have been found to impact on LGBTI disaster experiences (Gorman-Murray et al, 2014b). For example, some LGBTI residents of Brisbane reported being reluctant to access government or charity-based assistance following the 2011 floods because of fears of discrimination. Feelings of marginalisation or past experiences of abuse or discrimination may then feed in to disaster experiences, leading LGBTI populations to avoid circumstances in which further discrimination may occur.

These studies point towards ways in which government or NGO disaster management policies and practices may exclude or negatively impact on LGBTI populations. Thus, policies and processes intended to assist populations effected by a natural disaster frequently cater to the specific needs of heterosexual or normative-gendered populations, rather than the society as a whole. That LGBTI populations are not considered in emergency management policies and remain apparently voiceless in public discussions about disaster risk reduction ultimately leaves these populations vulnerable. Further research is necessary in order to more completely understand these impacts and to investigate ways in which policies can be developed to enhance resilience among LGBTI groups (Dominey-Howes et al., 2013; Gorman-Murray et al., 2014a).

What each of these three areas of scholarship leads us towards is an understanding that the media plays a critical role in constructing public understandings and experiences of disasters; that the media plays a central role in LGBTI marginality by including or excluding LGBTI experiences within broader social or cultural narratives; and that LGBTI populations experience disaster impacts in ways other than – or additional to – the heterosexual mainstream. In this paper, we take these arguments as a
starting point in seeking to understand how the media influences, frames and ultimately constructs the experience of disasters by LGBTI populations and how those experiences are understood, if at all, by the broader society.

In asking the question “how are LGBTI disaster experiences reported by the mainstream and LGBTI media?” our aims, therefore, are: (1) to investigate the sexual or gender identities of informants chosen by the mainstream media and hence to understand the inclusion or exclusion of LGBTI disaster narratives; (2) to investigate the interest of the LGBTI media in reporting on disasters and the degree to which that reporting reflected the diversity of the LGBTI community; and (3) to raise questions about what this may mean for both the public understanding of disasters and the social marginality of LGBTI populations impacted by disasters.

3: The Disaster Event Case Studies

Brisbane Floods, Queensland, Australia

In December 2010, the Australian state of Queensland experienced its highest rainfall on record (Queensland Floods Commission, 2011; 24). With further heavy rainfall into January 2011, catchments were unable to absorb excess rain. The excessive rainfall over the period from December to the first half of January resulted in almost every river in Queensland south of the Tropic of Capricorn and east of Longreach (central Queensland) recording major flood levels at some stage during this period (van den Honert and McAneney, 2011). This resulted in flooding across large areas of the state (Figure 1c). The most severe flooding occurred along the Lockyer Creek and Bremer River, which are major tributaries of the 13,570 km² Brisbane River Catchment (van den Honert and McAneney, 2011) (Figure 1b). In the Queensland capital city of Brisbane, the flood gauge of the city exceeded its major flood level on 12 January 2011 (Queensland Floods Commission, 2011; 27). The flood peaked at 2:43 am local time (in tandem with high tide) on 13 January, reaching 4.46m, its highest level since 1974 (Figure 1d). At that point, 14,100 properties were affected and 1,203 houses were inundated.
Across south-east Queensland, flooding from 10 to 24 January 2011 resulted in 22 deaths (Martin, 2011). Thirty-four emergency shelters, managed by the Red Cross, were established to accommodate approximately 12,000 displaced residents. On 17 January, 600 people in Brisbane were accommodated in the RNA Showgrounds and QEII Stadium (Cubby and Murdoch, 2011). Altogether, over 200,000 people were affected. Approximately 3,570 business premises were inundated, and commercial losses of approximately $4 billion were reported across the mining, agriculture and tourism sectors (van den Honert and McAneney, 2011). Damage to infrastructure included over 19,000 kilometres of roads, 28 percent of the Queensland rail network and three major ports significantly impacted (van den Honert and McAneney, 2011). Twenty-eight thousand homes would need to be rebuilt with many more requiring extensive repairs. According to the Insurance Council of Australia (ICA), insurers, with an insured cost of $2.25 billion, received 56,200 claims. Hydrologists appointed by the ICA to investigate events leading to flood damage claims in the Brisbane River Catchment consider the event a “dam release flood”. In their view, release of water from the Wivenhoe Dam (Figure 1b) was a key contributor to the flooding of Brisbane, Ipswich, Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley.

The community response to the floods was tremendous. Over 55,000 volunteers registered to help clean up Brisbane’s streets and homes in the aftermath, with thousands more unregistered volunteers. Several aid efforts to raise money for the recovery were undertaken including a live telethon broadcast by the Nine Network which raised more than $10 million (ABC News, 2011). A number of sporting events including a cricket match between Australia and England, the Australian Open tennis tournament, and a rugby league charity match helped contribute money towards the recovery effort. The then Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, introduced a temporary reconstruction tax called a ‘flood levy’ to help affected communities recover after the flood (Australian Taxation Office, 2012). The flood levy applied to taxable income of non-flood affected Australians for the 2011-12 financial year only.
Figure 1: Physical geography of the Brisbane floods. (a) Australia: red box indicates the location of Brisbane within the state of Queensland, where the 2010-2011 floods occurred. (b) A topographical map of the Brisbane River catchment (images a and b from van den Honert and McAneney, 2011). (c) Queensland river conditions on 9 January 2011 from the Bureau of Meteorology. (d) A modelled overlay of flooding around Brisbane on 13 January 2011 (image from http://b2cloud.com.au/general-thoughts/brisbane-floods-on-google).
Christchurch Earthquake, Canterbury, New Zealand

On the 4 September 2010 at 4:36am local time, a magnitude $M_w$ 7.1 earthquake occurred on the Greendale Fault near Darfield (the so called ‘Darfield Earthquake’) on the Canterbury Plains, near Christchurch, South Island, New Zealand (Figure 2c). This event was followed by a series of aftershocks focused on adjoining hidden faults in the months after. The largest aftershock, with a magnitude of $M_w$ 6.2, occurred at the eastern end of the aftershock zone at 12:51pm on the 22 February 2011 (Figure 2c). It was associated with a previously unknown fault, occurred at a very shallow depth below the ground surface and was located (its ‘hypocentre’) almost directly beneath Christchurch city centre. This earthquake triggered unusually violent ground motion that devastated Christchurch. Aftershocks from this event continued for months with two very significant events occurring at 14:20pm on 13 June 2011 ($M_w$ 6.0) and at 14:00pm on 23 December 2011 ($M_w$ 5.9) (Figure 2c) (Berryman, 2012; Campbell et al., 2012; Keiser et al., 2012). Collectively, this entire ‘earthquake sequence’ has been referred to as the “Canterbury Earthquake Sequence of 2010–2011” (Berryman, 2012). However, it is the event of 22 February 2011 that is noteworthy since it was the deadliest and costliest disaster to have affected New Zealand since WWII.

The earthquake resulted in the deaths of 185 people. Just over 6,500 people were injured and required medical assistance. Thousands of buildings in the city centre were either partially or severely damaged and over 50% would eventually be demolished (McSaveney, 2013). Damage occurred to many significant and iconic cultural locations including the city cathedral. The earthquake is estimated to have cost circa NZ$15-20 billion although the final cost of reconstruction is likely to exceed this figure significantly. Christchurch CBD remained a ‘no go’ red zone as late as June 2013. Some 80% of the city water and sewerage systems were damaged and/or disrupted. Very extensive liquefaction occurred across the city and large areas have been rezoned as locations that can no longer be built upon – including significant former residential areas.
The earthquake has had a sustained and significant socio-economic impact on Christchurch specifically, the Canterbury region and New Zealand generally. As far as we are aware, there has been no systematic and consolidated assessment of the ‘overall impacts’. Furthermore, whilst individuals and communities continue to experience ‘disrupted daily lives’, it is likely that the effects of the earthquake will last for a number of years to come. In March 2011, it was announced that the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) would be established to oversee the reconstruction of the city. On 11 April 2011, the Canterbury Earthquakes Royal Commission was established to investigate the causes of the extensive building damage and collapse.
Figure 2: Physical geography of the Christchurch earthquake. (a) Inset location of New Zealand: red box indicates the Canterbury Plains region of the South Island where the 2010-2011 earthquake sequence was located. (b) South Island and its seismicity for the 10 year period up to March 2010. Each dot represents an earthquake with a magnitude of 3 or greater. The larger the dot, the larger the earthquake. The black lines represent major active faults and are referred to in (c). MFS = Marlborough Fault System. Thick black lines indicate the plate subduction margins. Arrow and number = rate and direction of plate movement per year. (c) Green star indicates location of the Darfield Earthquake (September 2010). Red star indicates the location of the destructive February 2011 event. Blue star indicates location of June 13th 2011 aftershock (also damaging). The green, red and blue dots represent locations of aftershocks for each of the main events in this sequence. Surface traces of active faults are shown as red lines. The yellow dashed line indicates the location of the subsurface (buried) Darfield earthquake fault. Bold red line is the surface expression of the Greendale Fault. (Figure adapted from Kaiser et al., 2012.)
4: Methods

The material analysed for this paper can be divided into two categories: first, we have analysed reports in mainstream newspapers in order to identify the sexual or gender identities of informants chosen by the mainstream media. Second, we have analysed reports from LGBTI media in order to understand the inclusion of disaster events as news items, the continued reporting of the impacts of those disasters across time, and the level of inclusivity of the various identities that comprise the LGBTI acronym.

In the mainstream media, we concentrated our research on the major local broadsheet newspaper for each of the locations of interest. In Brisbane, the newspaper was the Courier Mail. In Christchurch, it was The Press. In each of these publications, we initially conducted keyword searches of online fulltext databases to locate reporting of either the flood or earthquake. We then combined those results with keywords ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘transgender’, ‘bisexual’, ‘intersex’, ‘LGBTI’ or ‘LGBT’. Our timeframe for these results was from the date the disaster occurred until November 2012. The limited number of articles located by those searches formed the initial material for analysis.

On the basis that the sexual identity of informants may also be revealed by their relationship status or family composition, we then performed keyword searches for ‘flood’ or ‘earthquake’ and combined those results with keywords ‘couple’ or ‘family’. Due to the large number of results located by those searches, we used a more limited timeframe, restricting results to the month of the disaster and the month following the disaster – for Brisbane, January and February 2011, and for Christchurch, February and March 2011. From those results, we conducted discourse analysis to select articles that directly related to the impacts of the disaster on particular informants. We did not include statements from politicians or other official sources, instead concentrating on reports in which residents or business owners in either Brisbane or Christchurch were interviewed or wrote about their experiences. Also included were stories in which biographical descriptions were given of those who died in these disaster events. We classified informants according to their relationship status or household composition.

In our investigation of the LGBTI media, keyword searches were undertaken of the online versions of LGBTI publications in order to locate all reports referring to floods (Brisbane) or earthquakes
(Christchurch). With reference to the Brisbane floods, we have drawn on local (Queensland) and national (Australian) online sources, all of which would have been readily available to readers in Brisbane. The publications included were *QNews*, *Gay News Network*, *Star Observer* and *Lesbians on the Loose (LOTL)*. Reports were included across the time period from the original event through to the conducting of that research in September 2012.

With reference to the Christchurch earthquakes, we have drawn on local (Christchurch) and national (New Zealand) online media sources available to readers in Christchurch. The publications included were *GayNZ.com*, *AaronandAndy.com* and *GayExpress*. The date range of articles included was from the time of the original event through to September 2012.

Analysis was also conducted to assess the gender and sexual identity of those positioned as informants in LGBTI media reports. This quantitative analysis leads towards an understanding of the dominant voices in LGBTI media and the success of that media in representing the diversity of the community. Although the acronym ‘LGBTI’ suggests a community or coalition of communities with shared goals and concerns, it is important to note unequal power relations and uneven levels of vulnerability within that community as impacted by factors such as gender identity. The concerns of many cisgendered gay men, for example, may not be shared by transgender individuals. By conducting a count of the gender and sexual identity of informants we are able to examine the levels of representation within each subgroup.
Results and Discussion

In this section, we present the results of our analysis and discuss the possible impacts of media disaster reporting on LGBTI communities and on the understanding of disasters by the broader or mainstream community. We have arranged the analysis according to the three research aims identified above.

(1) Aim: To investigate the sexual or gender identities of informants chosen by the mainstream media and hence to understand the inclusion or exclusion of LGBTI disaster narratives

Our initial research, covering articles from January 2011 to September 2012, identified no reporting in the *Courier Mail* of any informants who were identified as LGBTI or any reporting of the impacts of the 2011 floods on LGBTI community organisations or commercial venues in Brisbane.

This absence indicates the invisibility of LGBTI narratives in the Brisbane mainstream media. The specific impacts of a natural disaster on LGBTI populations were therefore absent from the construction of that event by the media. It is likely, then, that the Brisbane media played no role in developing understandings of LGBTI vulnerabilities among the broader public or in influencing a discussion of LGBTI needs in disaster risk reduction strategies or policies.

From the time of the disaster event until September 2012, six articles in *The Press* discussed the impacts of Christchurch earthquakes on the local LGBTI community. Two of these articles discussed impacts on a local gay nightclub. Two discussed the organisation of a local gay pride event. One article discussed experiences of homophobia by gay business owners forced to relocate by an earlier earthquake in September 2010. One article quoted the transgender son of a woman killed in the earthquake.

Although limited in number, these articles do go at least some way to including LGBTI narratives within stories of the disaster, as well as noting some of the specific impacts of the event on LGBTI populations. The report on business owners whose premises in a LGBTI-friendly neighbourhood were
destroyed, and who then experienced homophobia after relocating to a new suburb, may encourage understanding of potential discrimination experienced by LGBTI people displaced by disasters. Reports on a gay nightclub highlight the place of gay venues in the life of the disaster-impacted city. These reports counter the “symbolic annihilation” (Gross, 1994) of heteronormative reporting and add LGBTI narratives to the ways in which the media has constructed the disaster.

Figure 3 shows the relationship or family identity contained in reports in the Courier Mail from January to February 2011 inclusive and in The Press from February to March 2011 inclusive. As shown by Figure 3, in Brisbane the predominant voices in this reporting were those of heterosexual couples, and particularly nuclear families. In Christchurch, the relationship status of informants was frequently unclear (representing 60% of included articles), however heterosexual couples were again the dominant group among those identified.

Such predominance of one kind of voice reflects the heteronormative construction of a natural disaster by the news media. When seeking the voice of the ‘ordinary’ resident impacted by disaster, that resident is overwhelmingly defined by the media as a member of an opposite sex couple. Other voices remain absent and their experiences consequently remain invisible.
Figure 3: The relationship, family composition and/or sexual identity of informants included in the Christchurch mainstream media sample.
In many ways, the absence of LGBTI disaster narratives is unsurprising. As we noted above, the work of a range of researchers has identified an absence of LGBTI voices in media reporting generally. What Edward Alwood has described as the ‘heterosexual assumption’ (Alwood, 1996: 8) means that the mainstream media frequently assumes uniform heterosexuality among both news subjects and the reading audience. Unless a story relates directly to LGBTI life – the same-sex marriage debate being a recent, frequent example – the media are unlikely to specifically seek out the viewpoint of LGBTI informants. Disasters are unlikely to present themselves as events for which an LGBTI informant would be specifically sought out given the predominant media presentation of these events as objective realities defined by natural factors (Ploughman, 1995). Only through the prioritisation of social or human factors as determining disaster impacts does the significance of social marginality become apparent.

LGBTI identity may ultimately lead some individuals, couples or families to feel excluded from the heteronormative and cisnormative community the media presents. For those who experienced abuse or who were excluded from emergency support on the basis of their LGBTI identity, for example, the community formed by the media may represent exclusion rather than inclusion. Those not represented in media reporting may, therefore, fail to benefit from the feelings of community, belonging and participation generated by that reporting.

As argued by Panit, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle, ‘media today perform a leading role in the public constitution of disasters, conditioning how they become known, defined, responded to and politically aligned’ (Panit et al, 2012: 5). If disasters are understood only as ‘natural’ events, or as events with uniform impacts on human populations, then political responses may also fail to incorporate relevant social factors. It is unlikely that the Christchurch or, more particularly, the Brisbane media played any role in encouraging discussion of LGBTI needs in public, political or policy discussions related to disaster events. Indeed, the heteronormative and cisnormative nature of reporting may have contributed to the continued absence of such discussions.
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(2) Aim: To investigate the interest of the LGBTI media in reporting on disasters and the degree to which that reporting reflected the diversity of the LGBTI community.

Through quantitative analysis, we have examined the number of reports by date included in the LGBTI media related to each disaster (Figure 4). The results demonstrate, firstly, a variation in the relative number of articles published in the New Zealand LGBTI media on Christchurch and in the Australian LGBTI media on Brisbane. The New Zealand LGBTI media published 41 articles about the Christchurch earthquake, while the Australian LGBTI media published 21 articles about the Brisbane floods. This indicates a different intensity and duration of reporting in the respective local LGBTI media. The LGBTI media in New Zealand covered the Christchurch disaster, its impact and aftermath, with greater frequency and over a longer time period than did the LGBTI media in Australia for the Brisbane floods (see Figure 4). This may reflect the relative intensity of the event, which in Christchurch had a significantly higher rate of death and injury and a more extensive and extended period of recovery and rebuilding.

Also evident, secondly, is a rapid drop in published articles following each event. Although follow-up articles – which generally focussed on recovery or relocation efforts – did appear in the months following each of the initial disasters (notably on one, six and twelve month anniversaries), the LGBTI media was quick to move on to other stories.
Figure 4: Timeline of Australian and New Zealand LGBTI media reporting on the Christchurch earthquake

The efforts of the LGBTI media to assist their readership to cope with disaster impacts were likely, therefore, to have been most effective in the days and weeks immediately after the initial event. Long term assistance does not appear to have been a significant element of the support provided by LGBTI media. This suggests that, while LGBTI media may provide a sense of community and belonging for those experiencing disasters during their initial impacts and immediate recovery, that media does not participate in ongoing debates about emergency management policy and procedure. Brisbane publication QNews did establish a register of LGBTI-friendly emergency accommodation, thereby acknowledging the fact that local LGBTI people may feel uncomfortable or vulnerable in official emergency shelters. There appears to have been no attempt, however, to engage with emergency management officials to ensure the development of inclusive policies and safe accommodations. The LGBTI media did not, therefore, reduce LGBTI marginality in or exclusion from emergency management and disaster risk reduction debates.
In order to examine the levels of inclusion of disparate identities included under the LGBTI acronym, we have conducted quantitative analysis of the sexual identity indicators of informants mentioned in articles in the New Zealand \( (n=41) \) and Australian \( (n=21) \) LGBTI media (Figure 5). What is clear is that ‘gay’ was the predominant indicator used in both locations. In the press about Christchurch, 46\% of references to sexual identity were to ‘gay’. By comparison, only 8\% of references were to ‘lesbian’ while 16\% were to a generic ‘LGBT’ or ‘GLBT’ (Figure 5a). In the press about Brisbane, in articles which quoted an informant, the sexual identity of the informant was either not stated (24\%), identified as GLBTIQ (5\%) or identified as gay (43\%) (Figure 5b). Somewhat surprisingly there were no other mentions of specific sexual identities, for example, ‘lesbian’.

This suggests that reports in the LGBTI media were heavily weighted toward stories involving gay men. It is important to note that, while ‘gay’ may at times have been used to indicate the LGBTI community more broadly, we believe it is a term most frequently used in the Australian media to describe gay men specifically, a contention that is born out in our analysis of gender representation below.
Figure 5:
(a) Sexual identity of informants included in the New Zealand LGBTI media sample. The numbers in figures 4a and 4b reflect the fact that while some articles about the disaster did not include an informant, others included multiple informants. The category ‘none stated’ indicates the inclusion of an informant whose sexual identity was not specifically stated in the article.
(b): Sexual identity of informants included in the Australian LGBTI media sample.

Our quantitative analysis also examined the gender identity of informants included in the LGBTI media sample. Again, these figures indicate the very predominant male voice – and most likely a gay male voice – in these publications, confirming our understanding of the identity label ‘gay’ as referring to gay men, rather than gay men and lesbians. In fact, the figures about gender identity are even more persuasive than those for references to sexual identity given above. In the New Zealand LGBTI media, 85% of articles included an informant identified as male (Figure 6a). In the Australian LGBTI media, only 4 articles (19%) included a female informant (Figure 6b).
Figure 6:
(a): Gender identity of informants included in the New Zealand LGBTI media sample. The numbers in figure 6(a) and (b) reflect the fact that some articles about the disaster did not include an informant, while others included multiple informants.
(b): Gender identity of informants included in the Australian LGBTI media sample.

The over representation of gay male voices accords with widespread critique by lesbian and trans researchers and community organisations, in particular, about the continued predominance of gay male voices, histories and spaces in sexual and gender minority research and communities (Browne, 2007; Browne and Lim, 2010). Such reporting may leave significant proportions of the LGBTI community marginalised, with the benefits of community and belonging derived from inclusion in disaster-related reporting perhaps enjoyed less by those unnamed or unseen. Also absent are the specific vulnerabilities experienced by lesbians and transgender individuals (for example, sexist or transphobic abuse or discrimination) which are not likely to be relevant to the experiences of gay men.
(3) Aim: To raise questions about what this may mean for both the public understanding of disasters and the social marginality of LGBTI populations impacted by disasters.

This article represents early steps in a process that we hope will highlight the role of LGBTI identity in determining disaster impacts and that will, in effect, lead to a queering of disaster narratives. While our analysis highlights significant issues regarding media inclusivity and visibility, we acknowledge that limitations remain and that more work is needed to further this process. In this section, we consider these limitations, make suggestions for further research and raise questions around the implications of our analysis. Most importantly, we believe that further research is necessary in order to better understand the development of government and NGO emergency management policies and practices, and how they impact on LGBTI populations; into understanding experiences of disasters as reported by LGBTI individuals, couples and families; and in understanding how LGBTI populations make use of the media during and after disasters.

As our analysis shows, the mainstream media currently plays little or no role in improving knowledge of LGBTI vulnerabilities in disasters. If we accept that media reporting can influence political and policy discussion of disasters (Kelly, 2011), then we must also conclude that the media plays little or no role in encouraging policy developers to consider LGBTI issues in emergency management and disaster risk reduction policy. While we call for more inclusive media reporting, we acknowledge that more work is necessary in order to develop sound understandings of LGBTI disaster experiences and to develop pathways towards greater inclusivity in policy development.

As we noted above, research into LGBTI disaster experiences to date has found significant vulnerabilities experienced in various global locations, including Australia. These research examples highlight the necessity of localised studies which taken into account the geographically constituted nature of sexual and gender identities. While our analysis of media reporting in Australia and New Zealand highlights the marginality of LGBTI populations in terms of public discussion of disasters, further research is needed in order to more fully understand LGBTI vulnerability and resilience in
those locations. How, for example, do Australian and New Zealand laws recognising same-sex relationships (including, in New Zealand, marriage) alter disaster experiences when compared to same-sex couples in locations which do not recognise those relationships? How do local anti-discrimination laws impact on emergency management protocols? To what extent do the experiences of the range of identities within the LGBTI acronym differ in specific locations?

Further research is also necessary to better understand the ways in which LGBTI people make use of the media during disaster events. Although our analysis suggests that the LGBTI media have attempted to counter the absence of LGBTI narratives in mainstream reporting, the question remains as to whether or not readers turn to the LGBTI media as a source of disaster news. Do readers make use of LGBTI media during significant events such as disasters? During these events, does the LGBTI media hold greater value for some members of that community than for others? Do LGBTI individuals who have experienced disasters express concern about queer invisibility in mainstream reporting of these events? Our analysis has established levels of representation and possible areas of concern which we believe will benefit future research investigating reader responses and media uses.

10: Conclusion

In addressing the question “How are LGBTI disaster experiences reported by the mainstream and LGBTI media?” we ultimately find that LGBTI narratives were largely absent from mainstream disaster reporting in Brisbane, Australia and Christchurch, New Zealand. Heteronormative reporting of these events highlighted the experiences of heterosexual nuclear family groups and couples. This is problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, public understandings of natural disasters are largely constructed by the news media (Miles and Morse, 2006). Those populations not included in media reporting may find their specific needs are not met in assistance efforts. The ways in which the public understands these events may also influence the development of emergency management policies. Leaving LGBTI populations absent from these policies enhances the vulnerabilities of a marginalised group. Secondly, those affected by disasters rely on the media to provide support and to enhance
resilience by offering a feeling of belonging during potentially isolating events (Perez-Lugo, 2004). Reporting which excludes minority populations may leave these populations further marginalised.

The influence of LGBTI identity on experiences of disaster may not be self-evident. An earthquake or flood cannot be said to care about the gender or sexual identity of the people in its way. It is only through examination of LGBTI disaster narratives, and an acknowledgement of the importance of social factors in disaster impacts, that the relevance of sexual or gender identity becomes clear. A transgender New Orleans woman who spent four days in prison because she used the women’s shower facilities at an emergency evacuation centre (D’Ooge, 2008); same-sex couples negotiating government support services, insurance claims and emergency accommodation in jurisdictions that do not recognise their relationships as legitimate (D’Ooge, 2008; Leap et al, 2007); lesbians in Haiti subject to abuse and ‘corrective’ rape in evacuation centres following an earthquake (IGHLRC and SEROVie, 2011). These examples make clear the centrality of minority sexual or gender identity to experiences of disaster for many people, but such issues may not enter the public discourse without media attention.

For some LGBTI readers, the LGBTI media does offer a degree of representation and perhaps encourages a greater sense of belonging and shared experience than does the mainstream media. As our research has shown, the local LGBTI media of Brisbane and Christchurch did report on these events, particularly during the impact and immediate recovery phases. Reports in the LGBTI media also sought out LGBTI informants (albeit, predominantly gay male informants) to discuss their experiences, thereby developing, for some, a community of shared experience around these events. In this way, the LGBTI media ensured that queer voices were heard and that the specific experiences of sexual and gender minorities were provided with some level of media attention.
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