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Apocalypse Media Now: Disaster, Death and Disease in Social Media

Twitter, the social media service, is extraordinarily efficient at the dispersal and recirculation of 'crisis coverage'. National and transnational news organisations are now using Twitter to send up-to-the-second news about the development of disasters such as fires, tsunamis and disease outbreaks. Large scale events – be it the death of Michael Jackson or the flu epidemic of 2009 – generate massive peaks of activity, as millions of users recirculate news, add comments or disclose grief or concern. In these moments of heightened public emotion, Twitter has a split function: journalists continuously cover a crisis event, while users add layers of personal responses, intensifying the disaster-as-event and becoming part of what Brent Plate has called a vast 'apocalypse machine' (2009). The Greek root of the word 'apocalypse' means to reveal, or uncover, and on Twitter there are complex circuits of covering and uncovering, rumour, fact and affect. This paper will consider the ways public concern about disasters, grief over deaths, and anxiety about pandemics are fed by – and feed into – mainstream media crisis coverage. The aim is to better understand the ways in which public service information circulates and mutates, and the relationship between emergency management, news narratives and widespread human interest and empathy during disasters.