Why I am not talking to media

During the days following the earthquake in Nepal of 25th of April, came again for me the question of the interaction with media, although I thought I had settled the matter for good more than twenty years ago. My position is very simple: zero relation with media, be it written, radio or TV.

This position obviously is not very fashionable, we are in the time of appearance, the time of fake language, fake courtesy, and overwhelming presence of mass communication, and even the dictatorship of the pretended need for communication. But I am used to be outdated, on this matter as on many other subjects, and this does not bother me at all. Actually I am not the only one to stay away from media. My colleague Jean-Philippe Avouac also turned down all invitations to appear in the media following the deadly quake in our working region, probably out of pure efficiency requirements. Indeed, there was a lot of urgent work to do, and little time left to play the rooster on antennas. As for me, my position is slightly harder to justify, but clear nevertheless. My work is more long-term based and I did not have that much to do on the spot, despite taking care of my kin and my friends in Nepal before I was able to go there. I would have had the time, if I would have wanted. But I did not want. Some journalists were tougher than others, and did not only manage to find my mobile phone number and leave messages. They managed to actually get in touch with me despite my blockade. Then I was compelled to give my reasons, and, as I am getting tired of repeating myself, I am putting it in writing.

It is actually slightly ironic. Who cares about my reasons, which interest nobody, and the media will definitely recover and quickly forget about me, and if I do not want to have anything to do with them, they certainly do not give a damn. I am perfectly unknown, I am not photogenic. I am dressed like a penguin. I cannot talk sweet language that people like, I cannot help making blunders, I am unbearable, and anyway I cannot explain things any better than any scientific journalist. All this is true. However, it did nevertheless happen that media requested my services, much to my surprise. It must be that these media people, despite the fact that they think they know everything about everybody, did not have correct information concerning me, and that my reputation of incontrollable grumbler is not established well enough yet.

Anyway, during the days after this terrible quake, I would have been completely unable to do science in a decent manner. I was emotionally overwhelmed, and it was only after about a week that I came to know that the Nepali people who had done so much for me during the last twenty years were alive and more or less safe. Bad news was also coming, and I was not sleeping much. Definitely it was not the appropriate time to come to harass me.

Under normal circumstances, anyhow, I cannot stand the media and the press. I cannot stand the model of society they advertise. Information in the media is a great joke, even in the media of supposed continuous information. It is just spreading of a media-world concerned only with itself, concerned only with sensational, superficial, which practises, in place of information, plain hammering entertaining a single one-world thought, with the only goal of selling commercial slots. Nevertheless, I am pointing out that I have nothing against journalists themselves, I know a few of them, they are doing their job as they can, and they are the first prisoners and the first victims of this system, whose most disgusting face is TV. Well, there must be some rare exceptions, and even rarer good television, which should moderate these peremptory statements, but I will not advertise here.

What is usually just a matter of irritation, which actually decreases progressively with age, becomes however particularly unbearable, insupportable, during natural disasters, and especially during great earthquakes able to deliver, to these gentlemen and ladies of the media, the mass of dead bodies and horror stories they enjoy and need to make audience and print. Profiting of distress, of disasters, of dead and wounded, this irrepressible tendency of the media, represents the worst perversion of the techniques of communication, credit given to the morbid taste to the evil fallen on others, and a good way, probably the best circumvolution, to avoid discussing more embarrassing matters. Talking about rescue, or lack of rescue, is probably all right, if enough time is given to proper analysis of the facts. In this galore, anyway, what is it that the scientists could possibly tell?

First of all, each large deadly earthquake is the failure of science; it is not really the time to boast. What we know, the journalists also know, what is the need of grabbing the supposed experts, at the time of wreckage? Personally, I just want to run away and hide in a hole, and I am not in the mood of playing the fool and of looking for a tribune. For the last twenty years, I have been preparing for a major earthquake in Nepal, and the disaster which I dreaded, which I was trying to prevent, which
caused me sleepless nights and gave me also my motivation, this disaster has happened. What could I say, but utter a few apologies? Really, it is not the time to bother me.

Media are not used of being sent away, as the reactions I got indicate. However, frankly, what is the need of one more clown, and I really wonder why I was so much in need. Candidates are numerous; there is a huge crowd to fight for the media. It is what some call "the hour of glory". There is indeed more than enough disaster vultures, they can be seen making circles as soon as there are enough dead bodies, pushing each other for fear the colleague or the (otherwise) friend might capture the opportunity in their place. For some, this just represents an impossible to miss occasion for personal promotion. What a pitiful display, and in this case the journalists must have fun when they witness this masquerade. In fact, not only the journalists are enjoying the show, everybody sees the situation and the stupidity in the display of this seismological science which cannot prevent dramas and is therefore good for nothing. Everybody asks the question and sees the problem, but the scientists don't. What is the need and cruelty of putting them in this embarrassing trap, while many of the scientists were actually genuine and enthusiastic, with good intentions? What need there is to expose their weaknesses and discomfort, when a professional of scientific communication, which all decent media have, would perfectly do the job, giving the essentials while staying humble and moderate, as is adequate in this case. It is however preferred to have scientific communication be made on the spot by a scientist, while it is not his job. His job is to search and find, far away from the chaos of media.

It is however a characteristic of our time; people do everything, but their job. Plumbers do carpentry, carpenters do painting, journalists play the judges, judges play theater, actors do politics, diplomats do commerce, doctors play journalists, teachers do psychological counselling, parents act as teachers, and so on, everything is upside down; politicians do nothing, which is maybe better.

However, all this is in fact secondary; it is just the huge human comedy of our society perpetually put in shows and pictures.

My choice is in fact based on a deeper approach and a clear conceptual stand. This could be interpreted as supreme infatuation; actually I don't really care how people feel about it. For me, the search for science is an interior journey completely incompatible with the press and the media.

Science is a personal quest, and each scientist follows his own path, straight or tortuous, which, in any case, carries him to become a master. It is the essence of science, the actual spirit of science, which does not care about the fashions of our time or of other times. Search of a science which is not knowledge, but search for knowledge. It is the path that counts, not the goal, which is an everlasting illusion. This aspiration implies elementary rules, which have their roots in the beginning of civilization, and that cannot be violated. In the Pythagorean tradition, the masters, simply to preserve their nature of masters, were only talking to the disciples of the first circle. Not because they thought they were superior and that the common people was not worthy of their sight – probably Pythagoras himself was thus misinterpreted – but because the master must be entirely devoted to his task and entirely devoted to the disciples of the first circle. He must give to them all his efforts and all his time, because it is his essence and his purpose; that is actually very simple. All interactions beyond the first circle pervert his role, his nature as master, and the very substance of his journey in his personal quest, whose benefit is not for himself, but for all sentient beings, not only humans, in principle. The Master of Science, among other rules, as for the true philosopher, must live in retreat, protected by the first circle, far from all media and press, and away from all other factors of degradation. This isolation is as necessary today as it was before, maybe more necessary now that it has never been before.

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