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Remembering and forgetting 1974: the 2011 Brisbane floods and memories of an earlier disaster

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Abstract

The city of Brisbane, capital of the Australian state of Queensland, sits on a floodplain and has been struck by two devastating flood disasters in the last 50 years. This article contributes to the growing literature on disaster memory by tracing memories of a flood in 1974 as they were constructed and re-enacted in a more recent disaster in 2011. The article examines how disaster memories shape local identities and considers how such memories influence policy and local knowledge, doing so by reference to an analysis of three forms of memory media-personal narratives, news media reporting, and built memorials. At times, memories of 1974 enabled Brisbane residents to prepare for an oncoming flood and to understand the scope of the 2011 event. Yet other memories produced a form of forgetting by positioning the earlier flood as a successfully navigated event now safely contained in the past. Findings from the analysis thus point to the importance of understanding memories of past disasters as a critical element of disaster planning and management.

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Keywords: memory; disaster; floods; vulnerability; Queensland; Australia

Introduction

In January 2011, the Australian city of Brisbane experienced devastating flooding which inundated 1,203 homes and left a damage bill in the billions of dollars. In this article, I explore some of the ways in which memories of an earlier flood, in January 1974, influenced how people prepared for and responded to the 2011 disaster. My aims are to trace both the connections and tensions between varied forms of memory media, and to reveal the contradictory ways in which memory may act both to aid in disaster preparation and to heighten the vulnerability of individuals and communities. Memories of a brave response and successful recovery following the 1974 floods had become an element of local Brisbane identities. Yet even among a population that cherished its record of disaster recovery, maintaining continued lifestyle, development, and expansion had necessitated an equivalent process of forgetting or, alternatively, the production of memories which carried with them an assurance that this would never happen again.

The critical place of memory in both pre-disaster planning and post-disaster recovery is increasingly understood (Garde-Hansen *et al.*, 2017; McEwen *et al.*, 2017). At its core, research into disaster memory disrupts the definition of past disasters as temporally discrete events with finite impact and recovery periods, instead highlighting the enduring political, social, and cultural impacts of these events and the cyclic nature of the hazards by which they are often triggered. As climate change increases both the frequency and intensity of natural hazards (IPCC, 2012), there is significant value in attending to how individuals and communities remember past disasters and in reflecting on the influence of those memories on disaster preparation. This article traces the contours of disaster memory as it changes over time, and considers how residents of an Australian city simultaneously understood floods as cyclic events likely to be repeated and as successfully negotiated moments securely located in the past. In it, I draw on three forms of memory media in order to examine how memories of

one disaster became central to the experience of a later one. This analysis reveals that flood memory is both critical to local identities and is a form of local knowledge. In contemplating how future disasters will be experienced, I conclude that it is necessary to understand how past disasters endure through memory.

Remembering disasters

Drawing on theories of collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992), I define ‘memory’ as the spatial and socio-cultural processes through which the past is constructed and enacted in the present. As argued by Hoelscher and Alderman (2004, p. 348), together ‘social memory and social space conjoin to produce much of the context for modern identities—and the often-rigorous contestation of those identities’. A vision of the past is developed by communities at multiple scales in order to explain, defend or enforce collective identities in the present.

In recent years, scholars from a range of disciplines have begun to consider the role of memory in the experience of disasters (David, 2008; McEwen *et al.*, 2017; McKinnon *et al.*, 2016; Wilson 2015). As a form of collective memory-making, disaster memory represents both the decision to draw on past disasters as a means of understanding present day events (Wilson, 2013), and the elements of past disasters that are selectively remembered or willfully forgotten within a particular space and time.

Perhaps the most self-evident use of memory in disaster contexts is as a form of local knowledge that may assist in disaster preparation. Informed and knowledgeable communities with understandings of local environmental and social contexts may draw successfully on memories of previous disasters in ways that bolster resilience (McEwen *et al.*, 2017). Yet, such resilience relies on maintaining memory over long time periods and is highly susceptible to error, disagreement, and political intervention. Environmental historian Tom Griffiths (2009, p.35.5) has addressed the problems caused by shifts in memory in populated areas of

Australia prone to bushfires, describing a ‘dangerous mismatch between the cyclic nature of fires and the short-term memory of communities’. Griffiths (2012, p.47) also argues that there ‘is often an emotional need, as people return and rebuild, to deny ... the inevitable recurrence of the event’. Post-disaster recovery processes will frequently comprise a complex mixture of remembering and forgetting. Commemoration through, for example, built memorials and commemorative ceremonies, may act as part of the healing process, offering solace to survivors and developing a narrative of resilience and recovery (Eyre, 2006).

Commemoration may also act, however, to close off further discussion of an event and to place it in the past. As Susan Brison (1999, p.49), has argued, ‘we live with the unbearable by pressuring those who have been traumatized to forget ... Even a public memorialisation can be a forgetting, a way of saying to survivors ... “Now you can put this behind you”’.

Equally important is the political nature of disaster-memory. The social and cultural rupture caused by disaster offers an opportunity for certain dominant individuals or groups to impose particular ideologies on vulnerable citizens (Simpson & Corbridge, 2006). As a result, marginalised groups may find their experiences excluded from official versions of history [and memory]. Pointing to one exception to this general pattern, Emmanuel David (2008) writes of creative memory-making practices developed by marginalised populations of New Orleans post-Hurricane Katrina. In public acts of commemoration, activists have demanded that their experiences of the disaster be recognised. Commemorative acts were thus used as a form of intervention in broader disaster narratives.

When put to political use, disaster-memory may also exclude failed disaster management policies, instead highlighting narratives of forceful response and readily-available assistance (Neal, 2005). The result may be increased vulnerability either in the reduced efficacy of post-disaster recovery strategies or in disaster planning which fails to acknowledge previous policy failures.

Conflict may also arise in communities about how, or if, a disaster will be commemorated (Read, 1996). While some disaster survivors find value in ongoing practices of commemoration, others see commemorative acts or sites as distressing reminders of events they would prefer to forget (Muzaini, 2015). Remembering and forgetting each plays a role in recovery processes, yet the tension between these practices can produce conflicts that ultimately reduce community resilience.

Below, following an outline of my data and brief descriptions of the 1974 and 2011 Brisbane floods, I explore the memories linking these two disasters under three themes: identity, policy, and knowledge. In each theme, memories of 1974 are seen at work in experiences of the 2011 floods, sometimes in ways that benefited the people of Brisbane, and sometimes in ways that left many more vulnerable to the impacts of the disaster.

Data: linking individual memories, media reporting and commemorative sites

One feature of this article is to draw together and create links between disaster memory as constructed through and within three forms of memory media: the individual memories of disaster survivors as recounted in semi-structured interviews; news media reporting; and commemorative monuments or sites. The role of each of these forms of memory media has been the focus of increasing scholarship (McEwen *et al.*, 2017; Robinson, 2009; Simpson & Corbridge, 2006). I add to that body of work, bringing together various forms of data to develop understandings both of their interplay in constructing collective memory of past events and of the frequent disconnection between, for example, individual experiences and news media narratives.

My interest in exploring memories of the 1974 floods emerged while researching a separate project about the impacts of social marginality on the disaster experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities (see Dominey-Howes *et al.*, 2014; Gorman-

Murray *et al*, 2017; McKinnon *et al*, 2016). The 2011 floods were one of four case studies for that project and I conducted a small series of eight semi-structured interviews in Brisbane in March 2014. In conducting those interviews, I was struck by how often the 1974 floods were raised by interview participants. None had been present in Brisbane in 1974 and I had not intended to ask them about those floods. Yet the *collective* memory of that earlier disaster was such that many felt the need to refer to 1974—either in passing or in detail—as a means of making sense of their own disaster experiences in 2011. In developing this paper, I have re-read each of the transcripts of those interviews to identify emergent themes around 1974, memory and local (Brisbane or Queensland) identity. The interviews are not intended as a representative sample of the Brisbane population but as indicative examples of how the earlier flood was discussed by some local residents when narrating their 2011 experiences (Stratford and Bradshaw 2016).

The earlier project also involved analysis of news media reporting of the 2011 floods. The news media is highly influential in constructing collective memory (Kitch, 2008; Robinson, 2009) and in defining public understandings of disaster (McKinnon *et al*, 2016; Ploughman, 1995). Indeed, the news media frequently draw on memories of past disasters in reporting on present-day events; this is used to create a sense of scale, in a sense historicizing the present disaster in the process of reporting on it. Again, in conducting both online and archival research about reports of the 2011 event, the very frequent references to 1974 were striking. Here, I have revisited the media materials collected for that project—including print, online and television reporting (Table 1)—to show how memories of 1974 were included in local (Brisbane) and national media reports from the 2011 floods. I have also conducted new archival research in the collections of the State Library of Queensland to identify news media anniversary commemorations of the earlier floods between 1975 and 2011.

Print and online (Local)	<i>Courier Mail; Brisbane Times; Queensland Times</i>
Print and online (National)	<i>The Australian; ABC News Online</i>
Television	<i>Flood of Memories</i> (Documentary, Channel Nine, 1984); <i>The Brisbane Floods of 2011</i> (Documentary, Channel Seven, 2011); <i>7.30 Report</i> (ABC Television, January 2011)

Table 1. News media sources consulted

Finally, I have investigated media reports of a series of memorials to the 1974 floods positioned around Brisbane (figure 1). These memorials were commissioned as part of the twenty-fifth anniversary commemorations of that disaster. My aim has been to understand how these memorials were used to intervene in collective memory of 1974 and to consider how the memories that attach to these sites intersected with memory-making processes used by the news media.

Figure 1. A memorial to the 1974 floods in the Brisbane suburb of New Farm. Source: author

The floods

The city of Brisbane sits on a bend of the Brisbane River some 15 kilometres from the Queensland coastline. Located on a floodplain, with a sub-tropical climate and criss-crossed by a number of suburban creeks, the city has a history of flooding (Cook, 2016; see <http://floodinformation.brisbane.qld.gov.au/fio/> for comparative maps of historical flooding).

Figure 2. Highest recorded flood peaks of Brisbane River. Data: Australian Bureau of Meteorology http://www.bom.gov.au/qld/flood/fld_history/brisbane_history.shtml

In 1974, Brisbane was largely suburban and had a population of around one million (Felton, 2011). Cyclone Wanda, a low level cyclone, crossed the coast of Queensland around 150 kilometres north of Brisbane in January that year. A monsoonal trough pushed south into the capital and rain saturated the catchment (Cook, 2017a). From Friday 25th January and through the Australia Day holiday long weekend that followed, flooding occurred across large sections of the city and nearby Ipswich. Approximately 13,000 buildings were submerged, inundated, or damaged (Cook, 2017a). Fourteen deaths were recorded in Brisbane and two in Ipswich.

By 2011, Brisbane was a very different city. Through the 1990s and early 2000s the city had, in the words of Emma Felton, ‘morphed rapidly from a provincial, suburban town to a metropolis’ (2011, 3). The population had more than doubled to 2,065,996 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Intensive urban development had seen substantial increases in the number of inner-city apartments and commercial buildings. Large areas of riverfront had been repurposed via large-scale residential, commercial, and cultural development.

In December 2010 and January 2011, extremely heavy rainfall resulted in widespread flooding across large areas of South-East Queensland. In Brisbane, the flood peaked on 13 January, at which point 14,100 properties were affected (Bohensky & Leitch, 2014). Although there were no fatalities in Brisbane itself, 25 people died in other areas of Queensland. Insurance costs came to \$2.55 billion (van den Honert & McAneney, 2011).

“We’re the ones that they knock down, and we get back up”: identity, memory and resilience

Recollections of the 1974 floods were a significant element of the collective memory of Brisbane before the 2011 disaster and had developed a defining place within local identities. As Astrid Erll (2011, p.17), has argued, a ‘central function of remembering the past within the framework of collective memory is identity formation. Things are remembered which correspond to the self-image and the interests of the group’. In Brisbane, the ways in which the 1974 floods were remembered were, at least in part, defined by their value in constructing an identity based on resilience, strength, and self-sacrifice in the face of danger and trauma.

Writing in the *Brisbane Times*, local author John Birmingham (2011a, no page), stated:

In Queensland, '74 is shorthand, especially in Brisbane. Knowing of '74, understanding it and what it might mean, separates the natives from the hundreds

of thousands of blow-ins who've arrived in the past 10 or 15 years. It was the year of the last great flood. If cities have memories, '74 is a haunted memory for this city. It all but drowned.

Birmingham makes clear here the links between memory of the floods and Brisbane identities. He implicitly critiques the influx of new residents arriving in the city as a result of the development boom who had not experienced the identity-defining disaster.

Attaching the identity of a city so explicitly to a remembered disaster necessitated a selective process of remembering that was constructed and maintained in the news media from 1974 onwards. In 1984, for example, local television station Channel Nine marked the tenth anniversary of the floods with a one hour documentary titled *A Flood of Memories*. As the documentary's title suggests, the place of the floods in the collective memory of Brisbane was a central focus of the programme. Following archival images of the flooded city, *A Flood of Memories* begins with two journalists standing in a grassed area that, before the floods, had been a residential street. As one reporter stated, the 'emotional scars will always be with Brisbane, I think. And the people of Brisbane will certainly never forget the 1974 floods' (McCowan, 1984).

In its depiction of the floods as an unforgettable event, the documentary struggles with a number of contradictions. One of these lies in its determination to depict the residents of Brisbane as having uniformly faced the floods with bravery, determination, and strength—attributes linked specifically to the collective identity of the people of that city—while acknowledging the devastating and ongoing physical, emotional, and psychological impacts of the event. The narration states, for example, 'Many would live with a flood of memories. Memories of heartbreak, of loss, despair. But most of all, memories of how a city had fought back and survived one of nature's greatest assaults on its security'. In the documentary, such

memories allow for emotional responses such as ‘heartbreak’ and ‘despair’, yet give prominence to the idea of resilience. ‘Most of all’, what should be remembered is a city, not heartbroken and despairing, but which ‘fought back’ and ‘survived’.

In the documentary, people not only ‘survived’ but did so with uniform fortitude and resilience. Arthur Neal (2005, p.198) argues that to ‘take their proper place in the fabric of social life, traumatic events need to be selectively remembered. Those aspects of the past that were embarrassing to the nation or lacked relevancy for the moral foundations of society need to be ignored’. Acts of generosity, bravery, and sacrifice are highlighted, posited as typical or universal, and then tied to the identity of the disaster-affected community. The exclusion of negative behaviours means that such acts are, if not forgotten, then certainly not commemorated. Thus, in *A Flood of Memories*, a journalist observes that ‘People refused to wallow in self-pity. They took it on the chin’. Actions in the floods are recollected in ways which assume particular attributes. People who assisted in cleaning their places of employment, we are told, were not ‘motivated by where their next pay cheque might come from’ but, instead, by the generosity of spirit uniform in responses to the 1974 Brisbane Floods. While the need for a pay cheque might be considered a valid reason for action by those facing substantial costs in rebuilding and recovery, such an entirely human response disappears in the documentary’s narrative of stoic acceptance.

Memories were constructed, therefore, that defined both the disaster and the people of Brisbane in particular ways. The floods were an ‘assault’ by ‘nature’, and the disaster was thus a ‘natural’ event—a conceptualisation deprioritising political and social factors such as the decision to allow development on a floodplain (Ploughman, 1995). And the people had recovered with unerring resilience. The exclusion or excision of alternate disaster memories from news media memory-making also means that other experiences have gone unacknowledged and unsupported (McKinnon *et al.*, 2017). A narrative that praises people

for not wallowing in ‘self-pity’, for example, implicitly criticises traumatised individuals unable to smile in the face of devastation.

These memories of strength linked to local identities were carried through into the 2011 disaster response, as was evident in a televised speech given by then Queensland premier, Anna Bligh, at the height of the crisis. Choking back tears, Bligh stated, ‘I want us to remember who we are. We are Queenslanders. We’re the people that they breed tough, north of the border. We’re the ones that they knock down, and we get up again.’ (Bligh, 2016). Bligh here is drawing on and reviving memories that had been constructed between 1974 and 2011, again specifically linking particular behaviours and attributes to a regional identity.

Individual memories recounted by interview participants often resisted or undercut the forms of collective memory-making found in the news media, revealing disconnection between broad narratives of successful recovery and personal experiences of struggle. Sue, for example, lived in a street of the inner-Brisbane suburb of New Farm that was more heavily flooded than other streets in the area. She remembered:

There was a small clumping in New Farm that had been affected and we were in that. You know, and then the rest of the suburb is pretty ok ... [People say], “Oh, [gives the name of her street], that’s a crap street.” And then we felt like, are we losers? [laughs] That we live here? You know ... there ends up becoming a bit of judgement. And other people would be saying ... “Oh, we’re on a hill”. And it was like, “Oh, well if you were in [the flood] you were somehow stupid.”

Sue also spoke of the support she received from strangers who helped with the post-disaster clean-up, memories that are more easily linked to the dominant narrative of resilient, strong Queenslanders. Yet Sue was also excluded from the broader Queensland identity because her flood memories did not always align with narratives of a united community successfully

battling the forces of nature. In fact, in the process of recovery, at times she felt isolated and excised, facing blame in a city whose population quickly moved on and was now choosing to remember the flood as a past challenge that had been successfully overcome.

Such exclusion or foreclosure of memory in Brisbane also had political ramifications. By linking disaster memory, resilience, and identity so specifically, the public narrative quickly became one of successful recovery post-disaster, rather than unsuccessful policies, practices, or behaviours prior to disaster. Although a commission of inquiry was established to investigate flood causes and responses, and the Queensland news media investigated and debated who could be blamed for the event (Bohensky & Leitch, 2014), neither memories of 1974 or 2011 have had lasting impacts in terms of, for example, changed urban development policy.

Development in Brisbane after 2011 has continued to escalate, including in areas that had been badly flooded (Cook, 2017b). In lower value suburbs, the median house price dropped by 22.7 per cent in the three months after the floods (Eves & Wilkinson 2014). Prices in wealthier areas, however, experienced a less significant drop and a more rapid recovery, particularly in areas where repairs were done swiftly and the material impacts of the flood were no longer on view (Eves & Wilkinson 2014). Recent news reports argue that the floods have had no long-term impact on the local real estate market, with river-side homes and apartments in high demand (Foster 2018; Horn & Hamilton-Smith 2018).

Memories of flood management policy and practice: The Mighty Wivenhoe

After the 1974 floods, the Wivenhoe Dam was constructed on the Brisbane River about 80 kilometres from the city. A lasting memory subsequently developed among Brisbane residents that, thanks to the construction of the dam which opened in 1984, the city had been flood-proofed. A commemorative article in the local *Courier Mail* newspaper in 2014, for

example, stated that the 1974 flood ‘would usher in the building of the Wivenhoe Dam which the politicians proclaimed would be Brisbane’s great protector and flood-proof the city’ (Freudenberg, 2014). In our interview, Helen, whose two storey house was flooded in 2011 to the ceiling of the second storey, stated, ‘Before the Wivenhoe Dam, I wouldn’t have got the loan through the bank to buy this house, back in 1990. But that the capacity of the dam ... to stem such a flood, was the basis upon which I was able to get the loan to buy this place.’ Remembering talk of the 1974 floods when she first moved to Brisbane in the 1990s, interviewee Kelly stated, ‘Some people were of the opinion that the Wivenhoe Dam would stop it happening again and others weren’t so sure.’

Plans for the Wivenhoe had first been announced in 1971, three years before the floods. Post-1974, the building of the dam took on new urgency and it was used by the Queensland Premier, Joh Bjelke-Peterson, as a means to resist widespread calls for a Commission of Inquiry to investigate flood causes (Cook, 2017b). Bjelke-Peterson announced that heavy rain was already known to be the cause of the flood and that the government had, in the Wivenhoe, a solution ready to go. The memory of Wivenhoe Dam as the city flood-proofer became widespread and, if frequently a little uncertain, had significant ramifications. Historian Margaret Cook argues that the reliance on dam building is one element in a range of policies that have failed to protect the city from flooding. She states, ‘Brisbane has been set on a path dependence of intensive floodplain development that continually relies on engineering solutions for flood mitigation combined with inadequate and poorly implemented land use policies’ (Cook, 2017b, p.345).

This is not to say the memory of Wivenhoe as flood-proofer had always gone unchallenged. In 1984, for example, the *Flood of Memories* documentary specifically set out to inform Brisbane residents that Wivenhoe was designed for flood *mitigation*, not flood-proofing. In other words, the dam would reduce flood risk and mitigate the damage caused by some future

floods, but would not put an end to Brisbane's history of flooding. Interviewed in the documentary, John Lawrence of the Institute of Engineers told reporters, 'Wivenhoe will diminish the risk but, I think it's unwise to get into a false sense of security.' Standing in front of the, at that stage still incomplete dam, the documentary's host stated, 'This is the Wivenhoe Dam as it stands today—still unfinished and still claimed, by our politicians at least, to be the answer to our flood problems. But the experts don't agree. It seems we still haven't learnt how to stop those disastrous floods.'

Through the 2000s, Brisbane City Council had also taken some steps to resist the flood-proofed myth, running a program instructing Brisbane residents that they lived in a flood prone city and that they needed to be 'Flood Wise'. Through a website, advertisements, and printed materials, locals were advised to develop flood plans. Information leaflets distributed to residents specifically addressed the issue of the dam, stating, 'Wivenhoe Dam serves as Brisbane's primary water supply. The additional storage capacity of the dam may reduce the severity of a Brisbane River flood but can never eliminate the risk entirely' (*Be FloodWise*, 2006, p.1).

Flood warnings were also installed into the series of wooden memorials that were placed around Brisbane to mark the twenty-fourth anniversary of the 1974 disaster, each of which marked the height that the floods had reached in the specific location in which the marker was sited. A plaque attached to each marker contains information about Wivenhoe, stating, 'Since the 1974 floods Wivenhoe Dam has been built on the Brisbane River near Fernvale. The dam was designed with excess capacity to store flood waters.' The plaque then states that the 1974 floods would have been lower had the Wivenhoe been in place at that time. A material act of remembrance is thus acting here as an intervention into other memory narratives, arguing that the dam would have reduced the level of the 1974 floods, not prevented them.

Despite these interventions, the memory of the Wivenhoe Dam as city flood-proofer persisted. In the days after the 2011 floods, a local resident interviewed for national ABC television news program 7.30 explained that many residents had no flood insurance cover, ‘because they believed that the Wivenhoe Dam would protect the city and that we wouldn’t have to go through this kind of nightmare again’. Another stated, ‘We had friends in the area before we moved here and they lived through the 1974 flood. And they all said, “With Wivenhoe ... it won’t happen again”’.

Clear in these statements is a complete lack of doubt about the intended functions and capacities of the Wivenhoe Dam. Memories of 1974 constructed through a combination of political rhetoric and the talk of local residents incorporated both the trauma of the earlier flood and related reassurances that it could not be repeated. The term ‘flood mitigation’, which offers little in terms of firm data, became lost amid memories of more definitive phrases like ‘flood proof’ and ‘never again’.

Also clear are the consequences on households when memories of a past flood do not incorporate an understanding of potential future risk. Private precautionary measures can reduce the impacts of flooding and a combination of risk awareness and knowledge of effective action has been found to prompt people at risk to take action to protect their home (Grothmann & Reusswig 2006). Such action was unlikely among residents who saw themselves as protected from risk by the dam. In understanding the perception of risk, it is critical to consider the contexts in which individuals are assessing their potential vulnerability (Elrick-Barr *et al.*, 2015). How a past disaster is remembered is an important element of that context.

After the 2011 floods, debates would quickly follow as to whether management of the dam had in fact contributed to the floods, or whether without the Wivenhoe, the flood would have

been even worse (Bohensky & Leitch, 2014; van den Honert & McAneney, 2011). Ten years of drought leading up to 2011 had altered water policy in Queensland, strengthening Wivenhoe's importance as water reservoir over its capabilities for flood mitigation. The collective memories of the dam, still attached to narratives developed in the late 1970s, had not adapted to these changing policies and practices.

A local television news documentary titled *The Flood of 2011*, which screened just weeks after that event, began, 'For the past 37 years, Brisbane's talked about the flood of 1974. From here on, the talk will be about the flood of 2011. Deadlier, costlier, and forever destroying the myth that Brisbane was flood proof'. The shocked reactions of many locals to the 2011 flood might at first suggest that Brisbane residents had forgotten about the potential for disaster in their flood-prone city. Yet memories of 1974 were at the heart of local identities and lived on in the collective memories of the city. Brisbane residents had not forgotten about floods; they had, instead, been reassured by widely circulated memories that either positioned the disaster safely in the past or contained false information. These memories left many dangerously vulnerable.

Utilising memory as local knowledge before, during and after the floods

Sue was home alone on the days leading up to the 2011 floods. She had not lived in Brisbane in 1974, so had no memory of what a flood in the city could do. In fact, when warned that her street was likely to be impacted by approaching flood waters, Sue struggled to imagine what that fact might mean for her home or what actions she should take to protect her belongings. She stated:

I remember sort of manically ringing the Brisbane City Council and, when you think about it ... what were they going to say? But [I was] trying to get through to understand where the levels were going to come to. ... And I think now that the

energy that I put into trying to understand where the water was going to come to, it was like, they should have just told us they didn't know, you know what I mean?

Sue's memory reveals the 'embodied uncertainty' (Sword-Daniels *et al.*, 2018, 290) involved in the experience of a disaster and the challenge of finding information through which to contemplate likely impacts and to plan an appropriate course of action. A flood might be approaching, but how high will it rise? How long will the waters remain? What should be saved? This uncertainty also reveals the gap between the information expected or required by disaster impacted individuals and that which can or is likely to be provided by emergency services and/or governments.

This gap is often filled by processes described by McEwen *et al.* (2017, p.7) as 'active remembering', in which individual or local disaster memories are put into action as lay knowledge. Sally and her partner, Jane, for example, lived in the ground floor flat of a two-storey, two-home dwelling. Their actions in the flood were largely determined by the memories of a neighbour:

A lady across the road, Margaret, was in the '74 flood and she came over and said, "If it's going to be worse than '74, you girls have to get out, or else be up top and get everything you can up".

The upstairs neighbours subsequently decided to stay with friends and gave Sally and Jane permission to use their flat if needed. Sally stated:

Margaret had said to me, "If in the morning it reaches into the middle of the road, you know it's going to be bad" ... And in the morning I went out and I went, "Oh, I don't like the look of that" ... So I woke Jane up and said, "We've got to get up to the shops, get what we can there because we don't know how long we're going to be and if we're going to have to have water or anything like that". So, by the

time we went up the road, went to [a supermarket] and came back, [the water] was up to my knees. It was just half an hour and bang.

Sally and Jane were then trapped in the upstairs flat for several days. They were without power and water but had fortunately managed to buy enough supplies to manage through the event.

As noted above, flood-markers that indicated the height of the 1974 flood were positioned in various locations throughout Brisbane. These may have provided useful information to some locals; however it is equally possible that the memorials' long-term presence in each location and relatively modest and unremarkable design meant that they were largely ignored by most. In December 2010, the *ABC* online news service reported on Bureau of Meteorology predictions of further rain and drew on the 1974 memorials to begin a process of public memory-making. Journalist Emma Sykes (2010, no page) wrote that the Bureau's predictions were 'casting minds back to the flood of 1974'. Sykes then noted the presence of the wooden memorials in the city and requested that readers send in photographs. These images were uploaded to the *ABC* site and were marked on a digital map of the city. Also requested were photographs of informal flood markers, including markings that had been placed on businesses and other private buildings by residents. Interested residents could then draw on these material memories of 1974 in order to understand the possible consequences of another flood.

This act of news media remembrance signifies another moment in which memories of 1974 were enacted within the 2011 event, in this case through the interplay between a fixed memorial site and the active memory-making processes of local news media. Memorials are sites at which memory is imagined as fixed and solid, yet the meanings of such structures shift and adapt across time (Ashton & Hamilton, 2008). In the moments before a disaster, the

1974 flood memorials shifted from easily ignorable monument representing an event in the past to a source of information usefully deployed in the present.

In the days leading up to the floods, as a large-scale disaster began to look likely, the local news media utilised memories of 1974 as a means of informing the city's residents about what they might expect. On 12 January, for example, the national 7.30 current affairs program dedicated a five minute story to memories of the earlier flood. Introducing the story, host Leigh Sales stated, 'Even with the emergency response in full-swing, some experts in disaster management believe it's not too late to learn lessons from the devastating floods of 1974'. The program then featured interviews with Australian flood historian Emily O'Gorman, as well as a local resident, Stel Cusmiani, who had experienced the 1974 floods.

Again, memories of the 1974 floods were revived or reconstructed here as a means of providing residents with important information. Memory-making processes enacted by the news media acted as a form of resilience building. When televised at other times, archival images of the 1974 floods displayed a moment in history that—particularly if combined with the narrative of a 'flood-proof' city—placed the disaster as a temporally discrete event contained in the past. In January 2011, however, with another flood appearing likely, these images took on greater urgency and new meanings. They now represented the cyclical nature of flooding and provided residents with a sense of the possible scale and the potential impacts of the approaching floods. The intention was not only to reveal a moment in the past but to provide a guide for actions in the present.

In the weeks and months after the 2011 floods, the local news media continued to use memories of 1974 in order to tell the story of the more recent event. The enduring importance of 1974 to the collective memory of Brisbane gave the 2011 floods a sense of scale and a place within history. The people of Brisbane had endured a devastating disaster, and

participated in an historic event. Channel Seven's news special *The Flood of 2011* used a split screen to run images of 2011 and 1974 in parallel. Direct comparisons were made between the two floods, explaining the differences in their impacts while creating a form of joint memory.

In creating memories of both 1974 and 2011, the news media labelled each disaster 'unforgettable' while simultaneously expressing fear that important lessons would be forgotten. In 1984's television documentary *A Flood of Memories*, a journalist states 'One lesson that must always be remembered is that it will probably happen again' (McCowan, 1984.). In 2011's documentary *The Flood of 2011*, we are told, 'Not forgetting the lessons of 2011 will be critical' (Doherty, 2011). A tension remains in these memory narratives. The disasters were of such scale that their fading from memory seems impossible, and yet perhaps they will be remembered in ways which fail to create necessary change in policy and practice.

Conclusion

Memories of Brisbane's 1974 floods played multiple and complex roles influencing how the people of Brisbane experienced another devastating flood in 2011. The ways in which 1974 was—and was not—remembered tended to bolster the resilience of some residents by providing them with information about the coming floods and by providing them with confidence in their ability to survive and recover. Yet those memories also left many people vulnerable, providing some with a false sense of security in a city they believed to be flood-proof and excluding others from a sense of strong community as they struggled to recover and rebuild.

What the interactions between 1974 and 2011 most clearly suggest is that past disasters are not discrete moments in history. Disaster impacts do not end when the last muddy debris is cleared away or the last building rebuilt. The impacts of 1974 endured in Brisbane as

memory. In order to understand how communities may be vulnerable to future disasters, therefore, it is critical to understand how memories of earlier disasters continue to operate in the present. Attending to shifts in local memory narratives as they appear in the news media, in the talk of local residents, or as constructed through official forms of commemoration, may have value for the development of localised emergency management policies and practices. Equally, governments and other official agencies should consider the memory narratives they construct as not only a form of post-disaster recovery but also as a form of pre-disaster planning. The ways in which the disaster is remembered will have ramifications for how possible future disasters will be experienced.

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