Media reporting of humanitarian crisis has changed considerably in light of the affordances of new media and the capacities of ordinary people who have access to a mobile phone to report their own suffering and that of others. This phenomenon is evidenced internationally by, for example, reporting of earthquakes in Haiti, coverage of the plight of Syrian refugees and a range of reportage on the ‘boat people’ arriving in Australian coastal waters. The proliferation of new media platforms and smartphones offers opportunities for ordinary people to engage in every stage of an unfolding crisis through their access to and use of information before, during and after a crisis. This offers new possibilities for representation unmediated by what used to be the traditional ‘white’ journalist who was often parachuted in to cover distant suffering through discourses that emphasised pity at the expense of human dignity. However, this is just one aspect of the complex access to and use of communication that involves governments, humanitarian agencies, ordinary citizens and mainstream media in times of crisis. This volume addresses this complexity against the background of the political economy of humanitarian crisis and the increase in global risk. It also explores very effectively the complex nature of responses from NGOs and humanitarian agencies that use social media in their funding campaigns.

This book makes an important contribution to our understandings of media, crisis, communication and social change precisely because it includes both the big picture of global crisis and the smaller-scale view of media and social media affordances. It does so in the context of crisis, amply supported by reflective critique, theoretical engagement and practical knowledge.

Simon Cottle’s introductory chapter describes the extensive and intensive nature of the role played by the media in contemporary humanitarian crisis and deals with six of its characteristics – scale, speed, saturation, social relations enfranchisement, surveillance and seeing (pp. 23–5) – although he points out that all stakeholders in a crisis have the capacities to use these media characteristics to their own advantage – for example, the use of social media by ISIS to communicate the terrorising and torture of captive prisoners.

In Chapter 10, Chouliaraki deals with the nature of suffering in a post-humanitarian world in which celebrities and media strategies are involved in displacing the realities of suffering, thus offering audiences sanitised, removed, comfortable opportunities for engagement that are devoid of any need to deeply identify with or respond directly to suffering. It highlights the possibility of agonistic solidarity as a means to counter the ‘self’ in neoliberal society that has been shaped by celebrations of the ‘I’ at the expense of ‘thou’ as the foundation for a global ethics.

One of the refreshing features of this volume is the mixture of academic writings along with shorter pieces from humanitarian workers. Chapter 6, for example, is an interview with Paddy Coulter, former head of Oxfam, and Chapter 15 on big data and humanitarian response is
written by technology innovator Patrick Meier. This mixture offers an understanding of the ecology of contemporary humanitarianism, the many actors and their complex motivations, which include self-interest as much as a genuine desire to contribute to change.

Social media and big data sites such as Ushahidi now offer opportunities to crowd-source critical data on emergency situations and create GIS-enabled maps that help pin-point hotspots such as in Aleppo, Syria, resulting in possibilities for coordinated emergency supplies of food and medicine. However, one of the assumptions in this volume is that humanitarian crisis is primarily the space for actors from civil society and not the state. While there is no denying the fact that civil society actions and actors continue to play an important role in responding to humanitarian crisis, the state continues to have the power and resources to support such activities, partner with humanitarian groups and establish its own responses; however, it can also impede and obstruct relief, and delay supplies of critical aid to communities that, for whatever reason, are not considered to be part of the mainstream. The mere availability of big crisis data does not guarantee a scaling up of the state’s response to emergencies, something illustrated clearly in the lacklustre response of the government in Tamil Nadu in India to maps of floods in Chennai in December 2014. So the lack of a clear understanding of the evolving role of the state in the context of humanitarian crisis, social media and big data is perhaps a missing dimension in an otherwise stellar volume.

The broad range of chapters and writing styles offers entry and access points for both academics and scholars, but also for many others interested or working in the area of humanitarian crisis. This accessibility is one of the strengths of the book. It clearly fills a gap in the field of communication and social change, given that it provides both an informed critique of the relationship between crisis, media, development institutions and social change, and provides examples of new media interventions in crisis that are continuing to make a difference in people’s lives.