



Finding and Framing Katrina: The Social Construction of Disaster

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For the past several weeks, the major programmatic themes and news headlines generated by the media, but particularly television, have centered on hurricanes, specifically Hurricane Katrina, and more recently, Hurricane Rita. These themes have provided graphic glimpses of the human toll and suffering that such disaster events can have; but in drawing these pictures, television stations have also conveyed irrational and exaggerated information (many times based on rumors or incorrect information based on unverified data) focusing on both human loss and physical destruction. The aftermath of such hurricanes is bad enough without such promotion.

All disasters are not equal. Just as disasters are a quantitative leap over routine community emergencies, it is hard to compare Katrina to any other recent US hurricane. The Galveston hurricane¹ might be the closest parallel, but not many commentators could go beyond superficial comparisons. Also, Galveston was in 1900 and was not covered by TV. Thus, the images of desolation and destruction as a consequence of this storm did not reach the international community with the speed and intensity of Hurricane Katrina.

Katrina impacted an extensive geographical area of the United States. The combined impact of high winds, rain, storm surge distressed levees, and flooding created conditions that affected and disrupted the lives of hundreds of communities and millions of people. Further, there was a significant loss of life, extensive or total destruction of property, disruption of lifeline services, and the sources of livelihood (including employments) were significantly impacted, if not totally lost. Help from nearby communities was difficult to come by since they were in similar circumstances. The scope of the impact made dormant political divisions important. Katrina crossed state lines, parish boundaries, ideological positions, and activists' concerns. It also separated extended families, and disrupted, if not severed, community, government, and industrial activities and functions. These effects were exacerbated by a lack of an adequate and coordinated response at the local, state, and federal level.

Framing Katrina

Katrina was the first hurricane to hit the United States to the accompaniment of continuous (24/7) TV coverage. Certainly, Andrew (1992) had considerable TV coverage, but that was before competitive twenty-four hour cable coverage. In social science terms, television constructed the frame of meaning to which audiences and decision-makers came to understand Katrina. For some along the coast, personal experience with Katrina might have helped. If you were on Dauphin Island or in Moss Point, Biloxi, Bay St. Louis, north or south of Highway 10, in Kenner or in a bar on Bourbon Street, the storm was slightly different. However, for most of us, the reality of the storm came through TV networks. Even for “victims” who lost electrical power, if it came back, the coffee pot and the TV were the first appliances back on so that one’s own experiences would be understood and confirmed in the context of the information provided by the media.

Of course, TV had considerable advantages in framing the storm, but it also framed distortions that we will touch on later. The advantage of TV as an informational source is its visual imagery, usually backed by musical effects. People believe what they see, especially when it is considered “live.” When the season started, it was not clear whether Katrina would be a one night special or the beginning of a new prime-time series. However, Katrina, like any new series, had a lengthy and colorful promotion, called weather reports. After the long prelude, monitoring the wind speed and its direction, the impact of Katrina was slowly revealed. Generating facts about the consequences of the disaster’s impact in many different locations takes time. Consequently, factual information about the impact was much less in terms of “air time,” than on the available time that TV has to program. Given the disparity of time and few facts, TV tends to draw on common cultural assumptions (including myths) about what will happen. These assumptions include extensive damage, death and injury, concern for children, the ill and the elderly, forecasting mental health trauma, the absence of authority, extensive looting and the incompetence of government and the inevitability of social disorder; in essence, a state of chaos and anarchy. These assumptions and others framed the details of what came to be known as Katrina.

With new technology, including split screen, individual segments can be magnified; feeds can also be combined from several states within one screen. Programming formats to retain viewer attention suggest that the most dramatic stories in the last segment will be elaborated on in the next. Reporters also have the independence to create their own stories (Wenger and Quarantelli, 1989) and dispersed film crews have latitude to find their own stories, ask their own questions and to develop their own special vocabularies, such as being surrounded by “toxic soup,” missed by snipers or unable to find FEMA representatives. When one network had a “hot” story, other networks soon appeared on the same scene.

Over time, however, New Orleans became the feature presentation, and the rest of Louisiana and Mississippi became very minor themes. Certainly, because of the breaks in the levees and the flooding, the helicopter rescues, film clips of looting, angry crowds at the Superdome and the Convention Center, it was vivid TV drama and suspense. Many viewers would have fond recollections of New Orleans and also TV personnel could find some high dry ground there. So, New Orleans became the center of operations for the media regarding Katrina. Its mayor

and police superintendent were available for interviews, but New Orleans was presented as a disorganized city on the brink of collapse, less from the storm than from its residents. On September 2, *The Army Times* (newspaper) reported that “combat operations are now underway on the streets...This place is going to look like little Somalia...We’re going to go out and take the city back.” “This will be a combat operation to get this city under control,” was the lead comment by the commander of Louisiana National Guard’s Joint Task Force. Several weeks after the storm, the story of Katrina can now be better told.

Framing Themes

Certain programmatic themes emerged in the TV coverage, identified here as finding damage, finding death, finding help, finding authority and finding the bad guys.

Finding Damage. Certainly, TV excels in presenting damage. Often, however, it is difficult to place that damage either in a particular geographical location or within a meaningful social context. In certain ways, that lack of context can enhance concern, as well as sympathy. It allows viewers to use their own imaginations projecting the meaning of such losses for those people who live in the area, or to the home owners of what is now not salvageable. Electronic technology can enhance the images and provide views from all angles. The levee system and the canals in New Orleans provided outlines of the destruction of neighborhoods.

Finding Death. From the very beginning of the hurricane impact, and with the onset of flooding in New Orleans, there were predictions of the death toll. The Mayor of New Orleans predicted the figure at 10,000 and there were repeated statements that FEMA had ordered 25,000 body bags. Several days into the flood, there was repeated visual evidence of bodies in the flooded area and continuous allegations that such conditions pose serious health risks. However, the Pan American Health Organizations have reviewed the research of the epidemiological risks of dead bodies in disaster situations and concluded that dead bodies seldom constitute health risks, and suggest that the anxiety which leads to the inept removal of bodies often destroys information necessary for identification (PAHO, 2004). In such cases, family members are unnecessarily exposed to a second episode of unresolved grief.

As of October 15th, the death toll in Louisiana was declared to be 972 and in Mississippi 221. In Louisiana, the search for bodies was recently declared complete, but the state has released only 61 bodies and made the names of only 32 victims public (*New York Times*, Oct. 5, A1). This raises the question whether predictions regarding the total death toll in the early response period have any value. Although Katrina has one of the highest death rates in US hurricane history, it is still significantly lower (10%) than the projected number publicized. This raises questions about why these projections were released and reemphasized by the local government. Perhaps it was to speed up efforts to provide assistance and disaster relief aid from the State and Federal level. This can also reflect the inherent difficulties and problems with estimating the death toll immediately following disaster impact. It is noteworthy that in past disaster events initial death estimates could be quite low, particularly in impact-isolated areas of developing countries. This was certainly the case with the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami when initial estimates suggested several thousand dead and now the actual figure comes closer to 300,000.

Finding Help. In the immediate post-impact period, reporters often asked those they were interviewing whether they had received any type of help or aid, often inquiring directly if FEMA had been there. In every disaster, the first to help (the “first” responders) are actually neighbors, family members and other community members. Most persons (including reporters) do not think of such usual assistance as help; rather “help” is someone they do not know. Also, more recently, the term “first responders” has come into vocabulary to describe police, fire, and EMS personnel. Perhaps that terminology has created the expectation for “victims” to anticipate that a first responder would be at their house “quickly.” Nevertheless, “true” first responders are also community members who have been impacted by the same events, but who are characterized by altruistic behavior in their response to these disaster events.

In addition, TV coverage early in the response period revealed tremendous confusion about the role of FEMA, both on the part of TV reporters and those they interviewed; this problem was exacerbated given the inadequate response and performance of the FEMA and DHS bureaucracy in the initial stages of the response process. There was also an initial tendency to describe FEMA as the organizational location for a national 911 phone number; if hurricane victims called, someone would allegedly respond to their needs and provide the necessary assistance. This misunderstanding regarding the role of FEMA in assisting state and local governments among state and local officials, as well as by victims, added to the perception of the lack of help.

The perception of the absence of help in the face of overwhelming need combined with bureaucratic niggling can persuade members of a national TV audience of the need to volunteer, to come to the disaster locale to help remedy that lack of help. At times, they can fill a need. On the other hand, at considerable personal expense in time and money, volunteers may arrive days later to find they are not needed or that they are not welcomed by government personnel at the scene. Just as victims might need helpers, helpers also need victims. Frustrated helpers are often prime candidates for TV interviewers, accusing government bureaucrats of preventing their involvement while emphasizing their skills and their sacrifice as well as their conviction that they are needed.

Certainly, there may be a lack of knowledge by victims about the help that is available within a community and the location where information might be obtained. It is also possible that some victims will have much higher expectations about the nature and/or scope of help that will be available. Many will discover that the type of homeowner’s insurance on which they have paid on for years will not cover their losses as they had long expected, nor will a reimbursement be quickly forthcoming. The long-run problem of “finding help” will be a topic of conversation in town councils, state legislatures, in Congress, and in the media for years to come.

Finding Authority. First of all, let us admit that the issue of authority in disasters is complex. Part of the complexity centers on the relationship among political jurisdictions and the understanding that current political officials have of that relationship. This is further complicated by the fact that US political system officials come and go after elections, but disasters do not happen on that schedule. In fact, for most political officials, every disaster is their first in office. Historically, in the United States, responsibility for dealing with disaster response is located at the local level. If the demands are too great for the local community, the responsibility to assist the “locals” is assumed to involve the

state. Again, if state resources are not sufficient, the federal government is expected to provide additional resources. There are certain events (e.g., a terrorist attack) which are not respectful of local or state boundaries and in those cases, federal assistance can be predicted to be necessary. In those cases, federal resources and personnel are often pre-positioned. As such, this creates the expectation that resources will be made immediately available to be used by local and state officials.

With the long lead time to Katrina, some TV reporters were already on location interviewing local officials who usually expressed their expectation that FEMA would be immediately available. The same conversations were repeated in other localities but the director of FEMA, also appearing in the media, seemed equivocal about assuming total responsibility; that ambivalence, in time, led to his replacement and eventually his resignation. Appearing before a congressional committee after his resignation, Michael Brown asserted that one of the problems with the response to Hurricane Katrina was that local officials in Louisiana were dysfunctional, thus trying to shift the blame away from the federal government, and in this case, FEMA.

In addition to the problems of legal authority among different levels of political units, the notion of authority has been complicated by the adoption of a “command and control” vocabulary by some emergency management organizations. In a disaster with diffuse impact such as Katrina, the notion of having command and control is self-delusional. However, in the reorganization of FEMA and its inclusion in the new Department of Homeland Security, a standardized organizational system identified as the “Incident Command System” was administratively decreed as normative for disasters in the United States. There are elements of that notion which have considerable utility. For example, the notion of a command post as a location for coordinating the activities of the multiple organizations that will become involved in a disaster response makes sense. However, the idea that this is the location of someone who is commanding those organizations in their activities and is in control of the incident is out of touch with the reality and the events that are taking place.

The media’s constant question as to “Who’s in Charge?” seems to be based on what might be called the “Oz Theory of Authority,” with apologies to Max Weber. The Oz theory is that behind some curtain, there is a wizard. It is the media’s responsibility to pull back that curtain to reveal the wizard commander. Perhaps the best advice is that if the question is answered by person’s identifying themselves as being in command, the person being interviewed does not understand the complexity of the response. A response to a disaster such as Katrina is complicated and involves coordination and extensive communication, a complex task accomplished by many different groups and individuals. The decision-making necessary is decentralized and usually made at levels much lower in the status hierarchy implied by the command and control model (Dynes & Aguirre, 1978). In other words, there is no curtain and no wizard, simply a very complicated mosaic of individuals and organizations with skills, resources, energy, the capacity to improvise, and the knowledge of the impacted community. Merging their knowledge and energy in a coordinated effort is the real wizardry.

Finding the Bad Guys. Probably the most dramatic “evidence” of social chaos assumed to be created by Katrina was centered on New Orleans. The city was heavily populated by poor African Americans² who lived in areas that were the first ones flooded. They were directed to

go to the Superdome where assistance would be available. The photographic opportunity to show “mobs” of residents located together provided the backdrop for repetitive stories of looting, rape, murder, sniping and roving gangs preying on tourists. Such stories introduced the next time segment with an implication that it would continue as the major programmatic theme. Such rumors were also promulgated by the New Orleans police department and other local officials; they were even presented as facts by local officials on “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” There were stories of piles of bodies in the Superdome and outside the Convention Center where bodies were stored in basement freezers. One of the consequences of these stories was the diversion of security forces to follow-up on such reports when they were needed for other duties. Also, as the climate of fear increased, some EMS personnel refused assignments, citing their own apprehension.

While it is common for rumors of looting and all kinds of anti-social behavior to emerge in most major disasters, the volume and persistence of such rumors on TV in Katrina was unparalleled. The staff of writers from the *Times Picayune* provided a major critique of those stories in the September 26th issue. Among their stories, they quoted the Orleans Parish District attorney pointing out that there were only four murders in New Orleans in the week following Katrina, making it a “typical” week in that city which expected 200 homicides throughout the year.

When the Louisiana National Guard at the Superdome turned over the dead to federal authorities, that representative arrived with an 18-wheel refrigerated truck since there were reports of 200 bodies there. The actual total was six; of these, four died of natural causes, one from a drug overdose and another had apparently committed suicide. While four other bodies were found in the streets near the Dome, presumably no one had been killed inside as had been previously reported. There were more reports that 30 to 40 bodies were stored in the Convention Center freezers in its basement. Four bodies were recovered; one appeared to have been slain. Prior to this discovery, there had been reports of corpses piled inside the building.

In reference to reports of rapes during the six days that the Superdome was used as a shelter, the head of the N.O. P. D. sex crime unit said that he and his officers lived inside the Dome and ran down every rumor of rape and atrocity. In the end, they made two arrests for attempted sexual assault and concluded the other incidents rumored had not happened, although it is important to note that rape is generally underreported in non-disaster times.

In reference to claims of looting, similar observations can lead to quite different conclusions. Is the person sifting through debris a friend or relative, or a looter? Is the person pushing a grocery cart full of clothes someone flooded out of his home trying to save what few possessions he had left, or is it filled with looted materials? Are claims of looting at times used to inflate future insurance settlements? Again, rumors of looting are common in other disasters, but valid cases are rare. Some valid cases of looting can involve security forces brought in to protect against looting.

It does seem to someone who has studied disaster behavior over a long period that the rumors of anti-social behavior were particularly virulent in New Orleans. Certainly, media coverage facilitated that impression. On the other hand, New Orleans has always had a reputation as the place

for “hedonistic behavior,” particularly among some religious observers, in part because of its reputation for Mardi Gras. Perhaps, for many TV viewers, it was a short step from the Big Easy to the Big Mess, thus lending public credibility to the stories disseminated through the media.

Fractured Frames

There were many frames which were briefly mentioned on TV, but never became a focal point of stories. While there was preoccupation with death, there was less concern for the possibilities for suffering. Asking a victim who has lost family members or their entire possessions “How They Feel?” evokes sound bites which are neither cathartic nor reflective. They may evoke the initiation of a longer period of suffering the consequences of being a victim. But that longer period will be of little interest in future programming. Loss of jobs, economic security, and familiar neighbors, along with possible relocation and the initiation of a journey into the unknown are seldom captured in a short response. And the transition from being a victim to being a survivor will not be newsworthy to prime time audiences, nor will the rediscovery of racism and poverty which flooded the screens. Much of the flood damage seen was difficult to differentiate from the dilapidation of sub-standard housing. The loss of fragile resources was more hurtful for those who had little to lose. The lack of resources also created the inability to evacuate easily and efficiently. Also, many of the medical problems experienced by evacuees had little to do with the hurricane itself, but were the result of the quality and availability (or lack thereof) of health care services prior to the hurricane.

There were other views that were difficult to visualize. One could not see the historic depletion of wetlands along the Gulf Coast which for centuries had cushioned the effects on coastal areas. Nor could one easily see the quality of building codes and their previous enforcement, or the abundance of manufactured homes in certain coastal areas. It is also noteworthy that there has been a significant movement of the US population toward high risk coastal areas. Population density in coastal (high-risk) regions continues to increase, sometimes at a higher rate than the non-coastal populations. Currently, coastal counties constitute about 17 percent of the land mass (excluding Alaska) in the US, but 53 percent of the US population (153 million people) live in these areas. Also, coastal population increased by 28% from 1980 to 2003, and ten of the fifteen cities with the highest population counts are in coastal counties (see Crosett, K.M., et. al., 2004). Such population movement results in more building in desirable coastal areas. Further, in some coastal areas, gambling has become a major economic sector. When Camille hit Biloxi in 1969, there were no casinos to be blown across the highway.

Hurricane Katrina was an event of catastrophic proportions, resulting in an extensive loss of life, property and human suffering; problems that were greatly compounded by significant deficiencies in governmental preparedness and response at all levels. Nevertheless, now that the waters have receded, we have come to realize that the images of chaos and anarchy portrayed by the mass media were primarily based on rumors and inaccurate assumptions. Some of these were supported by official statements by elected officials. This view of the drama of disasters is assumed to be another version of “reality TV.” Now, a month after Hurricane Katrina, less attention is given to the hundreds of thousands of displaced, uprooted from their communities, and their loss of economic livelihood. The efforts for reconstruction are not likely to appear in prime time any time soon.

Endnotes

¹ The Galveston hurricane (or better known as "the storm") devastated Gavelston on September 8, 1900. A Category 4 hurricane, it is estimated that this storm resulted in over 6,000 deaths, primarily in the Galveston area, and over 3,500 homes were completely destroyed. This storm has been recognized as the "deadliest natural disaster" in US history.

² According to 2004 data, provided by the US Bureau of the Census, 68% of the population in the City of New Orleans were African Americans (compared to 12.2% for the US) and 23% of all individuals in the city were living below poverty (compared to 13.1% for the US).

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