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Abstract:

“On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Louisiana. In this narrative analysis of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina, a sample of news articles and television reports are examined to show how collective media play narrator and choose ways to construct the setting and characters, as well as promote a good self image. This diverse sample includes articles written by both white and black reporters as well as more popular news journals and lesser known newspapers and magazines. Analyzing the aftermath of the hurricane in New Orleans by challenging how media covered this event will reveal how media in America influence people. It will also reveal how media use narrative as a means to send specific messages to people, and how these messages affect those people.”

Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina: A Rhetorical Response

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, Louisiana. While it slowed to a category 4 hurricane before reaching New Orleans, it was the “first Category 5 hurricane of the 2005 season...and the sixth-strongest storm ever recorded in the Atlantic basin...” (“Hurricane Katrina”). The strong winds damaged the levees that protected the city from Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River and when the levees finally gave way the area was flooded. This flooding caused severe damage and took many lives making Katrina the “most destructive and costliest natural disaster in the history of the United States” (“Hurricane Katrina”). In total 1, 325 people were killed and it has been estimated that this natural disaster was the costliest ever recorded in the United States. The incredible displacement and poverty of those affected has not been experienced in America since the Great Depression (“Hurricane Katrina”).

This study is a narrative analysis of the media coverage of this devastating event which will look at some of the controversies surrounding the aftermath of the hurricane, specifically in New Orleans. Analyzing the aftermath of the hurricane in New Orleans by challenging how media covered this event will reveal how media in America influence people. It will also reveal how media use narrative as a means to send specific messages to people, and how these messages affect those people.

Method

This analysis of media coverage of Hurricane Katrina uses narrative criticism. According to Sonja Foss, narrative criticism is comprised of four defining characteristics: 1) events that are either active or stative, 2) the events are arranged in sequence, 3) shows

relationship among events, 4) and it is about a unified subject (Foss 334). In 1984 Walter R. Fisher proposed the Narrative Paradigm. This theory suggests “that all meaningful communication is a form of storytelling or to give a report of events and so human beings experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, each with their own conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends” (“Narrative Paradigm”). Further, “Fisher maintains that, armed with common sense, almost any individual can see the point of a good story and judge its merits as the basis for belief and action” (“Narrative Paradigm”).

Narrative criticism is a useful tool for analyzing media coverage of Hurricane Katrina because it reveals the sequence of events that took place and can help offer an explanation for the outcome. By showing examples of how the narrative of Hurricane Katrina was constructed and portrayed through media coverage, readers will be able to, as Fisher says, “judge its merits as the basis for belief and action” (“Narrative Paradigm”).

Literature Review

There have been many other studies of media coverage and news reporting in general and recently even more specifically about the covering of Hurricane Katrina. Michael Bürgi of *MediaWeek* claims that objectivity should be key in reporting: “I’ve always been under the impression that journalism--the profession of finding and delivering news--is supposed to be objective. Well, watching, hearing and reading the heroic, impressive and passionate coverage of the horrors wrought by Hurricane Katrina by our news organizations served as a reminder that objectivity still exists, if only in times of crisis”(Bürgi). He explains that many people he has spoken with noted how

impressed they were with the coverage of Katrina (Bürigi). An analysis of news reporting during the 2000 presidential campaign by Geri Alunit Zeldes and Frederick Fico in *Mass Communication & Society* magazine found that women and minorities on the reporting staff was linked to diversity in the news reporting itself. They wrote, “Stories by women and minority reporters were more likely to use and give time to women and minority noncandidate sources than did stories by male and White reporters. Women and minority reporters also gave more story attention and time to sources such as experts and ordinary people” (Zeldes and Fico). They suggest that women and minority reporters will report differently because of the sources they choose to use. Not only is objectivity important in news reporting, but so is the diversity of reporters.

Aside from trying to be objective and diversify their staff, many argue that media seek to also persuade their audience. Isabella Poggi in *Pragmatics & Cognition* journal writes that “...persuasion is a process in which communicating beliefs to other people is aimed at influencing them. It is a process through which a person causes another person to have some belief in order to induce him/her either to have goals that s/he did not have before, or to give up previously held goals” (Poggi). Media certainly have an affect on people. For example, they show people what is fashionable thus affecting what they wear, or what is new in healthy living, consider the bottled water craze. While it is not hard to argue that media have an affect on people, what is debated though is whether media show people what is happening, or tell people what to think about what is happening.

Some critics think that media are driven by people and what those people want, not by what is happening. Joe Skeel in his article for the journal *Quill*, in reference to the

aftermath of the hurricane, writes, “Everyone in America needs to learn from this disaster, not just those who live there. But then again, does the general public really want to talk about that stuff, or does it want to know why Kenny Chesney and Renee Zellweger couldn't make their marriage work? Which brings us back to the bigger question: What is news? Is it what people want to hear or what they need to hear?” (Skeel). Skeel raises an important question that consumers of media should be asking themselves. He explains that news is what sells; it caters to the general public and what they want to see.

Analysis

The messages that the media set forth in the coverage of Hurricane Katrina were conveyed through wording, reference, exaggeration, and select information. These messages present a somewhat deceptive narrative of Hurricane Katrina’s effect on New Orleans. This narrative analysis examines a sample of news articles and television reports to show how collective media play narrator and choose ways to construct the setting and characters, as well as promote a good self image. This diverse sample includes articles written by both white and black reporters as well as more popular news journals and lesser known newspapers and magazines. It is a good selection because it presents a wider range of views, news mediums, and perspectives so as to reduce any kind of possible bias in the analysis.

Setting

The narrative of Hurricane Katrina is set in New Orleans, Louisiana. *Newsweek* used striking words to describe the town after the hurricane hit. It describes what could be seen in the streets of New Orleans as, “...a noxious soup of rubble” (Thomas). Later in

the same story the water is referred to as “putrid floodwater, rich in E. coli and lead...” (Thomas). By referring to a city as “a noxious soup of rubble,” *Newsweek*, leads readers to think of New Orleans as an object instead of a devastated American city full of people just like themselves. Readers are thus allowed to remove themselves from the situation and view it as just another tragedy on the front page, instead of really letting the reality sink in and possibly encourage a positive reaction of responding to the need of fellow citizens.

Jet magazine, an African American publication, also sent reporters to cover the story and their description of what was seen is very graphic. One journalist writes, “Brick buildings crumbled like building blocks. Cars tossed around like toy models. Bloated bodies floating down city streets” (Chappell). The similes used here, such as buildings crumbling like blocks and cars tossed like toys, not to mention bloated floating bodies, give the reader something closer to home to compare this horror with. This brings the event right into the reader’s home or safe haven and may cause them to stop reading as the reality of such an unpleasant occurrence is not often invited into personal space.

A perfect example of media using vivid descriptions comes from an article by journalist Alexis Martin, of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. She writes, “The picture of New Orleans being presented right now is unlike anything we have ever seen on American soil. The picture is of astonishing dislocation, destitution and anarchy--replete with images of hysterical families camping on highways and begging for help, babies, dirty and hungry, sobbing from their discomfort, and the elderly and the sick dying in front of news cameras for lack of basic medical supplies” (Martin). These descriptive details

kindle within readers a feeling of loss, heartache, and frustration which media intend to fan into flame as the reporting continues. When faced with such a hopeless situation however, readers will commonly have a “fight or flight” reaction. The easier of these two though is flight and readers all too often will lay down the paper and walk away with a sense of “that’s too bad, but this can’t possibly be happening in MY country.” They put the horrific scenes out of their minds and simply continue on with their comfortable lives. But setting is only one of the ways media construct their narrative.

Characters

The People of New Orleans

Another way that the media continue this tragic narrative of devastation in America is through the written descriptions of the people of New Orleans affected by Katrina and the emergency responders, primarily the American government. The media portray the residents of New Orleans as poor and predominately black, identifying them as victims waiting for rescue, help, aid or response. One journalist reported that “most of those who died were poor and Black, being residents of one of the most undesirable and lowest lying areas of the city that lay near Lake Pontchartrain” (Yount). The media use descriptive language such as “poor” and “undesirable” to imply that the affected area and its people were already in dire straights even before the hurricane hit, thus depressing readers and often discouraging them to read further. But if readers do read on they may be confronted by an even worse mental picture, that of a third world America.

One of the most debated uses of wording by media came when news television, newspapers and journals began referring to the people of New Orleans as refugees. According to the Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of Law, the definition of a refugee is “an

individual seeking refuge or asylum; especially: an individual who has left his or her native country and is unwilling or unable to return to it because of persecution or fear of persecution (as because of race, religion, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion)” (“Refugee”). Thus the use of the term “refugee” to refer to fellow American citizens forced out of their city, not their country, becomes problematic. It paints a picture of New Orleans as a developing nation within a nation, a third world America. American readers think of third world countries being miles away and having nothing to do with their own, superpower country. This further pushes these fellow citizens out of readers’ hearts and minds and these suffering neighbors will soon be forgotten.

Our Week, an African American newspaper featured a front page story on September 12, 2005 titled “Katrina shows racism, classism deeper than floodwaters,” in which staff writer Dan Yount reports evidence of race and class playing a major part in the slow response by our government to those in New Orleans affected by the hurricane. Yount writes about how Travis Smiley, a radio talk show host, explains reasons why race and class have a connection with the slow response. Smiley says that “after eight days the federal government had not established a victim’s relief fund. In the case of the attack on 9/11, a \$7 billion relief fund for victims was established within three days after the towers fell” (Yount). Yount also reports Smiley saying, “This is where the real racism comes in...If the death toll in New Orleans is greater than it was in 9/11, don’t these people deserve \$7 billion in relief, too?” (Yount). The media prey on quotes like these which send a twisted message to the reader. They take two unrelated events, however tragic, and try to draw parallels where none can be drawn.

The characters in the narrative produced by media were also characterized as poverty-stricken. “Poverty, Race & Katrina Lessons of a National Shame,” were the words on the cover page of the September 19, 2005 edition of *Newsweek*. Jonathan Alter, a journalist for *Newsweek* wrote an article, titled “The Other America,” in which the utter poverty not just in New Orleans, but throughout America is laid bare. He writes, “In a nation of nearly 300 million people, the number living below the poverty line (\$14, 680 for a family of three) recently hit 37 million, up more than a million in a year...The poverty rate, 12.7 percent, [is] the highest in the developed world and more than twice as high as in most other industrialized countries...even if the real number is lower than 37 million, that’s a nation of poor people the size of Canada or Morocco living inside the United States” (Alter). Statistics like these are stunning to readers, as they should be, but they also only offer one side. These figures do not take into account all of the Americans that are not impoverished, nor does it take into account all of the charities that work night and day to help provide a better life for Americans who are battling poverty. But, this “shock factor” is no new concept in news reporting. According to *KING-TV*’s, Scott Miller “...attempts to bring home the intensity of a disaster scene by shooting tight close-ups can cause the television to lose perspective. With fires, television producers want the biggest flames on air...They want to see, essentially, hell on Earth, the end of the world as we know it, but they seldom show the vast acreage not burning” (Wall). By only presenting this “worse case scenario,” the media skew information going out to the public and can generate unnecessary mass hysteria. Readers only need to see the facts of what is happening to the people in New Orleans, the reality is astonishing enough to keep viewers’ attention.

Government Officials/ Those in Leadership

The media, whose job it is to communicate with the mass audience, made an effort to place blame somewhere and make sense of all the suffering. Thus many news writers hounded officials looking for any reason to accuse them of insensitivity and fault. Many media writers focused on governmental leadership, both locally and nationally, to explain the slow response to the people affected by Hurricane Katrina. *Time* may have summed up the media portrayal of government officials best when it said "...at every level of the government, there was uncertainty about who was in charge at crucial moments. Leaders were afraid to actually lead, reluctant to cost businesses money, break jurisdictional rules or spawn lawsuits. They were afraid, in other words, of ending up in an article just like this one" (Tumulty 35-36). The wording in this *Time* article is characteristic of the language media used to convey the message that the American government is not only corrupt, but also uncaring, and far removed from the suffering of American citizens.

According to *OurWeek*, "Bush was on vacation at his Crawford, Texas ranch when the hurricane struck Monday, August 29, and he did not return to Washington until two days later after he had attended a ceremony in California making the 60th anniversary of victory over Japan. Bush did not visit the hurricane zone until Friday, and he has not set foot in New Orleans, although Air Force One flew over the city on the flight back to Washington" (Yount). This publication uses choice words and generalizing to construct a negative image of the President in this article. They first mention the fact that he was on vacation and then say the reason he did not come quick to the rescue was because he was attending a party to celebrate a war victory. Bush has long been negatively

associated with a love of war. Knowing that the general public often believes this association the paper emphasized this event to send the not so subliminal message that Bush is more concerned with matters of war than he is with his own countrymen and women, especially those who happen to be of a lower socioeconomic level and/or have a darker complexion. The news article concludes by telling readers that, not only does the president care more about war matters but, he mocked the devastated residents of New Orleans as he watched their plight from the air, far away from danger in his cushy personal jet, numb to their suffering and deaf to their desperate cries for help. Other writers also used this theme of leadership viewing the suffering from a safe distance, to place more blame on them, thus turning the audience's shock into anger.

Vice President, Dick Cheney was also chided by media for his actions following Hurricane Katrina. According to WKYT-TV, Cleveland, OH, Dick Cheney ordered workers at South Mississippi Electric Power Association to “restart two power substations in Collins that serve Colonial Pipeline Co...[which] delayed efforts by at least 24 hours to restore power to two rural hospitals and a number of water systems...” (Maute). Interestingly enough, “The substations were crucial to Atlanta-based Colonial Pipeline, which moves gasoline and diesel fuel from Texas, through Louisiana and Mississippi and up to the Northeast” (Maute). Media use information such as this to strike a cord of irritation and anger in readers so that readers will continue to place blame on government officials. Like they have done with Bush, the media have now associated Cheney with being more concerned with keeping the ever lucrative resource of oil flowing than he is with sustaining the lives of fellow Americans, who in this case are sick and dying in hospitals. But, according to the media, Cheney is not only a heartless

money monger, but he has also made himself nearly unavailable as he numbly continues to vacation as New Orleans sinks deeper under water. *Newsweek reports* “Dick Cheney, who was vacationing in Wyoming when the storm hit, characteristically, kept his counsel on videoconferences...” (Thomas). The media use the word “characteristically,” to imply that Cheney, numb to all suffering around him, has acted this way before. Apparently this writer desperately hopes nothing happens to President Bush, because according to this account the presidential successor would be even worse. But media do not just focus on the corruption and heartlessness of the upper ups in our government, they also go local.

Newsweek's Evan Thomas reports about where Cynthia Morrell, City Councilwoman of New Orleans, first viewed the damage of her district. “Outside, Canal Street was dry. ‘Phew,’ Morrell told her driver, ‘that was close.’ But then, from the elevated highway, she began seeing neighborhoods under eight to 15 feet of water,” writes Thomas (Thomas). The use of the word “elevated” suggests that Morrell was safe and sound as she looked down from on high at the ruins below her. Not only was she safely above the danger, but she was also being chauffeured around by a driver, a common practice among royalty.

Ray Nagin, Mayor of New Orleans, did not escape unscathed either. Further on in the same article the media harp on the Mayor for his somewhat ironic action while aboard the president’s jet, Air Force One, for a meeting. The story reads “Governor Blanco was there, along with various congressmen and senators and Mayor Nagin (who took advantage of the opportunity to take a shower aboard the plane)” (Thomas). This journal reveals that the Mayor of New Orleans was more worried with washing away his

greasy hair and foul body odor than he was with saving his townspeople who were also being washed away. These seemingly inconsequential details however, help contribute to the theme of an out-of-touch and uncaring leadership which is consistent with attempts by media to redirect America's frustration. But, this is damaging because it makes much of the country's leadership, both nationally and locally, out to be the "bad guys" willing to let American's suffer as they watch from a safe distance, counting their money and pampering themselves with vacations, chauffeurs and warm showers. This sends a shockwave of fear and insecurity throughout the rest of the nation and increases citizen's distrust of their government, leading to possible national disorganization and disgruntled activist uprisings.

Narrator

While media increase Americans' distrust in their government, media, including newspapers, journals, and television continually sang their own praises and used their news covering success to boost their own ratings and sales. They continually described themselves as miracle workers and heroes who braved long nights, harsh conditions, and even vicious mosquitoes. *TelevisionWeek* said "Hurricane Katrina, like most disasters, natural and manmade, produced immense technical and human hurdles. And as usual, journalists pulled off coverage miracles on a daily basis, with surprises at every turn" (Wall 23). One news reporter, Mike Von Fremd for *ABC News Dallas*, recaps his experience. "I've covered every hurricane during the past 20 years except two. This is the worst I've ever seen," he said. "We slept in our cars for two nights with the windows open, next to the satellite truck. We used tons of bug spray, and that saved us from mosquitoes that would eat you alive" (Wall 23). If the media were not high-fiving each other in one area than they were congratulating themselves in another; if the media

workers were not portrayed as brave heroes then they were seen as the most dedicated and hard working news reporters in their class. George Haj, Deputy Managing Editor for the *Houston Chronicle* explains how his crew worked nonstop to make sure the news was covered and up to date. He says, “Online, we updated the news stories several times a day...We printed 10,000 copies a day of a special refugee edition that was distributed to evacuees living in area shelters... focused on service journalism-where to get help, how to find housing...”(Wall 23). Haj gave himself a pat on the back as he added that the *Chronicle* “played an important watchdog role in identifying problems with the FEMA response and how the city of New Orleans failed its most vulnerable” (Wall 23). Here we see the media not only singing their own praises, but also bad-mouthing government aid to make themselves look even better. The media indirectly show the American people that their trust should not be put in their government, but in those with television cameras and satellite links to news rooms. Aside from swaying the public’s trust in government, when media focus so much positive attention on themselves, as they blow their own horn, it detracts from the negative news they are reporting. They make it sound like they were the ones doing most of the suffering and the stranded people on rooftops or the bodies floating by were simply part of the landscape.

While this horn-blowing is never commented on by other media, for obvious reasons, the accuracy of reporting and the way the people of New Orleans were depicted by some news sources was. A journalist for the *Los Angeles Sentinel* addresses the media references to New Orleans as a developing country. She writes, “...comparing the victims of this disaster to ‘refugees’ from ‘third world’ nations is still problematic, because it only substantiates the kind of blatant racism and classism that produced this

avoidable situation in the first place by exacerbating a divisive us and them mentality...This is a process of association that if internalized would only emphasize the very behavior of racist and classiest disregard that created such a suitable venue for this embarrassment and inspired the "third world" comparison to begin with" (Martin). This article, from a newspaper that reaches fewer readers than big news magazines like *Time*, shows a glimmer of actual care for the victims of Hurricane Katrina and a little less glory for the media. However, it was also sadly enough one of the only such articles written and it was published in a lesser known source.

Joe Skeel for the journal, *Quill*, comments on the accuracy of news writers. He writes, "The sad truth is, very little of what was reported was 100 percent accurate, and it almost never is when it comes to breaking news of this magnitude. In a hurry to file the latest news, reporters are forced to go on what officials and witnesses tell them. At its worst, this type of reporting can perpetuate fear and hopelessness. But I stop short of blaming the journalists. They were reporting on what they saw and what they were told. And, after all, that is their job" (Skeel). The larger media do not want to lose the public's support, which would show up in poor television ratings and journal sales, so ridiculing remarks such as those reported by the *Los Angeles Sentinel* or *Quill* come mostly from lesser known or independent news sources.

Conclusions and Implications

This analysis shows how writers in media use selective information and choice wording to construct a distorted narrative of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and that their influential message affects people in many ways. First media distort the audience's perception with the use of setting as they lead their audience to view New Orleans as an

object instead of a devastated city full of real human beings. Media also bring the horror too close to home with gory descriptions and details, often causing the audience to want to forget about the terrible occurrence and continue on with their lives unaffected by what they viewed.

Secondly, media develop the three main groups of characters connected with the event in such a way as to cause reactions of depression, non-association with those suffering, distrust, and anger from the audience. The residents of New Orleans are portrayed as economically deprived, predominantly dark-skinned victims and refugees trying to escape from a devastated developing nation while American governmental leaders are portrayed as uncaring, out-of-touch, money mongers who are willing to watch their own countrymen suffer and die as they pamper themselves and watch from a safe distance.

Finally, media construct a distorted narrative of Hurricane Katrina's destruction by praising and focusing lots of attention on their own "heroic" reporters. All of this distortion was created through the use or wording, select information, exaggeration, and incorrect referencing by media.

Not only is it important to consider the information in the news, but also the medium through which that news is being presented. Whether it is through a journal, newspaper, magazine or news program on television, people should always pay attention to how the news is being presented. It is vital to consider how words are used, images are shown, in short, how the message is sent. It is also important that people do not simply rely on one source for complete news, but consult several different sources and seek a diversity of perspectives. By doing these things, consumers of media will receive a more

balanced and complete news message and be able to, as Walter Fisher says, “judge its merits as the basis for belief and action” (“Narrative Paradigm”).

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