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An investigation of focus: local, regional, and national newspaper coverage in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

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**AN INVESTIGATION OF FOCUS:
LOCAL, REGIONAL, AND NATIONAL NEWSPAPER COVERAGE
IN THE AFTERMATH OF HURRICANE KATRINA**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
of the Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by
Roxanne Kearns Dill
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1977
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the content in coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina by local, regional, and national newspapers. Specifically, six newspapers were examined for a variety of items, including topics covered, frame, types of sources cited, types of authorities quoted, geographic focus, and assignment of blame for the devastation and evacuee distress that followed this historic storm. The analysis covered a two-week period, from August 29, 2005, the day Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, to September 11, 2005.

The research methods included a content analysis of the 263 articles that appeared on Page 1 of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Advocate* in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, *The Clarion-Ledger* in Jackson, Mississippi, *The Sun Herald* in Biloxi, Mississippi, and *The Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, Louisiana. In addition, interviews were conducted with management and staff of the newspapers to determine management style, reader focus, and unique circumstances reporters on the field and editors at home encountered in providing coverage of this historic storm.

Topic and frame selection were similar at the local and regional levels, which focused on life, limb, and property issues, need for information, and distress of those affected by the storm. National newspapers focused most often on evacuee distress, but were more likely than local and regional newspapers to address criminal activity, government failure, and broader reaching economic considerations.

The results of this study offer challenges to the typical daily news cycle. Ordinarily, journalists most often look to official government sources, even when many citizens are available. After Katrina, citizens such as relief workers, medical personnel, and evacuees became significant sources of information. Most importantly, intermedia agenda setting—the tendency of journalists to look to the elite media to set the news agenda—seemed to be suspended during the

two weeks following Katrina. It appears that in times of widespread disaster, newspapers attend most closely to the anticipated needs and demands of their readers.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Media coverage of Katrina produced memorable and dramatic stories of heroic search and rescue and heartbreaking accounts of death, disease, and distress. The media also reported rapes, murders, and other violence perpetrated by hurricane victims in and around the city of New Orleans—the majority of which have been proven to be false and the result of out-of-control rumors (U.S. House of Representatives, 2006). Because the media’s presentation of events is an important factor in dialogue concerning public policy, the pictures that remain in the minds of many long after Katrina has passed will weigh heavily in the debate concerning rebuilding of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Inaccurate reporting is damaging and, in the case of Katrina, it was determined to have added to the misery that existed in New Orleans as inaccurate accounts were circulated nationally and globally, hindering rescue efforts and endangering lives (U.S. House of Representatives, 2006). It also could be argued that inaccurate national coverage is far more damaging than sensationalism at the local level because it reaches to corners of the nation and may influence national officials on whom those in the affected areas depend for future assistance.

Did national, regional, and local newspapers, in covering the areas directly affected by Hurricane Katrina, frame events differently during the days immediately following the storm? What news topics were the focus of the three categories of newspapers during the two weeks following Hurricane Katrina? These two questions were the impetus behind this study. Research comparing national and local coverage of a disaster is quite limited. Wenger and Friedman (1985) examined the treatment of disaster myths by local and national media following Hurricane Alicia. Others (Argothy, 2003; Piotrowski and Armstrong, 1998; Quarentelli, 1991; and Wenger and Quarentelli, 1989) have studied media preferences, behaviors, and frames in

covering crises; however, none compares topics, frames, and sources selected by local, regional, and national newspapers in covering a disaster. As the most costly national disaster in U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina provides a laboratory for the study of media choices at all levels.

An examination of newspaper content during the two weeks following the storm may shed some light on how readership demands and level of circulation influence news coverage. Analyses may also provide insight into the level of influence of newspapers on general media accounts after the storm in broadcast news, Internet news sites, and citizen web logs. This may reveal the extent to which newspapers of record initiated the sensational topics that, for many, have come to define the days following Katrina. Finally, an examination may reveal how newspapers record a monumental event such as Katrina in relation to the direct impact of the event on their readers.

The reasons for this examination are also personal. As a life-long resident of south Louisiana, I have endured many hurricanes—some serious—and all that accompanies them: the boarding of windows, stocking of goods, housing of extra family, the property damage, and the days (and sometimes weeks) of no electricity, running water, and general discomfort that follow. After Katrina, when the 14 family members who evacuated to my house in Baton Rouge returned to their homes and my electricity was restored, what I saw on television and heard on the radio was mind-boggling. Chaos and disorder seemed to define those days following the storm. The most disheartening images were those of my fellow south Louisianans who were directly affected by Katrina, turning against each other through murder, rape, and theft.

As a former newspaper reporter and managing editor, I was interested in what my colleagues were reporting during those days following the storm. As I watched the television and listened to the radio, I wondered what topics were being presented in newspapers nationally and locally. With a news cycle that differs from broadcast and the Internet, would newspapers present the

topics differently? What mental pictures would remain of the storm and its survivors if all I had were newspapers to give me accounts of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Importance of Media in a Community Crisis

The general public relies heavily on mass media to obtain information on what should be done before, during, and after a crisis. Before a disaster, the media disseminate warning messages and preparedness information. Immediately afterward, the media is a source of critical information to the public, emergency personnel, and officials—many of whom may be cut off from other outside communication. The media have considerable responsibility and influence on how a community experiences and responds to a mass emergency (Piotrowski & Armstrong, 1998). Differences in the reliability of news sources, media gatekeeping responsibilities, and the predisposition to promulgate disaster “myths” create difficulties in presenting accurate and timely news to the public in times of crisis. In adjusting to meet situations presented by a crisis, the media also must select frames in which to present the latest breaking situations. When prearranged communication networks fail, officials are forced to turn to the media to coordinate their responses (Wenger, 1985). Consequently, news reports are usually the only credible information source for the public during a disaster event (Sood, Stockdale, & Rogers, 1987). The media bring before the public those issues involving accountability for official response to the disaster, rebuilding of the devastated community, and dialogue on preventing such disasters in the future (Hiroi, Mikami, & Miyata, 1985). Included in the weighty responsibility of the media during times of crisis is the ability to define public attitudes toward issues and individuals associated with the disaster. This determines how people cope during and after the crisis (Nimmo & Combs, 1985). When a major disaster occurs within a community, the media’s structured pattern for covering events is necessarily altered. For organizations geared to covering predictable events, “disasters present a problem of adjustment” (Quarantelli & Wenger, 1989).

Key Players in Disaster Newsgathering

Perhaps more than any other circumstance, a disaster presents news agencies with significant power in the shaping of news. Witnesses, victims, experts, and officials are key players in the newsgathering process during a natural disaster. These sources are the originators of the raw data presented to the public (Hornig, 1993). Quite often, the news generated in a crisis becomes a battlefield where a variety of actors struggle to generate public experience (Molotch & Lester, 1975). Sources of news possess a dimension of power in that they have the ability to have their accounts become the perceived reality of others. These dimensions of power are enhanced during times of crisis. With access to the media crucial to creating and maintaining the realities placed before the public, a study of access to the public through news accounts is also a study of power relationships (Molotch & Lester, 1975).

Quarantelli (1981) asserts that the media assume a “command post” perspective, obtaining information primarily from community officials generally located at the command post or emergency operations center. One consequence of relying on traditional sources during a disaster is that activities of nontraditional sources, such as citizens, are often missed as valid spokespersons for news (Quarantelli, 1990). Volunteer groups that are not part of the normal news beat but may offer reliable and timely information are often ignored. For example, search and rescue is overwhelmingly conducted by immediate survivors, but media accounts focus on formal search and rescue efforts which are insignificant in light of the task. The media usually ignore the efforts of spontaneous, individual efforts, which are often the essence of disaster response (Wenger, 1985). While community officials present the primary source of news in a crisis, citizens are heavily used as sources of information, particularly for newspapers. This allows average citizens to have an official voice (Quarantelli, 1990). An increased demand for information forces journalists to fill the need with readily available bystanders, often at the

expense of meeting information needs that demand more of the journalist (Hornig, 1993). Local elected officials and those average citizens who are allowed to pass through the information gates are called upon to discuss subjects that demand a level of knowledge only expected in experts such as engineers, preparedness specialists, and health care professionals. As a result, dubious information makes its way to the public as fact.

Unfortunately, the media can be seen as a foe to those who are heavily involved in mitigation and response activities (Wenger, 1983). Reporters pose questions early in the emergency period, and accurate answers may not be known for weeks; in effect, many facts may never be known with certainty. Wenger argues that in reporting disasters, the media present a distorted, mythical, and perhaps inaccurate depiction of actual disaster behavior. Reporters focus primarily upon the scenes of destruction by “framing” an event within a preconceived notion of what *should* occur, rather than what actually happened. The media focus upon the most dramatic, visual, or exciting elements to the exclusion of the most significant (Wenger, 1983). Some have proposed that there is actually a shortage of news and information during a disaster. As a result, everything related to the disaster is communicated to the public. The news flow resembles an inverted funnel, with stories bypassing the usual gate keeping process (Quarantelli & Wenger, 1989).

Disaster “Myths”

Decades of disaster research have found that many popular images of disaster behavior, while widely believed, are often inaccurate or exaggerated (Quarantelli & Dynes, 1972). Looting is less common during times of disaster than it is during a civil disturbance; however reports of looting are frequently spread by the media. Often, the media report rumors of criminal activity, such as looting, as actual looting. In reality, the crime rate does not increase during times of emergency, a fact that runs counter to popular opinion. According to Wenger (1983), crime rates usually drop during and after a disaster. The media’s promulgation of these myths may result in

misallocation of resources and unrealistic demands made on emergency officials who must then strain their resources even further to investigate activities such as crime or public disturbances that may not have occurred.

Because the media focus on official search and rescue while ignoring citizen volunteers, the public does not realize the scope of individual efforts in disaster relief. “The resulting picture is one of helpless victims who must rely upon traditional organizations to respond to the disaster” (Wenger, 1985). In fact, as a whole, Quarantelli (1991) found that, at the impact of a disaster, most people act responsibly and with an eye out for their neighbors. The nearer the threat is perceived to be or the more there have been life and home disruptions, the more persons will respond to meeting their own needs and the needs of others (Quarantelli, 1991). Wenger and Friedman (1985) found that both local and national newspapers perpetuated these myths when covering the crisis following Hurricane Alicia.

Media Source and Topic Selection in Disaster Coverage

The direct impact of a natural disaster makes it an excellent case study for examining news media source selection and use and the framing mechanisms of local and national news outlets. The potential differences in framing by national and local media will affect the social understanding of the disaster. News frames direct audience attention to particular issues, influencing risk management decision makers and setting the tone of debate on policy during and after the crisis (Birkland, 1996). There is reason to suspect that local media might carry more citizen sources than national media. Local newspapers are more likely than national newspapers to quote “unaffiliated” individuals (Brown, Bybee, Weardon, & Straughan, 1987). The increased autonomy of field reporters during disasters (Quarantelli & Wenger, 1989) may contribute to marked differences in directions in news content. Local reporters are more directly affected by the disaster and have direct knowledge of the most reliable sources for hard-to-find news. In

other words, they know the back roads of their community. It is also reasonable to conclude that local media which have been directly impacted by a disaster will direct all their resources to covering the disaster. Finally, Quarantelli (1990) argues that local mass media systems consider disasters in their own community as “their” disasters. As a result, it is quite possible that local framing would be considerably different than that of national reporters who are not emotionally, financially, and socially vested in the community.

Intermedia Agenda Setting

During ordinary times, one of the most important influences on content produced by a particular medium is the content of other media. Through a process called intermedia agenda setting (Danielian & Reese, 1989), elite media set the agenda for other media. Their study of the prominence of the drug abuse issue in the media found a noted influence of *The New York Times* on other media. Also, they found that print media influence broadcast media (Reese & Danielian, 1989). Within the intermedia agenda setting concept, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) suggest the further influence of individual media workers on each other, the influence of media routines and individual media organization goals on daily news content, and the influence of groups from outside the media organization.

Framing and the Presentation of News Events

Social scientists for a number of decades have attempted to define the concept of framing. Some focus on how news is presented, others on how news is perceived (Semetko & Valkenberg, 2000). A frame is “a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991). A media frame is a certain way in which journalists present an event to achieve the maximum audience interest while simplifying and giving meaning to the event (Valkenberg, Semetko, & DeVrees, 1999).

It has been suggested that framing a story is the most important and least discussed issue in newsrooms and that, by training and practice, journalists instinctively frame their stories (Smith, 1997). Entman (1993) states that journalists select an aspect of an event or idea and make it more salient. This practice serves to promote a definition of the problem, moral evaluation, or recommendation for a treatment of the situation. By enhancing certain aspects and diminishing others, journalists attempt to capture and hold a reader's attention to the story (Gitlin, 1980). Golan and Wanta (2001) state that the frames the media select can influence the way in which the public perceives the issues covered. Consequently, the media draw the pictures that often remain in the mind of citizens long after the event has passed. Both routine and "accidental" events provide the raw material for daily news content. These events are not simply reported; reporters give events meaning as they present them as news. Whether the events are planned by officials who attempt to frame the debate or the events are unplanned and unexpected, the media's presentation heavily influences the public debate that follows. Lawrence (2000) argues that the media's discussion of events often shapes the discussion of public policy issues and forces to the forefront problems that may have been hidden. In her study of the media's construction of policy brutality, Lawrence found that the initial presentation of dramatic, unplanned news was not always accurate:

Event-driven news . . . is often sensationalized, hyperbolic, and overheated; at the least, it may be based on erroneous first impressions and irresistible but misleading metaphors. In the rush to "get the story" and to hold audience attention, events can take on greater significance than they may deserve and be defined in inaccurate ways (p. 187).

The Hurricane and the Media

On Monday, August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina blew into the Gulf Coast, creating what is now considered the costliest and one of the most deadly hurricanes in U.S. history. Katrina is

estimated to have caused at least 1,604 deaths and \$75 billion in damages to Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama; an estimated \$200 billion will be needed in assistance for rebuilding efforts (Kelson, 2005). While the area affected covered 90,000 square miles, perhaps the most disturbing images presented to the public came from events that began in the city of New Orleans after the storm passed. The Category 4 hurricane's storm surge caused breaches in levees, flooding 80 percent of the bowl-shaped city and leaving thousands of residents stranded without food and water on rooftops and in the Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center.

The drama of the next week produced sensational stories of rampant murder, rape, and shooting in crowded shelters as desperate evacuees waited for help. When residents were finally brought to safety and the shelters emptied, investigators found that many of these rumors that had been propagated internationally by the media were greatly exaggerated (Thevenot & Russell, 2005). A bipartisan committee of the U.S. House of Representatives (2006) found that, while the media provided invaluable and necessary services to evacuees and rescue workers, erroneous reporting negatively affected the public response during the difficult days following the impact of Katrina. The committee found that media exaggeration of violence heightened public concerns and further hampered relief efforts, influencing decisions on where to direct resources. It concluded that unsubstantiated reports of snipers shooting at relief helicopters and truck drivers caused many to turn away who would have transported needed food and medical supplies, increasing the need for additional security. Erroneous reports discouraged residents in dry neighborhoods from evacuating (U.S. House of Representatives, 2006). The federal, state, and local governments appeared to lack a public communications strategy while local public officials even fed rumors of rape, shootings, and other violence in New Orleans. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Police Chief Eddie Compass repeated unsubstantiated rumors before the media, fueling an image of lawlessness among hurricane victims (U.S. House of Representatives). Later

testimony by police and National Guard officials revealed that, while the evacuees were anxious and unhappy, they were not out of control. The same media reports that created chaos in the minds of viewers outside of New Orleans contributed to further anxiety in the crowded and sweltering shelters. The committee concluded in its 379-page report that the media must share some of the blame for the poor disaster response:

The Select Committee agrees the media can and should help serve as the public's "first informer" after disasters. In the 21st Century, Americans depend on timely and accurate reporting, especially during times of crisis. But it's clear accurate reporting was among Katrina's many victims. If anyone rioted, it was the media. Many stories of rape, murder, and general lawlessness were at best unsubstantiated, at worst simply false. And that's too bad, because this storm needed no exaggeration (p. 360).

Research Questions

Based on the aforementioned literature, the inquiry will focus on the Page 1 content of local, regional, and national newspapers in their coverage of Hurricane Katrina. Therefore, the following research questions were raised:

RQ1: What news topics were the focus of local, regional, and national newspapers during the two weeks following Hurricane Katrina?

RQ2: Did the type of sources cited differ at the national, regional, and local levels?

RQ3: Did national, regional, and local newspapers, in covering the areas directly affected by Hurricane Katrina, frame events differently during the days immediately following the storm?

RQ4: Were experiences different for management and reporters at the national, regional, and local levels in covering Hurricane Katrina?

RQ5: Who was most often assigned blame for the events following Katrina by local, regional, and national newspapers?

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The primary method for this study was content analysis. Included in the study sample are the front pages of six newspapers: two national, two local that were directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina, and two regional in areas that provided significant relief and recovery following the storm. The two national newspapers examined were *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. The two local newspapers that were directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina were the New Orleans, Louisiana, *The Times-Picayune*, and the Biloxi, Mississippi, *The Sun Herald*. Both of these cities were evacuated, but the staffs of each paper were able to continue publication on-line and later with the help of other publishers outside of the affected areas who were willing to share their production facilities. *The Times-Picayune* did not print for three days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, but digital versions of the newspaper were available for coding purposes.

Two regional papers examined were *The Advocate* of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and *The Clarion-Ledger* of Jackson, Mississippi. Baton Rouge is about 60 miles west of New Orleans; Jackson is about 150 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico. Jackson and Baton Rouge received minor damage from Katrina, but newspaper production was uninterrupted. Both cities are state capitals and served as command centers for rescue and relief operations. Baton Rouge and Jackson also absorbed tens of thousands of evacuees, immediately increasing population and affecting management decisions of their respective newspapers.

The sample period of the newspapers was two weeks, from August 29, 2005, the day Katrina made landfall, until September 11, 2005. A total of 263 front page articles were examined. The study was limited to Page 1 articles alone because time did not allow for a study of all stories dedicated to Hurricane Katrina during that time period, which would have numbered in the thousands. The coder recorded details about each article, including the date, placement on Page

1, geographic focus, dateline of the article, size in paragraphs, and whether the writer was a staff member, wire service or other (See Appendix A, Coding Sheet).

The coder read each article in its entirety and determine up to six major topics covered. Numeric values were given to represent some of the major topics related to Katrina: informational (where to find food, water, shelter), weather, flooding, evacuee distress, economic impact, property damage, rescue and recovery, governmental failure, crime, death and disease, evacuee diaspora, rebuilding and reconstruction, military and police activity, race relations, and positive outcomes, such as the strength and resilience of evacuees.

The coder selected the primary frame of the article. Often, the frame would be obvious in covert information, such as the headline, subheads, and lead paragraph. At other times the frame could be determined only after reading the entire story. In some articles, no frame was identifiable. A preliminary study of post-Katrina news articles revealed some common frames, which were included in the coding sheet: hurricane results in unimaginable destruction; delays cause evacuee distress; racial inequality results in evacuee distress; Katrina results in economic changes; governmental failure is the cause of evacuee distress; evacuees create an atmosphere of fear; rebuilding to be a long process; future of evacuees is uncertain; and evacuees, others respond positively to circumstances. The frame “information necessary for preparation and recovery” was added when it became apparent that substantial percentage of articles in the two regional newspapers dealt with informational topics, such as statistics about the impending storm and available public services after the storm.

Also included in the examination were the types of sources included in each article: government official, evacuee or person affected by the storm, academic or business expert, rescue/relief worker, policy/military spokesman, community/civic leader, media sources, and rumor. For the purposes of this study, government official refers to those individuals who have

been elected or appointed for leadership in positions of responsibility in the community. These top governmental officials would be expected to not abandon their work roles in favor of their family roles during a disaster (Quarantelli, 1987). Quarantelli and Wenger (1981) point to official sources as those upon whom field reporters tend to rely for their information about disasters and civil disturbances. These officials are usually located at the “command post” of a disaster, reflecting what they call a more formal “top down, governmental and social control perspective” (p. 8). The authors go on to state the command post perspective is only one of the different orientations available to view the disaster. They state that “other possible perspectives would be that of on-the-line operational personnel such as police and fire officers; of disaster impacted victims; of relief workers from outside the community; of foreign researchers; of distant relatives and friends of victims; of non-impacted community residents, etc.” (p. 5).

Types of government authorities were also coded. Authorities listed by name were President George W. Bush, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, New Orleans Chief of Police Eddie Compass, FEMA Director Michael Brown, and Director of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff. Other categories of authorities included U.S. senators and representatives, federal and state officials, city officials, parish/county spokespersons, policy/military, other FEMA representatives, and state homeland security spokespersons.

As delays in relief and rescue exacerbated evacuee distress—particularly in New Orleans—the subject of who or what was to blame for the resulting disaster became a topic worthy of examination. The coder was directed to check all that applied in the category of blame, which included President George W. Bush, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, FEMA, Homeland Security, non-profit organizations, the evacuees themselves, Hurricane Katrina, broken levees, bureaucracy, or federal, state, or local governments. Finally,

the valence of the story was determined, whether it was positive, negative, mixed/neutral, or undetermined. The option of “other” was provided in all categories where applicable, such as topic, source type, authority type, frame, blame, geographic area, and byline.

The coding sheet was first tested to determine whether coding categories were inclusive, mutually exclusive, and representative of the information provided by each newspaper. The categories were adjusted with the findings of the test. The author was the primary coder; a second coder evaluated 11 percent of the articles surveyed. SPSS 12.0 statistical software was used to calculate the outcomes. Using the Holsti method, total intercoder reliability was calculated to be .71. Reliability for sources was .89; for blame, .66; and for topics, .79.

Also, included in the research were telephone interviews of reporters and managers of the six newspapers examined in this study who spoke of their personal experiences in reporting on a disaster of this magnitude. A total of 16 were contacted: two from *The Times-Picayune*, three at *The Sun Herald*, two at *The Clarion-Ledger*, three at *The Advocate*, four at *The New York Times*, and one at *The Washington Post*. The number of interviews included in this study is as follows: *The Times-Picayune*, one; *The Sun Herald*, two; *The Clarion-Ledger*, one; *The Advocate*, three; *The New York Times*, one; and *The Washington Post*, one. The interviews were conducted in an attempt to determine individual newsroom management styles, and other issues that might have contributed to decisions regulating Page 1 content during the two weeks following Katrina.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The six newspapers examined published a total of 263 Page 1 articles related to Hurricane Katrina and its consequences from August 29 to September 11, 2005. The majority of articles on Page 1 of all six papers were hurricane related; the closer the paper was to the epicenter of the destruction, the more its Page 1 and inside contents were related to Katrina. The national and regional newspapers dedicated whole sections to Katrina during the two weeks after the storm ravaged the Gulf Coast.

Number of Articles

The six newspapers placed the hurricane or its consequences as the lead story in the vast majority of front pages examined. Of the 263 articles, 20.9% belonged to *The Washington Post*, followed by *The Advocate*, 19.4%; *The New York Times*, 19.0%; and *The Clarion-Ledger*, 16.0%. The two local papers, *The Sun Herald* and *The Times-Picayune*, contributed the fewest articles, 12.9% and 11.8%, respectively. In the early days after the storm, these two local newspapers often dedicated their front pages to only one or two hurricane-related articles and large, five- or six-column photographs illustrating the destruction in their respective communities. These local Page 1 articles were often longer than those in other newspapers and each included a wide variety of topics worthy of front page coverage.

TABLE 1
Number of Articles by Newspaper

Newspaper	n	%
<i>The Washington Post</i>	55	20.9
<i>The Advocate</i>	51	19.4
<i>The New York Times</i>	50	19.0
<i>The Clarion-Ledger</i>	42	16.0
<i>The Sun Herald</i>	34	12.9
<i>The Times-Picayune</i>	31	11.8
Total Articles	263	100.0

Only the news of the death of Supreme Court Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist appeared prominently on Page 1 in the two national newspapers on September 4, 2006; however, the headline size was not larger than that of the lead article on Hurricane Katrina. The nomination of Rehnquist’s successor, John G. Roberts, also appeared prominently on Page 1 during the two-week period. Items related to the war in Iraq and some international news appeared in the national newspapers, most often below the fold. The date of the last paper examined—September 11, 2004—was the fourth anniversary of the terrorist attack of 9/11, which was noted in all newspapers. Often, the 9/11 articles were Katrina related, featuring New York City rescue personnel such as firefighters who had traveled to Gulf Coast region and New Orleans to participate in search and relief activities.

Article Credits

Most stories—89.7%—were written by staff reporters; only 5.8% were attributed to the Associated Press and 5.0% to others.

TABLE 2
Article Credits

Byline	n	%
Staff reporter(s)	253	89.7
Associated Press	15	5.3
Other	14	5.0
Total	282	100.0

The majority of the others included reporters who were sent from Knight-Ridder affiliate newspapers to help staff members of *The Sun Herald* who were dealing with widespread community devastation as well as personal losses as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Some articles cited more than one source; hence, the number of total responses in bylines is greater than the total number of articles examined.

Article Placement, Pull Quotes, and Length of Article

All papers presented information about Hurricane Katrina above the fold every day during the time period with lead articles and/or large five- or six-column photographs and most often banner headlines directly below the masthead. Nearly half, 48.3%, appeared above the fold; 51.7% were below the fold. A small percentage, 18.6%, displayed pull quotes.

TABLE 3
Article Placement

Page 1 Placement	n	%
Above the Fold	127	48.3
Below the Fold	136	51.7
Total Articles	263	100.0

TABLE 4
Pull Quotes

Pull Quotes	n	%
Yes	49	18.6
No	214	81.4
Total Articles	263	100.0

Several articles were more than 100 inches and were lengthy analyses of governmental failure that led to evacuee distress. Of the articles coded, 10.3% were 1-10 paragraphs in length; 14.1% were 11-20 paragraphs long; 36.9%, 21-30 paragraphs in length; 23.2%, 31-40 paragraphs; and 15.6% were 40 paragraphs or longer.

TABLE 5
Length of Article

Paragraph Length	n	%
1-10	27	10.3
11-20	37	14.1
21-30	97	36.9
31-40	61	23.2
41 or longer	41	15.6
Total Articles	263	100.0

Geographic Focus

As would be expected, New Orleans was the most common geographic focus represented in all the stories examined; 38.8% of those articles which had a geographic focus dealt with news

about New Orleans. Mississippi was the center of geographic focus in nearly every article published by *The Clarion-Ledger* and *The Sun Herald*—both Mississippi papers—and occurred as the focus of 31.2% of the total articles coded for all six newspapers. Washington, D.C., occurred as the geographic focus in 7.2% of the articles; Louisiana, 7.2%; the Gulf Coast region, 4.6%; Texas, 3.4%; Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 3.0%; nationwide, 2.3%; other, 1.5%; and Alabama, 0.8%.

TABLE 6
Geographic Focus

Area	n	%
New Orleans	102	38.8
Mississippi	82	31.2
Washington, D.C.	19	7.2
Louisiana	19	7.2
Gulf Coast	12	4.5
Texas	9	3.4
Baton Rouge	8	3.0
Nationwide	6	2.3
Other	4	1.5
Alabama	2	.8
Total Articles	263	100.0

Since Mississippi papers were examined at the local and regional levels, a look at the geographic focus of national newspapers may provide an example of the amount of coverage provided nationally to that state as opposed to New Orleans. The two national newspapers devoted 44.5% of their stories to events in New Orleans. Mississippi appeared in 9.1% of the national articles while events originating in Washington, D.C., received 13.6% of the coverage. The Gulf Coast, which comprised the area from southwestern Louisiana to southeastern Alabama, was covered the same amount as Mississippi, 9.1%. Slightly less coverage, 7.3%, was given nationally to events in Texas, primarily the evacuation of thousands to that state.

TABLE 7
Comparison of Geographic Focus in Local, Regional, and National Papers

Topic	Local %	Regional %	National %	Total %
New Orleans	46.2	31.0	44.5	39.5
Mississippi	50.8	39.7	9.1	30.6
Louisiana	0.0	19.0	7.3	10.3
Washington, D.C.	0.0	5.2	13.6	7.2
Texas	0.0	1.7	7.3	3.4
Gulf Coast	1.5	1.7	9.1	4.5
Nationwide	0.0	0.0	5.5	2.1
Alabama	1.5	0.0	0.9	0.7
Other	0.0	1.7	2.7	1.7
Column Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Datelines

Fifty-seven percent of the 125 articles with datelines featured New Orleans; Biloxi, Mississippi, was the second most common dateline, but it appeared in only 4.1% of articles with datelines. Both were two of the hardest hit areas along the Gulf Coast. The third most common dateline was Gulfport, Mississippi (3.1%), followed by Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2.7%; Washington, D.C., 2.1%; Houston, Texas, 2.1%; Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, 1.4%; and Ocean Springs, Mississippi, 1.0%. Occurring twice were datelines for Chalmette, Lafayette, and Metairie, all Louisiana locations, and Laurel and Waveland, both in Mississippi. Occurring once were datelines for these Louisiana cities: Belle Chase, Gonzales, Kenner, Slidell, St. Gabriel, and Westwego. Mississippi locations occurring once as datelines were Hattiesburg, Jackson, Kiln,

Pascagoula, Pearlinton, and Ridgeland. Other locations cited once were Saraland, Alabama; Seguin, Texas; Chicago, Illinois; and Bluffdale, Utah.

TABLE 8
Datelines

Area	n	%
New Orleans, Louisiana	51	57.0
Biloxi, Mississippi	12	4.1
Gulfport, Mississippi	9	3.1
Baton Rouge, Louisiana	8	2.7
Washington, D.C.	6	2.1
Houston, Texas	6	2.1
Bay St. Louis, Mississippi	4	1.4
Ocean Springs, Mississippi	3	1.0
Chalmette, Louisiana	2	.7
Lafayette, Louisiana	2	.7
Laurel, Mississippi	2	.7
Metairie, Louisiana	2	.7
Waveland, Mississippi	2	.7
Belle Chase, Louisiana	1	.3
Bluffdale, Utah	1	.3
Chicago, Illinois	1	.3
Gonzales, Louisiana	1	.3
Hattiesburg, Mississippi	1	.3
Jackson, Mississippi	1	.3
Kenner, Louisiana	1	.3
Kiln, Mississippi	1	.3
Pascagoula, Mississippi	1	.3
Pearlington, Mississippi	1	.3
Ridgeland, Mississippi	1	.3
Saraland, Alabama	1	.3
Seguin, Texas	1	.3
Slidell, Louisiana	1	.3
St. Gabriel, Louisiana	1	.3
Westwego, Louisiana	1	.3
Total Articles with Datelines	125	100.0

Types of Sources Cited

Coders were instructed to check only once for each type of source mentioned in an article. For example, several government officials were often interviewed in one article, but the option “official” was checked only once as being a type of source named in the article. The same

procedure was followed when several evacuees were interviewed for one article:

“evacuee/person affected by the storm” was checked only once as a type of source cited.

Officials—those elected or appointed to office or those who were spokespersons for government-appointed agencies—were most often cited as sources of information; the second most often cited sources were evacuees or those who were personally affected by Hurricane Katrina. Of a total of 787 instances in which a type of source was named, government officials were cited in 28.6% of responses; evacuees or persons affected by the storm, 18.7%; business expert or spokesman, 10.0%; police/military spokesman, 9.9%; media sources or media outlet as a source of news, 8.0%; rescue/relief worker, 7.8%; other, 6.5%; academic expert, 5.5%; rumor as a source of news, 2.8%; and community/civic leader, 2.3%. “Others” were most often medical personnel and church representatives, such as priests and ministers.

TABLE 9
Types of Sources Cited for Information

Sources	n	%
Government official	225	28.6
Evacuee/person affected by storm	147	18.7
Police/military spokesman	79	10.0
Business spokesman	78	9.9
Media source/media outlet	63	8.0
Rescue/relief worker	61	7.8
Other	51	6.5
Academic spokesman	43	5.5
Rumor	22	2.8
Civic leader	18	2.3
Total number of types of sources	787	100.0

Types of Government Officials Cited

A wide variety of government authorities were cited as sources, from President George W. Bush to parish and county officials to spokespersons for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In this study, a government official is one who had been elected or appointed to office or who served as a spokesperson for a government agency. Each official was counted

only once per article. Those who represented state governmental agencies were the most commonly cited official sources. These included state representatives and senators and spokespersons for state departments, such as those dealing with the environment, education, and emergency preparedness.

TABLE 10
Types of Government Officials Cited

Government Official	n	%
State official	81	11.2
City official	68	9.4
Police/military spokesperson	66	9.2
Parish/county official	61	8.5
U.S. President George W. Bush	55	7.6
New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin	53	7.4
Federal official	47	6.5
Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco	35	4.9
U.S. senator	33	4.6
FEMA spokesperson	29	4.0
U.S. representative	29	4.0
Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour	28	3.9
Red Cross	28	3.9
Director of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff	27	3.7
New Orleans Police Chief Eddie Compass	22	3.1
Other	20	2.8
FEMA Director Michael Brown	16	2.2
State Homeland Security spokesperson	12	1.7
Mayor (other cities besides New Orleans)	11	1.5
Total times official cited per article	721	100.0

Government officials were mentioned 721 times in the articles examined, with state officials cited in 11.2% of the cases. City officials—mayoral office, city councilmen, and others—were the second most commonly cited authorities at 9.4%. Police/military spokesmen were the third most cited, 9.2%, followed by parish/county officials (parish and county presidents and appointed emergency preparedness officials in Mississippi), 8.5%. President George W. Bush was fifth most cited, in 7.6% of cases, followed by New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, 7.4%; federal officials, such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Centers for Disease Control,

6.5%; Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, 4.9%; U.S. senators (from Louisiana, Mississippi, and across the United States), 4.6%; and FEMA spokespersons and U.S. representatives, both, 4.0%. Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour and the American Red Cross were both cited in 3.9% of the cases; Director of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, 3.7%; New Orleans Police Chief Eddie Compass, 3.1%; other, 2.8%; FEMA Director Michael Brown, 2.2%; state (Mississippi or Louisiana) Homeland Security, 1.7%; and mayors of other cities besides New Orleans, most notably Houston, Texas, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Jackson, Mississippi, 1.5%.

Topics Presented

As many as six topics per article, in order of importance, were recorded. It must be noted that some articles were quite lengthy and contained more than six topics. This was particularly true for local newspapers, which often published fewer articles Page 1 articles that contained a wide variety of topics.

A total of 867 topics were recorded in Page 1 articles from August 29, 2005, to September 11, 2005. “Evacuee distress” was the primary topic covered during the two weeks following Katrina. Evacuee distress defined difficulties the storm’s victims faced after the storm: loss of loved ones or not being able to locate loved ones, lack of food, water, shelter, and adequate medical care, property damage, and an uncertain future. Evacuee distress occurred in 12.8% of the total topics, followed by death/injury/illness (or the potential for these), 11.6%; rescue/relief operations, 10.3%; criminal activity or the threat of criminal activity, 10.1%; property damage, 9.7%; government failure, 7.6%; informational (such as where to find practical assistance following the storm), 6.7%; and economic considerations (cost of storm to community, cost of rebuilding, job and property loss, rise in gas prices because of the storm), 5.4%.

Information with a positive slant, such as evacuees overcoming their circumstances or citizens unselfishly providing aid, occurred in 4.8% of the articles examined; flooding, 4.7%; rebuilding

and reconstruction, 3.8%; military or police activity, 3.3%; other, 2.7%; weather (predictions prior to and directly after the storm), 2.5%; conflict among government officials, 2.2%; race and discrimination based on race, 1.0%; and diaspora of evacuees, 0.6%.

TABLE 11
Most Prominent Topics Presented from August 29-September 11, 2005

Topic	n	%
Evacuee distress	111	12.8
Death/injury/illness (or potential)	101	11.6
Rescue/relief operations	89	10.3
Criminal activity (or threat)	88	10.1
Property damage	84	9.7
Government failure	66	7.6
Informational	58	6.7
Economic	47	5.4
Articles with positive slant	42	4.8
Flooding	41	4.7
Rebuilding and reconstruction	33	3.8
Military/police activity	29	3.3
Other	23	2.7
Weather	22	2.5
Conflict among government officials	19	2.2
Race and/or discrimination based race	9	1.0
Diaspora of evacuees	5	0.6
Total topics coded	867	100.0

Predominant Frames

A predominant frame was not apparent in all articles examined. In those where a frame was evident, “government failure is the cause of evacuee distress” and “hurricane results in unimaginable destruction” were both presented as most predominant at 19.9% each, followed by “future of evacuees is uncertain,” 9.4%; “rebuilding and reconstruction to be long process,” 8.3%; “delays cause evacuee distress,” 7.9%; “economic changes are the result of Katrina,” 7.5%; “evacuees, those affected by the storm respond positively to circumstances,” 6.8%; “information is necessary for preparation and recovery,” 6.4%; “evacuees create atmosphere of criminal activity and fear,” 4.9%; “others give unselfishly to help those affected by the storm,” 4.5%; and “racial inequality results in evacuee distress” and “other,” both 2.3%.

TABLE 12
Most Prominent Frames Presented

Frame	n	%
Government failure is the cause of evacuee distress	53	19.9
Hurricane results in unimaginable destruction	53	19.9
Future of evacuees is uncertain	25	9.4
Rebuilding/reconstruction to be a long process	22	8.3
Delays cause evacuee distress	21	7.9
Katrina has economic effect/to result in economic changes	20	7.5
Those affected by storm respond positively to circumstances	18	6.8
Information necessary for preparation and recovery	17	6.4
Evacuees create atmosphere of criminal activity and fear	13	4.9
Other citizens give unselfishly to help those affected by storm	12	4.5
Racial inequality and prejudice results in evacuee distress	6	2.3
Other	6	2.3
Total articles with predominant frames	273	100.0

Attribution of Blame

Instances of blame were attributed in 461 cases, obviously with some articles assigning more than one source of blame. Hurricane Katrina was cited as the source of blame in more than one-fourth of the cases, 28.6%. The federal government, in general, was blamed second most often, at 15.4%, followed by broken levees, 11.7%; FEMA, 10.2%; state government, in

TABLE 13
Assignment of Blame

Entity at fault for negative circumstances	n	%
Hurricane Katrina	132	28.6
Federal government (in general)	71	15.4
Broken levees	54	11.7
FEMA	47	10.2
State government (in general)	41	8.9
Local government (in general)	34	7.4
Evacuees	29	6.3
Other	15	3.3
President George W. Bush	14	3.0
Bureaucracy	8	1.7
Non-profit organizations	6	1.3
Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco	4	0.9
New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin	3	0.7
U.S. Department of Homeland Security	3	0.7
Total instances of attribution of blame	461	100.0

general, 8.9%; and local government, 7.4%. Also to blame were the evacuees themselves, 6.3%; President George W. Bush, 3.0%; bureaucracy in general, 1.7%; non-profit organizations, such as the Salvation Army and the Red Cross, 1.3%; and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, all 0.7%. Others, 3.3%, included most often either the Democratic or Republican parties.

Valence

Of the 263 articles examined, the valence of 58.6% was negative; 34.2% were mixed or neutral, and 7.2% were positive.

TABLE 14
Valence

Valence type	n	%
Negative	154	58.6
Mixed/neutral	90	34.2
Positive	19	7.2
Total Articles	263	100.0

A Comparison of Topics Covered by Local, Regional, and National Newspapers

Death/injury/illness or the potential for these was the topic most commonly presented by local and regional newspapers during the two weeks following the landfall of Hurricane Katrina. Rescue/relief efforts and evacuee distress were the second most common topics presented by local newspapers, followed by property damage and criminal activity. For regional newspapers, property damage was the second most common topic, followed by informational news, such as where to find help after the storm. National newspapers most often presented the topic evacuee distress, with the second most common topic being criminal activity and government failure as the third most common. Topics presented by national newspapers, in order of frequency, were evacuee distress, 15.5%; criminal activity, 11.6%; government failure, 11.0%; rescue/relief operations, 10.7%; death/illness/injury or the potential, 9.8%; economic, 7.9%; property damage,

6.1%; positive aspect of situation, 4.0%; conflict among government officials, 3.7%; flooding, 3.4%; military/police activity and other, 3.7%; rebuilding/reconstruction, 2.1%; diaspora and informational, both 1.5%; and weather, 1.2%.

TABLE 15
Comparison of Topics Presented in Local, Regional, and National Papers

Topic	Local %	Regional %	National %	Total %
Death/injury/illness (or potential)	12.2	13.2	9.8	11.6
Evacuee distress	11.7	10.7	15.5	12.8
Rescue/relief operations	11.7	8.9	10.7	10.3
Property damage	10.8	12.6	6.1	9.7
Criminal activity (or threat)	10.3	8.6	11.6	10.1
Informational	6.6	12.0	1.5	6.7
Government failure	6.6	4.9	11.0	7.6
Flooding	6.1	5.2	3.4	4.7
Positive aspect of a situation	5.6	5.2	4.0	4.8
Military/police activity	5.2	1.8	3.7	3.3
Economic	3.8	4.0	7.9	5.4
Weather	3.3	3.4	1.2	2.5
Rebuilding/reconstruction	3.3	5.8	2.1	3.8
Conflict among government officials	0.0	2.1	3.7	2.2
Race and/or discrimination based race	0.0	0.0	2.7	1.0
Diaspora of evacuees	0.0	0.0	1.5	3.7
Other	0.0	1.0	3.7	2.7
Column Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Regional newspapers presented these topics in order of frequency: death/injury/illness, 13.2%; property damage, 12.6%; informational, 12.0%; evacuee distress, 10.7%; rescue/relief operations, 8.9%; criminal activity, 8.6%; rebuilding/reconstruction, 5.8%; positive aspect of situation and flooding, both 5.2%; government failure, 4.9%; economic, 4.0%; weather, 3.4%; conflict among government officials, 2.1%; and military/police activity, 1.8%; and other, 1.5%. Regional newspapers did not present either diaspora or race as topics.

Local newspapers presented these topics in order of frequency: death/injury/illness, 12.2%; evacuee distress and rescue/relief efforts, both 11.7%; property damage, 10.8%; criminal activity, 10.3%; informational, 6.6%; flooding, 6.1%; positive aspect of a situation, 5.6%; military/police activity, 5.2%; economic, 3.8%; weather, 3.3%; and other, 2.8%. Local newspapers did not present the topics of diaspora, race, or conflict among government officials.

A Comparison of Sources Presented by Local, Regional, and National Newspapers

All newspapers turned to government officials as sources most often and then to evacuees or persons affected by the storm; however, national newspapers were overwhelming in their selection of these two sources as opposed to all the others examined. Both regional and national newspapers attributed information to business experts or spokespersons third most often; local newspapers cited police or military spokespersons third most often.

While local papers turned most often to government officials and then to evacuees, they also relied heavily on police and military sources, other media sources, rescue and relief workers, and academic and business experts. Of the three categories of newspapers, regional papers carried the highest percentage of reliance on government officials and evacuees, followed by business experts and police/military spokespersons. Both local and regional newspapers cited rescue and relief workers in more of their articles than did national newspapers. Local newspapers turned to other media outlets or media sources for information with a higher frequency than either regional

or national newspapers. Rumor was cited as a source more often in local newspapers than in regional or national papers. Regional newspapers were least likely to attribute information to rumor.

TABLE 16
Comparison of Types of Sources Presented in Local, Regional, and National Papers

Source	Local %	Regional %	National %	Total %
Government Official	28.0	32.1	25.8	28.6
Evacuee/person affected by the storm	15.2	20.0	19.2	18.7
Police/military	12.2	11.0	8.1	10.0
Business spokesperson	7.9	11.4	9.6	9.9
Media source/media outlet	11.6	4.5	9.3	8.0
Rescue/relief worker	7.9	9.3	6.3	7.8
Other	6.1	4.8	8.1	6.5
Academic spokesperson	5.5	2.8	7.8	5.5
Rumor	4.9	1.0	3.3	2.8
Community leader	0.6	3.1	2.4	2.3
Column Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
$\chi^2 = 13.97$	df = 18		p ≤ 1	

Local newspapers relied on government officials in 28% of instances where sources were cited; evacuees or persons affected by the storm, 15.2%; police or military, 12.2%; media sources or media outlets, 11.6%; rescue/relief worker and business expert, both 7.9%; others, 6.1%; academic expert, 5.5%; rumor, 4.9%; and community/civic leader, 0.6 percent.

Regional newspapers cited government officials in 32.1% of cases, followed by evacuee or person affected by the storm, 20.0%; business expert or spokesperson, 11.4%; police/military spokesperson, 11.0%; rescue/relief worker, other, 4.8%; media sources or media outlet, 4.5%; community/civic leader, 3.1%; academic expert, 2.8%; and rumor, 1.0%.

National newspapers relied on government officials in 25.8 percent of instances where sources were cited, followed by evacuees or persons affected by the storm, 19.2%; business expert or spokesperson, 9.6%; media sources/media outlet, 9.3%; police/military and other, 8.1%; academic expert, 7.8%; rescue/relief worker, 6.3%; rumor, 3.3%; and community and civic leader, 2.4%.

Frames Presented by Local, National, and Regional Newspapers

Local and regional newspapers were similar in their presentation of frames. “Hurricane results in unimaginable destruction” was the most predominant frame followed by “government failure causes evacuee distress.” Local newspapers had another frame as second most predominant: “evacuees, those affected by storm react positively to circumstances.” National newspapers had as their most predominant frame “government failure causes evacuee distress” in more than one-fourth of the cases examined, followed by “hurricane results in unimaginable destruction.” Only the national newspapers presented the frame “racial inequality and prejudice results in evacuee distress;” neither local nor regional newspapers presented that particular frame in any of the articles examined. Other frames presented in national newspapers, in order of predominance, were “hurricane will result in economic changes,” 11.7%; “future of evacuees is uncertain,” 9.7%; “delays result in evacuee distress,” 7.8%; “racial inequality, prejudice cause evacuee distress,” 5.8%; “evacuees create atmosphere of criminal activity and fear,” 5.8%; “evacuees respond positively to circumstances” and “citizens give unselfishly in response to storm,” both 4.9%; “rebuilding/reconstruction will be long process,” 3.9%; and “future of

evacuees is uncertain,” 3.9%. National newspapers never presented the frame “information is necessary for preparation and recovery.”

TABLE 17
Comparison of Frames Presented by Local, Regional, and National Papers

Frame	Local %	Regional %	National %	Total %
Hurricane results in unimaginable destruction	20.7	25.7	13.6	19.9
Government failure causes distress	13.8	15.2	28.2	19.9
Those affected by storm respond positively	13.8	4.8	4.9	6.8
Rebuilding/reconstruction to be a long process	6.9	13.3	3.9	8.3
Information is needed for preparation, recovery	12.1	9.5	0.0	6.4
Delays cause evacuee distress	8.6	7.6	7.8	7.9
Evacuees create atmosphere of crime, fear	5.2	3.8	5.8	4.9
Future of evacuees is uncertain	12.1	7.6	9.7	9.4
Katrina has economic effect	3.4	5.7	11.7	7.5
Other citizens respond unselfishly to victims	3.4	4.8	4.9	4.5
Racial inequality, prejudice result in distress	0.0	0.0	5.8	2.3
Other	0.0	1.9	3.9	2.3
Column Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
$\chi^2 = 49.555$	df = 22		p = .001	

Additional frames presented in regional newspapers, in order of predominance, were “rebuilding/reconstruction will be long process,” 13.3%; “information is necessary for preparation and recovery,” 9.5%; “delays result in evacuee distress,” 7.6%; “Katrina affects economy,” 5.7%; “evacuees react positively to circumstances” and “citizens give unselfishly to those affected by storm,” both 4.8%; “evacuees create atmosphere of crime and fear,” 3.8%; and

“other,” 1.9%. Neither local nor regional newspapers presented the frame “racial inequality and prejudice result in evacuee distress.”

Other frames presented by local newspapers, in order of predominance, were “information necessary for preparation and recovery,” 12.1%; “delays cause evacuee distress,” 8.6%; “rebuilding/reconstruction to be long process,” 6.9%; “evacuees create atmosphere of criminal activity and fear,” 5.2%; Katrina affects economy” and “citizens give unselfishly to those affected by storm,” both 3.4%; and “other” and “race, prejudice cause evacuee distress,” both 0.0%.

A Comparison of Blame Assigned by Local, Regional, and National Newspapers

Not all sources of information in articles assigned blame for the circumstances following Hurricane Katrina; however, some articles contained at least five sources of blame. All newspapers—local, regional, and national—most often attributed blame to the storm itself for the destruction and the dismal circumstances that followed. The federal government, in general, was blamed second most often in articles in all newspapers examined. Regional newspapers blamed the broken levees as often as the federal government for the circumstances in New Orleans.

Both regional and national newspapers attributed blame to FEMA third most often. State and local newspapers attributed blame to their state governments more often than to local officials. National newspapers did not attribute blame to either Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco or New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, but did attribute a small percentage of blame to President George W. Bush.

National newspapers assigned blame in these categories: Hurricane Katrina, 23.4%; the federal government, 17.4%; FEMA, 11.5%; broken levees, 11.0%; local government, 8.3%; evacuees themselves, 7.3%; President Bush, 3.7%; bureaucracy, 2.8%; Department of Homeland

Security, 0.9%; non-profit agencies, 0.5%; and Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin, 0.0%. Other (5.0%) was most often attributed to the Republican or Democratic parties or individual U.S. Congressmen or state officials. This was the case also for the local and regional newspapers.

TABLE 18
Comparison of Blame Attributed in Local, Regional, and National Papers

Blame	Local %	Regional %	National %	Total %
Hurricane Katrina	26.4	37.5	23.4	28.6
Federal Government	16.5	11.8	17.4	15.4
Broken Levees	13.2	11.8	11.0	11.7
FEMA	7.7	9.9	11.5	10.2
State Government	12.1	7.9	8.3	8.9
Local Government	11.0	3.9	8.3	7.4
Evacuees	3.3	6.6	7.3	6.3
Other	1.1	2.0	5.0	3.3
President George W. Bush	2.2	2.6	3.7	3.0
Bureaucracy	0.0	1.3	2.8	1.7
Nonprofit Organizations	3.3	1.3	0.5	1.3
Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco	2.2	1.3	0.0	0.9
New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin	1.1	1.3	0.0	0.7
U.S. Department of Homeland Security	0.0	0.7	0.9	0.7
Column Total %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
$\chi^2 = 24.57$	df = 26		p ≤ 1	

Regional newspapers attributed blame in these categories: Hurricane Katrina, 37.5%; federal government and broken levees, both 11.8%; FEMA, 9.9%; state government, 7.9%; evacuees

themselves, 6.6%; local government, 3.9%; President Bush, 2.6%; other, 2.0%; Governor Blanco, Mayor Nagin, and non-profits; bureaucracy, 0.3%; and Homeland Security, 0.7%. Local newspapers attributed blame in the following categories and percentages: Hurricane Katrina, 26.4%; federal government, 16.5%; broken levees, 13.2%; state government, 12.1%; local government, 11.0%; FEMA, 7.7%; nonprofit organizations and the evacuees, both 3.3%; and Governor Blanco and President Bush, both 2.2%; and Mayor Nagin, 1.1%. Local newspapers did not assign blame to either Homeland Security or bureaucracy.

Interviews

One common thread ran throughout the responses of management and reporters at all six newspapers examined in this study: the coverage of Hurricane Katrina was more physically, emotionally, and logistically arduous than any other assignment they had been given during their newspaper careers. All six newspapers had covered past hurricanes and done so successfully, but even papers in the South which had detailed hurricane coverage plans in place before Katrina and had experienced devastating storms were not ready for the destruction and despair that followed this hurricane in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast.

Local Newspapers: *The Sun Herald* and *The Times-Picayune*

Both *The Times-Picayune* and *The Sun Herald* printed their August 29, 2005 editions early, before Katrina arrived, but were forced to publish off-site during the early weeks after the storm because of extensive wind and water damage to their respective communities. *The Sun Herald* had minor damage to its building and barely escaped the Gulf of Mexico storm surge; however, lack of power and water prohibited production in Biloxi. Staff members had access to the building and, with great difficulty, were able to communicate with a skeleton crew who assembled the eight-page post-Katrina editions at the facility of a sister newspaper in Georgia. While New Orleans floodwaters lapped at the steps of *The Times Picayune* and appeared to be

rising, the staff was forced to evacuate the city. The newspaper was not printed for three days and was then published at the facilities of *The Houma Courier*, in Houma, Louisiana, and later at *The Register* in Mobile, Alabama. Despite their employees' devastating loss of personal property, these two newspapers managed to stay connected to their readership via the Internet and through print copies with the generous outside help from other news institutions.

According to Peter Kovacs, managing editor of *The Times-Picayune*, among the greatest challenges the newspaper faced was the immediate, forced relocation of its entire staff and everything it needed for day-to-day operations. "The biggest difficulty was that we really didn't have a plan that envisioned having to leave" (Kovacs, P., telephone interview, August 1, 2006). As water began to flood into the city, they watched it creep up the steps to *The Times-Picayune* building. The staff evacuated in circulation trucks, leaving behind production computers containing the newspaper's typefaces, payroll information, inter-employee email capability, and employee contact information so that management could find its people who had been scattered by the storm. "We all had to use private and personal emails, and we obviously couldn't print. We didn't have a place to base our New Orleans reporters. We had, at various times, operations in three, four, and five places for different functions," Kovacs said. Besides printing in other locations, the staff worked to report and edit at the Louisiana State University Manship School of Mass Communication and had a contingent of reporters in New Orleans operating out of a private home. Even without a plan, the staff at *The Times-Picayune* was determined to bring news to their displaced readership. "In a sense we had to get back in operation. Every group within the newspaper had to figure out a way to reinvent what they did," Kovacs said.

"My most vivid memory of this was after we fled this building we went to our suburban building on the West Bank," Kovacs recalled. "We were in the parking lot, and we got together and said, 'What are we going to do now?' We were stuck there and we couldn't get to our

reporters,” he said. “Our main mission was to tell our readers and the people of New Orleans, most of whom weren’t around here to know what was going on.” To accommodate a scattered readership, the newspaper posted photos on line. “The photos probably got more hits than anything else. It’s because everyone looked at all the photos to look for something that they would recognize.” The use of satellite imagery allowed viewers to find landmarks to help identify their property to determine the severity of flooding.

Finding Reliable Information

Reporters were first sent out geographically to determine the location and extent of hurricane damage, the topic of most importance to readers. “We sent reporters and photographers in different directions,” he said. Calls from residents stranded on rooftops were entered onto the paper’s web log with the location of the call, giving readers an idea of the extent of the flooding. The type of beat each reporter covered changed with the circumstances. “After awhile it evolved more topically—getting water out of the city, looting, and those kinds of things. Different reporters would have different topics,” he said. “That was how we were organized once the city was evacuated.”

Reporters found reliable information a rare commodity. “The usual structures of authority were there, so it was not difficult to get information, but it was difficult to get accurate information.” At times, “rumors were the only information there was. In many cases it’s like the man on his roof in Chalmette. Is he telling a rumor, or is he a truth teller? We’d quote him by name, but the normal journalistic standard would be to call the sheriff. But the sheriff was on his roof.”

Disturbing reports of rapes and murders were coming from the Superdome and the Convention Center, where thousands of evacuees had gathered to await rescue. Many of these rumors of violence were reported to have happened in the River Center, where many had been

dropped off after having been rescued from rooftops. As a result, the River Center was more loosely organized than the Superdome. With a lack of available authority sources, reporters did not follow more traditional methods. “I think you had to invent a model in which you quoted people saying what was going on,” he said. “Some of the people said things that were so bizarre that you sort of tried to weigh it against the other evidence you had. You had to see if the wind blows in the same direction,” or whether or not the reports could be corroborated. “In the case of the Convention Center, Kovacs said, “the wind was not blowing in the same direction. People were actually helping each other.”

Mayor Ray Nagin and Police Chief Eddie Compass were official sources who spoke of a large number of crimes occurring in the two shelters, events which *The Times-Picayune* learned weeks later were untrue. “It is not below the standard of the practice of journalism” to report what a public official states as true, he said. “If the mayor and police chief say something is going on, that generally opens the door for you to believe it has really happened,” he said. “I feel like I understand how the Salem witch hunt happened.” Consequently, Kovacs said, “there was no official version of events.” Good crime reporting involves interviewing the police as well as witnesses to determine what really happened. In the case of Katrina, there was a shortage of officials who could be counted on as reliable sources. Reporters at the scene began to realize that the rumors of rapes and murders did not match everything they saw. “People were sitting around there with their children,” he said. “If that were happening, you’d take your family and go hide in the city.” In fact, several months after the storm, *The Times-Picayune* became one of the first newspapers to document the false reports and provide accurate information. In retrospect, Kovacs said, “one of the worst things was that the false reports hindered the rescuers.”

According to Kovacs, no one, from the federal to the local governments and including *The Times-Picayune*, had a plan in place for the situation that occurred in New Orleans after

Hurricane Katrina. “I think most people would say that we and every other entity in the city did not have a plan that anticipated this,” Kovacs said. “We were not alone in that. The mayor and the hospitals and the police and everyone else did not have a plan. The federal government did not have a plan that anticipated this. One of the reasons I think people are sympathetic to Ray Nagin when he’s called on the carpet for not having a plan is that most people realize that no one had a plan.”

Readers Respond with Gratitude

Readers responded favorably to the efforts of *The Times-Picayune* to keep them informed. “The most heartwarming thing is how thankful readers are,” he said. “You go somewhere and people find out you work for the *Picayune*, they say they couldn’t have gotten by without us and the web version,” he recalled. “That’s been kind of heartwarming, and it still goes on.”

In Biloxi, staff at *The Sun Herald* report the same outpouring of community gratitude for the work they did to keep readers informed during the weeks after Katrina devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In fact, no area of *The Sun Herald*’s readership along the coastline was untouched by the storm and reporters, photographers, and editors of that newspaper were also required to gather and publish news under trying personal circumstances.

Blake Kaplan, assistant city editor for *The Sun Herald* and a native of north Louisiana who has lived in Biloxi since 1994, worked with the production crew to finish the August 29, 2005, edition a day early and to distribute it residents in shelters and those who had not evacuated. Kaplan and a skeleton crew were sent to *The Ledger-Enquirer*, a sister paper in Columbus, Georgia, where they waited out the storm and prepared to print 20,000 copies of an eight-page paper to be distributed the day after Katrina passed. Knight-Ridder management sent more than 20 additional staffers from other newspapers to help with production in Columbus. In the early days after the storm, Kaplan’s only source of communication with editors and reporters in Biloxi

was via the cell phone of a co-worker from New York. After the storm passed, *The Sun Herald* was trucked from Georgia to Mississippi and distributed free of charge. “We sent reporters out with stacks of newspapers and handed them out,” said Kaplan. “Our business is selling newspapers, but this was an extraordinary circumstance which called for extraordinary decision making,” he added. “We gave it away for the first two weeks after the storm” (Kaplan, B., telephone interview, September 8, 2006).

Reporter Anita Lee is a native Mississippian who has covered many hurricanes during her 20-plus years as an editor and reporter for *The Sun Herald*. On the morning of Monday, August 29, 2005, Lee rode out the storm with others in *The Sun Herald* building, a “concrete bunker” built to replace the building that was destroyed in 1969 by Hurricane Camille which, until Katrina, was the most destructive storm to hit the Mississippi coast. As long as they had power—first through the local company and later by way of a generator—they continued to send on-line updates to their beachfront city. The most difficult part of the storm was waiting for an opportunity to safely leave the building to assess local damage. A freelance photographer staying in the building was eager to get outside in the early afternoon. “He went out and he came back 30 minutes later, and he looked like he was in shock. He looked at me and said, ‘Your city is gone.’ That’s when I knew it was bad,” (Lee, A., telephone interview, September 6, 2006).

Later, she and the photographer headed to check her house near the beach and interview people along the way. “We had to climb over trees. I had my notebook with me, and I was prepared to interview devastated people,” Lee said. “When I saw my house, I realized I was one.” The hurricane force winds destroyed her home; the storm surge took what was left inside and carried it into the Gulf of Mexico. “After I saw the house, I had to suck it up and move on and get focused on what we were going to write,” she said. Many others on staff had homes that were destroyed or badly damaged. “We really had to put those (losses) completely aside. Knight

Ridder management motor homes for Biloxi employees whose homes were damaged or destroyed “One of the hardest things to deal with was the heat; there was no air conditioning anywhere and there were no bathrooms – conveniences you take for granted we no longer had,” Lee recalled. “I had this attitude that this was an adventure. When I had to report on east Biloxi and they were pulling bodies out of the rubble, I didn’t feel so bad about my losses. It was just stuff.” In the midst of personal disaster and the monumental task of reporting, the beat structure of *The Sun Herald* remained intact. According to Lee, decisions on what to cover were also based on who was available for work. Knight Ridder also sent reporters, photographers, and editors to Biloxi to help the beleaguered staff. Even with the increased staff, she said, “there was no shortage of anything to do.”

Obtaining accurate information was difficult with communication systems destroyed or badly damaged. However, local reporters had the advantage of proximity and strong relationships built with sources. Rumors from Biloxi were filtered through to the national media but not reported by *The Sun Herald* because they could not be substantiated. In fact, Lee said, local reporters did not have time to watch national news. In one instance early in the recovery period, news company executives were anxious because national outlets had been reporting that 40 people had been killed in one Biloxi apartment complex alone and *The Sun Herald* had not written about it. “Well, there was only one way to check anything you wanted to find out,” Lee said. “You had to go there, so I got in my car and went,” she said. “This was a rumor. It was reported over and over in the national news, but we never reported that because we knew it wasn’t true. I don’t think we had a problem getting accurate information because we’d go where we needed to go.”

Experiences Reinforce the Power of the Print Medium

The decision of *The Sun Herald* management to distribute the paper free of charge was a demonstration of the paper’s commitment to its community. “I was told that it was a tremendous

experience because people were so starved for information about what was going on and it really reinforced the power of the print medium,” said Assistant City Editor Kaplan. At one point during the two-week period after Katrina, *The Sun Herald* had its largest press run in history, printing nearly 90,000 newspapers. “People to this day will tell you that *The Sun Herald* was their lifeline,” Lee said. “People were really anxious to have those newspapers. I think it has strengthened our relationship with the community. We are providing a necessary service,” she added. “I guess, if anything, that I have come to view what we do as more critical to the community right now because times are so critical,” Lee said. “That’s why a lot of us are in journalism—to help people improve their lives, and I think that feeling’s even stronger now. I’ve been able to give a lot of people hope and in some cases directly help people,” she said.

“As a journalist you’re just trying to do your job, and that doesn’t change because you’ve had a disaster. It just intensifies your motivation to do a good job,” Lee added. “It really shows you that newspapers play a very important role in our society and in our communities.” Through editorial comment, particularly addressed to the federal government when Mississippians felt overlooked in favor of New Orleans, *The Sun Herald* showed it would be an advocate for the people, City Editor Kaplan said. “This reinforces what a public service the newspaper is and can be,” he added. “People really needed us during that time. I think we came through and gave them all the information they needed and wanted to try to put their lives back together. The information in the newspaper was very, very vital in a way it had not previously been in a very long time.”

Regional Newspapers: *The Advocate* and *The Clarion-Ledger*

Both *The Advocate* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana) and *The Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi) are newspapers located in the seats of government for their respective states. They were also near enough to the storm to experience the indirect impact of the high winds and the direct impact of

waves of evacuees fleeing the Katrina's destruction. While local newspapers in the heavily devastated areas worked to get up and running, staff at neighboring regional newspapers felt the increased burden of providing information to evacuees, their families, and others concerned about the short- and long-term effects of the storm.

As Katrina approached, the staff at *The Advocate* put into place its standard practice for covering a storm. "When hurricane season starts, or even before hurricane season starts, everyone's hair on their back of their necks stands up and we get on alert. We prepare the best we can," said John Ballance, photo department manager who has been with *The Advocate* for 20 years. In keeping with the newspaper's hurricane coverage plans, sports utility vehicles were rented, carrying photographer/reporter teams, food, water, and 20-gallon cans of gasoline. Teams were placed in New Orleans, north of the city, and covering the evacuation to Baton Rouge. "With Hurricane Katrina, it started off, really, as just another hurricane," Ballance said. "The only difference was that it was going to hit New Orleans. When the levees broke, it became a whole different situation. It became the biggest news story we ever covered, personally, and I should say for *The Advocate*, too. When the levees broke it became the biggest story that was going. Period" (Ballance, J., telephone interview, September 1, 2006).

Equipping Reporters

The Advocate faced a problem that was common with other newspapers in this study: caring for their photographers and reporters who were in the field with limited communication, little shelter, and dwindling food, water, and fuel supplies. "Instead of getting the photographers out (of New Orleans) to take a shower, we sent stuff in to them. We didn't know if we pulled them out whether we would be able to get them in, especially a few days after the storm," Ballance said. One team was sheltered with the New Orleans mayor and his employees. While the photographer preferred to be outside of the mayor's shelter, the arrangement actually worked

well for *The Advocate* because it was the location of first-hand information as well as back-up power. Back in Baton Rouge, which became Louisiana's command center, photographers were embedded with National Guard troops and other agencies, allowing them ground access and better aerial photography. Baton Rouge also became temporary home to thousands of evacuees as shelters, churches, and schools were crowded to capacity.

Managing Editor Carl Redman, a native of New Orleans, said his reporters, who were instructed to link up with first responders, were perfectly situated to cover the storm. In addition to those teams covering the New Orleans areas, bureau chiefs were instructed to report on how Katrina affected local areas around Baton Rouge. Communities neighboring Baton Rouge, such as Gonzales to the east and Lafayette to the west, were also sites of massive evacuations. "We knew we had a lot of evacuees. We were trying to keep them in touch with what was going on in their local government, so far as going back to their home areas" (Redman, C., telephone interview, August 22, 2006). Residents north of New Orleans whose communities were also devastated by flooding and high winds, were dependent on *The Advocate* during those first few days after the storm when batteries ran out in their radios and *The Times-Picayune* could not print, Redman explained.

As with other newspapers examined in this study, *The Advocate* experienced communication problems. "Nobody's cell phones worked with great reliability," Redman said. "Text messaging seemed to be the most reliable form of communication." Some reporters were able to use satellite phones of Associated Press crews; others were able to use communication systems belonging to emergency operations in New Orleans. Along with the communication problems that other newspapers faced, *The Advocate* also struggled to get accurate information on circumstances in New Orleans. "We didn't print any of those wild stories about people lining up to rape people in the Dome and nurses forming circles around patients," Redman said. "We didn't do a lot of that

‘rumor mongering.’ A lot of that was coming from the electronic folks who had a different news cycle,” he explained.

Ballance said *The Advocate* news management carefully considered the types of photos selected for Page 1. In fact, it is not the paper’s policy to run the photo of a dead body. “We like to think about how this is going to affect the people who are viewing this,” he said. “You will not see *The Advocate* run a picture . . . for the shock value.” Management decided to run one particular photo on Page 1 of an evacuee surrounded by caregivers just moments before she died—but not without deliberation. “I, two photo editors, the metro editor, the managing editor, and executive editor got together and talked about it, and we decided to run it,” Ballance said. “It would be in the most respectful manner possible. That is just what we do,” he said.

Meeting the Needs of an Increased Circulation

“From the outset we knew that we had an all-encompassing story because we are the seat of government where the information was flowing. We also had so many of the evacuees,” said Linda Lightfoot, managing editor of *The Advocate*. “While we always covered the important events in New Orleans, we had to do much more coverage of New Orleans because many more of our readers now were from there” (Lightfoot, L., telephone interview, August 8, 2006). The storm affected every aspect of the newspaper. “It was such an all-encompassing story that . . . we really had to put almost every resource we had into it. There were so many aspects that, no matter what beat you had, there was a hurricane connection,” Lightfoot said. “No matter where we went, the hurricane was the focus of everything.” For example, the criminal justice system was impacted by the increase in population in the Baton Rouge area. Evacuees needed information, such as what to do about the interruption of a prescription. It was important to provide information about the non-profit sector, which assumed a tremendous burden in caring for evacuees; the religion editor focused on helping readers cope with the aftermath of Katrina,

she explained. News was not the only product in demand at *The Advocate*. The newspaper's advertising space increased as national, regional, and local advertisers, such as insurance companies, bought space to communicate with their displaced customers. "In those early days, we were faced, as the newspaper of record, with a broader circulation area than we've ever had," Lightfoot said. At one point, *The Advocate*'s circulation was up by an average of 10,000 to 12,000 copies per day, an increase of about 13 percent, Redman explained. Pre-Katrina, the paper prints about 95,000 copies per day; after the storm, the paper averaged from 7,000-9,000 more copies on weekdays. The newspaper's Sunday circulation was up from 125,000 to 132,000 after the storm.

Meeting the Needs of Other Media Outlets

Circumstances at *The Advocate* differed from other papers in this study because the newspaper plant became a point of contact for other media outlets. "Almost from the first day," Redman said, "we had newspapers from all over the country." Reporters from France called for assistance; other out-of-town crews wanted to sleep newsroom floor. "To me, one of the big things that *The Advocate* did here, besides covering the storm was that . . . we were 'news central'," photographer Ballance said. "We had photographers and reporters from all over the world coming here." Knight Ridder reporters as well as Associated Press and *Times-Picayune* staff displaced from New Orleans found a temporary home at the Baton Rouge newspaper's facility. *The Advocate* management converted a large, in-house auditorium to an ancillary press room, wiring it for Internet and phone service to accommodate crews who arrived at the newspaper's doorstep. Ballance said they did what they could to help their fellow newsmen. He even got a Nikon camera representative to clean and repair camera gear for photographers at *The Times-Picayune* and other news organizations temporarily house there. "Besides covering the news, we opened our doors to all of these people," Ballance said. "We helped them do what they

needed to do to cover the news. That, to me, is what I got out of it more than anything else—the outpouring of people.” Ballance and others on *The Advocate*’s staff housed *Times-Picayune* photographers and reporters as well as others in their homes during the weeks after the storm. Many *Advocate* staff members worked 12-14 hours per day; in their off time they participated in relief efforts.

Photographers and reporters were personally affected. “We had to pull photographers and reporters out (of New Orleans) just to give them some debriefing, just to kind of calm down,” Balance said. “I don’t think after covering that they will ever say ‘back to normal’ because it changed everyone. Covering that storm changed everybody here. It was an emotional thing as well as a physically draining thing—seeing people homeless, seeing people dying, and dealing with the things they were dealing with,” he said. Balance those who covered the storm look at other assignments differently since Katrina. “For the photographers who actually covered the storm it was almost like what I perceive when a photographer or a soldier in a war zone comes back with the depression or anxiety of having been in a war zone and seeing that kind of destruction. I think it’s similar to something like that; I think it affects people and changes them.” *The Advocate* had to force its photographers to take time off. “And then you couldn’t, because the people who were supposed to be taking off were getting in their boats and going to New Orleans to rescue people.”

Providing Information for Readers Displaced by Katrina

Management at *The Clarion-Ledger*, located about 240 miles inland from the Gulf of Mexico in Jackson, Mississippi, was also faced with the task of relaying news to a displaced and devastated readership. Debra Skipper, assistant managing editor for news and business, said the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina was the worst she has seen in her 23 years on staff with the regional newspaper. “We tried to provide shelter sites and information on where to get help,

what FEMA was doing, when people could come back to their communities” (Skipper, D., telephone interview, September 15, 2006). In addition to the newspaper’s regular circulation, *The Clarion-Ledger* was also trying to inform residents of the Mississippi coast, who had evacuated north, as well as those from New Orleans, who fled to Mississippi for shelter. “A lot of people were worried about family members,” she said. “People were separated; they were sent to different shelters. They didn’t know where everybody was.” The area also faced massive gasoline shortages, and readers wanted information on which gas stations were going to open.

Facing Hurdles to Get the News to Readers

Because of its experience in covering hurricanes, *The Clarion-Ledger* also had a plan in place before the storm; however, the management had no idea just how bad the impact would be. They placed teams in eastern and central Mississippi, as well as the Gulf Coast. After the storm, reporters who were familiar with the hardest hit areas were sent down because they would be able to navigate easiest. Because Katrina cut such a wide swath of destruction through south and central Mississippi, communication became *The Ledger*’s biggest hurdle. “We had massive, massive problems with phones,” Skipper said. “The cell towers were down and we had almost no cellular service.” One Gulf Coast reporter “stood under the remnants of a bridge” as the only location where she could get a signal to dictate her story, Skipper explained. In fact, all stories from the coast were dictated—when reporters could get a call through to Jackson. Photographers on the coast also had problems. “The photography department had to shoot, drive over to either Mobile (Alabama) or Hattiesburg (Mississippi) to transmit the photo,” she said. Photographers faced a 90-minute drive each time they had to transmit a photo because of a lack of wireless capability. “They basically didn’t have a choice.” In retrospect, she said, the newspaper was handicapped because it did not have the technology it needed. Like many other news outlets, they were not prepared for the devastation and, consequently, were not prepared to house their

reporters who were on the field. “We were literally having reporters sleeping in their cars,” she said. “There was no place for them to go.”

Skipper said they were cautious about running articles without accurate corroboration, which was made difficult because officials were overworked and understaffed and not always available for comment. The Hancock County coroner, who was coordinating body recovery, was difficult to contact. “We would go days without knowing exactly how many people died,” she said. Rumors of looting also circulated along coastal Mississippi, but were not always substantiated. In one such case occurred in Bay St. Louis, along the Mississippi coast. When reporters arrived, they learned that rumors of looting at one Wal-Mart were not true. “In fact, the manager had basically opened the doors and said, ‘Take what you need’,” Skipper said.

Because *The Clarion-Ledger* was key in providing information to an expanded circulation, its relationship with readers has been strengthened. “We probably have a stronger (relationship) with the coast.” *The Clarion-Ledger* became a crucial source for residents and evacuees, especially when Internet access was restored. Skipper explained that the newspaper was a voice for Mississippians who believed the nation was focused on New Orleans. *The Clarion-Ledger* also reported positive stories of evacuees who expected to overcome adversity. “It’s the nature of Mississippians,” she said. “The people just naturally pull together. That’s the way they are.”

National Newspapers: *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*

National newspaper reporters sent to cover Katrina faced many of the same difficulties as local and regional reporters: problems with communication as well as finding enough adequate food, water, and shelter in New Orleans and the affected Gulf Coast region. Robert Pierre of *The Washington Post*, a native of south Louisiana, was assigned with about a dozen other staff members to cover Katrina. Many other *Post* reporters are from Louisiana, and from their vantage point in the nation’s capital, “we were watching the hurricane like everyone else,” while

checking on family and friends, Pierre said. The day before Katrina made landfall, Pierre arrived in south Louisiana. Post reporters and photographers arrived via recreational vehicles and by way of airports in Houston and Florida. Because Louisiana is his home, Pierre said it was difficult to be dispassionate, especially in covering the life and death situations that occurred in New Orleans after the storm. He and other reporters found it difficult to find shelter during their assignment. Sometimes he drove home to his parent's house several hours to the west; sometimes they were able to share a hotel room. Often he slept in his car. Like others, he often struggled with communication. At one point, Pierre filed stories while aboard a barge floating in the Mississippi River.

Developing Themes for National Coverage

Most often, reporters were not assigned beats, but developed their own story ideas. Pierre said they were required to “use their own eyes and ears” to determine what was to be reported in the *Post*. As events in New Orleans unfolded, several topics moved to prominence for *Post* reporters. Katrina, he said, “was one of the biggest stories in America at the time,” he said. *Post* editors considered, “What would it look like if we lost an American city?” From the vantage point of the nation's capital, there was also a “huge human story to be told,” Pierre said. “What was the government response? Was there a sufficient government response?” He and other reporters chose to tell the human story in a number of ways. “What did the exodus from a city look like? How was this affecting other cities across the region? How did it affect our city (Washington, D.C.)?” Katrina was also a military story, he said, as the National Guard and other personnel were called to conduct search and rescue efforts and to help maintain order in New Orleans. “We were also just roving, just trying to figure out what was happening on the street” (Pierre, R., telephone interview, August 13, 2006). . As he traveled the streets of New Orleans, Pierre encountered a problem stated by other reporters: a lack of reliable information.

“There was such a lack of control of the situation,” he said. “The government did not have good information. The police chief did not have good information. All of these people were giving bad information,” he explained. The evacuees themselves were giving inaccurate information. “People would tell you about the murders that occurred in the Superdome as well as the Convention Center,” he said. Reporters would ask, “What did you do when you saw this?” It was then they learned that they really did not see the murders, but were reporting rumors. “That’s when you found out most of the time, ‘I didn’t really see it. Someone else saw it.’ Nobody saw all of the bodies because the bodies didn’t exist,” Pierre said. “Everybody was giving bad information. I think that was one of the biggest problems everyone encountered. There were very few people who had good information.” Still, Pierre said, it was the job of reporters to deliver accurate information, to find reliable sources. “It still was the obligation of those who reported what (New Orleans Mayor) Nagin or others said that wasn’t true – to go back and check it. That’s the job of the news organization.”

John Desantis, a reporter for a *New York Times* Regional newspaper in south Louisiana, has a long relationship with the *Times* national desk and is often activated to cover certain stories when he is in a good location geographically. “I remember our first full day. There was a briefing in Baton Rouge, and we had some sense of what was going on from the official standpoint. But we also knew that we weren’t going to know what was really going on unless we were there” (Desantis, J., telephone interview, September 13, 2006). His team flew into Baton Rouge, rented an SUV, loaded it with gasoline, food and water, and headed for New Orleans. “Once in the city, we tried to follow what threads we could.”

Like Pierre with *The Washington Post*, Desantis said his editors instructed him to go and find the stories. “Occasionally there would be some things they would ask for specifically,” Desantis said. “Basically what we were doing was, when we had an aspect of something that we thought

was important, we notified the national desk and we continued working whatever that angle was.” Once inside New Orleans most reporters did not have contact with outside media sources available through television, radio, and other newspapers. “It is an interesting vacuum that you tend to operate in without the benefit of knowing what the morning’s newscasts were,” Desantis explained. “What you were relying on was what you were hearing and feeling . . . and constructing a story from that. We didn’t have a script, really.”

Tracking Down Rumors

At times, editors at the national desk would contact them with a rumor and ask them to check it out; however, most of the time, they were on their own. One of the first spots he and his fellow reporter covered was a gathering place along Interstate 10 where evacuees gathered. “We saw crowds and crowds and crowds of people standing on the interstate—people plucked off rooftops, a collection site. We didn’t know the dynamic at first, so we started talking to people, finding out what their experience was. This taught us much about what was going on,” he said. Desantis and fellow reporters also encountered rumors and were forced to make decisions about how to handle them.

“Part of what we were doing was tracking down rumors,” he explained. “If there was anything relating to stuff that could end up in print, we really, really grilled people—more than you would ordinarily grill civilians. We heard the same rumors from place to place to place,” Desantis said. “It was almost like tracking down an urban legend on the Internet. He found it was necessary to “grill” policemen, too, who were subject to rumors, particularly those driven by fear, but also by having faced with what Desantis described as unspeakable and unbelievable situations.

“We were in uptown New Orleans. We ran into an elderly couple who were backpacking. They said they had just left the Convention Center and they started telling us all of these horrible stories about what was going on,” he recalled. “We started asking them for support for what they

were telling us—“How did you know this? Did you see any babies raped?” They replied, “My sister told me.” Desantis said they would then ask, “Well, what did your sister see?” They would reply, “No, she didn’t see it; a police officer told her,” he explained. They refused to file third- and fourth-hand information as fact, but also decided, based on the information, to follow up on the rumors by visiting the Superdome themselves. Ignoring warnings by police not to enter the Dome, Desantis said he did not see thugs, but people who were beaten down by the circumstances following Katrina. “In the Superdome: we saw people who were stripped of all humanity. They were no more capable of threatening us or anyone else than the rats that were drowning in the gutters,” he said. “They were people that I suppose some people might stereotype as street thugs because of their clothing, perhaps because of their race,” Desantis said. “Some of these young men . . . it appeared that what they were actually doing was serving as ad hoc protectors of certain areas of the Dome, It was a transference of street culture to the Dome itself. What I didn’t see first hand was wanton violence.” Desantis was personally moved by the situation he found among people who evacuated to the Superdome. “I have never in my 20-plus years of doing this seen such human misery in such volume in one place at one time,” he said.

“These people came to the door of the Dome as bank branch managers, supermarket cashiers, waiters, secretaries. Once you walked through that door you were no longer any of those things. Any conceivable thing that made you ‘you’ was gone. None of that mattered. Money didn’t matter. Station didn’t matter. The people were so powerless . . . so dehumanized. It was incredibly frightening to me as a human being. That was what struck me. I’ve seen all kinds of depravity, but never anything like this.”

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Topics Presented at the Local, Regional, and National Levels

This study intended to answer first whether news topics presented by local, regional, and national newspapers were different during the two weeks following Hurricane Katrina. The events surrounding Hurricane Katrina provided a perfect laboratory for examining the ways in which local, regional, and national newspapers portray an event with such staggering and historic consequences to human life, property, the economy, and the public's confidence in government. Because of the magnitude of the disaster and its ripple effect nationwide, it was covered heavily at all levels for an extended period of time. Readership demands and desires differed at the local, regional, and national levels, especially regarding the long- and short-term effects of the storm. The closer readers were geographically to the epicenter of destruction, the more desperate they were for information. Was the information presented locally different from what was offered at the regional level? Was it portrayed differently to readers represented at the national level, for instance, in Spokane, Washington, where hurricanes pose no threat?

It would not be exaggerating to say that employees of *The Times-Picayune* and *The Sun Herald*, the two papers most affected, faced a Herculean task as they worked to serve their readers after Katrina. During the course of this study, both local newspapers were awarded Pulitzer Prizes for public service. *The Sun Herald* was recognized “for its valorous and comprehensive coverage of Hurricane Katrina, providing a lifeline for devastated readers, in print and online, during their time of greatest need” (<http://www.pulitzer.org>). *The Times-Picayune* was honored “for its heroic, multi-faceted coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, making exceptional use of the newspaper's resources to serve an inundated city even after evacuation of the newspaper plant.” *The Times-Picayune* staff received a Pulitzer Prize for

a distinguished example of local reporting of breaking news for its “courageous and aggressive coverage of Hurricane Katrina, overcoming desperate conditions facing the city and the newspaper” (<http://www.pulitzer.org>).

The Times-Picayune and *The Sun Herald* were at ground zero of the hurricane’s effects. *The Sun Herald* was closer to the path of the storm’s eye and its most horrendous winds and storm surge effects. *The Times-Picayune* was to the west of the eye and residents of New Orleans, initially, breathed a sigh of relief—until the levees were breached. Clearly, the information needs of the readers of those two papers would be different from their regional neighbors and much different from those who live several states away. The most frequent topics presented at the local level dealt with those issues most important to the readers in the New Orleans and Biloxi areas: death, injury, or illness (or the potential for these), along with the ever-increasing problems faced by those who were devastated by the storm and its after-effects. Property damage would be foremost on the minds of residents whose homes were damaged or destroyed. Entire neighborhoods where generations lived were either flooded or obliterated. Businesses were flooded or, as in the case of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, simply disappeared with the storm surge. Not only were readers interested in their own homes, but also wanted to know about the homes and businesses of their family and friends. Staff interviewed said their readers craved information on what areas were safe to return to and what property was still left standing. Both local newspapers provided an abundance of photos on the web and in print detailing flooding, property damage, and the plight of local residents; most often, the printed photos spanned the width of Page 1 and were eight to twelve inches in height. Local papers also reported on criminal activity that might personally affect those who had not yet evacuated. Most importantly, local newspapers also presented information in the form of where to find help, how to find loved ones, what businesses were open or closed, or how to receive disaster aid.

Reporters and management of the local newspapers also saw their relationship with readers change to one of increased dependence immediately after the storm. Page 1 statements to readers were unique to local newspapers. These personal statements by management offered assistance to those who needed help finding loved ones, offered information to their own scattered staff, and explained how they would distribute newspapers despite the devastation. *The Sun Herald* became a voice for Mississippians along the Gulf Coast, publishing an editorial on Page 1 called “We Need Some Relief” where editors criticized the slow government response. “We are not calling on the nation and the state to make life more comfortable in South Mississippi, we are calling on the nation and the state to make life here possible.” Because of its strong stand in representing residents and providing an information lifeline, those interviewed said a higher level of camaraderie now exists between *The Sun Herald* and its readers. Staff of *The Times-Picayune* also noticed an increased appreciation by their readers for the paper’s work to provide information both in print and on line even though the staff was forced to abandon the newspaper plant when flooding became a threat. Interestingly, government failure ranked below information as a topic covered by local newspapers. Conflict among government officials and racial prejudice ranked far below other topics presented by local papers, perhaps because local papers were more focused on the immediate life and death issues of their readers after their storm than on who or what was to blame for the circumstances. Even more interesting was the inclusion of positive topics at the local level during the two weeks after Katrina. In fact, according to percentage point ranking, local newspapers contained more positively slanted articles than were presented at the regional and national levels. As one staff member said, people along the Gulf Coast are accustomed to picking up the pieces and moving on after the storm. They are resilient, and perhaps their local newspapers sought to remind them of that and encourage them not to lose hope in the midst of historically difficult circumstances.

Rebuilding/reconstruction and economic factors were not as prominent at the local level as they were regionally. While these two topics would be of prime interest in the future for local readers, immediate, daily needs would be expected to take precedence at the local level, especially in the devastation that followed this particular storm. Regional newspapers, with the advantage of perspective allowed in an area close to but not devastated by the storm, would have been in a position to focus on rebuilding and reconstruction during those two weeks. Also, as newspapers of record in the state capitals, the regional newspapers had ready access to sources that had begun to consider the rebuilding effort as soon as the last evacuee was plucked from his/her rooftop.

Both regional newspapers received effects from Katrina but not the widespread devastation that occurred at the local level. As explained by staff at both *The Advocate* and *The Clarion-Ledger*, their focus shifted with their readership when thousands of evacuees changed the landscape of their cities literally overnight. Indeed, the burden of supplying accurate, constant information fell squarely on the shoulders of regional newspapers whose staff members worked around the clock, doubling efforts in covering the storm while assisting displaced staff from New Orleans as well as acting as a clearinghouse for media worldwide. Both regional papers were called on to meet the needs of displaced citizens who would first want to know about death, injury, illness, or the potential for these in their stricken areas. They would also want to know about property damage. Interestingly, regional papers presented as their third most frequent topic articles that provided information, more often than either local or national newspapers. With printing facilities intact and publication uninterrupted, *The Advocate* and *The Clarion-Ledger* became newspapers of record for their new, increased readership, providing what may have been lacking in their home areas. Topics such as evacuee distress and rescue and relief operations ranked heavily; many residents who were readers of these papers were also participating in

rescue efforts along the Gulf Coast and in New Orleans, as well as relief efforts in their home towns where evacuees had fled for shelter. Being located in their state's capitals provided these regional newspapers with ready access to officials who had the most up-to-date information on relief and recovery—without the technical communication problems experienced at the local levels. Criminal activity ranked in the top half of topics covered at the regional level as readers were concerned with the possibility of the same activity occurring in their home towns, especially those who lived outside of New Orleans and in whose home towns the evacuees had come to stay. Again, a positive aspect of the situation ranked among the top half of topics, while those topics that would have assigned blame—government failure, conflict, and racial discrimination—ranked in the bottom half.

National papers differed markedly in their presentation of topics from local and regional papers. Evacuee distress was most frequently discussed, followed by criminal activity and government failure. Death, injury, and illness—which played most prominently at the local and regional levels—followed government failure and criminal activity as a topic at the national level. Economic considerations were also portrayed more frequently at the national level, as did conflict among government officials. Perhaps this is because national papers, farther removed from the impact of the disaster, are in a better position to contemplate who was to blame for the circumstances. Perhaps it is because of the watchdog role the national media play toward officials in Washington, D.C. Also, national newspapers compete with a host of other media to attract their audiences. Stories about crime, government failure, and conflict among officials—along with the distress these situations created for evacuees—are far more interesting and newsworthy at the national level than are flooded streets and school closures. Also, government involvement and the economic effect of the storm would be of interest to a national audience who wants to know, “How does a storm in the South affect a guy in Pocatello, Idaho?” or “If the

government failed in New Orleans, what will happen if a disaster occurred in my home town?”

While national papers presented positive articles, they did so with much less frequency than at the local and regional levels where the readership needed encouragement to persevere.

Informational articles, which were so prevalent at the local and regional levels, occurred rarely because those removed from the storm did not have a need for recovery information.

Source Selection

This study was also designed to look at source selection in general and whether there were differences at the local, regional, and national levels. As stated in the literature review preceding this examination, reporters tend most often to consult government officials for information, even when a multitude of citizen voices are available. It has been suggested that this “command post view” of disaster coverage often prevails among the mass media while the perspectives of other “on-the-line operational personnel” are overlooked. These personnel include policemen, firefighters, disaster-impacted individuals, researchers, and relief workers. In this study, these citizen voices—from evacuees to medical personnel to policemen—were cited as sources more often than elected, appointed top government officials.

The traditional gatekeeping process was altered in Katrina, allowing citizen voices of all shades to be cited most often at all levels. Newspapers studied consulted top elected and/or appointed government officials for their facts in less than one-third of the total cases. The remaining two-thirds of the sources included evacuees or persons affected by the storm, academic and business experts, rank and file policemen, rescue and relief workers, other media outlets, community leaders (such as Jesse Jackson), and even rumors. Regional papers cited government officials as nearly one-third of their total sources; local papers cited officials in 28 percent of cases. Interestingly, national papers got their information from government sources less often than all others, in only one-fourth of the national total. At all three levels, officials

representing state government most often provided information. State authorities, such as those representing state health departments and emergency management agencies, appeared to be most abundant and more readily available to speak than local and federal officials.

Evacuees (or persons affected by the storm) were the second most common sources at all three levels and the most frequently cited citizen sources. Several factors could explain this phenomenon. First, all news personnel interviewed said one of their greatest challenges was finding accurate information. Those elected and appointed government officials nearest to Ground Zero were extremely busy directing recovery efforts and caring for their own families. Communication was difficult at best and, often, the officials themselves presented conflicting views of events or simply did not have the answers. Finally and most importantly, evacuees and those affected by the storm were readily available sources of information and, sadly, easy to locate. According to reporters, they were often as reliable as government officials.

In the case of Katrina, a vacuum resulted from a lack of accessible, reliable official sources. To fill the void, reporters referred to academic experts and business spokespersons for information about the storm's effects and the rebuilding efforts. As one national reporter stated, Katrina became a military story as the National Guard and other troops arrived in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast to restore order and help with recovery. As a result, the military and police became important sources at all levels, especially locally and regionally.

Rescue and relief personnel—many of them citizens who gave unselfishly to help pull residents from debris and out of floodwaters—were cited at all levels, but most often by local and regional newspapers. The use of military, police, and rescue sources by those papers closest to the devastation would be understandable. The majority of these sources were familiar with the area; they understood the situation and, again, were more easily accessible than government officials. Many readers were themselves participating in relief efforts in and around the affected

areas from donating goods to area shelters to personally manning boats in flooded areas. Other media outlets were also cited as sources, especially when newspapers referred to an interview conducted with an official, primarily by a television or radio station. Finally, “rumor,” personified another source cited at all levels, particularly locally. In fact, “rumor” was specifically cited as the source, with reporters quick to make sure readers knew the origin of the information. Staff members at all levels said they devoted much time to tracking down and verifying information delivered word of mouth. Because of the unusual circumstances, some reporters said they spent more time than usual grilling both citizen and government official sources to avoid energizing the rumor mill.

Local, Regional, and National Frames

This study was to determine, secondly, if frames defining the circumstances following Katrina were different at the local, regional, and national levels. Again, the closer the newspaper was to the epicenter of the disaster, the more likely it would be to frame its articles around life, limb, and property—those topics which would most directly affect its readership. Both the local and regional newspapers most often presented the frame portraying the unimaginable disaster in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast, not just immediately after the storm, but throughout the two weeks following Katrina’s impact. That frame paralleled topic selection at the local and regional levels, which was similar and focused on physical harm, property damage, and rescue and relief efforts. The second most predominant frame presented by local and regional newspapers was “government failure results in evacuee distress.”

While papers at these two levels did not stress the topic government failure, articles containing topics such as evacuee distress, property damage, and risks to life and limb carried the overall tenor of having been caused by weaknesses in government response. As local and regional newspapers focused on the needs of their readers for information about their neighbors

and their property, the sense that their communities had been failed was carried through articles at this level second most often.

Interestingly, local newspapers—which had more reason than any others to portray despair on Page 1—were more likely than any others to present the frame, “those affected by the storm respond positively to circumstances.” In fact, local newspapers were nearly three times more likely to publish frames that portrayed evacuees as responding positively to the disaster than regional and national papers. This frame selection parallels the tendency of local newspapers to present positive topics in reporting the disaster, as an encouragement to their readers as well as a testament to others who may have seen evacuees as helpless and without initiative. Local newspapers also presented the frame “evacuee future is uncertain,” understandably one of the most predominant frames because so many of their readers, their families, and their advertisers were forced to rebuild, relocate, or both. As often as portraying the uncertain future of evacuees, local newspapers also presented “information is necessary for preparation and recovery” as a common frame. In fact, staff members interviewed said Katrina brought them a new appreciation for the value of a local newspaper to its community—as a provider of reliable, first-hand information put directly into the hands of readers. “Delays cause evacuee distress” also figured as one of the top frames at the local level, most certainly because their readers were the ones who were suffering because of delays in distributing food, water, and shelter either through government failure or because of difficulties in responding to large numbers of storm victims over a wide swath along the Gulf Coast.

Regional newspapers were more likely than others to present the frame “rebuilding and recovery to be long process.” In fact, regional papers were more than twice as likely as local newspapers and three times more likely than national newspapers to present this rebuilding frame. Both papers were located at their seats of government, where rebuilding efforts were

likely to originate. Because of their proximity to the disaster areas and their access to reliable communication, regional newspapers were best able to focus on rebuilding efforts, even during the early days after the storm. “Information is necessary for preparation and recovery” was also a predominant frame at the regional level, where staffers repeatedly stressed immediate and hefty increases in numbers of readers, the need for information for those participating in rescue and relief efforts, and the thousands who had evacuated to their circulation areas. Regional newspapers serving in state capitals would be called on to assess economic changes as a result of the storm; therefore, they were more likely than local newspapers to publish the frame “Katrina to have economic effect.”

At the national level, newspapers most often presented the frames that focused on government failure and human delay as the cause of evacuee distress. This frame parallels the national newspapers’ tendency to publish the topic of government failure—perhaps because they serve as a media watchdog in Washington, D.C., and perhaps because they have the privilege of perspective, being in some ways distanced from the first-hand effects of the storm. National newspapers presented the frame “government failure is the cause of evacuee distress” most often, followed by articles that showed the unimaginable disaster in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, and the frames “evacuee future is uncertain” and “delays cause evacuee distress.” These frames parallel the topic selections at the national level, where readers expect to find more detail about the behavior and foibles of government officials and where the newspaper does not face the demands of a displaced and needy audience. As one national reporter explained, he and his colleagues were looking at the big picture, at the movement of large groups of people, at the destruction of a city, and at how these things would affect the region and the nation. The tendency of national newspapers to present the frame “Katrina to cause economic changes” parallels the frequency with which they presented the regional, national, and international effects

of the storm. In fact, national newspapers were twice as likely as regional newspapers and three times more likely than local newspapers to address the economic effects of the storm.

Understandably, a national audience would demand more than information about local effects but would want to see short- and long-term changes that might affect them personally, even though they are thousands of miles from the disaster area.

Personal Experiences

Newspaper reporters and editors interviewed had an average of about 20 years each of experience, and they agreed that covering Hurricane Katrina was perhaps the most difficult assignment they had ever been given. Telling the story of Katrina's aftermath was physically, emotionally, and logistically grueling. Reporters and photographers were not prepared for what they would see and hear in the flooded city of New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast, where entire neighborhoods virtually disappeared in the storm. Even those reporters and editors who were hurricane savvy, who had weathered many destructive storms during the past quarter century and who considered themselves prepared, were caught off guard by the devastation of Katrina. Reporters on the ground found themselves facing a lack of basic necessities, such as food, water, and shelter. A clean shower became a luxury. Often, they found themselves sleeping in their cars or, if they were fortunate, a borrowed hotel room.

Everyone interviewed work long and intense days, whether they were on the street or back in their offices, especially staff at local and regional newspapers. Finding reliable sources who could corroborate facts was also a challenge for all reporters who were interviewed. Reporters were creative in dealing with communication problems created by downed phone towers along an extremely wide area of the Gulf Coast. They connected with military personnel or camped with local officials who had phone lines. Media representatives helped each other. They borrowed satellite phones or sent stories from river barges. They dictated entire stories via

telephone (when they could get a clear line), even if it meant standing for lengths of time in one spot where a signal could be received. Reporters took extensive measures to check and re-check facts. The journalists interviewed were personally affected by the storm, many indicating they would never view their jobs the same again. All reporters, but especially those at the local level, found a renewed sense of the importance of the print media as they ignored personal difficulties to meet the needs of their readers.

Who Was to Blame?

Nearly one week after Katrina made landfall—as evacuees in New Orleans languished on rooftops and in packed shelters, and Mississippians waited for food and water rations—fingers began to point. As the days stretched on, “Who is to blame?” became as big a story as Katrina. Blame was assigned to everyone from God to the Salvation Army to government red tape. Newspapers at the local, regional, and national levels agreed that the hurricane itself was most to blame for the catastrophe. This was evident particularly during the early days of the storm. The closer the newspaper was to the epicenter of suffering, the more Katrina seemed to be blamed for the results.

Articles in newspapers at all three levels also blamed the federal government second most often, with national newspapers more likely than others to blame Washington, D.C., for the distress of those affected by the storm. In total, entities of the federal government, which included the president, FEMA, and Homeland Security, accounted for nearly 30% of the total blame for all three levels. At the same time, articles in local and regional newspapers considered broken levees the culprit. This could be expected, considering their readers were the ones coping with the faulty levee system, either directly through flooded homes or indirectly as evacuations created the exponential growth of neighboring communities.

Because of their focus on Washington, articles in national newspapers blamed FEMA and its director, Michael Brown, and President George W. Bush more often than did the other papers. Bureaucracy—associated with business in the nation’s capital—was also more likely to be blamed in articles at the national level. At the same time, local and regional newspaper articles were more likely to place blame for evacuee distress and the chaos that followed the storm on their own local and state governments. Local newspaper articles were nearly three times more likely to blame their local governments than were regional newspapers. Local newspapers were also more likely than either regional or national newspapers to blame their state governments for the disaster.

Newspapers at all levels were reluctant to blame individuals outside of Washington, particularly Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco or New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin. Articles where sources blamed Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin appeared only a couple of times at the regional and local levels. No newspaper at any of the three levels attributed blame to Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour. Perhaps local and regional audiences and article sources understood during those early days of recovery the enormous strain placed on local officials. In fact, nonprofit agencies such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army received more blame than local and state officials.

National newspapers did not blame either Blanco or Nagin, and local and regional newspapers were reluctant to blame the two leaders; however, newspapers at all three levels did not shy away from blaming faceless federal, local, and state governments. Newspapers at the national level were more likely than others to print articles that blamed evacuees themselves for the problems. Local newspapers, who considered themselves the champions of those affected by the storm, were half as likely as either regional or national newspapers to run articles that blamed evacuees themselves for the crises.

Limitations of This Study

One of the areas of concern addressed in the U.S. House Report was the effect of inaccurate or exaggerated media reports of criminal activity on rescue and relief activities. According to this study, two prominent national newspapers presented criminal activity as their second most prominent topics; however, this occurred in only 11.6% of all topics presented at the national level. As newspaper staff members who were interviewed stated, newspapers operate in a news cycle that is different from broadcast, and print reporters often have more time to investigate what appear to be spurious claims and to correct errors. The inclusion of broadcast and Internet sources in similar study would determine whether any particular medium or combination of media was responsible for the reports of criminal activity suggested by the House report. Also, because of time restraints, this study only looked at Page 1 of all six newspapers. An investigation of the papers in their entirety would yield much richer data and determine whether Page 1 phenomena were characteristic of the newspaper as a whole.

An investigation of newspapers at all three levels during a broader time frame could reveal patterns in coverage after a disaster. As time passes, how would the three levels of newspapers compare in amount of coverage of the disaster? What topics and frames would be predominant a month after the disaster? Six months? One year?

Finally, as with most studies, a major limitation is probably the human factor: people are formulating the questions, examining the samples, and making decisions on what to assign as values. Those areas of coding that suffered from lower inter-coder reliability, particularly the assignment of blame, were often difficult to decide. Often blame was attributed by a source; other times it was inferred in the article. Perhaps more stringent coding guidelines would eliminate instances of low inter-coder reliability.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The results of this study offer several challenges to previously held notions regarding the daily news cycle. Ordinarily, reporters turn most often to elected and/or appointed government officials as sources for information, even when a multitude of citizen voices are available. Usually, government officials are thought to have the answers, to be most eager to offer explanations, and to be most accessible to the press. Citizens, while they may possess some knowledge about an issue, are not usually counted on as the most reliable sources. In the case of Katrina, reporters consulted a variety of citizen sources most often, producing a more diverse source structure.

Katrina did not present ordinary circumstances. Instead, reporters found that government officials did not have all of the answers, nor were they always accessible or reliable. At the same time, there was no lack of citizen sources or citizen “experts” on the effects of the hurricane. Did they add to the accuracy and validity of the information presented? Further studies could shed light on whether the citizen as a major source would alter the landscape of what we consider the accurate reporting of news. Again, Katrina shifted the usual news source structure by presenting a circumstance where government authorities were a very small part of the mass of people who had become instant experts through personal experience. The streets, the shelters, the churches, the universities, and the businesses from across the Gulf Coast were filled with people who had experienced something and were willing and available to talk about it.

Unexpectedly, “rumor”—that entity responsible for our most titillating daily news—emerged as a source of information on Page 1 newspapers locally, regionally, and nationally. The unique situation presented by the storm, especially struggles with communication between reporters and official sources and between official sources and those who held the facts, created an information

vacuum where rumor was allowed to take its place among legitimate citizen sources. Word-of-mouth, perhaps the oldest form of information transfer, found its way into 21st century news reporting. Also challenged by the results of this study is the concept of intermedia agenda setting where others look to the elite media to set the news agenda. It appears that local and regional newspapers did not take their cues from the elite media and instead took their cues from the anticipated needs and demands of their readers. The increased autonomy of field reporters during this disaster resulted in a difference in news content at all three levels. Without the time and/or availability of television and radio talk shows or the luxury of perusing *The New York Times* over morning coffee, reporters indicated they operated within a curious vacuum while covering events in New Orleans and along the Gulf Coast. In fact, they did what they were trained to do: follow their eyes and ears and determine the important stories, most often without the benefit of outside suggestion. Further study would be necessary to determine how long the intermedia agenda influence was suspended in newspaper coverage of Katrina.

Finally, this study sheds some light on how journalists themselves participate in the newsgathering process during a large-scale disaster. Unfortunately, journalists covering Katrina learned afterwards that they were as susceptible to believing disaster myths such as looting and evacuee-on-evacuee crime as anyone else. In the future, this knowledge can prevent the widespread coverage of inaccurate and, in the case of Katrina, harmful information that should delay rescue efforts and contribute to further distress among those affected. Most importantly, regardless of the perceived or anticipated content of other media outlets, newspaper journalists are invariably wedded to their audiences, especially when the need for information is greatest. Katrina revealed that the needs of their readers were pre-eminent in the selection of news topics by reporters and editors. The closer the newspaper was to the epicenter of destruction, the more it assumed the role of spokesman for the voiceless thousands who had no public arena in which to

be heard. Further study would be needed to determine if the trends displayed here were unique to Hurricane Katrina or whether similar results could be culled from the examination of local, regional, and national coverage of another widespread disaster. While such studies of cataclysmic and far-reaching events would enrich our understanding of newsgathering habits at differing levels, this author hopes that we will never again have the opportunity to find out.

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APPENDIX
CODING SHEET

Coders: Choose all stories that mention Katrina. Each news story should use one sheet.

___ **Coder** 1. Roxanne 2. Katherine

___ ___ **story number**

(Enter 3 digits; start with 001—every coder should be consistent with his/her numbering system)

___ **Name of the paper** ___ ___/___ ___/___ **Date: month/day/year**

- | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| 1. <i>The Advocate</i> | |
| 2. <i>The Times-Picayune</i> | |
| 3. <i>The Sun Herald</i> | ___ Lead story |
| 4. <i>The New York Times</i> | 1. Yes |
| 5. <i>The Washington Post</i> | 2. No |
| 6. <i>The Clarion-Ledger</i> | |

Dateline: _____ (Leave blank if none)

___ **Source of information (record the credit the story recognizes, usually at byline)**

1. own staff/reporter
2. AP (Associated Press)
3. UPI
4. Reuters
5. AFP (Agence France Presse)
6. other _____ (name)

___ **Placement of the story:** ___ **Pull quotes**

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| 1. Front page <u>above</u> the fold | 1. Yes |
| 2. Front page <u>below</u> the fold | 2. No |

___ **Number of paragraphs in the story (excluding headline, subhead, bio, etc.)**

1. 1-10
2. 11-20
3. 21-30
4. 31-40
5. 41 or more

___ **Geographic area of primary focus in article (Enter locale of focus)**

1. New Orleans
2. Louisiana
3. Washington, D.C.
4. Mississippi
5. Texas
6. Alabama
7. Other _____
8. Baton Rouge
9. Gulf Coast
10. Nationwide

_____ **Enter the number of following sources used. (Check only once when they appear.)**

Type of source(s):

- _____ 1. Official
- _____ 2. Evacuee/person affected by storm
- _____ 3. Academic expert
- _____ 4. Business expert/spokesperson
- _____ 5. Rescue/relief worker
- _____ 6. Police/military
- _____ 7. Community/civic leader
- _____ 8. Media sources (or media outlet) _____
- _____ 9. Other _____
- _____ 10. Rumor _____

Type of authoritative (check once when any of the following appear in the story)

- _____ 1. President George W. Bush (or his representative)
- _____ 2. Governor Kathleen Blanco (or her representative)
- _____ 3. Governor Haley Barbour
- _____ 4. Mayor Ray Nagin (or his representative)
- _____ 5. Mayor (other)
- _____ 6. FEMA Director Michael Brown
- _____ 7. FEMA (other)
- _____ 8. U.S. Senator
- _____ 9. U.S. Representative
- _____ 10. Federal official
- _____ 11. State official
- _____ 12. City official (New Orleans, Houston, Dallas, Little Rock, etc.)
- _____ 13. Parish/county official
- _____ 14. NOPD Chief Eddie Compass
- _____ 15. Police/military spokesman
- _____ 16. Director of Homeland Security
- _____ 17. State Homeland Security
- _____ 18. Red Cross spokesperson
- _____ 19. Other _____

_____ **Primary frame of article (Derive from headline, subheads, lead paragraphs. Read entire article if necessary to derive primary frame. If a frame cannot be determined, do not mark one.)**

- 1. Delays cause evacuee distress
- 2. Racial inequality results in evacuee distress
- 3. Katrina results in economic effects/changes
- 4. Governmental failure is the cause of evacuee distress
- 5. Evacuees create atmosphere of criminal activity and fear
- 6. Rebuilding/reconstruction to be long process
- 7. Katrina results in positive outcome/evacuees respond positively to circumstances
- 8. Other _____
- 9. Future of evacuees is uncertain
- 10. Hurricane results in unimaginable destruction
- 11. Other citizens respond generously to those affected by storm
- 12. Information is necessary for preparation and recovery.

Primary topics in article (Enter primary topics in order of appearance. Mark as many as appear, with a maximum of 6.)

1. Flooding
2. Weather
3. Criminal activity: looting, shootings, other
4. Death/injury/illness (potential for death/injury/illness)
5. Conflict among government officials
6. Race
7. Economic
8. Rescue/relief operations
9. Government failure
10. Evacuee distress
11. Positive aspect of situation
12. Informational (such as where to find assistance, shelter, etc.)
13. Property damage
14. Rebuilding/reconstruction
15. Military/police activity
16. Other
17. Diaspora

_____ **Valence of the story:**

(This will be a general feeling after having read the article. Read the headline and lead paragraph first to decide how the story describes the situation. Read the entire article, if necessary; however, the headline and/or lead paragraph should prevail.)

1. positive
2. mixed/neutral
3. negative
4. can't decide

Failure: Who should be blamed? (Check all that apply)

- _____ 1. President George W. Bush
- _____ 2. Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco
- _____ 3. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin
- _____ 4. FEMA
- _____ 5. Homeland Security
- _____ 6. Non-profit organization
- _____ 7. Evacuees
- _____ 8. Hurricane Katrina
- _____ 9. Federal government (in general)
- _____ 10. State government (in general)
- _____ 11. Other _____
- _____ 12. Broken levees
- _____ 13. Local government
- _____ 14. Bureaucracy

VITA

Roxanne Kearns Dill is a native of Thibodaux, Louisiana. She is a 1977 graduate of Louisiana State University with a bachelor of arts in journalism. Dill worked as a photographer and darkroom technician at The Denham Springs News in Denham Springs, Louisiana, before joining the staff of The Daily Comet in Thibodaux, Louisiana, a New York Times affiliate newspaper where she served as a reporter and later as managing editor. Dill also has a background in education, having taught writing workshops for students in grades one through college level. For two years, she taught the children of missionaries for The Medical Centers of West Africa, Inc., in Cameroon. Dill is currently program coordinator for the Louisiana State University Center for Community Engagement, Learning, and Leadership. She is the mother of two children, Katherine and James.