

The Role of the Media in Mass Casualty Events: Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina

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“The first thing you should know about Hurricane Katrina is that everything you know about it is wrong.” So said editor Jonah Goldberg of the *National Review Online* in a post mortem of the media’s performance following the deadly 2005 hurricane.¹ This clever quip is startling, but is it accurate? In the days following Katrina, the public was treated to an endless media diet of horrifying stories that included wanton violence and destruction; reports of rescuers being fired upon by snipers; and a multitude of reports of rape and burglary. Most astonishing perhaps, were reports of thousands of people dead with bodies stacked like cord wood in refrigerated units.

The facts of the hurricane were terrible enough: By the time Hurricane Katrina had cast its net of devastation over New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, her fury had inflicted an estimated \$75 billion in damages – the costliest hurricane in U.S. history. In its wake, Katrina left about 1,420 people dead and millions displaced. It is estimated that more than 275,000 homes and businesses were damaged or destroyed.² The breach of the New Orleans levee, intended to keep storm surges at bay, left 80 per cent of the city under water. Wind damage stretched along the coastlines of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.³ Katrina was the sixth strongest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded, and its legacy was one of chaos and human tragedy.

¹ www.hurricane-katrina.org/medias_coverage_of_the_disaster/Index.html

² Ken Ritter, Associated Press writer; www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/ap/nation

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina

Rescue personnel, law enforcement agencies, and other first responders faced logistical and communications challenges never before encountered. The lack of interoperability (the ability of multiple agencies to communicate with one another during emergencies) was, and is, a problem that plagues agencies to this day. Astonishing as that may seem – especially following Columbine and 9/11 – it remains true. Media covering the aftermath of the hurricane likewise faced daunting problems of communications, with the contrasting result that much misinformation was disseminated, while at the same time serving as valuable communications links relaying vital information.

World Attention

Reporters from throughout the world descended on New Orleans in the days following Katrina. The story was one of the biggest of 2005. If the media are judged on their ability to deliver accurate information in a timely way to a public desperately in need of information, then one would have to conclude that their effort fell short of the mark and left the industry stained. For most emergency service personnel, the presence of reporters and photographers at the scene of a crime or disaster is an annoyance that is expected and tolerated. A natural conflict exists to one degree or another when both parties are simply trying to do their jobs. The rub comes from the divergent missions of law enforcement and media.

Law enforcement is to investigate and to bring order from chaos. The media are there to gather information and make it available to the public. For law enforcement to fulfill its mission, confidentiality and secrecy are often required. Too, most emergency personnel simply want to be left alone to do their jobs. For the media to fulfill their

mission, openness and accuracy are required. At times, those seemingly conflicting requirements are compatible, at other times, they are not. At times the public is served; at times it is not.

Following Katrina, the media were plagued by the same communications blackouts – such as land-based and cellular phones – as everyone else. Relaying information, checking leads, investigating rumors, and confirming facts were made nearly impossible by the communications collapse. In many cases public officials dispensed inaccurate information, believing it (presumably) to be accurate. Rumors fed larger rumors. Problems were spotlighted to appear much larger than they were. The nerves of citizens, emergency personnel, and the media were stripped raw. In part because gathering factual information was so difficult, the citizenry of New Orleans could not be assured of its safety or rescue. Coupled with media deadlines and a competition to “out-scoop” the next guy, the situation was ripe for an orgy of hyperbole and distortion.

Misinformation

The reality of the disaster was epic without embellishment. When swollen further by misinformation, it became stupefying. Stories abound. For instance, on Tuesday Sept. 6, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported a story of a National Guardsman who said 30 to 40 bodies were stored in the Convention Center freezer. Six days later the newspaper corrected itself and noted that only four corpses were there.⁴ In another instance, National Public Radio reporter John Burnett repeated the circulating story that a

⁴ www.sptimes.com/2005/09/28/Columns/Media_outlest_exagger.shtml

young girl, perhaps 13, was dead and had possibly been raped in a bathroom at the Convention Center.⁵ The reporter had evidently taken his information from eyewitnesses who turned out not to be credible.

Readers of newspapers and viewers of TV news were treated to seemingly endless reports of thefts, carjackings, gunfire, rape, murder, and gang violence. In some instances, city officials relayed gross misinformation. CNN anchor Paula Zahn quoted the mayor as saying that “as many as 10,000 people may have died in that storm or its aftermath.”⁶ (About 1,400 people perished, not all of them of course, from New Orleans). On Sept. 6, (a week after Katrina) New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and (then) police Superintendent Eddie Compass appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey* TV show. They told viewers of hundreds of armed gang members raping and killing people, including babies, inside the Superdome.⁷ Earlier the mayor had said on camera, “They have people standing out there, have been in that frickn’ Superdome for five days – watching hooligans killing people, raping people.”⁸

Reporters, with no way to confirm the mayor’s comments, took him at his word. Problem was, the mayor gave erroneous information. One can sympathize with a reporter hearing the same “facts” from multiple sources, but unable (because of blacked out communications) to verify the information, might conclude that the information is accurate. The same could be said of emergency personnel. It is also entirely reasonable to expect reporters to qualify their reports with a disclaimer such as “these reports could not be verified.” In too many cases that was not done, and rumors were presented as

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ www.sptimes.com/2005/09/28/Columns/Media_outlets_exagger.shtml

⁸ www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/weather/july-dec05media_9-29.html

facts. On a brighter note, the *LA Times* observed in a post mortem of the disaster that the *New York Times* was generally more cautious about stating that certain information could not be verified, than were other media.⁹

Looking back on the coverage, NBC News reporter Carl Quintanilla said, “I can’t recall a situation or a story in which I tried harder to couch what we were saying in as much uncertainty as we could, telling people, these are reports that are coming from authority figures, people who you normally quote without question in regular everyday stories, fires, police stories and so forth.”¹⁰

A Mythical Place

Throughout much of the aftermath of the hurricane, the media indulged in a frenzy of exaggeration and fabrication. “It just morphed into this mythical place where the most unthinkable deeds were being done,” said National Guard spokesman Maj. Ed Bush.¹¹ Rumors such as sharks from Lake Pontchartrain swimming through the New Orleans business district or an infant’s body being found in a trash can¹² fed the media’s insatiable need for news, regardless of source or accuracy. The *Ottawa Sun* reported that a man seeking help was gunned down by a National Guard soldier and that another young man was “run down and then shot by a New Orleans police officer.”¹³

Nationally syndicated radio talk show host Hugh Hewitt delivered a scathing critique of the media’s performance during a panel discussion:

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ www.lastimescom/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-rumors27sep27,0,5492806

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

...in fact, they were reporting lies. The central part of this story, what went on at the convention center and the Superdome was wrong. American media threw everything they had at this story, all the bureaus, all the networks, all the newspapers, everything went to New Orleans, and yet they could not get inside the convention center, they could not get inside the Superdome to dispel the lurid, the hysterical, the salaciousness of the reporting. I have in mind especially the throat-slashed seven-year-old girl who had been gang-raped at the convention center – didn't happen. In fact, there were no rapes at the convention center or the Superdome that have yet been corroborated in any way.¹⁴

In some instances, reporters stepped out of their traditional roles as detached observers and became players within the story. Fox TV news reporter Shepard Smith at one point angrily and emotionally pleaded on air for rescuers to bring water and food to a group of citizens stranded on an overpass. “What are you going to do with all these people? When is help coming for these people?” Smith demanded to know. “Is there going to be help? I mean, they're very thirsty. Do you have any idea yet? Nothing?”¹⁵ Within his industry, Smith was criticized by some for his lack of composure, yet his outburst reflected the frustration felt by many at the slow response to the situation. Ironically, had he not been able to uplink his report, the stranded hurricane victims would have gone unnoticed even longer.

Smith's pleas point out an important part of the media story in New Orleans. Despite the excesses and negligence in verifying facts, the media (TV in particular) played a valuable role in assisting authorities. City and government officials monitored TV reports and were able to coordinate rescue efforts based on the information being broadcast. Equally valuable was the Internet – a conduit of information and photos for citizens searching for loved ones.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/weather/july-dec05/media_9-29.html

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina

The media's efforts following Katrina are likely to be fodder for panel discussions and journalism textbooks for long to come. But did the media hurt their credibility in the long run? After all, most media honored their professional obligation to correct inaccuracies once they were known. "I see this as an admirable amount of self-examination (The press) has been very quick at calling public attention to their own dirty laundry," said Steve Lovelady, managing editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review*. He noted, "You don't see FEMA saying to the public, here's seven ways we screwed up."¹⁷

In a panel discussion about the role of the media in the disaster, the editor of *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine, J. Max Robins, crowed, "This in so many ways was local television, the local media, really at its finest hour."¹⁸ Others saw it differently. Mayor Nagin noted to the panelists that once the national media arrived on scene, the hurricane changed "from reporting the news to making the news."¹⁹ *The National Review*'s Jonah Goldberg called the coverage "probably the biggest media scandal of the last 20 years."²⁰ Was it as bad as Goldberg asserts? Will the public forgive? Whether it does likely depends on the media's ability to get it right the next time a disaster visits.

But what would it take to get it right? The question is a conundrum because Hurricane Katrina wasn't a singular event such as a hostage situation or plane crash in which command and control is clearly defined. With Katrina, no one person or agency had the knowledge or responsibility to control the flow of information. Katrina's fury

¹⁷ www.sptimes.com/2005/09/28/columnse/Media_outlets_exagger.shtml

¹⁸ J. Max Robins, editor of *Broadcasting & Cable*, a trade magazine. *Nagin chides media for Katrina coverage*, Tuesday January 24, 2006, Associated Press, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/02933,182689,00.html>

¹⁹ www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/ap/nation/3609577

²⁰ www.hurricane-katrina.oorg/medias_coverage_of_the_disaster/Index.html

wreaked its devastation (mostly) in three different states, and affected thousands upon thousands of people. Property destruction occurred on a massive scale. Thousands of stories were being played out at the same time – most of them emergencies in their own right. Did any one agency have the whole picture?

Further, should the public expect a flawless and efficient response from emergency services in such a situation? Katrina was a once-in-a-hundred year event. Communications were flawed and sometimes non-existent. Emergency crews literally from throughout the U.S. descended on the area, and there was no plan for what to do with them. Some might say the left hand didn't know what the right was doing. In fact, it might be more accurate to say the left hand didn't even know if there was a right hand. Certainly the public shouldn't expect a flawless performance in such a time, but just as certainly it has the right to expect a better performance from both service agencies and the media.

The chaos of Katrina strained every emergency service provider from the National Guard to local police departments and ambulance crews. No one disputes that the effort was disorganized and slow. Placing blame for the chaotic response depends upon where one sits. Mayor Nagin bitterly blamed the Bush administration and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for not mobilizing faster. Today, few would take issue with his argument. The Bush administration blamed officials at the local level for not using the resources at hand to move people to safety and to provide services. Few would take issue with this argument either.

There are no neat and easy answers to the many questions surrounding relief efforts and dissemination of news during Katrina. Some general observations, however,

are in order. Surely technology will provide some assistance in the future. The blackout of cell phone communications during Katrina severely handicapped efforts to coordinate relief efforts. The media were likewise affected and were frequently unable to check out leads, verify facts, or seek comment from appropriate officials. It is not unreasonable to expect a day when person-to-person communications will not be so vulnerable to weather.

The issue of interoperability looms large in Katrina and other disasters. No doubt the public would be astonished to know that emergency responders – even after Columbine and 9/11 – still cannot communicate with one another in times of crisis. Yet, this is the case. With different agencies using different communication systems, a fire department over here, can't talk with a fire department over there. But interoperability *is* achievable. What's lacking is sufficient will too make it happen. One has to wonder why the media have not taken up this issue as a national scandal.

The confusion and misinformation that plagued the news media during Katrina were also something of a national scandal. No one seemed to have the “big” picture. In many disasters or incidents, journalists can rely on a spokesperson to feed them information. The devastation of Katrina was so widespread that to expect one agency to be the mouthpiece to the media would be utterly impractical.

Nevertheless, coordination could have been better. FEMA might be the appropriate agency to provide accurate information about what resources are deployed, where, and why. Certainly during Katrina, FEMA was in no position to fulfill that role. Criticism of FEMA's competence during the disaster was withering and left the public wondering how the U.S. might rescue itself in a larger event. It also seriously eroded

FEMA's credibility. Presumably FEMA will repair its own inadequacies before being called up on such a scale in the future. If it does, then perhaps it will be in a position to provide vital information to the media (and therefore the public) that can save lives and bring relief.

The river of misinformation and confusion that was Katrina has too many tributaries to point blame in only one direction. It would also be self-serving since there was plenty of blame to be shared. A dispassionate review with an eye toward interagency cooperation, coupled with media's rededication to the principles of journalism, will strengthen the response the next time a Hurricane Katrina comes calling.