

COVERING KATRINA:  
RUMOURS AND ACCURATE REPORTING IN THE DISASTER ZONE

by  
STEPHANIE DUNN, B.A.

A thesis submitted to  
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfilment of  
the requirement for the degree of

Master of Journalism

School of Journalism and Communication

Carleton University  
Ottawa, Ontario  
August 9, 2006  
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*Your file* *Votre référence*  
*ISBN: 978-0-494-23356-6*  
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*ISBN: 978-0-494-23356-6*

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## ABSTRACT

In August, 2005, a powerful hurricane swept up the Gulf Coast of the south-western United States. It killed hundreds and caused millions of dollars in damage, but it also flooded New Orleans and trapped residents in the city with few resources and little aid. The big news story was not the natural disaster but the social breakdown that followed.

This study employs content and linguistic analysis in order to examine the reporting of three baseless rumours: the rape and murder of a child at one of the city's two major shelters, the presence of piles of dead bodies at these locations, and sniper attacks on rescue helicopters. This study examines *how* they were reported by journalists, paying particular attention to the different levels of accuracy and transparency demonstrated in the articles. The final chapter offers guidelines for future disaster reporting.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Many thanks to my thesis advisor, Peter Johansen. Your encouragement, patience, and valuable feedback made this possible.

To those who took the pressures of day-to-day life and life-changing events off my shoulders so I could get this finished – my parents, my brother, and my Patrick – thank you.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When Hurricane Katrina swept up the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in August, 2005, stories of destruction, disaster and survival swept through the North American media. When the levees that protected New Orleans from Lake Pontchartrain were overwhelmed – flooding the city, trapping people in the attics of their homes and turning post-hurricane recovery missions into frantic search and rescue operations – the media were also flooded with captivating human stories and compelling life-or-death dramas. The American public tuned in in droves. All three major U.S. networks reported millions of additional viewers for their nightly news programs.<sup>1</sup> The cable news stations Fox News and CNN saw their ratings increase by one-half.<sup>2</sup> According to a CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup Poll, almost two-thirds of Americans said they were following the breaking story.<sup>3</sup> The media's – and the public's – interest was also long-lasting. In 1992 Hurricane Andrew caused \$30 billion in damage to South Florida and Louisiana and received only three weeks of ongoing news coverage.<sup>4</sup> Hurricane Katrina held the coveted “above the fold” position on the front page of the *New York Times* for more than three weeks<sup>5</sup> and more

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Johnson, “Katrina may Unleash a Media Storm,” *USA Today*, Sept. 6, 2005, page D:1.

<sup>2</sup> The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Huge Racial Divide Over Katrina and its Consequences: Two-in-three Critical of Bush’s Relief Efforts,” 8 Sept. 2005, [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org) (05 Jan 2005).

<sup>3</sup> “Gallup: Majority Say Press Doing Good Job on Katrina,” *Editor and Publisher*, 13 September 2005, [www.editorandpublisher.com](http://www.editorandpublisher.com) (18 Nov. 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, “Katrina may Unleash.”

<sup>5</sup> “Above the fold” means that the story or headline appeared on the top half of the front page of the paper. It is a coveted position because the article can be seen when the newspaper is folded and stacked for delivery or sale. The last day that Hurricane Katrina was featured “above the fold” was September 20, 2005. The story spent one more day on the front page before being bumped completely.

than four months after the storm, stories of the struggle to rebuild continued to make the front page of the United States' most influential national paper.<sup>6</sup>

As a news story, Hurricane Katrina was more than a natural disaster; it was a story of a federal government's failure to help its people, of undeniable suffering, endurance and political finger pointing. As *The New York Times* so powerfully said on September 4, six days after Katrina hit New Orleans, the hurricane was just the beginning:

The mix of fatalism and bravado that allowed the city's biggest fear – a killer hurricane – to become the marquee drink of Bourbon Street gave way to terror and despair and horrifying spasms of looting and violence. New Orleans became unrecognizable not just physically, but psychologically as well. Faced with a disaster of biblical proportions, everything fell apart, and government was either overmatched or slow to the task.<sup>7</sup>

In reporting on this multifaceted disaster story, the media faced a considerable challenge. In addition to the normal disruption of a community that defines a disaster,<sup>8</sup> journalists encountered widespread social breakdown characterized by looting, violence and almost universal suffering.

Once the city had calmed and the water began to recede, reporters had a chance to reflect on both their experiences and the news coverage they produced. From this self-reflection came praise for the role the media adopted as advocates for hurricane victims who found themselves without food and water. One week after they started covering the

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see Susan Saulny, "Students Return to Big Changes in New Orleans," *The New York Times*, 4 Jan. 2006: A:1.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Applebaum, Christopher Drew, Jere Longman and Andrew C. Revkin, "A Delicate Balance is Undone in a Flash, and a Battered City Waits," *The New York Times*, 4 Sept. 2005: page 1:25.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Scanlon, "The Search for Non-Existent Facts in the Reporting of Disasters," *Journalism and Mass Communications Educator* (Summer 1998): 46. And: Henry W. Fischer, *Response to Disaster: Fact Versus Fiction & Its Perpetuation: The Sociology of Disaster* (New York: University Press of America, 1994), 2-3.

disaster, the media were already patting themselves on the back for a job well done. Matt Wells of the BBC called ‘Katrinagate’ “public service journalism ruthlessly exposing the truth on a live and continuous basis.”<sup>9</sup> When the heads of Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) appeared for interviews, Wells argued, “Their defensive remarks about where aid was arriving to, and when, were exposed immediately as either downright lies or breath-taking ignorance.”<sup>10</sup> Jack Shafer, of *Slate*, perhaps summed it up the best:

In the last couple of days, many of the broadcasters reporting from the bowl-shaped toxic waste dump that was once the city of New Orleans have stopped playing the role of wind-swept men facing down a big storm to become public advocates for the poor, the displaced, the starving, the dying and the dead.<sup>11</sup>

According to a *USA Today* article, many journalism and communications scholars agree that “Katrina’s media legacy may be a return to a post-Watergate-like era of tougher scrutiny of the federal government and public policy issues.”<sup>12</sup>

This praise was just the beginning of the media’s self-reflection. The criticism that followed undermined many earlier reports from the disaster zone. In the midst of holding the government accountable for the widespread suffering, the media recounted horrific stories from New Orleans. While the survivors’ suffering and inhumane living conditions were undoubtedly real, many of these high profile crimes – those cited time and time again by journalists and various levels of government to illustrate just how bad conditions were – proved to be baseless. Of these rumours, three stand out both for the

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<sup>9</sup> Matt Wells, “Has Katrina Saved US Media?” *BBC News*, 5 Sept. 2005. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4214516.stm> or <http://news.bbc.co.uk> (18 Nov. 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Wells, “Has Katrina?”

level of violence and societal breakdown they imply and for the lack of evidence to back them up. These three rumours are the focus of this thesis.

### *Rape and murder of a child at the Superdome and convention centre*

Variations of this rumour appear throughout media coverage of this disaster. In many news stories, rape and/or murder appear briefly, as one more example of deteriorating conditions in the city's two major shelters. While few articles or newscasts agreed on the age or sex of the victim, many propagated the rumour that a child was raped and murdered at either the Superdome or convention centre.<sup>13</sup> As a groundbreaking *Times-Picayune* article reported weeks after the disaster, no victims or witnesses of violent or sexual crimes ever came forward.<sup>14</sup> An editorial in the next day's *Times-Picayune* concluded, "No matter how convincing the eye-witness accounts, the bodies that back up their stories aren't there."<sup>15</sup>

### *Piles of bodies at the Superdome or convention centre*

Along with reporting the desperate conditions at the city's two major shelters, many articles said these sites were littered with the bodies of those who died for lack of

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<sup>11</sup> Jack Shafer, "The Rebellion of the Talking Heads: Newscasters, Sick of Official Lies and Stonewalling, Finally Start Snarling," *Slate*, 2 Sept. 2005, <http://www.slate.com/id/2125581> (18 Nov. 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Johnson, "Katrina Rekindles Adversarial Media," *USA Today*, 6 Sept. 2005: page D:3.

<sup>13</sup> For example: Mark Egan, "Rapes, Killings Hit Katrina Refugees in New Orleans," Reuters News, 3 Sept. 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Thevenot and Gordon Russel, "Rape. Murder. Gunfights. ; For three anguished days the world's headlines blared that the Superdome and Convention Center had descended into anarchy. But the truth is that while conditions were squalid for the thousands stuck there, much of the violence NEVER HAPPENED," *Times-Picayune*, 26 Sept. 2005: page A:01.

food, water or medical attention.<sup>16</sup> Of those that estimated the body count, some articles reported between 30 and 40 decomposing bodies in the non-operational freezer of the convention centre and 10 or more bodies in the Superdome.<sup>17</sup> Later, interviews with National Guard members assigned to clean up the Superdome revealed that there were only six stored on the melting ice in the stadium's non-operational freezers.<sup>18</sup> Four were found in the Convention Center.<sup>19</sup> Writes the *Times-Picayune*, "The actual tally has to be given more credibility than unconfirmed reports by traumatized people."<sup>20</sup> Since there is a grain of truth behind this rumour, it is *exaggerated* rather than *baseless*. Still, due to the fact that piles of bodies were proven to be non-existent, for the sake of this study, it will be considered to be a baseless rumour.

#### *Sniper attacks on rescue helicopters*

Amidst reports of widespread looting and violence came media reports of snipers firing at rescue helicopters. The attacks were said to have caused the suspension of evacuation efforts at a local hospital and the delivery of supplies to the stranded at the Superdome.<sup>21</sup> Despite an immediate denial of sniper attacks on aircraft by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), stories of sniper fire abounded. One month later, neither

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<sup>15</sup> "Hurricane-Force Rumors," *Times-Picayune*, 27 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>16</sup> For example: Robert Taner, "Thousands Rescued; Thousands Dead in Hurricane Katrina," Associated Press State and Local Wire, 3 Sept. 2005.

<sup>17</sup> For example: Brian Thevenot, "Katrina's Body Count could Reach 10,000; Bodies Found Piled in Freezer at Convention Center," *Times-Picayune*, 6 September 2005: page A:08. And: Martin C. Evans and Tina Susman, "Katrina the Search Continues: Desperately Seeking Survivor," *Newsday*, 5 Sept. 2005: page A:04.

<sup>18</sup> Thevenot and Russel, "Rape. Murder. Gunfights."

<sup>19</sup> "Hurricane-Force Rumors."

<sup>20</sup> "Hurricane-Force Rumors."

the FAA nor representatives from the Air Force, Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security or Louisiana Air National Guard said they could confirm reports of gunfire.<sup>22</sup>

The context in which these rumours emerged and the evidence used to disprove them will be elaborated in the second chapter.

Disaster scholars agree such events come complete with their own specific challenges for reporters. In the immediate aftermath of any catastrophe, accurate information is scarce and confusion is rampant.<sup>23</sup> Because of working conditions – both the pressure of the news cycle and the constraints of working within a disaster zone – early reports of disaster are often incomplete, speculative and inaccurate.<sup>24</sup> But if mistakes made by the journalists covering Hurricane Katrina were predictable, were they also inevitable? The answer, as my study will show, is no. In considerable measure, print journalists did not repeat these three rumours: of the more than 150 articles examined, only 26 did. And of those articles which did, a range of transparency and accuracy is evident. While a few journalists reported these events as fact, many more questioned or sought to disprove the contentious information.

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<sup>21</sup> Adam Nossiter, “More National Guardsmen are Sent In,” Associated Press, 1 Sept. 2005. And: Ellen Barry, Scott Gold and Stephen Braun, “In Katrina’s Aftermath: Chaos and Survival: New Orleans Slides Into Chaos, U.S. Scrambles to Sent Troops,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>22</sup> Miriam Hill and Nicholas Spangler, “No Evidence Backs Up Reports of Rescue Helicopters Being Fired Upon,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3 Oct. 2005: page A:2.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Scanlon, Suzanne Alldred, Al Farrell and Angela Prawzick, “Coping with the Media in Disasters: Some Predictable Problems.” *Public Administration Review* 45 (January 1985): 129.

<sup>24</sup> Gary A. Kreps, “Research Needs and Policy Issues on Mass Media Disaster Reporting.” In Committee on Disaster and the Mass Media, Commission on Sociotechnical Systems, National Research Council, *Disasters and the Mass Media: Proceedings of the Committee on Disaster and the Mass Media Workshop* (February 1979). (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1980): 42.

It is because of this range of reporting that media coverage of Hurricane Katrina offers a unique opportunity. By employing content analysis and linguistic analysis, I shall determine how newspapers reported these inaccuracies and look for common trends that contributed to the promotion of rumour as fact. As mentioned briefly above, I have chosen to focus on three sensational and high profile rumours in order to limit the scope of my study. These specific incidents were chosen because, once the chaos of the disaster zone had passed, evidence of or eye-witnesses to these crimes should have remained. This contrasts with other reports, such as those of frequent rape and assault by roving bands of armed gang members; these are difficult to prove or disprove because many hurricane victims have scattered and, even in the course of ordinary life, the reporting of such crimes is low.

My study will examine the reporting of these rumours in a wide selection of newspapers, ranging from national papers like the *New York Times* to regional papers like the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The intention is not to explain how and why the rumours started but instead to examine *how* they were reported by journalists. I will go on to then formulate guidelines to prevent the repetition of such mistakes in the future. But first I turn to the seemingly obvious: that accuracy is a journalist's concern.

## Accuracy and Hurricane Katrina: a Journalist's Responsibility

As journalists and media critics Kovach and Rosenstiel argue, "Journalism's first obligation is to the truth."<sup>25</sup> Truth, they argue, is the linchpin for all journalistic values. Without truth, objectivity, fairness, and balance are meaningless.<sup>26</sup> As I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 2, accuracy – getting the information right and presenting it in a truthful context – is more than just a journalistic ideal. It's also the source of the media's credibility. Without it, news reports become little more than fiction. Still, many articles that discuss inaccurate reporting of Hurricane Katrina grapple with who was to blame. For some, the difficulties of working in a disaster zone excused the mistakes. Joe Skeel, the editor of *Quill Magazine*, wrote,

The sad truth is, very little of what was reported was 100 per cent accurate, and it almost never is when it comes to breaking news of this magnitude.

In a hurry to file the latest news, reporters are forced to go on what officials and witnesses tell them.

At its worst, this type of reporting can perpetuate fear and hopelessness. But I stop short of blaming the journalists. They were reporting on what they saw and what they were told. And, after all, that is their job.<sup>27</sup>

Some media scholars say journalists had to report the claims of violence, rape and murder in the Superdome. David Rubin, Dean of the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, told Reuters, "I do not think the media was

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<sup>25</sup> Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 12.

<sup>26</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Joe Skeel, "From the Editor: Thoughts on Coverage of Hurricane Katrina," *Quill Magazine*, 93:8 (Oct./Nov. 2005): 3.

irresponsible, because they had sources as high as the New Orleans police chief and the mayor. In fact, it would have been irresponsible not to report it.”<sup>28</sup>

Others, like American University communications professor W. Joseph Campbell, disagree. He told the *US Fed News* there was little verification and a lot of “winging it.” He said, “Granted, the sources they were relying on were on the face of it legitimate sources, the mayor and the police commissioner, but reporters have a duty to press and to prove and to say, ‘OK where did you get that, where is the data from, where are the bodies stacked in the basement in the Superdome?’”<sup>29</sup> The *Washington Times* quoted a high-level Republican who accused MSNBC of “distorting reality.”<sup>30</sup> The British paper, *The Guardian*, quoted a Baltimore-based journalist who criticized his peers for passing off unsubstantiated rumours as fact.<sup>31</sup> A survey of early reports from New Orleans conducted by the *New York Times*, concluded, “[T]he media’s willingness to report thinly attributed rumours may also have contributed to a kind of cultural wreckage that will not clean up easily.”<sup>32</sup> *New York Times* journalist David Carr says, “The fact that some of these rumours were repeated by overwhelmed local officials does not completely get the news media off the hook.”<sup>33</sup> He continues, “Many of the more toxic rumours seem to have come from evacuees, half-crazed with fear sitting through night after night in the

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<sup>28</sup> Daisuke Wakabayashi, “Accounts of New Orleans Violence Questioned,” Reuters News, 30 Sept. 2005.

<sup>29</sup> “Rumors of Post-Katrina Anarchy Prove False,” *US Fed News*, 30 Sept. 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Harper, “Media, Blushing, Takes a Second Look at Katrina,” *Washington Times*, 28 Sept. 2005: page A:01.

<sup>31</sup> Gary Younge, “Murder and Rape – Fact or Fiction?” *The Guardian*, 6 Sept. 2005: sec. 5.

<sup>32</sup> David Carr, “More Horrible than Truth: News Reports,” *The New York Times*, 19 Sep. 2005: page C:1.

<sup>33</sup> Carr, “More Horrible than Truth.”

dark. Victims, officials and reporters all took one of the most horrific events in American history and made it worse than it actually was.”<sup>34</sup>

Regardless of what sources said, ultimately it was the journalists who brought these stories to the American public. This is not to say that journalists are responsible for what their sources say, but that they are responsible for what they publish. While there’s no denying the importance of telling the stories of the displaced, the recently homeless and the increasingly desperate, the question remains: how could the media have successfully brought the plight of the victims to the nation’s attention if the very stories they were using to illustrate that hardship were based on rumour, not fact? And if the stories they were citing were without factual basis, then were the media aiding those in need, or were they simply perpetuating myths about how people react in crisis situations and casting hurricane victims as villains?

### **My Study**

While this thesis will not be able to determine why rumour was accepted as fact, it will provide a focused look at how these rumours were reported. In analyzing this, I can judge the validity of the criticism journalists faced when the truth behind these rumours began to emerge. To what extent did journalists report them as solid fact? How were they reported in the American mainstream press? How much supporting evidence was provided?

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<sup>34</sup> Carr, “More Horrible than Truth.”

My examination will take a broad approach. In addition to looking at the three specific rumours described above – what I shall throughout call *baseless rumours* – I will examine what I call *general rumours*; the many variations of these specific rumours. The baseless rumours are those that refer *specifically* to the rape and murder of a child at the Superdome and convention centre, piles of bodies at either shelter and sniper attacks on rescue helicopters. By contrast, the general rumours may encompass elements of the baseless rumours, but they are much broader. For example, reports about sniper fire on rescue helicopters are baseless rumours; articles about snipers in any context are general rumours. I will examine all reports of rape and/or murder in the main shelters and all articles that say dead bodies are present at these buildings. The *baseless rumours* deal with incidents that have no factual basis and are generally understood to be false, while the *general rumours* range from truthful accounts, such as accurate accounts of the number of bodies in the convention center to unverifiable accounts, such as reports of rape. As noted above, reports of rape and assault are difficult to either prove or disprove as the reporting of these kinds of crimes is low. Beyond these two extremes, the majority of the incidents considered to be general rumours are vague accounts that, in providing inadequate information about who, when, and where, are impossible to categorize as either true or false.

A third term also needs to be defined. *Incidents* will be used to refer to *both* the baseless rumours and their variations – the general rumours. As will be detailed further in Chapter 2, during the first two weeks of the disaster, rumours abounded and few took the same form.

Examining both the general and baseless rumours serves three purposes. First, it acknowledges the nature of rumours. As will be explored further in the third chapter, rumours mutate and evolve every time they are passed on. While often they originate from a ‘kernel of truth,’ as rumours are communicated details are lost, key elements are exaggerated and the story is adapted to fit expectations and experiences.<sup>35</sup> As this illustrates, one rumour does not grow in isolation. Instead, it grows and evolves exponentially; every retelling gives birth to a new version. By examining both the general and baseless rumours – or incidents – we can examine broadly how the media reported the many rumours that made up these larger incidents. In doing so, the media helped to create an environment in which the baseless rumours would be accepted as fact. Second, examining both kinds of rumours puts the reporting of the baseless ones into context. Were snipers firing on rescue helicopters really the big sniper story, for example, or were the print media more interested in snipers halting a hospital evacuation? Finally, the broad approach will provide an overview of how sources were used throughout the coverage of this disaster. How often did print journalists present sources to back up their claims? Looking at source use for all stories about rape and/or murder will reveal whether reporters presented more or less evidence when reporting on the specific rumoured rape and murder of a young girl, for instance.

As the second chapter of this thesis will detail, the reporting of these rumours took place in the context of city-wide chaos. I will trace both key events in the

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<sup>35</sup> Gordon W. Allport, and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1965), 3 and 75-136.

development of the disaster and key dates in the coverage of the disaster (i.e. when the inaccuracies were first reported). By presenting the deprivation many of the hurricane survivors were subjected to and the extreme behaviour many had to resort to for survival, I will show how these rumours would have been shocking but believable. Reports of snipers firing on rescue helicopters were rolled into reports of other sniper fire. Reports of the rape and murder of a young girl accompanied reports of widespread rapes in the Superdome and convention centre. Stories about piled bodies inside these under-equipped, overpopulated gathering points also described dead bodies lying untouched outside these buildings and floating through the streets.

The third chapter will provide a broad background on problems with reporting in general and problems with disaster reporting in particular. First, I will address how pressures from the news industry itself – such as deadlines, the ideal of objectivity and the role and influence of sources – affect the process of news gathering and reporting. Through a review of key research into disaster coverage I will identify the specific problems journalists face in the disaster zone.

To determine the many variations in these rumours and how they were reported, I will employ content analysis. Chapter 4 will detail this broad study that examines the reporting of the *incidents*, encompassing both the *baseless* and the *general rumours*. It will also be used to determine the types of sources used to report these rumours and the roles those sources played in the articles.

In the fifth chapter, a linguistic analysis will add an in-depth discussion of how the *baseless rumours* were reported to complement the previous chapter's discussion of how the *incidents* were reported. By examining the language, sentence structure and format of the articles, I will also examine the transparency of the reports and sketch the many variations in the reporting of these three baseless rumours.

It will be shown that, though many newspapers published stories about these incidents, few propagated the three baseless rumours. Moreover, as the linguistic analysis indicates, the baseless rumours were not reported with a uniform level of certainty. Reports that a young child was raped and murdered at the Superdome or convention centre were almost always qualified as "rumours" or "stories" and sources were clearly identified as evacuees living in the shelter. Generally the same approach was taken with the reporting of large numbers of bodies at the shelters. Many articles displayed a moderate degree of transparency; some went so far as to lead the reader through the different versions of the story by juxtaposing what the evacuees were saying with what the reporter was able to find and what the authorities were doing.

In contrast, however, little transparency was presented in the reporting of sniper attacks; this baseless rumour was almost always reported with great enthusiasm and little caution. When it came to reports of sniper attacks in the city, journalists did not appear to question the veracity of these incidents and most stories featured the stories of rescue workers who were not witnesses to attacks. The way these articles were written often elevated sniper attacks as the most glaring example of how chaotic and lawless New

Orleans had become. They excluded the possibility of alternate explanations, such as the use of guns to attract the attention of rescue workers.

While relatively few articles reported these rumours outright in the first few weeks of September 2005, it is an examination of the *variations* in how these rumours were reported that will be the central focus of this study. As I have already noted, rumours change as they are transmitted. While few articles reported these specific rumours, many reported variations of them. While all journalists in New Orleans faced the challenges of working in a disaster zone, they didn't all make the same mistakes. The differences in how these rumours were reported demonstrate different levels of accuracy and transparency. By examining the similarities and differences in the way these baseless rumours and general rumours were reported, I will identify key factors that are present in this sample and known to impair the accuracy of news reports. By combining these results with research into disaster myths and the factors known to contribute to the widespread acceptance of these post-disaster behavioural expectations, I will show how the sources used and the style of writing led to inaccurate reporting. By examining the many ways these articles were able to present the atypical as typical, I will show how the news coverage contributed to the impression that these incidents were not only factual, but widespread. By looking specifically at how official sources were used in this sample, I will show how the words of "powerful" sources were not questioned and outline the consequences of this acceptance. Finally, by exploring the construction of media hype, I will look specifically at the rumour of sniper attacks on rescue helicopters and show how the media can construct an incident in such a way that it dominates news coverage and

results in a skewed understanding of the frequency, risk and truth behind the story. This study of what happened is designed to build towards the formulation of six guidelines. The final chapter of my thesis, Chapter 6, will detail these guidelines and, in doing so, establish how journalists can avoid making these mistakes in the future.

It is important to note that this study does not, and will not, provide an in-depth examination of the specific challenges facing reporters on the Hurricane Katrina story. This study focuses on the contents of articles, not the working conditions of journalists. This is both to acknowledge that a newspaper article is not the product of one reporter and to keep the focus of this study on the article – the information available to the reader in the days following the disaster. Accurate reporting means the creation of an accurate article. In the end, no matter what the process, accuracy is gauged by the final product.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE STORY OF HURRICANE KATRINA

“This natural disaster is beginning to look like a Watts riot.”  
– Unnamed Congressional aide<sup>1</sup>

“It’s looting times five. I’m telling you, it’s like Sodom and Gomorrah.”  
– New Orleans City Council President Oliver Thomas<sup>2</sup>

“Across New Orleans, the rule of law, like the city’s levees, could not hold out after Hurricane Katrina.”  
– *The New York Times*<sup>3</sup>

“In the aftermath, we have seen fellow citizens left stunned and uprooted, searching for loved ones and grieving for the dead... We’ve also witnessed the kind of desperation no citizen of this great and generous nation should ever have to know – fellow Americans calling out for food and water, vulnerable people left at the mercy of criminals who had no mercy, and the bodies of the dead lying uncovered and untended in the street.”  
– President George W. Bush<sup>4</sup>

There’s no shortage of vivid description – hyperbolic and otherwise – to describe the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. At the base of these claims of great social breakdown are the rumours, those sensational stories of opportunistic crime, that are the focus of this thesis. Before we can examine how these three specific rumours – sniper attacks on rescue helicopters, a raped and murdered child, and piles of bodies at the Superdome and convention centre – were relayed to the media-consuming public, we must look at the context in which they gained currency. Understanding the context requires the careful sifting of competing news stories, rumours and first hand accounts.

<sup>1</sup> Evan Thomas et al., “The Lost City,” *Newsweek*, 12 Sept. 2005: 27.

<sup>2</sup> Ed Anderson and Jan Moller, “Looting Difficult to Control,” *Times-Picayune*, 30 Aug. 2005: web edition.

<sup>3</sup> Felicity Barringer and Jere Longman, “Owners Take Up Arms as Looters Press Their Advantage,” *The New York Times*, 1 Sept. 2005: page A: 16.

<sup>4</sup> President George W. Bush, “Address to the Nation,” September 15, 2004, [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/) (18 Nov. 2005).

This section is intended to provide an overview of the focus and tone of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina and the New Orleans floods. It is not a complete picture of local, national and international coverage of this disaster.

### **The Natural Disaster**

“The worst natural disaster since a hurricane wiped out Galveston, Texas, in 1900, killing 6,000 to 12,000 people.”  
 -*Newsweek*<sup>5</sup>

“This nation’s costliest hurricane ever.”  
 -The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration<sup>6</sup>

As of December 2005, Hurricane Katrina is estimated to be responsible for 1,300 deaths, over \$100 billion US in damages and the displacement of more than 250,000 people.<sup>7</sup> Katrina alone caused five times more damage than the other three hurricanes that hit the U.S. last year combined. Preliminary figures show that hurricanes Dennis, Rita and Wilma claimed 166 lives, and caused \$20 billion US in damages.<sup>8</sup> As the rebuilding is estimated to continue for years, if not decades, these numbers are subject to change.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas et al., “The Lost City.”

<sup>6</sup> The NOAA is a division of the U.S. Department of Commerce. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Press Release, 27 Jan. 2006, <http://www.noaanews.noaa.gov/stories2006/s2566.htm> (02 Feb. 2006) And: Axel Grauman, Tamara Houston, Jay Lawrimore, David Levinson, Neal Lott, Sam McCown, Scott Stephens, David Wuertz, “Hurricane Katrina: A Climatological Perspective,” (Asheville, NC: US Department of Commerce, Oct. 2005, updated Jan. 2006) <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/oa/reports/tech-report-200501z.pdf> (10 Jan. 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Grauman et al., “A Climatological Perspective.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. And: NOAA, Press Release.

Like any memorable hurricane, Katrina had a short but eventful history. Born from a tropical depression that formed near the Bahamas on August 23, 2005, Katrina hit Florida as a moderate Category 2, according to the Saffir/Simpson scale. It was the kind of storm that can be expected to cause surface damage to most buildings and flooding in low-lying coastal areas.<sup>9</sup> Eleven people were killed after the storm meandered across the Florida panhandle and hit North Miami. The hurricane then rapidly gained strength in the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. By August 28, 2005, Katrina was a roaring Category 5, headed straight for New Orleans. At this point, hurricane force winds extended 170 km (105 miles) from the eye of the hurricane and covered an area roughly the size of Maine.<sup>10</sup> As a Category 5, Katrina could be expected to tear roofs off houses and flood the first floor of most buildings.<sup>11</sup> Massive evacuation is recommended in the case of these catastrophic storms.<sup>12</sup> The next day, the path of the hurricane shifted slightly, sparing New Orleans the worst of the storm but hitting Biloxi, Mississippi straight on. Luckily, by this point Katrina was downgraded to a Category 4 storm, with winds ranging from 210 to 250 km/h (131 to 155 mph). Still, as *Newsweek* describes it, “A hurricane like Katrina packs the energy of a 10-megaton nuclear bomb – exploding every 20 minutes.”<sup>13</sup> One hour before the storm hit New Orleans, at 5 a.m., the storm surge was already causing waters to rise to dangerous levels in the canals that border the city.

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<sup>9</sup> National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, The National Weather Service, the American Red Cross and Federal Emergency and Management Agency, “Hurricanes...Unleashing Nature’s Fury: A Preparedness Guide,” National Hurricane Center library, No date, <http://www.aoml.noaa.gov/general/lib/hurricane.html> (2 Feb. 2006).

<sup>10</sup> “In the Storm; a Look at How the Disaster Unfolded,” *Times-Picayune*, 18 Sept. 2005: page A:21.

<sup>11</sup> NOAA et al., “Hurricanes...”

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Whether New Orleans is a “saucer waiting to be filled,”<sup>14</sup> or is situated “in a bowl...like gumbo,”<sup>15</sup> the city is a flood waiting to happen. Located below sea level, New Orleans is hemmed in by Lake Pontchartrain to the north and the Mississippi River to the south. The Gulf of Mexico lies beyond the Mississippi River, south and east of the city. Prior to the hurricane, an intricate series of levees and canals kept the lake and river water out of New Orleans and facilitated shipping on the Mississippi River. Explaining New Orleans’s vulnerability to floods the day before the hurricane hit, the *Miami Herald* said, “129 miles of steel-reinforced levees and pumps preserve the fiction of the city’s dryness.”<sup>16</sup> The city’s vulnerability was not lost on the local paper. The *Times-Picayune* predicted a storm surge of roughly 5 m (16 feet), with an additional 1.5 m to 3 m (5 – 10 feet) in waves, that would overwhelm levees in eastern New Orleans, flooding parts of the city.<sup>17</sup> The night before, the National Weather Service predicted that levees would be breached. “All indications are that this is absolutely worst-case scenario,” said Ivor van Heerden, deputy director of the Louisiana State University Hurricane Center.<sup>18</sup> On Monday, August 28, the surge that hit the coast, at 9 m (29 feet), was the highest ever recorded.<sup>19</sup>

Leading up to the hurricane, the media were filled with predictable stories featuring local and federal officials preparing for the storm. On Friday, August 26, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco declared a state of emergency. The next day, New

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Romano, “Chaos in the Crescent City,” *Newsweek*, 12 Sept. 2005: 45.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas et al., “The Lost City,” 46.

<sup>15</sup> Erika Bolstad and Marc Caputo, “In New Orleans Residents Getting Prepared for Worst,” *The Miami Herald*, 28 Aug. 2005: page F:1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Nolan, “Katrina Takes Aim,” *Times-Picayune*, 28 Aug. 2005: Sec. 01.

<sup>18</sup> As quoted in: “In the Storm,” *Times-Picayune*.

Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin also declared a state of emergency and gave a voluntary evacuation order. “Ladies and Gentlemen, this is not a test. This is the real deal,” he said, speaking to a city that had grown complacent after the false threats of two recent hurricanes, Ivan in 2004 and Dennis the month before.<sup>20</sup> He added, “Treat this one differently because it’s pointed towards New Orleans.”<sup>21</sup> Most who could, left. Traffic was backed up on major highways away from the coast, despite the implementation of “contraflow lanes” that eliminated inbound lanes and turned the roads into one-way routes out of the city.<sup>22</sup>

On Sunday, August 28, the day before the hurricane hit, Mayor Nagin ordered a mandatory evacuation and warned the residents that flood waters could rise above the levees.<sup>23</sup> This left some areas of New Orleans, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported on August 29, “as they should be – virtually deserted.”<sup>24</sup> In contrast, other areas were scenes of panic and chaos as residents planning to ride out the storm scrambled to gather last-minute supplies to protect their homes and stock up on food and water to ensure their own survival. A few, those unwilling or unable to even prepare for the storm, were left, as if abandoned, in the deserted city.<sup>25</sup> The day the storm hit, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “it was clear that thousands of people did not have the means to evacuate. One man sat forlornly on a street corner with a backpack and an umbrella. Another man

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas et al., “The Lost City,” 46.

<sup>20</sup> Scott Gold, “The Nation: Thousands Flee as Hurricane Closes In,” *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Aug. 2005: page A:14. And: Mayor Nagin as quoted in: Amanda Ripley, “An American Tragedy: How did this Happen?” *Time*, Special Report: *An American Tragedy*, 12 Sept. 2005: 34.

<sup>21</sup> As quoted in: Ripley, “An American Tragedy.”

<sup>22</sup> “In the Storm.” *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Scott Gold, “The Nation: Hurricane Lashes a City Abandoned,” *Los Angeles Times*, 29 Aug, 2005: page A:1.

walked down Canal Street carrying only a pillow.”<sup>26</sup> Of the city’s half-million people, 80,000 to 100,000 stayed behind.<sup>27</sup> In the greater metropolitan area, 600,000 of the area’s 1.6 million people didn’t evacuate.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Damage**

Within hours of Katrina making landfall, the levees were overwhelmed. At 11 a.m. the floodwall of the Industrial Canal, a five-mile link between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, broke in two places, flooding the streets of the 9th Ward with 1 to 3 m (3 – 10 ft) of water. Residents of East New Orleans clambered to roof tops, despite the rain and wind of the hurricane.<sup>29</sup> By mid-morning on Monday, August 29, the flooding had also spread to the low-lying areas of the southern tip of the city, the area surrounding the Louisiana Superdome. The Lakefront airport and the Pontchartrain Expressway were left underwater and the train span causeway was washed out.<sup>30</sup> At 1:30 a.m. the day after Katrina hit, the lake would overwhelm the 17<sup>th</sup> St Canal. Eighty per cent of the city was under water.<sup>31</sup>

The news coverage directly following the hurricane presented the city as broken but not beyond repair. Articles and broadcasts chronicled power outages, fires, gas leaks and the destruction of homes and businesses that had been torn apart, or simply collapsed,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas et al., “The Lost City,” 46.

<sup>28</sup> Scott Gold, “Hurricane Lashes.”

<sup>29</sup> Romano, “Chaos in the Crescent City,” 46C.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 46C.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 46B.

from hurricane force winds.<sup>32</sup> Some, like the *New York Times*, which ran the headline “Escaping Feared Knockout Punch, Barely, New Orleans is One Lucky Big Mess,” reported that the damage wasn’t as bad as expected.<sup>33</sup> Other stories presented dramatic cases of survival. Because newspapers have a lag between the writing of the story and its publication, coverage immediately following the storm did not focus on the flooding. But within two days, the rising water in the city was the story that couldn’t be ignored.

### **The Human Disaster: Inside the Superdome and Convention Centre**

They had flocked to the arena seeking sanctuary from the winds and waters of Hurricane Katrina. But understaffed, undersupplied and without air-conditioning or even much lighting, the domed stadium quickly became a sweltering and surreal vault, a place of overflowing toilets and no showers. Food and water, blankets and sheets, were in short supply. And the dome’s reluctant residents exchanged horror stories, including reports, which could not be confirmed by the authorities, of a suicide and of rapes.

- *The New York Times*<sup>34</sup>

The day before the hurricane hit, the 125-million-cubic-foot Louisiana Superdome opened as the city’s largest hurricane shelter. In the official announcement, a spokesperson for the mayor called the stadium a “refuge of last resort” for those with special needs, like senior citizens or people with medical conditions.<sup>35</sup> Mayor Nagin advised refugees to bring small quantities of food to last three or four days.<sup>36</sup> By 3 p.m.

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<sup>32</sup> See Joseph B. Treaster, “Escaping Feared Knockout Punch, Barely, New Orleans is One Lucky Big Mess,” *New York Times*, 30 Aug. 2005: page A:14.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph B. Treaster, “At Stadium, a Haven Quickly Becomes an Ordeal,” *The New York Times*, 1 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>35</sup> As quoted in: Gold, “Thousands Flee as Hurricane Closes in.”

<sup>36</sup> Nolan, “Katrina Takes Aim,” 01.

on Sunday, August 28, 10,000 people had moved into the Superdome.<sup>37</sup> For those without special needs, the Dome was ill-equipped. According to the *Times-Picayune*:

The Dome was set up as a divided safe haven, with one side of the facility for the disabled and medically ill, where food and water and emergency personnel were plentiful, officials said. For the masses of residents, however, there was the other side, where all that was provided was a concrete stadium built for athletes and spectators.<sup>38</sup>

With the arrival of Katrina, the Superdome quickly deteriorated into what *Newsweek* called “the first circle of hell.” First, the air-conditioning and then the lights failed, leaving the thousands of stranded residents with only the dim lights provided by generator power. The powerful winds of the hurricane tore two holes in the sheet-metal roof of the dome, leaving the football field soggy and residents scared. Later, a reporter for *Newsweek* would juxtapose the hellish conditions inside the Dome with the “biblical shafts” of sunlight that poured in through the holes in the roof.<sup>39</sup>

The end of the storm and the beginning of the rescue effort brought increasing numbers of desperate, unprepared evacuees to the Dome. On Monday afternoon, the National Guardsmen, those already stationed within the city, began to rescue people from the attics and roofs of their flooded houses and drop them off at the Superdome. The *Times-Picayune* reported, “Many are barefoot and wrapped in sheets.”<sup>40</sup> The paper also reported that there was a steady stream of refugees wading through deep water on their

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<sup>37</sup> “In the Storm,” *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon Russell, “Ground Zero: Superdome Becomes Last Resort for Thousands Unable to Leave.” *Times-Picayune*, 29 Aug. 2005: page 01.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas et al., “The Lost City,” 46B.

<sup>40</sup> “In the Storm,” *Times-Picayune*.

way to the Superdome.<sup>41</sup> At this point, according to Mayor Nagin's estimate, 30,000 people were holed up inside the stadium. Speaking on the *Today Show*, Mayor Nagin told Matt Lauer, "Well, you know, we have everything planned for them to be in there for four to five days. And then if it has to extend beyond that, we're going to – we're basically counting on the federal government to supply us with what we need."<sup>42</sup> The next day, Tuesday, August 30, many newspapers were reporting a scarcity of food, medical aid and safe drinking water at the Superdome and an inability by officials to confirm when those needs would be met.<sup>43</sup> It would take five days for the federal government to provide both adequate supplies and an evacuation plan for the tens of thousands of stranded residents.

Descriptions of life in the Superdome were powerful attempts by journalists to make readers imagine unimaginable living conditions. In one compelling article, the *New York Times* reported, "By Wednesday the stink was staggering. Heaps of rotting garbage in bulging white plastic bags baked under a blazing Louisiana sun on the main entry plaza, choking new arrivals as they made their way into the stadium after being plucked off rooftops and balconies."<sup>44</sup> Inside the Dome,

Trash spilled across corridors and aisles, slippery with smelly mud and scraps of food...the field looked like a sprawling military aid station, littered with casualties from a major battle. Families huddled together on scraps of cardboard and torn sheets of vinyl ripped off the lower walls of the stadium. A few stretched out on cots. Piled beside them were plastic

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<sup>41</sup> Brian Thevenot, Gordon Russell, Keith Spera and Doug MacCash, "City a Woeful Scene," *Times-Picayune*, 30 Aug. 2005: web edition.

<sup>42</sup> As quoted in: "In the Storm," *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Gold, "Hurricane Lashes a City Abandoned."

<sup>44</sup> Treaster, "At Stadium."

shopping bags and suitcases, holding a few clothes. Some people had arrived with nothing more than what they were wearing.<sup>45</sup>

The day after the hurricane hit, the Dome was closed to new evacuees.

By Thursday, September 1, television and newspaper stories about deteriorating conditions inside the Superdome were commonplace. Reports of suicide at the Dome – reports that were later confirmed – accompanied the contested stories of widespread rape, murder and roaming armed gangs.<sup>46</sup> It is here that the rumours started flying. Later that night, Fox News anchor Greta Van Susteren interviewed a doctor providing emergency care at the Superdome. Dr. Charles Burnell gave a laundry list of the crimes committed inside the shelter. He said, “We had three murders last night. We had a total of six rapes last night. We had the day before, I think, there were three or four murders. There were half a dozen rapes that night.”<sup>47</sup> On Saturday September 3, Reuters reported hundreds of bodies in a make-shift morgue and the rape and murder of a young girl.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, the Associated Press reported that “dead bodies were a common sight, in wheelchairs, wrapped in blankets or just abandoned.”<sup>49</sup>

Hurricane survivors were facing similar deteriorating conditions across town at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center. A gathering point that turned into an impromptu shelter, the convention centre was without basic provisions or emergency

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See for example, Scott Gold, Lianne Hart and Stephen Braun, “Katrina’s Rising Toll; New Orleans Death Toll May Soar; Survivors Desperate,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 Sept. 2005: page A:1. or Romano, “Chaos in the Crescent City,” 46C.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in: David Carr, “More Horrible than Truth: News Reports,” *The New York Times*, 19 Sep. 2005: page C:1.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Egan, “Rapes, Killings hit Katrina refugees in New Orleans,” Reuters News, 3 Sept. 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Tanner, “Thousands rescued; Thousands Dead in Hurricane Katrina,” Associated Press State and Local Wire, 3 Sept. 2005.

supplies. Still, word spread among survivors that it was a rescue site. By Thursday, September 1, the mayor issued a statement about conditions in the convention centre: “This is a desperate SOS. We are out of resources at the Convention Center.”<sup>50</sup> It would take until Friday, September 2, before authorities provided food, water, and medical care to the tens of thousands stranded at the convention centre.<sup>51</sup> Until then, television news was filled with images of dehydrated survivors sitting dazed and immobile under the hot sun while their stronger counterparts stood, yelling for help, willing someone to pay attention to their plight.

Media reports about conditions at the convention centre focused on the crowd’s desperate behaviour and reports that local police were reduced to holding the survivors at gun-point for fear of riots.<sup>52</sup> Aid was slow to arrive because, according to media reports, the National Guard was unable to land safely in the parking lot of the convention centre. When the Guardsmen attempted to deliver supplies, the crowd surged forward, forcing the helicopter to take off and drop its precious cargo – self-heating meals and bottles of water – from the air. Many of the bottles of water, so desperately needed by those on the ground, burst on contact.<sup>53</sup>

Local officials also fed into this image of chaos in the shelters. On Monday, September 5, one week after the Hurricane, Police Chief Eddie Compass described

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<sup>50</sup> “In the Storm,” *Times-Picayune*. Emphasis in original.

<sup>51</sup> Brian Thevenot and Gordon Russel, “Rape. Murder. Gunfights. ; For three anguished days the world’s headlines blared that the Superdome and Convention Center had descended into anarchy. But the truth is that while conditions were squalid for the thousands stuck there, much of the violence NEVER HAPPENED,” *Times-Picayune*, 26 Sept. 2005: page A:01.

<sup>52</sup> Allan G. Breed, “New Orleans in the Throes of Katrina, and Apocalypse,” Associated Press State and Local Wire, Sept. 2, 2005.

conditions in the Superdome to TV talk show host Oprah Winfrey. He said, “We had little babies in there, some of the little babies getting raped.”<sup>54</sup> On the nationally syndicated show, Mayor Ray Nagin said that the crowds of victims had been reduced to an “almost animalistic state.”<sup>55</sup> The mayor said the people had been trapped in the Superdome for days, “watching dead bodies, watching hooligans raping people, killing people, that’s the tragedy.”<sup>56</sup> Overcome with frustration and outrage, the mayor then walked off camera.

It’s important to note that while the National Guard was having trouble delivering aid to the convention centre and Superdome, the media and concerned celebrities didn’t have a problem getting to the scene. *Time* notes, “Somehow singer Harry Connick Jr. could get to the New Orleans convention center and offer help, but not the National Guard.”<sup>57</sup> For many, this added to the mounting frustration. Where was the aid and why was it taking so long?

By Friday, five days after the storm, five days after the power went out and the levees failed, five days after the looting began, the National Guard arrived. *Time* noted,

Virtually along, Lieut. General Russell Honore, commanding Joint Task Force Katrina, whom Mayor Nagin referred to as the John Wayne dude, seemed to be moving pieces into place. He was out on the streets with his troops, directing convoys and telling anxious Guardsmen to keep their weapons pointed down.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Interview with Ray Nagin and Eddie Compass. Originally aired September 5, 2005. [http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/200509/tows\\_past\\_20050906.jhtml](http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/200509/tows_past_20050906.jhtml) (18 Nov. 2005).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Nancy Gibbs, “New Orleans Lives by the Water and Fights It,” *Time*, Special Report: *An American Tragedy*, 12 Sept. 2005: 23.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 27.

Joint Task Force Katrina (JTF-Katrina), a joint operation of the United States Department of Defense and FEMA, was created on August 31, 2005 to manage the relief effort in the disaster zone. The National Guard brought water and meals ready to eat – packaged military food known commonly as MREs – to the convention centre. The Army Engineers’ Brigadier General Mark Graham, who was serving as deputy commanding general of JTF-Katrina’s Task Force West, coordinated the evacuation of the convention centre and the Superdome. In only 72 hours, 65,000 people were evacuated.

One week after the hurricane hit, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers plugged a levee breach on the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal. Water was finally being pumped out of the city.

### **The Human Disaster: Inside the City**

The deterioration of conditions in the Superdome was presented alongside the deterioration of conditions in the city as a whole. Prior to the disaster, officials expected some measure of lawlessness. If the coverage is any indication, they had no idea how bad it could get. On August 28, the day before Katrina hit, New Orleans Police Chief Eddie Compass told the city, “Looters will be dealt with severely and harshly and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”<sup>59</sup> The day after the hurricane hit, stories of looting filled the mainstream press. *The New York Times* reported that looting began just as the hurricane-force winds died down. Late on the Monday, looters broke windows and

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<sup>59</sup> As quoted in: Nolan, “Katrina Takes Aim.”

swarmed into drug stores, shoe stores and electronic shops.<sup>60</sup> According to the *Los Angeles Times*, by 5 p.m., nearly 12 hours after Katrina first made land-fall, “about 30 looters descended on a general store in east New Orleans.”<sup>61</sup> The next day, the Web edition of the *Times-Picayune* ran a story headlined “Even a cop joins in the looting.”<sup>62</sup> Describing the scene at a Wal-mart, where handing out essentials quickly turned into mass looting, one man said, “The police got all the best stuff. They’re crookeder than us.”<sup>63</sup> Those carting off food and water looted side-by-side with those stealing jewelry, alcohol and electronics. The articles described a general feeling among officers that there were just not enough cops to keep this behaviour in check. It also quoted one officer who said, “It’s like this everywhere in the city. This tiny number of cops can’t do anything about this. It’s wide open.”<sup>64</sup>

Media coverage of chaos in the city presented a two-sided conflict. If the looters were the offensive, the city’s defence was its gun-toting, property-protecting residents, not the police. The *Times-Picayune* described the scene in one of the few dry areas of the city: “[A] bearded man patrolled Oak Street near the boarded-up Maple Leaf Bar, a sawed-off shotgun slung over his shoulder. The owners of a hardware store sat in folding chairs, pistols at the ready.”<sup>65</sup> Many articles profiled those resolute hurricane survivors

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<sup>60</sup> Jim Dwyer and Christopher Drew, “Fear Exceeded Crime’s Reality in New Orleans,” *The New York Times*, 29 Sept. 2005: A:1.

<sup>61</sup> Scott Gold and Ellen Barry, “Katrina Hits the Gulf Coast; Dozens Killed, Damage Heavy as Katrina Roars In,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 Aug. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>62</sup> Mike Perlstien and Brian Thevenot, “Even a Cop Joins the Looting,” *Times-Picayune*, 30 Aug. 2005: web edition.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Thevenot et al., “Woeful Scene.”

who remained in the city to protect their homes. The image was one of city-wide lawlessness.

By Wednesday, September 1, New Orleans was in the grip of a full-force human disaster. While the rescue effort continued and National Guard helicopters fought to fill the holes in the levees, the efforts of city officials and the eyes of the nation were focused on the chaos. Conditions were so bad that by Wednesday night, Mayor Nagin ordered 1,500 police, almost the entire force, to halt rescue efforts and focus on stopping the looting.<sup>66</sup> That day the mayor warned that looters were hitting heavily populated areas – hotels and hospitals.<sup>67</sup> At this point, *Newsweek* reported, “New Orleans was on the verge of anarchy.”<sup>68</sup> Reports circulated of police officers turning in their badges rather than facing another day of looting.<sup>69</sup> On Thursday, three days after the Hurricane, Mayor Nagin told the *Los Angeles Times* that looting had gone from individuals trying to survive to mass chaos.<sup>70</sup>

With the backdrop of the deteriorating and desperate conditions at the Superdome and convention centre and the widespread looting on the streets, came the rumours – perhaps the most difficult to understand – of snipers firing at rescue helicopters. On Thursday, September 1, the Associated Press reported that the evacuation of the Superdome was temporarily suspended after reports of shots fired at military

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas et al., “The Lost City,” 47.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>70</sup> Gold et al., “Katrina's Rising Toll.”

helicopters.<sup>71</sup> Thursday, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted Richard Zuschlag, chairman of Acadian Ambulance service in Lafayette, who said their agency halted medical evacuation after at least one shot was fired.<sup>72</sup> That same day, efforts to evacuate patients at Charity Hospital were stopped after reports of sniper fire.<sup>73</sup>

Despite the fact that the Federal Aviation Administration immediately denied they received any such reports, stories of sniper fire on rescue workers became just one more element of the already established chaos. That night, Fox News anchor John Gibson said he had heard “all kinds of reports of looting, fires and violence,” including “[t]hugs shooting at rescue crews.” The on-scene reporter, David Less Miller, replied, “There are so many murders taking place. There are rapes, other violent crimes.”<sup>74</sup>

The next day, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that police are “in instances outgunned by snipers holed up in abandoned apartment buildings and storefronts.”<sup>75</sup> The *Chicago Tribune* reported “gun-toting residents” firing on rescue workers.<sup>76</sup> Reports of snipers continued on Saturday, September 3.<sup>77</sup> The next day, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) “Joint Task Force Katrina Airspace Control Plan” (a document publicly released on the FAA Website) warned that “if any small arm fire is observed,

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<sup>70</sup> Gold et al., “Katrina’s Rising Toll.”

<sup>71</sup> Nossiter, “More National Guardsmen.”

<sup>72</sup> Ellen Barry, Scott Gold and Stephen Braun, “In Katrina’s Aftermath: Chaos and Survival: New Orleans Slides Into Chaos, U.S. Scrambles to Send Troops,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>73</sup> “In the Storm,” *Times-Picayune*.

<sup>74</sup> Carr, “More Horrible than Truth.”

<sup>75</sup> Barry et al., “Chaos and Survival.”

<sup>76</sup> Michael Martinez and Howard Witt, “A desperate SOS; New Orleans Mayor Pleads for Help from Washington as Rescuers, Survivors Face Gunfire, Anarchy,” *Chicago Tribune*, 2 Sept. 2005: sec. 1.

<sup>77</sup> David Zucchino, “Katrina’s Aftermath; They Just Left Us Here to Die; At the New Orleans Convention Center, Thousands Waited Days Cut off From Relief,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Sept. 2005: page A:23.

immediately take protective measures.”<sup>78</sup> While this appears to be simply a warning, fueled more by rumours than actual reports, it’s clear there were some reports of shots on the ground as the document goes on to list areas of the city where gun fire had been observed.<sup>79</sup>

### **The Political Disaster**

The lack of rapid response left people in the United States, and all over the world, wondering how an American city could look like Mogadishu or Port-au-Prince....What went wrong? Just about everything. How the system failed is a tangled story, but the basic narrative is becoming clearer: hesitancy, bureaucratic rivalries, failures of leadership from city hall to the White House and epically bad luck combines to create a morass.

- *Newsweek*, September 12, 2005<sup>80</sup>

As the narrative above makes clear, the official response to this crisis was inadequate at all levels of government. In essence, the government failed to fortify the region against hurricanes, or to implement emergency plans that would limit the number of casualties and provide aid for evacuees and those who remained in the city. The government response – or its inability to respond – is not the main focus of this study. But it is important to understand some of the criticism in order to understand the actions of local officials whose role, as sources for journalists covering the story, will be explored in this thesis.

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<sup>78</sup> Federal Aviation Authority, Joint Task Force (JTF) Katrina Airspace Control Plan, 4 Sept. 2005, [http://www.faa.gov/news/disaster\\_response/katrina/media/katrinaacp4sept.pdf](http://www.faa.gov/news/disaster_response/katrina/media/katrinaacp4sept.pdf) (5 Jan. 2006).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas et al., “The Lost City,” 44 – 45.

As described above, New Orleans' susceptibility to both hurricanes and floods was well known. Entrusted with the care of the extensive levee system that surrounds the city, the Army Corps of Engineers had for years been asking for more federal money to prop up the aging system. The current, cash-strapped government, more focused on fighting the global war on terrorism and the war on Iraq, reduced funding for the city's levees.<sup>81</sup> Aside from fortifying the city, local officials should have formulated a plan that took the city's vulnerabilities into account. Indeed, these vulnerabilities were well-known. A planning exercise in the summer of 2004, "Hurricane Pam," predicted that 30% of the city's half-a-million residents would stay behind because they didn't have the means to leave and, as a result, tens of thousands of people would die. In retrospect, despite the inflated death toll, this exercise provided an accurate picture of the city-wide flooding and large numbers of stranded residents.

Aside from failing to plan adequately, federal officials were criticized for being out of touch with the reality of the disaster zone. This was demonstrated, in part, through the abundance of political rhetoric in support of the government's response. President George W. Bush, for example, praised the "good work" of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) three days after the storm and one day before adequate food, water and medical aid arrived at the Superdome and convention centre.<sup>82</sup> Later that day, at a press conference at the regional airport in Mobile, Alabama, Bush would make his now infamous statement, "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job."<sup>83</sup> At this time, Brownie - Michael Brown, then director of FEMA - was under intense criticism for

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>82</sup> Gibbs, "New Orleans Lives by the Water," 23.

his agency's failure to respond to the crisis. His career in emergency management was short. He resigned on September 12, saying, "It is important that I leave now to avoid further distraction from the ongoing mission of FEMA."<sup>84</sup>

President Bush wasn't the only public figure accused of having incomplete knowledge about conditions of survivors, conditions that were broadcast on the nightly news. In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), on Thursday, September 8, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said, "I think it is a source of tremendous pride to me to work with people who have pulled off this really exceptional response."<sup>85</sup> After being asked six times about the condition of the 25,000 people at the convention centre, *Time* reports, "Chertoff said he had not heard about any problems."<sup>86</sup> FEMA seemed equally out of touch Wednesday when head Michael Brown told CNN's Paula Zahn that the federal government didn't know evacuees were gathering at the convention centre until that day – two days after the storm and 24 hours after the first news reports from the scene.<sup>87</sup>

This abundance of political rhetoric provided cold comfort for local officials dealing first-hand with the disaster. On Thursday, September 1, after Bush praised the "good work" being done, the New Orleans mayor exploded. Speaking on local radio station WWL-AM, Mayor Nagin said, "This is ridiculous. I don't want to see anybody do any more press conferences...we authorize \$8 billion to go to Iraq lickety-quick. After

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<sup>83</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller, "Casualty of a Firestorm," *The New York Times*, 10 Sept. 2005: page A:11.

<sup>84</sup> Bruce Alpert, "Brown resigns FEMA Post; Nagin: Stepping Down Won't Solve Problems," *Times-Picayune*, 13 Sept. 2005: page A:02.

<sup>85</sup> Ripley, "An American Tragedy," 37.

9/11, we gave the president unprecedented powers lickety-quick to take care of New York and other places...you mean to tell me that a place where you probably have thousands of people that have died and thousands more that are dying every day, that we can't figure out a way to authorize the resources that we need? Come on, man."<sup>88</sup> He added, "I need reinforcements, I need troops, man. I need 500 buses, man. . . I've got 15,000 to 20,000 people over at the convention center. It's bursting at the seams... Don't tell me 40,000 people are coming here. They're not here. It's too doggone late. Now get off your asses and do something, and let's fix the biggest goddamn crisis in the history of this country."<sup>89</sup> He ended the radio interview in tears.<sup>90</sup>

Later the president would accept responsibility for the federal government's failure. A federal inquiry into the government's response to the disaster was launched less than one week after Katrina hit. In a speech to the nation, Bush said:

Americans have every right to expect a more effective response in a time of emergency. When the federal government fails to meet such an obligation, I, as President, am responsible for the problems, and for the solution....This government will learn the lessons of Hurricane Katrina. We're going to review every action and make necessary changes, so that we are better prepared for any challenge of nature, or act of evil men, that could threaten our people.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>87</sup> Bumiller, "Firestorm."

<sup>88</sup> Ripley, "An American Tragedy," 37.

<sup>89</sup> Susan Saulny, "Newcomer Is Struggling to Lead a City in Ruins," *The New York Times*, 3 Sept. 2005: page A:13.

<sup>90</sup> Gibbs, "New Orleans Lives by the Water," 23.

## Unearthing the Truth

Rape. Murder. Gunfights. For three anguished days the world's headlines blared that the Superdome and Convention Center had descended into anarchy. But the truth is that while conditions were squalid for the thousands stuck there, much of the violence NEVER HAPPENED.

- Headline, *Times-Picayune*<sup>92</sup>

Consider it an act of self-reflection. First newspapers reported on murders, rapes, snipers and piles of bodies. Then, weeks later, they questioned these sensational stories. While it's hard to provide a comprehensive timeline of this review process, it's clear that within days of their initial publication journalists were already wondering if there was truth to some rumours. It must be noted that, even when rumours were flying with the most credibility, some papers failed to endorse them completely, even as others presented them unquestioningly as fact. Here are a few key points in the process of re-evaluation, when the "truth" started to come out.

One of the first papers to report that some rumours were unsubstantiated was the British paper, *The Guardian*.<sup>93</sup> On September 6, only three days after Reuters and the Associated Press reported on the piles of bodies and the rape and murder of a young girl,<sup>94</sup> *The Guardian* stated, "In a week filled with dreadful scenes of desperation and anger from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina some stories stood out. But as time goes on many remain unsubstantiated and may yet prove to be apocryphal."<sup>95</sup> The article reports that local police were unable to confirm that a seven-year-old girl was

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<sup>91</sup> President G.W. Bush, "Address to the Nation."

<sup>92</sup> Thevenot and Russel, "Rape. Murder. Gunfights." Emphasis in original.

<sup>93</sup> Gary Younge, "Murder and Rape – Fact or Fiction?" *The Guardian*, 6 Sept. 2005: sec. 5.

<sup>94</sup> Egan, "Rapes, Killings." And: Tanner, "Thousands Rescued."

raped and murdered in the Superdome. While many survivors stood by the story, the article said, no eye-witnesses or relatives had come forward. As for the story of the two murdered babies, the article also reported no bodies had been found, nor could the source of the story be discovered. The paper reports that their own reporter's observations were able to confirm that while conditions in the Superdome were as terrible as described, there were no piles of corpses.<sup>96</sup>

Shortly after that, on September 11, a column in the *Boston Globe* compiled the expert opinions of disaster researchers.<sup>97</sup> Quoting many of the same scholars whose work will provide the theoretical base of this study, the paper said:

In fact, if criminal violence were indeed rampant in New Orleans after Katrina hit (setting aside the taking of food, water, bandages, and other necessities of survival), that would contradict much of what sociologists have learned in a half century of research about such situations.<sup>98</sup>

The article relies mainly on Enrico Quarantelli, the founding director of the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware; Kathleen Tierney, the director of the National Hazard Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder; and Clark McPhail, the author of *The Myth of the Madding Crowd*. It contrasts media reports of looting, violence, murder and anarchy in New Orleans with the survival and aid-oriented behaviour these researchers have learned to expect in disaster zones.<sup>99</sup> Overall, the column is inconclusive. Columnist Christopher Shea's last words on the subject were simply this: "As a clearer picture emerges of what happened to the social fabric of New Orleans after

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<sup>95</sup> Younge, "Murder and Rape."

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Christopher Shea, "Up for Grabs: Sociologists Questions How Much Looting and Mayhem Really Took Place in New Orleans," *The Boston Globe*, 11 Sept. 2005: page E:1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

the levees broke, we'll get a sense of whether they [the media], or the sociologists were right.”<sup>100</sup>

Over the next two weeks, a few newspapers would continue to build upon the argument in *The Guardian* and seek to answer the question posed by the *Boston Globe*. On September 19, *The New York Times* detailed its own study of Katrina coverage. The paper found that “on Sept. 1, the news media’s narrative of the hurricane shifted.”<sup>101</sup> The focus turned exclusively to the violence and the rumours and little effort was made to determine if there was any truth behind the stories. While the article acknowledges that in many cases officials and credible sources, like the doctor interviewed in the Superdome,<sup>102</sup> propagated these rumours, the main argument of the story is that journalists should be held accountable because they fueled the rumours rather than questioned them.

While these articles were questioning, it was the local paper, the *Times-Picayune*, that would return to the origin of the rumours and re-interview the sources.<sup>103</sup> The article argues:

As the fog of warlike conditions in Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath has cleared, the vast majority of reported atrocities committed by evacuees have turned out to be false, or at least unsupported by any evidence, according to key military, law enforcement, medical and civilian officials in positions to know.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Carr, “More Horrible Than Truth.”

<sup>102</sup> Dr Charles Burnell, interviewed by Greta Van Susteren of Fox News. Quoted in *ibid*.

<sup>103</sup> Thevenot and Russel, “Rape. Murder. Gunfights.”

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

Interviews with National Guard members, who were on scene either when the Superdome was bursting with evacuees or cleaning up afterward, revealed that rather than piles of bodies in the Superdome, there were only six and they were stored on melting ice in the stadium's freezers. Of these six, four were dead of natural causes, one had overdosed and one was a suicide. Four additional bodies were found outside the Dome. Officials say none was murdered. At the convention centre, four bodies were found and authorities suspect one was murdered. Contradicting reports of widespread murders throughout the city, authorities confirmed only four murders – a reasonable number, the *Times-Picayune* noted, for a city that sees more than 200 homicides a year.<sup>105</sup>

The evidence doesn't support the rumours that a young child was raped and murdered or that babies were killed. Interviews with the National Guard soldiers and local police who responded to reports of violence at the convention centre found that while shots were fired, no victims or witnesses of violent or sexual crimes ever came forward. The article acknowledges that reports of rape cannot be dismissed because rape is a "notoriously underreported crime under ideal circumstances."<sup>106</sup> The article reports that the National Guard and police confirm there was at least one attempted rape of a child and that a suspect was apprehended.

This article was groundbreaking in getting to the bottom of many of the rumours that swirled among the evacuees, the media and the nation in the first week of September. Significantly, it is compelling because it outlines clearly what it knows for a fact – that

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

evidence does not exist to support many of the rumours – and what it doesn't know – whether any rapes or assaults were committed. The article highlights discrepancies between the stories of officials and admits that the details surrounding the attempted assault of the young girl remain unknown. This article had a huge impact. Following its publication in New Orleans, the article was published in an abridged form in at least four other papers.<sup>107</sup> In the week that followed it, newspapers from across the U.S. and around the world pursued the story as it developed, many quoting the *Times-Picayune*.

Getting to the bottom of the reports of sniper attacks is more difficult. Reports of shots fired at police, victims and rescue workers are almost impossible to disprove. When it comes to snipers shooting at aircraft, the picture is a little clearer. Due to reliable communication between aircraft, the supervision of all planes and helicopters by air traffic controllers, and the role of the government regulatory body, the Federal Aviation Authority, any attacks should have been documented. None were. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote, “[M]ore than a month later, representatives from the Air Force, Coast Guard, Department of Homeland Security and Louisiana Air National Guard say they have yet to confirm a single incident of gunfire at helicopters.”<sup>108</sup> The first article that reported sniper attacks, published on September 1, quoted Laura Brown, a Federal Aviation Administration spokeswoman in Washington. She said, “We’re controlling every single aircraft in that airspace and none of them reported being fired

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<sup>107</sup> *The Seattle Times*, 26 September 2005; *The State* (Columbia, SC), 27 September 2005; *Detroit Free Press*, 37 September, 2005; and *The Star Ledger* (NJ), 2 October 2005.

<sup>108</sup> Miriam Hill and Nicholas Spangler, “No Evidence Backs Up Reports of Rescue Helicopters Being Fired Upon,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3 Oct. 2005: page A:2.

on.”<sup>109</sup> Indeed, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* article investigated the reports of sniper attacks at the Superdome and the Associated Press article that argued that Acadian Ambulance suspended their relief efforts after reports of shots fired. Further interviews with the Acadian Ambulance employee in charge of directing the relief effort determined that they had not observed shots fired but had heard that shots were fired. The source of that information – supposedly the military – could not be confirmed.<sup>110</sup> Similarly, weeks later on *Nightline* on ABC, Ted Koppel said the FAA told him it had no reports from pilots, but that the reports of snipers, unconfirmed though they may have been, grounded rescue workers.<sup>111</sup>

## Conclusion

The images and stories that filled the airways in the weeks following Hurricane Katrina were compelling. By delving into the way these articles are written through the use of content analysis, we can look at the extent to which these incidents were reported as fact. By pairing this study with a linguistic analysis of the baseless rumours, we can examine the range of accurate and inaccurate reporting. This brief sketch of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina was intended to show what the media said. Before examining how they said it, I shall review key problems in journalism and disaster coverage.

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<sup>109</sup> Mary Foster, “Evacuation Disrupted by Gunshot Report,” Associated Press, 1 Sept. 2005.

<sup>110</sup> Hill and Spangler, “No Evidence.”

<sup>111</sup> Ted Koppel, *Nightline: Lessons Learned*, ABC News, 15 Sept. 2005.

## CHAPTER 3

# JOURNALISM AND DISASTERS

### Introduction

For most who live outside the disaster zone, the story of Hurricane Katrina is one of media accounts. It's made up of newspaper articles about the inhuman conditions at the Superdome and television footage of hurricane survivors being airlifted from roof tops. As we saw in the previous chapter, the coverage includes the reporting of rumour as fact, along with true stories of desperate human need and suffering. Rather than accurate portrayals of the reality on the ground, these news stories were interpretations of that reality.<sup>1</sup> Before examining how these rumours were reported, we must first examine journalistic practice to understand why, despite its claims of objectivity and accuracy, journalism remains a flawed craft. From there we shall look at disaster coverage to understand why disaster-zone pressures compound those weaknesses.

This chapter is in two sections. First, I shall explain how journalism is mediated reality by examining some of the external pressures that affect the process of news gathering and reporting. I shall look specifically at the impact of such journalistic ideals as objectivity and accuracy and the influence of news values, sources, deadlines, story selection and industrial pressures. Second, I shall examine both the importance of disaster coverage and the specific challenges journalists face in such reporting.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Wilkins, "Bhopal: The Politics of Mediated Risk," in *Bad Tidings: Communication and Catastrophe*, eds. Lynne Masel Walters, Lee Wilkins and Tim Walters (Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum, 1989), 22-23.

## The Journalistic Process

The production of news is the gathering and ordering of information. As Paul Manning argues, news can never be objective; it is always influenced by the processes and pressures of news production.<sup>2</sup> Numerous decisions – insignificant and significant, large and small – go into the gathering and assembling of the elements that make up a news story.<sup>3</sup> News values, which constitute a checklist that can be used to determine if an issue, event or personality is news, determine *what* is covered. Then, numerous factors influence *how* those newsworthy stories are covered. These influences are at work both inside and outside the newsroom. Within the newsroom, journalists deal with the hierarchy of owners and editors and the pressures of tight deadlines and limited space.<sup>4</sup> Journalism is a business and reporters and editors alike are affected by economic pressures such as budget restrictions or the pressure to turn a profit. Outside the newsroom, journalists face competition with other media outlets and the sometimes conflicting interests of their sources.

Beyond reporting the news, the media are a forum for public discourse.<sup>5</sup> They are a place where issues are brought to the public's attention and are discussed and evaluated. Most scholars agree that journalists are responsible for communicating timely and accurate information to the public – information that is necessary to sustain political

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Manning, *News and News Sources: A Critical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001), 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

discussion, encourage political participation and strengthen the democratic process.<sup>6</sup>

Because of the power of the media, journalists do and must strive to overcome the weaknesses of their craft. This is done primarily through adherence to journalistic ideals of objectivity and accuracy.

Before looking at the concrete factors within the industry that can impact coverage, I shall look at the broader values of the profession and how these ideals, like many of the pressures journalists face, mediate the content they produce.

### *Accuracy*

At its most basic level, accuracy is getting the facts right. Media scholars have long measured the accuracy of news reports through the Charnley method. Pioneered in the 1930s by Mitchell Charnley, this method involves asking news sources to assess the accuracy of news reports.<sup>7</sup> Sources are instructed to look for misquotes and check that the spelling of names, ages, numbers, titles, addresses, times and dates are correct. Since then, researchers have refined this method of study to include “errors of meaning” – information that is not itself inaccurate but that is presented in a misleading fashion.<sup>8</sup> This includes overemphasis, underemphasis, omission and misleading quotes.<sup>9</sup> As Kovach and Rosenstiel explain, accurate reporting is presenting accurate information in a

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<sup>5</sup> William Gamson and Andre Modigliani, “Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach,” *American Journal of Sociology* 95 (1989): 3.

<sup>6</sup> Manning, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell V. Charnley, “Preliminary Notes on A Study of Newspaper Accuracy,” *Journalism Quarterly* 13 (December 1936): 394-401.

<sup>8</sup> Scott R. Maier, “Accuracy Matters: A Cross-Market Assessment of Newspaper Error and Credibility,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 82 (Autumn 2005): 534.

truthful light.<sup>10</sup> Truth necessitates accuracy, and accuracy necessitates verification. Journalism, Kovach and Rosenstiel argue, is fundamentally “a discipline of verification.”<sup>11</sup>

Despite the simplicity of this fundamental journalistic ideal, accuracy remains a concern. The public, research has found, see a clear link between accuracy and credibility.<sup>12</sup> Maier found that the number and severity of errors had a direct impact on the credibility of a story, in the source’s view.<sup>13</sup> Accuracy is also a concern for journalists. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, there is a continuing rise in the numbers of journalists who believe that news reports are full of factual errors.<sup>14</sup> In 1995, only one-third of journalists surveyed believed that news reports were inaccurate. The most recent survey, conducted in 2004, found that nearly half were concerned.<sup>15</sup> Many journalists blame structural changes in the newsroom and the shorter deadlines caused by a 24-hour news cycle.

### ***Objectivity***

Central to the credibility of journalists, objective coverage is balanced and free of bias. For many journalism scholars, however, objectivity is a process rather than a goal.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 534.

<sup>10</sup> Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 12.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Maier, 535.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 545.

<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center for People and the Press, “Press Going Too Easy on Bush: Bottom-Line Pressures Now Hurting Coverage, Say Journalists,” 23 May, 2004, [www.people-press.org](http://www.people-press.org) (18 Nov. 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Paul Manning argues, “[O]bjectivity’ is not something that journalists can achieve in the sense of producing value-free and comprehensive accounts of ‘real’ events; rather, the term in this context describes a set of practices that journalists can *defend* as objective.”<sup>16</sup> As Gaye Tuchman argues, objectivity is a ritual or a routine that allows journalists to defend their work as objective.<sup>17</sup>

While the ideal of objectivity does ensure that journalists strive to create value-free work, the process of objectivity can harm the accuracy of a news report. Manning argues that journalists will opt for balanced coverage that juxtaposes the opinions of opposing sources rather than verifying that the facts those opinions are based on are correct.<sup>18</sup> Hackett and Zhao agree that objectivity is far from benign. They argue that rather than ensuring bias-free coverage, the claim to objectivity implies an impartial method and hides the power relations inherent in choosing and producing news stories.<sup>19</sup> Objectivity allows journalists to position themselves and the news content they produce “above” public issues. Journalists become witnesses to but not participants in social change.<sup>20</sup> Finally, Hackett and Zhao assert that objectivity has political consequences. They argue that the quest for objectivity results in the conservatizing of the news and the displacing of alternative viewpoints.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Manning, 68. Emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> Gaye Tuchman (1972) ‘Objectivity as a Strategic Ritual’ as quoted in Ibid, 68.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, *Sustaining Democracy: Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1998): 143-144.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 143.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 143.

Objectivity may be flawed, but not everyone argues it can be forgotten. Judith Lichtenberg notes that many of objectivity's critics agree journalists cannot abandon the ideal.<sup>22</sup> According to Lichtenberg, objectivity and truth operate as "regulatory principles."<sup>23</sup> Without these ideals, she explains, we would be at a loss to further our knowledge and understanding. They are simply "ideals that we must suppose to apply, even if at the limit they do not, if we are to possess the will and the ways to understand the world."<sup>24</sup>

### *Story Selection / Gatekeeping*

No one element has a bigger impact on shaping the news than story selection. At every media outlet, editors and producers determine which stories reach the public and which stories are discarded. For media scholars, the theory of gatekeeping is used to explain the range of decisions that limit the ideas and narrow the range of people in the news.<sup>25</sup> As Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, and Wright describe it, gatekeeping "is the process by which the vast array of potential news message are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media."<sup>26</sup> Gatekeepers legitimize sources and stories by choosing who gets to speak and what they get to talk about.<sup>27</sup> Though powerful, gatekeepers are not immune from the demands of the industry

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<sup>22</sup> Judith Lichtenberg, "In Defence of Objectivity Revisited," *Mass Media and Society*, eds. James Curran and Michael Gurvitch, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Arnold, 1996), 227.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

<sup>25</sup> Graber, 109.

<sup>26</sup> Pamela J. Shoemaker, Martin Eichholz, Eunyi Kim, and Brenda Wright, "Individual and Routine Forces in Gate keeping," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 78:2 (Summer 2001): 233.

<sup>27</sup> Susanna Hornig, Lynne Walters and Julie Templin, "Voices in the News: Newspaper Coverage of Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta Earthquake" *Newspaper Research Journal* 12 (Summer 1991): 32.

and of the public. Gatekeepers are also heavily influenced by news values. Graber argues that coverage of events like wars, assassinations and airline hijackings is “almost mandatory.”<sup>28</sup>

### *News Values*

Research has identified industry norms that seem to coordinate story selection across all media. An often cited, groundbreaking study in 1965 identified 12 news factors. Conducted by Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge, the study attempted to determine how events become news.<sup>29</sup> While the study focused exclusively on the coverage of foreign news, the study identified factors that continue to be seen as industry norms, including:

- **Frequency:** the rate at which an event unfolds must be similar to the rate of production of the newsroom. It is for this reason that events are covered more frequently than social trends;
- **Threshold:** events must have a scope or an impact to become newsworthy. This scope or impact is often defined by the number of dead or the economic impact;
- **Unambiguity:** events must be clearly and easily understood;
- **Meaningfulness:** events must be meaningful to the audience;
- **Unexpectedness:** events are more of a chance of being selected as news if they are unexpected by the audience;
- **Continuity:** once an event makes the news it is more likely to be followed in the future;

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<sup>28</sup> Graber, 92.

<sup>29</sup> Tony Harcup and Deirdre O’Neill, “What is News? Galtung and Ruge Revisited,” *Journalism Studies*, 2:1 (2001): 262.

These industry wide norms are summed up in the five commonly used criteria for selecting news stories, as outlined by Graber in *Mass Media and American Politics*:

- relation to the publication or broadcaster's target audience; as a result, news stories are often told through the eyes of the average person;
- dramatic or salacious factors like war, murder, disaster or scandal;
- elements that are familiar to the audience, like a popular public figure or the experiences of everyday life;
- geographic proximity to the audience, reflecting the supposition that people prefer local news because it relates directly to where they live;
- timeliness and out of the ordinary qualities.<sup>30</sup>

As Paul Manning argues, this focus on breaking news means that stories are more likely to be covered as spontaneous events rather than ongoing developments.<sup>31</sup> Overall, Graber concludes, research has shown that conflict, proximity and timeliness are fundamental when it comes to actual news choices.<sup>32</sup> Manning argues that the western media are most likely to cover news of political elites, power, sex, crime, law and order and stories with strong visuals.<sup>33</sup> Graber sums it up by saying that American journalists "see it as their role to cover exceptional events rather than ordinary ones."<sup>34</sup>

### ***Deadlines***

Deadlines determine the amount of time journalists have to work on a story and, as such, shape how they work. Deadlines, Manning argues, provide both constraints and

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<sup>30</sup> Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media & American Politics*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2006), 99-101.

<sup>31</sup> Manning, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Graber, 102.

<sup>33</sup> Manning, 63.

opportunities.<sup>35</sup> Longer deadlines mean more time to search for informed sources, research background and tackle the many angles of a complex story. Short deadlines leave journalists scrambling for the information and sources that are most readily available. Manning notes, “The danger is that some of the most important procedures in producing authoritative news journalism – gathering background or contextual information – are the first casualties when news deadlines accelerate.”<sup>36</sup> Deadlines also shape the kinds of stories that journalists are able to chase. Television and radio can cover breaking news by taking the reader to the scene as news develops. For daily newspapers, on the other hand, their publication schedule makes the coverage of breaking news difficult, but often allows reporters to take more time with a story and provide a broad, context-rich overview.

Not surprisingly, the round-the-clock news cycle at 24-hour news stations and on-line publications has intensified deadline pressure. The constant need for news has led journalists to “freshen up” their stories by reorganizing old information or highlighting a different angle of the same story, rather than tracking down new developments.<sup>37</sup> The immediacy of publication at online news agencies has also raised concern about the accuracy of these quickly-published reports.<sup>38</sup> Will journalists sacrifice verification in favour of breaking a story first?

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<sup>34</sup> Graber, 91.

<sup>35</sup> Manning, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 58.

## *Sources*

Sources play an integral role in the production of news. At the most basic level, sources are where journalists get information. Beyond that, sources provide the context and commentary that turn a new public policy into a human-interest story, the eye-witness accounts that bring a disaster to life, or the expert opinions that simplify and explain the most complex scientific discoveries. Sources help journalists, but they can also push their own interests and, through that, shape the news. Conrad Smith calls these actions “sponsor activities” or “the efforts of organizations or individuals with vested interests to encourage journalists to package news in ways that serve those interests.”<sup>39</sup>

Due to the pressures of their industry, journalists aren’t always able to choose the source with the most expertise. As Powers and Fico determined, source selection depends on three things: accessibility, reliability, and the source’s ability to explain.<sup>40</sup> Fundamentally, journalists must first be able to contact sources before they can interview them. It is for this reason that formulating strong relationships with sources is one of the key ways through which journalists build stability into their chaotic routine.<sup>41</sup> Maintaining these relationships requires give and take from both parties; for journalists this can mean the inclusion of information that is beneficial to the source but not to the story, or the publication of stories with dubious news value. Journalists depend on

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<sup>38</sup> Mike Gasher, “On-line Journalism,” in *Mediascapes: New Patterns in Canadian Communication*, eds. Paul Attallah and Leslie Regan Shade (Canada: Thomson Nelson, 2002), 265.

<sup>39</sup> Conrad Smith, *Media and Apocalypse: News Coverage of the Yellowstone Forest Fires, Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, and Loma Prieta Earthquake* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 147.

<sup>40</sup> Angela Powers and Frederick Fico, “Influence on Use of Sources at Large U.S. Newspapers,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 15:4 (Fall 1994): 95-96.

<sup>41</sup> Manning, 55.

politicians and other authorities for information, and close relationships between the media and those they cover often develop. The journalist's desire to maintain the relationship can give politicians the opportunity to manipulate journalists to gain favourable reporting.<sup>42</sup> Sources can also take advantage of deadlines by releasing information either well in advance or minutes after the deadlines have passed to alternatively maximize or minimize publicity.<sup>43</sup>

Aside from deliberate attempts to manipulate journalists, sources influence the content of the news simply through their presence. When one source appears in the news many times, this influence is intensified. Studies of source-use have found that journalists, as a whole, interview a select group of sources again and again.<sup>44</sup> The media prefer to speak to elites who represent large groups of people or large organizations. This narrow range of sources includes government officials, politicians and industry leaders. Some sources acquire so much legitimacy as experts that they become "news shapers."<sup>45</sup> A term coined by Lawrence Soley, news shapers are perceived as objective, legitimate experts. Providers of background and context, news shapers are never the focus of stories but are powerful forces when it comes to influencing the slant or angle of the story.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Graber, 97.

<sup>43</sup> Manning, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Karen S. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing: Constructing Political Reality* (Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 219.

### *Industry Pressures*

The media industry is competitive. Despite journalism's wider societal responsibilities, it is a business and readers and viewers are consumers. Journalists operate in a complex power structure that includes the interaction of owners, journalists, news sources, audiences, advertisers, and government authorities.<sup>47</sup> Competition with other media outlets may encourage journalists to cut corners or ignore the professional practice of verification in order to break the story first. Like any business seeking to sell a product, media outlets cannot ignore the findings of market research. Media at all levels must ensure their product appeals to consumers in their key target audience. This can result in the exclusion of controversial, complex, or dull stories in favour of "infotainment" – entertaining stories with little news value.<sup>48</sup> Graber explains, "The criteria newspeople use in story selection relate primarily to audience appeal rather than to the political significance of stories, their educational value, their broad social purposes, or the reporter's own political views."<sup>49</sup>

Financial constraints and pressures from owners and advertisers also have a large impact on how journalists work. Owners appoint editors who hire the reporters. For reporters, conforming to the values and aspirations of those above them on the chain of command can offer rewards.<sup>50</sup> According to a 2004 study by the Pew Center for People

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 220.

<sup>46</sup> As quoted in *ibid*, 200. See also Lawrence Soley, *The News Shapers: The Sources Who Explain the News*.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 97-98.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>50</sup> Eileen Berrington and Ann Jemphrey, "Pressures on the Press: Reflections on Reporting Tragedies," *Journalism* 4 (May 2003): 226.

and the Press, roughly half of local and national media say that pressure from advertisers or corporate owners hurts journalists.<sup>51</sup> This is up from previous surveys conducted in 1995 and 1999. Ownership can also offer opportunities. Influential, well-respected media outlets offer journalists prestige, status, and access to important sources.<sup>52</sup>

Outside of business pressures, journalists are limited in how they work and what they can publish by the courts and legislators. Privacy laws restrict journalists from accessing personal information, and limit their access to sources. “Libel chill” – or the fear of inspiring a defamation lawsuit – may restrict what journalists and publishers publish. While these laws offer a defense against the media, they do come into conflict with freedom of the press laws designed to protect how journalists work and what they publish. This balance, between the media’s rights and the rights of the individual, is both difficult to assess and in constant flux.

### **Journalism in the Disaster Zone**

Many disaster scholars, from Charles Fritz to Joseph Scanlon, have defined disasters as events that threaten a community and disrupt its ability to function and respond to that threat.<sup>53</sup> They are not accidents. Major air, highway, or industrial

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<sup>51</sup> Pew Research Center, “Press Going Too Easy on Bush.”

<sup>52</sup> Berrington and Jemphrey, 226.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Fritz defines a disaster as “an event, concentrated in time and space, in which a society, or a relatively self-sufficient subdivision of society, undergoes severe damage and incurs such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfillment of all or some of the essential functions of the society is prevented.” As quoted in: Dan Nimmo, and James E. Combs, *Nightly Horrors: Crisis Coverage by Television Network News* (Knoxville, Tenn: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 10-11. And: Joseph Scanlon, “The Search for Non-Existent Facts in the Reporting of Disasters,” *Journalism and Mass Communications Educator* (Summer 1998): 46. And: Henry W. Fischer,

accidents may take hundreds of lives but these events largely fail to threaten community safety as a whole.<sup>54</sup> Accidents are typically confined to a specific geographic location, so the community is able to respond. Competing, more inclusive definitions of disasters encompass events that threaten rather than physically impact lives, property or peace of mind.<sup>55</sup> Despite this, the former succinct definition is useful for this study as it emphasizes that a disaster is an event that results in destabilization.

Disasters present a very different set of challenges for journalists.<sup>56</sup> While reporters can arrive at the site of an accident and talk to witnesses to determine what happened, journalists covering disasters have no one location at which to congregate and a comprehensive account of events may take days or weeks to emerge.<sup>57</sup> In addition, reporters in the disaster zone face the same external pressures reporters face everywhere else, but these are intensified. When it comes to journalistic practice, research has shown that disasters can cause alterations in news gathering activities, news processes and decision-making structures.<sup>58</sup> The pressures of deadlines are heightened by unreliable communication technology. Sources are busy with the rescue and relief effort and are hard to track down in the chaos of the disaster zone. Verification is almost impossible due to a lack of reliable information.

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*Response to Disaster: Fact Versus Fiction & Its Perpetuation: The Sociology of Disaster* (New York: University Press of America, 1994), 2-3.

<sup>54</sup> Scanlon, "The Search for Non-Existent Facts," 47.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Nimmo and Combs, 12.

<sup>56</sup> Scanlon, "The Search for Non-Existent Facts," 47.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 47

<sup>58</sup> E.L. Quarantelli and Dennis Wenger, "A Cross-Societal Comparison of Disaster News: Reporting in Japan and the United States," in *Risky Business: Communicating Issues of Science, Risk and Public Policy*, eds. Lee Wilkins and Philip Patterson (NY: Greenwood Press, 1991), 104-105.

Before examining the constraints journalists face in the disaster zone, we must first examine the purpose and importance of disaster coverage.

### *The Role and Importance of Disaster Coverage*

The media play a key role in disasters for one compelling reason: they are in the business of collecting large amounts of information and getting it to the public - fast.<sup>59</sup> Prior to a disaster, information and advice from the media, such as advising evacuation or preparation, can save lives.<sup>60</sup> In these initial stages, the media are a major source of information for public officials who use updated broadcasts to coordinate the public response. Disaster updates can also calm a worried public. Graber explains that even if the media are passing along bad news, information, as opposed to uncertainty, will relieve anxiety.<sup>61</sup> Stories about what local and federal officials are doing to prepare for or respond to a disaster will assure the public that the crisis is in hand.<sup>62</sup> But this depends upon accurate, complete, balanced, and relevant information presented with little harm.<sup>63</sup> However, a 1978 workshop involving members of the media, disaster related public and private agencies, and scholars, concluded that the media can cause harm by causing people to panic.<sup>64</sup> Graber argues that pictures of violence can “produce terrifying

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<sup>59</sup> Graber, 129.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 134.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 134-135.

<sup>63</sup> Deni Elliot, “Tales from the Darkside: Ethical Implications of Disaster Coverage,” in *Bad Tidings*, 163.

<sup>64</sup> Everett C. Parker, “What is Right and Wrong with the Media Coverage of Disaster?” in *Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media*, 237.

multiplication effects.”<sup>65</sup> Pictures of panic or violence on TV are not perceived by viewers as isolated incidents but as characteristic of the disaster zone as a whole.<sup>66</sup>

Disaster coverage also plays a major role in stimulating the relief effort. It’s hardly surprising that images and stories of human need can inspire a humanitarian response. Indeed, despite the demands the media place on local officials in the disaster zone, Scanlon argues their presence is not a curse but a blessing.<sup>67</sup> Coverage of an event can stimulate donations of goods, money, and even blood.<sup>68</sup> This is particularly evident when it comes to the coverage of international disasters. A study by Van Belle determined that for every *New York Times* article published about an international disaster, \$1.2 million US was delivered in aid.<sup>69</sup> By highlighting certain elements of the disaster, media coverage influences both what kind of aid is delivered and how quickly it gets there.<sup>70</sup> When it comes to disasters, the public, Graber states, looks to the media for interpretation.<sup>71</sup> As Van Belle explains, “As an integral part of the social and political response to these events, news media coverage plays a crucial role in the immediate reaction to disaster, the shaping of disaster policy, and even the efforts to prepare for and prevent future disasters.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Graber, 135.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Scanlon, Suzane Alldred, Al Farrell and Angela Prawzick, “Coping with the Media in Disasters: Some Predictable Problems.” *Public Administration Review* 45 (January 1985): 123.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 123.

<sup>69</sup> Douglas A. Van Belle, “New York Times and Network TV News Coverage of Foreign Disasters: The Significance of the Insignificant Variables,” *Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly* 77 (2000): 50-51.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 50-51.

<sup>71</sup> Graber, 130.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 50-51.

### *Journalists in the Disaster Zone*

Media coverage of disasters is clearly more than simply a recording of events; it actively molds the way the disaster unfolds and the way it will be remembered. But, like all journalism, disaster coverage is mediated by the processes and pressures that are inherent in reporting the news. Indeed, as many studies show, the effects of these factors are often exaggerated. Before exploring the specific factors that have been identified as shaping disaster coverage, and revisiting some of the factors that are explored in the first part of this chapter, I shall briefly sketch an overview of disaster coverage and the way the media typically act.

Compared to earthquakes or tidal waves, hurricanes are predictable and relatively frequent disasters. Often national and international weather services track the growth of the storm and project where it is likely to hit land. For the American media, any hurricane that is expected to hit national soil is a big story. For those media outlets located in areas frequently besieged by hurricanes, such as the southeastern United States, hurricanes are routine disasters and newsrooms are often well-equipped. Broadcasters have contingency plans in place to ensure they can stay on the air despite power shortages and high winds, and news vans are equipped with food, water, road maps, and other emergency supplies. Background stories advising residents how to prepare are often pre-packaged and ready to be published or broadcast.<sup>73</sup> Some companies even have

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<sup>73</sup> Julie M. Moos, "From Katrina to Rita: Coverage Q & A," *Poynter Online*, September 22, 2005, [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org) (18 Nov. 2005).

out-of-state phone lines designed to keep employees and their families connected throughout the storm.<sup>74</sup>

Journalists arrive on the scene with little warning and little time to prepare. This convergence of people ties up both physical and virtual communication routes and the limited time of local and emergency officials.<sup>75</sup> It's hardly surprising that many of the challenges of working in the disaster zone stem from the logistical problems of working outside the newsroom. Disaster zones rarely come equipped with an adequate number of rental cars, hotel rooms, or telephones.<sup>76</sup> Hurricanes and earthquakes down power and telephone lines. Blackouts immobilize computers and downed relay towers cut mobile phone service. Journalists must not only make sure their basic needs are met but they must ensure that they have the means to file their story, all under the ever-looming pressure of the deadline.

### ***Disaster Coverage: A Problem with Accuracy***

Disasters are clearly a challenge for a journalist to cover. The community-wide upset that defines a disaster means that a journalist's normal newsgathering techniques may no longer be adequate.<sup>77</sup> Communications scholars Berrington and Jemphrey argue,

Journalists arriving at the scene of a disaster have little time to prepare. They are expected to react as events unfold... The need to access material and produce copy to tight deadlines may necessitate overriding personal

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick, 124. and Joseph Scanlon, "Research about the Mass Media and Disaster: Never (Well Hardly Ever) The Twain Shall Meet," no date, <http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/downloads/ScanlonJournalism.pdf> (15 March 2005).

<sup>76</sup> Smith, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Berrington and Jemphrey, 229.

reservations, for example, approaching bereaved families in the immediate aftermath, or relying on rumour in the absence of confirmation or denial by those responsible for information management.<sup>78</sup>

For the same reasons, Conrad Smith adds that while journalists are well trained to cover routine news, they are ill-equipped for covering disasters.<sup>79</sup> As a result, stories are “more fragmented and less informative.”<sup>80</sup>

The challenge of tracking down reliable, accurate information is compounded by the widespread uncertainty that follows a disaster. In the immediate aftermath of any catastrophe, accurate information is scarce and confusion is rampant.<sup>81</sup> Graber argues that next to reaching the disaster site, the chief problem journalists face is getting accurate information.<sup>82</sup> Scanlon explains that both officials and the media need to recognize that “missing information is not a function of reporter competence or official concealment.”<sup>83</sup> Accurate information is hard to come by because first responders are often victims themselves and emergency workers, when they arrive on scene, are too busy to keep accurate records or brief the media.<sup>84</sup> Compounding this problem, studies have found that in the chaos of the disaster zone, where journalists are forced to abandon their standard news-making practices, validity checks are ignored.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>79</sup> Smith, x.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, x.

<sup>81</sup> Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick, 129.

<sup>82</sup> Graber, 132.

<sup>83</sup> Scanlon, “The Search for Non-Existent Facts,” 52.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid,” 45.

<sup>85</sup> Quarantelli and Wenger in *Risky Business*, 102.

Despite this lack of reliable information in the initial days of a disaster, news coverage rises sharply and audiences multiply.<sup>86</sup> Disasters are huge news stories. This is particularly apparent on 24-hour news stations, where regular programming is often preempted in favour of disaster coverage. Given this continuous coverage, it's hardly surprising that journalists report disasters as unfolding stories, not free-standing events.<sup>87</sup> This clashes with the reporting of routine news which, as explained above, is often framed as episodic events rather than developing stories.<sup>88</sup> For television news, the disaster story is thus "one that runs night after night, simplifies complex details around a few easily grasped symbols, and becomes almost a mini-series."<sup>89</sup> Much like the constant deadlines of on-line journalism or 24-hour news networks, disasters are continuous stories with continuous deadlines.

In the disaster zone, where information is scarce and the media's appetite is limitless, the same few facts are often repeated endlessly.<sup>90</sup> Far from satiating the media's appetite, the repetition of old information just compounds the pressure to find new information. Graber notes that "the unrelenting pressure for fresh accounts often tempts media personnel to interview unreliable sources who may lend a local touch but confuse the situation by reporting unverified or irrelevant information."<sup>91</sup> Elliott argues, "When faced with the choice between reporting uncertain information or reporting nothing, journalists often report what they have."<sup>92</sup> Case studies have also found that this

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<sup>86</sup> Graber, 131.

<sup>87</sup> Wilkins, in *Bad Tidings*, 22.

<sup>88</sup> Manning, 63.

<sup>89</sup> Nimmo, and Combs, 18.

<sup>90</sup> Graber, 131.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

<sup>92</sup> Elliot in *Bad Tidings*, 167.

lack of information can lead to speculation and rumours.<sup>93</sup> Rather than excusing inaccurate reporting in the disaster zone, this should serve as a cautionary warning for journalists. As Parker explains, “The very nature of disaster calls for self restraint and careful factual verification in reporting.”<sup>94</sup>

One glaring example of inaccuracy is the inflation of the numerical estimates used to assess the consequences of a disaster. The number of dead or wounded and the estimated cost of rebuilding are facts and figures that make up almost every journalist’s report. These essential elements of disaster coverage are also the most difficult – often impossible – information to confirm in the early days.<sup>95</sup> History shows that the numbers of dead and injured are frequently overestimated.<sup>96</sup> For example, while coverage of preparations for Hurricane Andrew were accurate, reports of evacuation rates, shelter populations, and the gravity of weather changes were all too high.<sup>97</sup>

When it comes to telling the complex story of a disaster, aspiring to accuracy in the literal sense may obscure larger elements of the news story.<sup>98</sup> Referring specifically to the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Prince William Sound, Conrad Smith says, “By implying that the accident could effectively be mitigated with technology, journalists trivialized its real impact and obscured the risks inherent in shipping oil by sea.”<sup>99</sup> As noted above,

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<sup>93</sup> Berrington and Jemphrey, 242.

<sup>94</sup> Parker in Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media, 237.

<sup>95</sup> Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick, 129.

<sup>96</sup> Graber, 132.

<sup>97</sup> Fischer, *Response to Disaster*, 38.

<sup>98</sup> Smith, 185-6.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, 186.

accuracy is not only getting the facts right; it's presenting those facts in the appropriate context.

Not all disaster reporting is inaccurate and not all media, whether television or print, local or national, make the same mistakes. But inaccurate reporting rarely happens in isolation. Often these baseless statements are picked up and carried by other news outlets.<sup>100</sup> The margin for error is small. As Graber explains, "If news sources or reporters make mistakes they are spread by all media."<sup>101</sup> Widespread cooperation of reporters in the disaster zone means that inaccurate information is often spread before it can reach the public.<sup>102</sup> This problem is compounded through information sharing systems like wire services – which not only distribute their own stories but also the stories of their member newspapers – and agreements between broadcasters to share video footage.<sup>103</sup> As I will explore later in the comparison of broadcast and print reporting of disasters, no media outlet operates in a vacuum. They heavily influence and are heavily influenced by each other.

### *Sources*

After a disaster, the media and public officials are in unique positions. The dearth of reliable, accurate information leaves both groups in a competition to define the event. Local officials – the media's sources and the ones initially in control of the flow of

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<sup>100</sup> Graber, 135.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>102</sup> Scanlon, "Research about the Mass Media and Disaster."

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

information – have the advantage. Graber argues that crises offer the authorities the opportunity “to shape perceptions of the nature and extent of the crisis, its causes and appropriate remedies.”<sup>104</sup> In an argument reminiscent of the old cliché, “keep your friends close and your enemies closer,” Scanlon contends that in order to maintain control of information during a crisis, public officials should make media relations a central part of disaster planning.<sup>105</sup> But this privileged position held by local officials is both unstable and fleeting. If the information isn’t forthcoming from the authorities, the media will look elsewhere.<sup>106</sup>

Like sources in general, sources in the disaster zone are not benign. As noted above, Scanlon argues local officials have much to gain by controlling the flow of information through the media. Lee Wilkins adds, “There is ample evidence to suggest that officials want to manipulate information and public sentiment about disasters.”<sup>107</sup> Local officials wishing to speed federal aid may stress the magnitude of the disaster and the number of lives lost. Those wishing instead to bolster their own careers may downplay the damage, emphasizing instead the community’s preparedness for the disaster and quick response.

In the chaos and information vacuum of the disaster zone, gatekeepers are forced to adapt their normal practices. Studies of American and Japanese broadcast coverage

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<sup>104</sup> Graber, 136-137.

<sup>105</sup> Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick, 129.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 128.

<sup>107</sup> Lee Wilkins, “Conclusion: Accidents Will Happen,” in *Bad Tidings*, 164.

have found that gatekeeping is diminished in disaster coverage.<sup>108</sup> Quarantelli explains, “During normal times, the gatekeeping process in all media involves a number of stages or steps in which incumbents in various mass media organizations mould and modify the content of a news story so that eventually it is a collective product... [G]atekeeping is truncated during disasters with the news process being simplified and skipping some of the normal editing steps and stages.”<sup>109</sup> In general, this diminished gatekeeping results in a greater role for the average citizen or victim of the disaster. However, recent studies have found that truncated gatekeeping is mainly a problem of the broadcast media. Newspapers, in comparison, experience more elaborate and complex gatekeeping.<sup>110</sup> Scanlon explains that reporters at head office are often assigned the task of re-writing copy from the disaster zone. The articles are then further reviewed and changed by editors and copy editors.<sup>111</sup> Quarantelli adds that newspaper staff are often assigned non-traditional roles as the focus of the organization turns solely to news production.<sup>112</sup>

As studies of television coverage of Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta Earthquake found, the majority of “faces” on TV are those of average citizens.<sup>113</sup> In comparison, a similar study by the same authors found that the “voices” in the newspapers were largely those of elected officials, experts, and spokespeople, with

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<sup>108</sup> Quarantelli and Wenger, in *Risky Business*, 102. and Lynne Masel Walters and Susanna Hornig, “Faces in the News: Network Television News Coverage of Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta Earthquake,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 37 (spring 1993): 221.

<sup>109</sup> E.L. Quarantelli, “Local Mass Media Operations in Disasters in the USA,” *Disaster Prevention and Management* 5:5 (1996): 8.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>111</sup> Scanlon, “Research about the Mass Media and Disaster.”

<sup>112</sup> Quarantelli, 7.

<sup>113</sup> Masel Walters and Hornig, “Faces in the News,” 228.

victims and witnesses making up only 10 per cent.<sup>114</sup> Another study on newspaper coverage of Hurricane Andrew found that though average people comprised the largest number of sources, they didn't occupy prominent positions.<sup>115</sup> Here, the increased gatekeeping of the print media meant that the average person was presented as an object of pity, while experts and officials were cited in the context of their expertise.<sup>116</sup>

This prominence of officials can result in a “command post view” of a disaster, a term coined by Quarantelli. “Command post” refers to the tendency to present disaster through information gained from local officials at the local emergency centre.<sup>117</sup> This reliance on traditional sources results in media coverage that presents a “formal bureaucratic view of the situation”<sup>118</sup> and the marginalization of actions of disaster relief agencies or local community organizations.<sup>119</sup>

For accuracy, it is not the types of sources that are important, but how they are used. As Conrad Smith's research shows, the use of inappropriate sources is one of the major weaknesses of disaster coverage.<sup>120</sup> He found that disaster articles often employed local residents to comment on the environmental impact of an oil spill or the biological function of a forest fire, rather than ecologists or scientists.<sup>121</sup> Walters and Hornig's study

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<sup>114</sup> Hornig, Walters and Templin, “Voices in the News,” 37.

<sup>115</sup> Michael B. Salwen, “New of Hurricane Andrew: The Agenda of Sources and the Sources' Agenda,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 72 (Winter 1995): 835.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 835.

<sup>117</sup> Quarantelli, 8.

<sup>118</sup> Quarantelli, in *Bad Tidings*, 7.

<sup>119</sup> Quarantelli, 7.

<sup>120</sup> Smith, x.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

of source use in television coverage of the Loma Prieta Earthquake and Hurricane Hugo also found that average people were often misused as sources.<sup>122</sup> The authors note:

They are discussing damages, making predictions, and assessing injuries, topics that more appropriately fall within the purview of engineers, preparedness specialists, and health care professionals. The fact that these experts make up relatively few of the faces in the news may lead to public confusion about the disaster and its aftermath.<sup>123</sup>

### ***Disaster Myths***

Disaster myths, held by politicians, journalists and the public alike, stem from a belief that people will panic and act only in self-interest during a crisis. These myths include the belief that issuing warnings will lead to panic; that victims will be paralyzed by shock and unable to help themselves or others; that emergency workers are able to rise above the chaos and stay calm and focused; and that disasters lead to looting.<sup>124</sup> However, research indicates that victims react well in times of stress. The rioting, looting, and panic that the public, the media, and local officials expect often fails to materialize.<sup>125</sup> Scanlon says the prevalence of these myths won't affect how victims react to a disaster, but does shape how emergency workers respond.

According to Quarantelli, disaster myths appear in only 10 per cent of stories, but many more stories, through the way they are written – including the types of issues

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<sup>122</sup> Masel Walters and Hornig, "Faces in the News," 229.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>124</sup> Scanlon, "The Search for Non-Existent Facts," 46.

<sup>125</sup> Quarantelli, in *Bad Tidings*, 6. And: Scanlon, "The Search for Non-Existent Facts," 48.

addressed and sources used – can perpetuate these behavioural expectations.<sup>126</sup> As other research has found, myths can shape how media cover the event: journalists approach the story with the expectation of either reporting deviant behaviour (looting, price gouging, etc.) or reporting on the measures local officials are taking to guard against those.<sup>127</sup> Reports about looting are common because the media play up stories about theft or extra security.<sup>128</sup> “During disasters,” Scanlon argues, “the media focuses on crime stories they would normally ignore.”<sup>129</sup> Research has shown it is not just reporters who can hinder news reports by promoting disaster myths. Accuracy, Fischer notes, is also dependent on the extent to which local officials subscribe to myths.<sup>130</sup> For example, local officials who expect looting may influence news reports by telling reporters what they have done to prepare or how they are planning on combating it, thus turning the journalist’s focus towards an event that has not and may not happen.

If these myths are almost universally held, then why does it fall to the journalist to dispel them? We return to the journalist’s responsibility to truth. Conrad Smith writes,

Journalists cannot tell stories without drawing on the cultural experiences and perceptions shared by their audiences. The stereotypes, myths, and distorted images that sometimes appear in news accounts are often the same as those widely shared in society. While it is not fair to hold journalists accountable for all of these mistakes, one of the functions of the search for truth, the idealistic goal of a journalist, is to reveal stereotypes, dispel myths, and transcend the kind of distortions that make better news stories but obscure important details.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Quarantelli, 9.

<sup>127</sup> Fischer, *Response to Disaster*, 69.

<sup>128</sup> Scanlon, “The Search for Non-Existent Facts,” 48.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>130</sup> Fischer, *Response to Disaster*, 39.

<sup>131</sup> Smith, 150.

If these news stories are indeed creating new disaster myths, or building on old disaster myths about how people behave, there are significant consequences. Singer and Endreny, in their study of media coverage of risks, argue that “what the mass media reports about hazards – which they select for emphasis and what information they present about them – becomes crucial in shaping public perceptions of hazards and their attendant risks.”<sup>132</sup>

### ***Rumour***

Accurate information should be the basis of every news report. In the disaster zone, where confirmed facts are scarce and the media’s continuous deadlines mean continued demand for information, rumours flourish, gain currency and sometimes become news. As Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick explain, “Unless emergency officials come up with something to satisfy media appetites, the media will find things to report. These may be offbeat stories or items that amount to made-up or created news.”<sup>133</sup> Research has shown that the number of rumours in circulation depends upon the importance of the subject and the ambiguity of the information available.<sup>134</sup> In the disaster zone, people need information in order to deal with their immediate needs, but often the normal channels of information are destroyed.<sup>135</sup> As Tamotsu Shibutani argues, in the disaster zone rumours “invariably flourish.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Eleanor Singer, and Phyllis M. Endreny, *Reporting on Risk: How the Mass Media Portray Accident, Diseases, Disasters and Other Hazards* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1993), 139.

<sup>133</sup> Scanlon, Alldred, Farrell and Prawzick, 128.

<sup>134</sup> Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York: Russel & Russel, 1965), 33.

<sup>135</sup> Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News* (NY: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966), 33.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

Allport and Postman, authors of *The Psychology of Rumour*, define a rumour as “a specific...proposition for belief passed along from person to person usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present.”<sup>137</sup> Rumours are not wholly without a factual basis. Allport and Postman note, “In rumour there is often some residual particle of news, a ‘kernel of truth,’ but in the course of transmission it has become so overlaid with fanciful elaboration that it is no longer separable or detectable.”<sup>138</sup>

By examining how rumours change and mutate as they are passed on we can see how rumours can permeate the media by providing variations of the same story. Rumours are “leveled,” meaning the amount of detail decreases rapidly as the rumour is spread.<sup>139</sup> Rumours are also sharpened, when one salient element of the story is retained.<sup>140</sup> Sharpening can seize small elements of a story, like “*odd, preservative wording*,” which having appeared early in the series, catches the attention of each successive listener and is often passed on in preference to other details intrinsically more important to the story.”<sup>141</sup> When some elements of the story are dropped, those that remain necessarily gain in emphasis and importance.<sup>142</sup> Rumours are also shaped by assimilation. With every retelling of the rumour, a person works to make all the details fit within a theme or specific expectation. Assimilation can thus favour the inclusion of elements of the story that fit the theme over those that don’t. Allport and Postman write that “leveling and sharpening, of course, do not occur haphazardly, but take place in

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<sup>137</sup> Allport and Postman, ix.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 75-76.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 86.

essential conformity with the past experience and present attitudes of the rumour spreaders.”<sup>143</sup>

As transmitters of rumours, the media are more than simply another link in the chain. As Shibutani argues, these institutional channels of communication are often assumed to be accurate.<sup>144</sup> As a result, when the media transmit a rumour not only does the number of people who hear it increase dramatically, but it endows the rumour with unforeseen credibility.<sup>145</sup> Rumours disseminated to the media also have staying power. According to Scanlon, they usually persist until they are contradicted.<sup>146</sup>

### *Television versus Print Coverage*<sup>147</sup>

In the early days of a disaster, television attracts the largest audiences because of the media’s natural ability to report breaking news.<sup>148</sup> Television presents the first images of the disaster and has the first chance to define the story.<sup>149</sup> Newspapers lag due to their publication cycle.<sup>150</sup> However, there is evidence to suggest that the coverage is

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<sup>141</sup> *Emphasis in original.* Ibid, 89.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>144</sup> Shibutani, 42.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>146</sup> Joseph Scanlon, “Research about the Mass Media and Disaster.”

<sup>147</sup> Despite the prevalence of online journalism in today’s media it is not examined here. Studies have found that the online news media can catalyze the formation of a disaster-response community in cyberspace (Kris Kodrich and Melinda Laituri, “The Formation of a Disaster Community in Cyberspace: The Role of Online News Media after the 2001 Gujarat Earthquake,” *Convergence: The Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 11:3 (Autumn 2005): 40.) Though many studies have examined the medium’s potential for interactive disaster relief, few examine online journalism or the larger relationship between print, broadcast and online coverage.

<sup>148</sup> Graber, 130.

<sup>149</sup> Smith, 152.

<sup>150</sup> Graber, 130.

similar across both media, as television sets the standard and the print industry follows.<sup>151</sup> Print journalists may feel compelled to tailor their copy to match the visuals broadcast by television.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, as television news consumers themselves, print journalists are guided by television coverage when structuring their own stories.<sup>153</sup>

Despite these similarities in what is covered, there are differences in the quality of coverage produced by the two types of media. Conrad Smith found that, on the whole, newspapers are better at conveying fact while television is better at conveying experience.<sup>154</sup> The print media, Graber agrees, are generally able to do a more thorough job than radio or television because they can pull together various events and fit them into a coherent story. Newspapers can include more research and more background than television stories, along with more information in general.<sup>155</sup> Where the broadcast media can instantly cover a story, the print media, with their capacity for background and analytical coverage, excel in the post-impact period.<sup>156</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Journalists in any disaster zone face challenges that complicate news gathering and news writing. Accurate reporting is both challenging and essential. The information vacuum of the disaster zone, the prevalence of rumours and myths, the breakdown of communication systems, and demanding deadlines may make it seem impossible. This

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<sup>151</sup> Smith, 152.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 154.

was certainly true for journalists assigned to New Orleans in the days following Hurricane Katrina. Many blamed the inaccurate reporting on the breakdown of the city's telephone system, claiming this made it difficult for both reporters and officials to relay up-to-date, accurate information.<sup>157</sup> The hurricane and flood took out New Orleans-based mobile phones and severed email communications by downing local internet servers.<sup>158</sup> Journalists were prevented from getting reliable information through intimidation and harassment by those entrusted with keeping order in the storm-ravaged city. Reporters and photographers said they were threatened with guns by local police unless they retreated from the scene. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) prohibited firefighters from speaking to the press and issued a controversial ban on the photographing of dead bodies.<sup>159</sup>

But are disaster zones necessarily a no-win situation for journalists? While previous studies have effectively outlined the problems of working in the disaster zone, few have formulated guidelines and methods of practice that would link the academic study examined here to the practical work of journalists. By drawing from this research and pairing it with an examination of specific inaccuracies from a specific disaster, I not

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<sup>155</sup> Graber, 133.

<sup>156</sup> Quarantelli, 8.

<sup>157</sup> Susannah Rosenblatt and James Rainey, "Katrina Takes Toll on Truth, News Accuracy," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 Sept. 2005: page A:16.

<sup>158</sup> Bill Mitchell, "Covering Katrina: About as Bad As Can Be," *The Poynter Institute*, 2 Sept. 2005, [www.mediachannel.org](http://www.mediachannel.org) (18 Nov. 2005).

<sup>159</sup> CNN fought the ban and it was overturned. Melanie Marquez, "Taking Journalists by Storm," *The News Media & The Law*, 29:4 (Fall 2005): 6-9. And: Melanie Marquez, "Zero Access Adds Up to Prior Restraint," *The News Media & The Law*, 29:4 (Fall 2005): 8-9 See also: NBC anchor Brian William's story of his confrontation with local police in New Orleans on his blog at: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9216831/> (18 Nov. 2005).

only show how these inaccuracies were reported, but also formulate guidelines that will, I hope, contribute to the creation of accurate disaster coverage in the future.

## CHAPTER 4

### INVESTIGATING THE INCIDENTS

This study does not trace the transition from rumour to “fact,” but it will provide a focused look at how three rumours about social breakdown in New Orleans were reported. By examining the original news stories that covered these incidents – the rape and murder of a young girl, sniper attacks on rescue helicopters, and piles of bodies in the Superdome and convention centre – I will determine the transparency of the reports. How clearly did journalists convey to the public what they knew and what they didn’t? What kinds of sources were named in these articles? Did the public get any indication that journalists questioned their sources and/or sought confirmation from others? In order to answer these questions, I will question both the *contents* and the *form* of the text. In doing so, I will identify trends in coverage that indicate an increased likelihood of inaccurate reporting.

As detailed in Chapter 1, this study will be presented in two sections. First, I will employ quantitative content analysis to examine the *content* of these articles. Special attention will be paid to the types of sources used and how they are used. In addition, I will examine how both the general and baseless rumours were variously reported in these articles.<sup>1</sup> Not only did each rumour take a variety of forms in the coverage, but each was also presented with differing degrees of accuracy and transparency. These variations –

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<sup>1</sup> These terms were first defined in Chapter 1. The *baseless rumours* are those that refer *specifically* to rape and murder at the Superdome and convention centre, piles of bodies at either shelter and sniper attacks on rescue helicopters, while the *general rumours* may encompass elements of the baseless rumours, but they are much broader. The *baseless rumours* are generally understood to be false, while the *general rumours* range from truthful to unverifiable accounts.

and the range of reporting style they imply – will be discussed further in the following chapter. The second part of this study, reported in Chapter 5, will focus on a linguistic analysis of the *form* of the text. I will specifically examine the transparency of the reports and determine the extent to which these three baseless rumours were reported as solid fact.

## Method

Content analysis was originally created as a value-free, scientific method of inquiry.<sup>2</sup> As Deacon et al. explain, “The purpose of content analysis is to quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts, and the statistics used to make broader inferences about the processes and politics of representation.”<sup>3</sup> At the simplest level, content analysis involves the counting of elements within a text. It can create what Brian Winston calls “maps,” the identification of trends, patterns, or absences over large samples.<sup>4</sup> But, as Deacon et al. are careful to point out, “this big picture comes at a cost...the methods tend to skate over complex and varied processes of meaning-making within texts.”<sup>5</sup> It is a means to quantify the surface-level content of a text and does not take into account latent meaning, or the meaning that one derives from reading into a text. It is most effective when used to provide the answer to specific questions.

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<sup>2</sup> David Deacon et al., *Researching Communications: a Practical Guide to Methods in Media and Cultural Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 115.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Winston, “On Counting the Wrong Things,” as quoted in Deacon et al., 117.

<sup>5</sup> Deacon et al., 117. *emphasis in original.*

In this study, the questions are intended to show how the rumours were presented and which sources were used to back them up:

1. Was the rumour denied or reported as either a rumour, an unconfirmed event, or as a factual event?
2. How often were sources used?
3. What sources were used? Were they quoted or paraphrased or did they appear in the text due to their actions rather than their words?
4. What role did sources play in the article? Did they testify to the veracity of the incident, question it or deny it?
5. What variations of these rumours appeared in the sample?

## Sample

I have chosen to examine articles from large U.S. urban and national newspapers in order to ensure that findings are nationally relevant. I will also examine the major local paper from the disaster zone, the *Times-Picayune*. With an estimated readership over half a million, it is New Orleans's major daily paper.<sup>6</sup> My sample will include all of the major American news and business papers as indexed by Factiva (see Appendix I).<sup>7</sup> These include both the American newspapers with the largest circulation – including such national papers as *USA Today* (with an estimated circulation of 2,590,695), the *New York Times* (1,682,644), and the *Washington Post* (965,919) – and large urban papers, such as

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<sup>6</sup> 2003-2004 data from the Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2005, <http://www.accessabc.com> (10 Dec. 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Factiva is a Dow Jones and Reuters company. A database of newspaper, broadcasting and wire content, Factiva contains the records of more than 9,000 sources.

the *Los Angeles Times* (1,247,588) and the *Chicago Tribune* (950,582).<sup>8</sup> Further, my sample includes such major news and business magazines as *Time* (4,114,137) and *Forbes* (921,400).<sup>9</sup> This sample covers a circulation of more than 30 million and a geographic area that encompasses most of the continental U.S., from Miami to Seattle and from Boston to San Diego.<sup>10</sup> While it doesn't include major American wire services like Reuters or the Associated Press, many of the articles in my sample contain information and text from these services. A list of newspapers is found in Appendix I.

This sample also includes some online content. While the focus of this study was exclusively on print reporting, some online content is necessary because of the impact the hurricane had on newspaper production in the region. Shortly after the hurricane hit, many of the *Times-Picayune* staff relocated to Baton Rouge. Following the hurricane, the paper was primarily published through online articles and blogs. On Friday, September 2, the newspaper was once again published in its usual hard-copy form.<sup>11</sup>

While these papers cover a large number of American readers and a vast geographic area, it is important to note that the national scope of this sample and its relevance to the American media as a whole comes from the inclusion of the *New York*

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<sup>8</sup> Circulation numbers from the Reader profiles published by the Audit Bureau of Circulations, ABC's FAS-FAX ending September 30, 2005, <http://www.accessabc.com/reader/top150.htm> (10 Dec. 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Media Distribution Services top circulating magazines, 2003, <http://www.mdsconnect.com/topcirculation.htm> (10 Dec. 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Circulation data from the Reader profiles published by the Audit Bureau of Circulations and Media Distribution Services.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Mitchell, "Covering Katrina: About as Bad As Can Be," *The Poynter Institute*, 2 Sept. 2005, [www.mediachannel.org](http://www.mediachannel.org) (18 Nov. 2005).

*Times* and *Washington Post*, two papers reputed to be national agenda-setters.<sup>12</sup>

According to Rogers and Dearing, “The *New York Times* is considered particularly important in setting the daily news agenda for other mass media in the U.S.”<sup>13</sup> Many editors and journalists start their day by reading the *New York Times*.<sup>14</sup> The *Washington Post* is considered to be another “elite” paper with specific influence when it comes to setting the agenda for national news.<sup>15</sup>

The sample covers the first two weeks of the disaster (August 29 to September 12, 2005). This time frame includes the initial chaos following the hurricane, the rescue effort and the beginning of the clean-up. It is also the time when the rumours were most prevalent in the press. By the end of the second week of the disaster, journalists had begun questioning if there was any truth behind these stories.

I compiled my sample by using a series of key words designed to cast as wide a net as possible (see Appendix II). I then rejected all articles that were not relevant. Articles that contained the key words were excluded if they did not report either of the three incidents. For example, an article about conditions in New Orleans may describe bodies floating in household attics and the lack of medical aid at the Superdome; while the article contains both the key words “bodies” and “Superdome,” it is clear the article does not report on bodies *at* the Superdome.

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<sup>12</sup> Josh Greenberg and Graham Knight, “Framing Sweatshops: Nike, Global Production, and the American News Media,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1:2 (June 2004): 156.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Singer, and Phyllis M. Endreny, *Reporting on Risk: How the Mass Media Portray Accident, Diseases, Disasters and Other Hazards* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1993), 171.

<sup>14</sup> Karen S. Johnson-Cartee, *News Narratives and News Framing: Constructing Political Reality* (Toronto: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 231.

Once this was completed, I had compiled an appropriate sample size given both my time and space restrictions. I found 57 articles about snipers, 64 articles about rapes and/or murder at the Superdome and convention centre and 53 articles about piles of bodies in those shelters. While the majority of these articles were news stories, some were editorials, columns or fact boxes.

### **Content Analysis: Results**

***Question 1:*** Was the rumour denied or reported as either a rumour, an unconfirmed event, or as a factual event?

Information can be conveyed to the reader in various ways. Through the words chosen, a journalist can construct an event as something that *has* happened, something people *say* has happened, or something that people *believe* to have happened.

Determining broadly how these incidents were reported will provide both a rich context for the subsequent linguistic analysis and an overview of the reporting of these general and baseless rumours.

Because content analysis provides a superficial examination of the text, I focused solely on manifest content. For example, I looked for the obvious identification of the information as a “rumour” or the explicit statement that a source could not verify the

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Singer and Endreny, 171. See also Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2001), 6.

information. I classified the reporting of these incidents according to the following terms<sup>16</sup>:

- **Reported:** When one of these incidents was reported as something that happened or something that someone said happened then it was considered to be “reported.” The reporter did not question the information and sources were not always used.
  - *Example:* “Evacuees said that seven dead bodies littered the third floor. They said a 14-year-old girl had been raped.”<sup>17</sup>
  - *Example:* “Media personnel sent out cries for help and helicopters started airlifting the most critical patients off the roof on Thursday – until snipers struck.”<sup>18</sup>
- **Reporter Accounts** (variation of “reported”): Reporter accounts refers to the reporting of information through first-person narrative or the journalist’s own on-scene observations. Reporters were determined to be on-scene if “New Orleans” was listed as a placeline or through the writing style. Sources are rarely used.
  - *Example:* “I was skeptical of the claim and a man took me to a massive refrigerator in the center’s kitchen. Eight bodies were inside, though there was no power to keep the refrigerator on. I found two corpses around the back, on a loading dock.”<sup>19</sup>
- **Illustrates/Context** (variation of “reported”): Incidents were often reported solely to illustrate a larger point or provide context for a personal story. Here, the incident is not the main focus of the article and is often included only to add colour and interest. It is mentioned in passing and sources are rarely used.
  - *Example:* “After a hot shower, a good night’s sleep and breakfast, after they called faraway relatives, filled their prescriptions, washed clothes, visited doctors, stocked up on socks and underwear, the rescue workers began to revive. They pieced together their experiences – the screaming wind, the rising waters, the snipers, the dying babies – trying to figure out just how they landed here.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Articles that contained more than one reference to the rumour were classified multiple times (i.e. an article could be counted under both “report” and “question”).

<sup>17</sup> James Dao and N.R. Kleinfield, “More Troops and Aid Reach New Orleans,” *New York Times*, 3 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>18</sup> Tamer El-Ghobashy, “A Boat out of Hell. Finally, Festering Hosp Cleared,” *New York Daily News*, 3 Sept. 2005: 7.

<sup>19</sup> Tamer El-Ghobashy, “Hunger and Rage. American City Become a Third World Nightmare,” *New York Daily News*, 2 Sept. 2005: 4.

<sup>20</sup> Gina Paccalo, “Katrina’s Aftermath; Their Turn to be Rescued,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 Sept. 2005: page E:1.

- **Unconfirmed Reports:** The reporter clearly identifies the reports as unconfirmed.
  - *Example:* “Witnesses said there were at least 22 bodies inside the center. Two corpses could be seen lying in a hallway, but there was no way to independently confirm the body count.”<sup>21</sup>
- **Rumours:** The reporter explicitly states that the information originates from rumours or stories.
  - *Example:* “After two nights shielding the baby’s eyes from dead bodies at the feces-infested Superdome, they set out for the convention center, where rumours of rapes and worse left them taking turns sleeping on the floor in fear for their children’s safety.”<sup>22</sup>
- **Questioned/Denied:** The reporter either contradicts the rumour or presents contradictory information that questions its accuracy.
  - *Example:* “The Federal Aviation Administration and military officials have cast doubt on the story of the rescue helicopter that came under fire outside Kenner Memorial Hospital on Aug. 31.”<sup>23</sup>

**Table 1: Incidents Reported**

	<b>Rape/Murder</b>	<b>Bodies</b>	<b>Sniper</b>
<b>Reported</b>			
<b>Illustrates/Context</b>	8	22	22
	13%	42%	39%
<b>Reporter Account</b>	0	7	0
<b>Total:</b>	45	49	52
	83%	92%	91%
<b>Unconfirmed Reports</b>	7	4	2
<b>Rumors</b>	6	0	0
<b>Questioned/Denied</b>	2	0	2
<b>Number of articles in sample</b>	64	53	57

<sup>21</sup> Paul H.B. Shin, “Thugs’ Reign of Terror. Marauders Rampage after Troops Leave, Say Victims,” *New York Daily News*, 4 Sept. 2005: 7.

<sup>22</sup> Jodi Wilgoren, “In Tale of Two Families, a Chasm Between Haves and Have-Nots,” *The New York Times*, 5 Sept. 200: page A:1.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Shea, “Up for Grabs: Sociologists Questions How Much Looting and Mayhem Really Took Place in New Orleans,” *The Boston Globe*, 11 Sept. 2005: page E:1.

The results of my study indicate that these incidents are overwhelmingly reported without qualification (see Table 1). On average, nine out of 10 articles report the incidents as true while only one out of 10 identify them as either unconfirmed reports or rumours. Significantly, of the articles that simply report an incident, one-third cite the incident to flesh out a larger point or provide context. In referring to – rather than reporting on – the incident, journalists were including little to no transparency while simultaneously emphasizing veracity of the information.

Variations appear in how the three rumours are reported. Every article that explicitly uses the term rumour is about the rape and/or murder. All articles that explicitly refer to the reporter's first-hand observations are about the piles of bodies around the convention centre and Superdome. Given that reporters passed through the disaster zone rather than bunking down with evacuees at the city's major shelters, this is hardly surprising. While sniper attacks, rapes and murders are episodic events reporters would have been unlikely to see first hand, the presence of bodies at the city's major shelters was, according to these reports, a constant feature and easy to observe. Thus, the reporting variations could relate to how journalists accessed the information. But, while this explains why stories of rape and murder were often presented as rumours, it does not explain why snipers attacks were not. This will be discussed further in the linguistic analysis.

**Question 2:** How often were sources used?**Table 2:** Incidents Reported, No Source Used

	<b>Rape/Murder</b>	<b>Bodies</b>	<b>Sniper</b>
<b>Reported</b>			
<b>Illustrates/Context</b>	7	20	19
	<i>11%</i>	<i>64%</i>	<i>76%</i>
<b>Reporter Account</b>	0	3	0
<b>Total:</b>	16	29	25
	<i>80%</i>	<i>94%</i>	<i>100%</i>
<b>Unconfirmed Reports</b>	1	1	0
<b>Rumors</b>	3	0	0
<b>Questioned/Denied</b>	0	0	0
<b>Total articles, no sources</b>	20	31	25
	<i>31%</i>	<i>58%</i>	<i>44%</i>

Many articles do not mention sources to support or disprove these incidents.

Fifty-eight per cent of the articles about dead bodies, 44 per cent of the articles about sniper attacks and 31 per cent of the articles about rape and murders use no sources. Not surprisingly, of these articles that do not employ sources, one-half cite the incident in order to illustrate a larger point (see Table 2). Further investigation revealed that many are editorials rather than hard-news stories (roughly one-half of the sniper articles, one-quarter of the articles about rape and murder, and one-tenth of the articles about dead bodies). In not using sources, journalists were again implying that these incidents were so widely accepted and well-known that collaborating information was not necessary.

Again, variation was seen in how these articles were reported. Articles reporting on rapes and murders were an obvious exception. Only 11 per cent of these articles mention the incident to illustrate or provide context (see Table 2). Does this indicate

increased caution in the reporting of rape and murder compared to dead bodies and sniper attacks? This will be explored further in the following chapter.

**Question 3:** What sources were used? Were they quoted or paraphrased or did they appear in the text due to their actions rather than their words?

While many articles named no source to tell readers where the writer obtained his or her information, many others did. For the sake of this study, a source is anyone who is quoted directly or attributed as the origin of information. The words of groups, such as National Guard soldiers or evacuees, are often paraphrased. By making this distinction between direct and indirect quotation, I can determine the extent to which the media “filtered” their sources’ words. I will also include people who appear in the story in relation to their actions not their words. These sources are called “narrative characters.” While they are not explicitly the source of the information, as those who are quoted or paraphrased are, they do add credibility to a reporter’s claim. For example, a front page *Los Angeles Times* article led with the following: “National Guard troops arrived in this broken city Friday, rolling through floodwaters to aid thousands of frayed evacuees and confront snipers still moving freely through unguarded streets.”<sup>24</sup> Neither the voice of National Guard Troops nor that of their superiors appeared in the article as the source of this information.

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<sup>24</sup> Scott Gold, “Katrina’s Aftermath: Guardsmen Arrive in New Orleans,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

Many of the articles in this sample provide a rundown of city-wide events and contain the words, actions and thoughts of a variety of sources, but I have limited my study to only those sources who comment on the three specific incidents that are the focus of this study. Sources were categorized as follows:

- **Evacuees:** This includes residents and visitors who were in New Orleans prior to Hurricane Katrina and who are presented in the article as victims of the storm and on the receiving end of the relief effort. Due to the criteria used to compile this sample, this largely includes Hurricane Katrina victims based out of either the Superdome or convention centre. These are further classified as named individuals, unnamed individuals or group. Generally this last category encompasses all terms used to refer to these displaced peoples as a whole.
- **Rescue Workers:** This includes anyone involved in the rescue and relief effort who is not in an official position of power or identified as a “spokesperson”. This includes local police, National Guard soldiers, the coast guard, paramedics and doctors, among others. Again, they are further classified as named individuals, unnamed individuals or a group.
- **Local Authority, State Authority and Federal Authority:** This category refers to the spokesperson or people in position of power at the different levels of government and various government agencies. They are classified as named or unnamed.
- **Experts:** This refers to anyone who, due to job title or educational background, provides an expert opinion. They are further classified as named or unnamed. Often they are removed from the situation and comment on the incident rather than attest to it. Examples are disaster scholars or sociologists.
- **Media:** This refers to all media outlets, including broadcast, print and online, and both named and unnamed. Articles that describe television coverage of the incidents were considered to be “paraphrasing.”

Overwhelmingly, the reporting of these incidents employed three main source groups: the evacuees, the rescue workers and the authorities (see Table 3). Overall, more than half the sources were ordinary citizens – residents and visitors affected by the storm or low-level rescue workers – not local authorities or government spokespersons in positions of power. As I will discuss in greater detail towards the end of this chapter, this

reliance on named or unnamed average people can impair the accuracy of these reports as idiosyncratic personal experiences become “typical” experiences from the disaster zone.

Along with indicating a heavy reliance on average people as sources, these results indicate that one-fifth of all stories included local, state or federal authorities as sources. Stories of rape and murder overwhelmingly employed a greater number of local authorities. Significantly, three-quarters of these stories quote or paraphrase one local authority, New Orleans Police Chief Eddie Compass. Of these articles, six out of ten quoted him saying, “We have individuals getting raped, we have individuals who are getting beaten,” in reference to the situation at the convention centre.<sup>25</sup> This indicates the potential that local authorities have to powerfully shape the coverage of a disaster. Because many journalists were covering the story, this could also indicate the effect of pack reporting in the disaster zone or, alternatively, a reliance on wire copy in the newsroom.

Despite the fact this sample focuses on the social breakdown that followed the natural disaster, rather than the natural disaster itself, it is surprising experts comprise only 1 per cent of the sources named. The quoted experts were a popular culture professor on media coverage of the hurricane, and disaster scholars, who suggested the social breakdown in New Orleans may have been rumours, not fact.<sup>26</sup> This successful use of expert sources allowed the latter article to approach the sensational stories of rape,

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Kate Thomas, Cynthia Daniels, Deborah Barfield Berry and Tina Susman, “Katrina Days of Despair,” *Newsday*, 2 Sept. 2005: page A:05.

<sup>26</sup> Mackenzie Carpenter, “Desperation, Death Make Compelling Television,” *Pittsburg Post-Gazette*, 2 Sept. 2005: page A:1. And: Shea, “Up for Grabs.”

murder, looting and sniper attacks from a new angle and encouraged readers to question all reports from the storm-ravaged city.

Overall, the media were used as sources only four times in this sample. In almost all cases, print journalists cite television coverage of the incidents. While this follows previous research in suggesting that the print media are influenced by broadcast coverage of a disaster, the results are largely inconclusive. Due to the focus on manifest content, my study found only explicit referencing of other media outlets and failed to examine how broadcast journalists may have contributed to the broader framing or shaping of this coverage.

Again, source use varies with the type of rumour. The fact that evacuees were most often used in stories dealing with rape and murder and the presence of dead bodies is hardly surprising, given that it was evacuees who were said to have been raped and killed or died waiting for help. Similarly, rescue workers were overwhelmingly used in news stories about sniper attacks, given that snipers were almost always presented as targeting rescue workers.

**Table 3: Source Identification**

	<b>Rape/Murder</b>	<b>Bodies</b>	<b>Sniper</b>
<b>Evacuees</b>	26	14	2
<i>percentage of total articles</i>	41%	28%	4%
<b>Named</b>	12	10	2
<b>Unnamed</b>	3	2	0
<b>Group</b>	11	2	0
<b>Rescue Workers</b>	7	14	35
<i>percentage of total articles</i>	11%	26%	61%
<b>Named</b>	3	8	21
<b>Unnamed</b>	2	3	2
<b>Group</b>	2	3	12
<b>Authorities</b>	23	2	9
<i>percentage of total articles</i>	36%	4%	16%
<b>Local named</b>	20	1	5
<b>Local unnamed</b>	2	0	2
<b>State named</b>	0	1	0
<b>State unnamed</b>	1	0	0
<b>Federal named</b>	0	0	2
<b>Federal unnamed</b>	0	0	0
<b>Experts</b>	0	0	2
<b>Named</b>	0	0	2
<b>Unnamed</b>	0	0	0
<b>Media</b>	1	3	1
<b>Named</b>	0	3	1
<b>Unnamed</b>	1	0	0
<b>Other</b>		1	

**Question 4:** What role did sources play in the article? Did they testify to the veracity of the incident, question it or deny it?

As mentioned in Chapter 2, sources serve a specific function in the news text. They provide information, offer eye-witness accounts, and give the commentary necessary to convey the human experience to the reader. Along with counting what kinds of sources were used, I have looked at the roles these sources played in the articles. Again, due to the requirements of content analysis, I have carefully defined how those sources are categorized and relied solely on the surface meaning of the text to determine if the source was commenting on, questioning or relaying the rumours.

- **Witnesses:** These sources are clearly identified as having seen one of the incidents first hand. Witnesses may also comment on the incident, indicate that while they were on scene they cannot confirm that anything happened, or deny the incident all together.
  - *Example:* “Darcel Monroe, 21, a bakery cashier, stammered hysterically as she recounted seeing two young girls being raped in one of the women’s bathrooms. ‘A lot of people saw it but they were afraid to do anything,’ she said. ‘He ran out past all of us.’”<sup>27</sup>
- **Comments:** These sources are giving their opinion of the incident. While they are implicitly passing along the rumour, their main function in the text is to comment on the incident as if it were true.
  - *Example:* “Rhonda Johnson and her husband, Wayne, made it to a friend’s house in Baton Rouge after leaving their home on a 16-foot boat. She was troubled by reports that people were shooting at rescue helicopters. ‘They were just trying to tell them, ‘come help us.’ But they weren’t shooting at anyone.’”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph B. Treaster, “At Stadium, a Haven Quickly Becomes an Ordeal,” *The New York Times*, 1 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas Birch, Stacey Hirsh and Arthur Hirsch, “Ruined City Turns Violent,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 2 Sept. 2005: 1:A.

- **Supports:** These sources serve to attest to the validity of the incident. While they may have seen it first hand this is not explicitly stated.
  - *Example:* ““People are shooting at police and trying to hijack boats,” Nick Oglesby, a detective with the West Monroe Police Department, said as he prepared to search the city’s canals for survivors.”<sup>29</sup>
- **Can’t Confirm:** These sources are identified as being unable to confirm the incident.
  - *Example:* “On Thursday, Governor Kathleen Blanco said she had no confirmation of corpses in the open at the convention center.”<sup>30</sup>
- **Denied:** These sources deny that the incident ever happened.
  - *Example:* “The sense of panic was only exacerbated by rumours: Many swore young girls and boys had been raped or even killed in the Superdome, but security officials denied it happened.”<sup>31</sup>  
(Note: security officials deny the incident while evacuees support it.)

While over half the sources used in these articles were quoted or paraphrased as testifying to the veracity of the incidents, only 20 per cent of total sources were identified as witnesses (see Table 4). While this does not mean that the other 80 per cent of sources were not witnesses, this ambiguity – or failure on the part of the journalist to tell the reader how the source knows what he or she claims to know – indicates a lack of transparency in those reports.

Given the nature of the incidents, it is hardly surprising that more witnesses were found to corroborate the stories of dead bodies and sniper attacks than to support claims of rape and murder. As mentioned above, dead bodies appeared as fixtures at these shelters and, according to the articles in the sample, sniper attacks were conducted

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<sup>29</sup> Brian Chasnoff and Sig Christenson, “Utter Desperation,” *San Antonio Express-News*, 2 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>30</sup> Brian MacQuarrie, “Waiting for Help, Officers Keep a Lonely Vigil,” *The Boston Globe*, 3 Sept. 2005: page A:15.

outside where more witnesses are likely to be present and against rescue workers who are used as sources. Comparatively, rape and murder were often described as taking place in the dark corners and bathrooms of the shelters where people are less likely to be positioned as witnesses.

**Table 4:** Source Role

	<b>Rape/Murder</b>	<b>Bodies</b>	<b>Sniper</b>
<b>Witnesses</b>	2	18	13
<i>percentage of total sources</i>	3%	34%	23%
<b>Comments</b>	2	0	3
<b>Supported</b>	46	16	30
<i>percentage of total sources</i>	72%	30%	53%
<b>Can't Confirm</b>	6	1	1
<b>Denied</b>	4	0	2
Number of articles in sample	64	53	57

**Question 6:** What variations of these rumours appeared in the sample?

**(A) Rape and Murder**

As mentioned above, the focus of this thesis is on three baseless rumours, but this content analysis is a broad study of the incidents including both the baseless rumours and their many variations – the general rumours. As noted above, the baseless rumours refer *specifically* to the rape and murder of a child at the Superdome and convention centre, piles of bodies at either shelter and sniper attacks on rescue helicopters. For example, the study of the reports of rape and murder that follows will examine the baseless rumour –

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<sup>31</sup> David Ovalle and Chris Adams, “Violence has Pushed City to the Brink,” *The Miami Herald*, 2 Sept. 2005: page F:2.

the report that a young child was raped *and* murdered – in addition to the general rumours – reports of rape and/or murder that do not specify the age of the victim. In doing this, I hope to elaborate on the context in which the baseless rumours gained currency and determine how prevalent these specific rumours were.

Of the stories that covered rape and/or murder at the Superdome and convention centre, the majority mentioned rape at one of the two shelters. Many reported on more than one incident of rape and/or murder, and many covered the situation at both major shelters.

Most articles that reported rape and/or murder did not specify who the victims were. Many of the articles reported multiple rapes and provided no additional detail. It appears that only the most sensational rape cases included the victim's age or sex. Generally, such information was provided only if it was a child. When it comes to the specific rumour of a young girl being raped or murdered at the Superdome or convention centre, 9 per cent of the articles about rape and murder reported it (see Table 5). These six articles all reported the girl's age as ranging from 5 to 14 years.

**Table 5: Rape and Murder**  
*64 articles in sample*

<b>Rape at Superdome</b>	<b>36 / 56 %</b>
not specified	25 / 39 %
child/children	5
girl	5
boy	1
baby/babies	0

<b>Rape at Convention Center</b>	<b>27 / 42 %</b>
not specified	24 / 38 %
child/children	1
girl	1
boy	1
baby/babies	0

<b>Murder at Superdome</b>	<b>2</b>
not specified	1
child/children	0
girl	1
boy	0
baby/babies	0

<b>Murder at Convention Center</b>	<b>3</b>
not specified	1
child/children	1
girl	0
boy	0
baby/babies	1

<b>Rape &amp; Murder at Superdome</b>	<b>13 / 20%</b>
not specified	8
child/children	0
girl	3
boy	2
baby/babies	0

<b>Rape &amp; Murder at Convention Center</b>	<b>9</b>
not specified	6
child/children	0
girl	3
boy	0
baby/babies	0

Note: The total number of articles analyzed is 64. Some stories fall into more than one category; they have been counted more than once. As a result, percentages add up to more than 100%.

**6(B) Bodies at the Superdome and convention centre**

**Table 6: Bodies**  
*53 articles in sample*

<b>Bodies at Superdome</b>	<b>18 / 34%</b>
Superdome (not specified)	2
In	9
Out	4
Superdome Freezer	1

<b>Bodies at Convention Center</b>	<b>46 / 87%</b>
Convention Center (not specified)	7
In	12
Out	23
Convention Center Freezer)	6

<b>Numbers of Bodies</b>	
Not Specified	29 / 55%
1	3
2 +	8
5+	9
10+	4
20 +	3

Note: The total number of articles analyzed is 53. Some stories fall into more than one category; they have been counted more than once. As a result, percentages add up to more than 100%.

The rumour of piles of bodies was based on media reports that the shelters were filled with dead bodies, but few stories specified that large numbers of bodies were in either location (see Table 6). Specifically, 15 per cent of articles mentioned fewer than five bodies; 17 per cent mentioned five to nine bodies; 8 per cent described 10 to 19

bodies; and only 6 per cent described 20 or more. More than half the articles did not specify a number.

It is important to note that the reporting of numbers did not follow a pattern over time. Articles from the second week did not consistently report more bodies than articles from the first week. These numbers thus reflect estimates on the part of the journalist or a source, rather than evolving official information.

### **6(C) Sniper attacks**

**Table 7: Snipers**  
*57 articles in sample*

Helicopters	16 / 28%
Ground	4
Rescue Workers	19 / 33%
Hospital	16 / 28%
Reconstruction Workers	4
Not Specified / Other	13 / 23%

Note: The total number of articles analyzed is 53. Some stories fall into more than one category; they have been counted more than once. As a result, percentages add up to more than 100%.

Overwhelmingly snipers were portrayed as firing at rescue workers who were in helicopters, on the ground or outside hospitals (see Table 7). Many articles reported more than one target; a roughly equal number of articles referred to helicopters, hospitals, or on the ground. Of the 16 items that reported shots fired at helicopters, only two mentioned fire on Chinook helicopters outside the Superdome – an incident that the

Associated Press reported internationally. The other 12 articles dealt with general incidents of fire at aircraft.

The specific story receiving the most coverage is that of snipers firing on doctors and nurses attempting to evacuate patients from Charity Hospital in New Orleans. Seven of the 16 articles about snipers firing on hospitals mentioned Charity Hospital specifically, while several others alluded to the incident. Only one article reported gun fire at a different hospital. Two-thirds of the articles that failed to identify the target of sniper fire mentioned the incident in order to illustrate their larger point or provide context. The articles that deal with sniper attacks on rescue workers were published towards the second week of the disaster and the tail end of the date range of this study. If the range of dates were lengthened, more articles about attacks on those attempting to rebuild the city might be found.

### **Taking Stock of the Data**

By pairing the results of this study with research into accuracy and disaster coverage, I will show how the trends identified above point to an increased potential for the reporting of inaccuracies.

**Finding: Largely these incidents were reported without qualification, indicating a tendency to present the atypical as typical.**

Mentioning these incidents to make a larger point or provide context for an argument or story indicates a tendency to present the atypical as typical (one-third of articles overall). This is seen to the greatest extent in the stories about stockpiled bodies and sniper attacks. These passing references – not reporting the event, merely alluding to it – are further indicated by the number of articles which did not use any sources (almost half). The result is the removal of the individual character of the event. As will be discussed further in the linguistic analysis, stories about bodies, through their descriptive language, often left the impression that dead bodies were a common sight. Similarly, sniper attacks were simply mentioned in passing, often without identifying characteristics like information about the target, or the location, date or time of the attack. Without explicitly saying these incidents were commonplace, by the way the articles were written, journalists presented them as everyday events. This method of reporting obscures how journalists learned their information, thereby limiting the transparency of their reports, and it emphasizes that these were “true” events that were so well-known and broadly accepted that journalists did not need to explain them.

**Finding: Journalists failed to use experts as sources.**

As noted, experts made up only 1 per cent of sources used. Stories that preceded the disaster often quoted meteorologists or hurricane specialists in order to provide

background to the *natural* disaster. Stories following the disaster largely failed to employ sociologists, psychologists or criminologists to provide the same background to the *social* disaster. As demonstrated by the successful *Boston Globe* article, this resulted in a failure to put these stories of social breakdown into context. Indeed, for journalists, employing disaster experts serves to powerfully link scholarly study with real-world events. As Conrad Smith argues, it enables the reader to look beyond the drama of the disaster.<sup>32</sup>

**Finding: Use of average people as sources further indicates a tendency to present the atypical as typical.**

The voices heard most often through newspaper coverage of the social chaos in New Orleans were those of average people – the ordinary residents and rescue workers on the front lines. Whether named or unnamed, evacuees and rescue workers were quoted and paraphrased in relation to their own experiences. They commented on what they had seen, heard or endured. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the media descend on the scene, seeking out survivors and presenting only the most sensational stories.<sup>33</sup> As Fischer argues, these dramatic narratives are not presented as extreme examples but simply as examples of typical experience:

[W]e tend to see the building that has been damaged most severely, conveying the image that this is typical of the damage sustained in the entire community. We tend to hear the story of victims who most

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<sup>32</sup> Conrad Smith, *Media and Apocalypse: News Coverage of the Yellowstone Forest Fires, Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, and Loma Prieta Earthquake* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 161.

<sup>33</sup> Henry W. Fischer III, *Quick Response Report #17: Hurricane Georges: The Experience of the Media and Emergency Management on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (Millersville, Penn.: Department of Sociology, Millersville University of Pennsylvania, 1999), 11.

dramatically relate their disaster experiences. Once again, we end up with the perception that the account is both true and typical of disaster coverage.<sup>34</sup>

Though many of these vignettes were included in hard news stories about flood damage or police actions, they were framed as personal experiences. In comparison to explicitly soft news – narrative stories which clearly tell one individual’s story of survival and endurance – the presentation of the human story in hard news serves to present that individual experience as indicative of everyone’s. This emphasis on the human experience, Scanlon argues, “can lead to a distorted impression of the impact of an event.”<sup>35</sup>

The presentation of the atypical as typical is furthered through the use of unnamed sources. More than half the evacuees used as sources on the rape and murder rumour were either unnamed individuals or a group, as were a little less than half the rescue workers used in stories about snipers. Reporters employed anonymous attribution, choosing to name sources through only a generic job title (such as National Guardsman or Police officer) or a title identifying their relationship to the disaster (evacuee or victim).

Research on anonymous attribution has found that reporters often do not identify their sources when relaying antagonistic or sensitive information, such as military maneuvers.<sup>36</sup> In the context of Hurricane Katrina, it is true that some information was

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Scanlon, “Research about the Mass Media and Disaster: Never (Well Hardly Ever) The Twain Shall Meet,” no date, <http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/downloads/ScanlonJournalism.pdf> (15 March 2005).

<sup>36</sup> William B. Blankenburg, “The Utility of Anonymous Attribution,” *Newspaper Research Journal* (winter/spring 1992): 19.

politically sensitive – in the initial days journalists painted a picture of deteriorating conditions at the Superdome and convention centre that contrasted with a federal government that took days to acknowledge the presence of refugees at those locations. On the whole, however, these anonymous sources were relaying merely sensationalist information.

**Finding: Official sources can powerfully influence coverage.**

Whether quoted directly or paraphrased, Police Chief Eddie Compass accounts for three-quarters of the official sources used in stories about rape and murder. The significance stems from both the prevalence of his comments and the lack of transparency with which they were reported. While the police chief of a major American city is a reputable source, journalists should be aware that in the chaos of the disaster zone, officials don't usually have the complete story. Indeed, in the following weeks, when many of these rumours were exposed as baseless, officials said they had received faulty information from their staff. New Orleans Police Chief Eddie Compass later admitted that he passed along second-hand information. He stepped down from his position.<sup>37</sup>

The focus on three specific rumours presents a skewed picture of official mistakes. It's clear that Compass wasn't the only one to err. In one high profile case, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin told Oprah Winfrey that the crowds of victims had been reduced to an

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<sup>37</sup> As told to the BBC. Laura Smith-Spark, "New Orleans Violence 'Overstated'," *BBC News Online*, 29 Sept. 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>. (5 Jan. 2006).

“almost animalistic state.”<sup>38</sup> The mayor said the people had been trapped in the Superdome for days, “watching dead bodies, watching hooligans raping people, killing people, that’s the tragedy.”<sup>39</sup> According to a spokesperson, Mayor Nagin promoted these unsubstantiated stories because he relied on faulty information from his officials on site.<sup>40</sup>

By questioning their sources, journalists could have better equipped their readers to judge the validity of official claims. The prominence given to Compass’ statement would have perhaps been less had reporters explicitly stated he was relying on unverified, second-hand information. Significantly, by neither questioning nor qualifying their sources, journalists allowed them free reign to frame the disaster. Given that Compass holds a politically appointed position and is accountable to the people, his behaviour has significant consequences. Research has shown that a politician’s role during and after a natural disaster can significantly help or hinder his or her career. O’Brien explains, “Natural disasters offer citizens the chance to scrutinize the character and capacity of elected leaders. An everyday local politician can take on a larger-than-life dimension, whether as hero or hapless victim, as reporters spin their stories of crisis and response.”<sup>41</sup> O’Brien’s study of the impact of national disasters on political careers also found that, in general, politicians with a high degree of visible involvement have gained support following a disaster.<sup>42</sup> As was explained in Chapter 2, Scanlon asserts that local officials

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<sup>38</sup> *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Interview with Ray Nagin and Eddie Compass. Originally aired September 5, 2005. [http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/200509/tows\\_past\\_20050906.jhtml](http://www.oprah.com/tows/pastshows/200509/tows_past_20050906.jhtml) (18 Nov. 2005).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> As quoted in: Associated Press, “Police: Reports were Exaggerated,” *Iowa City Press-Citizen*, 28 Sept. 28, 2005: sec. 1.

<sup>41</sup> Sue O’Brien, “Disasters and the Making of Political Careers,” in *Risky Business: Communicating Issues of Science, Risk and Public Policy*, eds. Lee Wilkins and Philip Patterson (NY: Greenwood Press, 1991), 177.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

have much to gain by controlling the flow of information through the media. He says that in the initial days of a disaster, local officials are in an unprecedented position to take control of the flow of information and shape the nature of the coverage.<sup>43</sup>

This is not to say that Compass was necessarily acting in his own self-interest. As Fischer explains, local officials may exaggerate conditions to encourage aid.<sup>44</sup> Whatever the ulterior motives, journalists covering a disaster should remember that information from official sources is not a benign explanation of what is happening on scene. Instead, it is what Smith terms a “sponsor activity,” in which “organizations or individuals with vested interests...encourage journalists to package news in ways that serve those interests.”<sup>45</sup> Journalists need to be aware of their sources’ interests.

Police Chief Compass’ quotation is perhaps the most dramatic example of a failure to question sources. This does not mean providing information that contradicts sources, but rather explaining to the readers how the source knows what he or she claims to know. For example, while many sources supported the stories of rape and murder or sniper attacks (72 per cent and 53 percent respectively), few were identified as eye-witnesses (3 per cent and 20 per cent respectively). This does not mean they did not witness them but that journalists failed to say how the sources knew what they claimed to know. Unquestioned reporting, though subtle, has a powerful impact in the conversion of a rumour to a fact.

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<sup>43</sup> Joseph Scanlon, Suzane Alldred, Al Farrell and Angela Prawzick, “Coping with the Media in Disasters: Some Predictable Problems.” *Public Administration Review* 45 (January 1985): 124.

<sup>44</sup> Fischer, “Quick Response Report,” 10.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, 147.

**Finding: Overall, conditions were ripe for disaster myths.**

While my study cannot determine the extent to which journalists or local officials subscribed to disaster myths, it can show us the extent to which the media created the conditions under which disaster myths are known to thrive. It is clear that many of the conditions that Fischer identifies as contributing to the acceptance of disaster myths were at work in this sample.

As explained in Chapter 2, disaster myths encompass a spectrum of expected behaviour in the disaster zone that ranges from panic reactions to opportunistic criminality. The news reports from New Orleans are not wholly typical of news reports propagating disaster myths, for two key reasons. First, in New Orleans many disaster myths actually became reality. New Orleans actually was the site of looting and panicked flight, and shelters, normally rarely used, were overcrowded.<sup>46</sup> The second key reason is that the criminal behaviours of rape, murder and sniper attacks are not the typical illegal activities predicted by disaster myths. They are extreme examples of the opportunistic, deviant behaviour that is expected in the disaster zone.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, myths dictate that disaster brings out the worst in people, and these three rumours clearly fit within the bounds of these expectations. In addition, the rumours all fit into the myth of “contagion,” which says that chaotic behaviour, once initiated, will spread.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Fischer, “Quick Response Report,” 5-6.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 5.

In two comparative studies of the presence of disaster myths in hurricane coverage, Fischer found five important factors that contribute to the likelihood that disaster myths will be reported as fact.

First, he found that increased presence of soft news meant greater mythologizing of disaster.<sup>49</sup> He explains that this focus on personal experiences – a trademark of soft news stories – constructs the source as a storyteller and puts greater emphasis on the narrative of their own experiences or observations.<sup>50</sup>

Second, coverage with a higher number of interviews contains more myths.<sup>51</sup> Fischer argues that survivors perpetuate myths because they often exaggerate, report what they believe, misinterpret information they themselves received, or are misinterpreted by the media.<sup>52</sup> Other research has found that the use of average people can impair the accuracy of news. Graber agrees that a heavy use of victims and witnesses as sources in the early stage of a disaster can confuse rather than clarify.<sup>53</sup> She explains that these sources may “lend a local touch” but can also “confuse the situation by reporting unverified or irrelevant information.”<sup>54</sup>

The third factor is recency. Fisher argues that coverage during the chaotic first few days is more likely to contain myths. The media are not usually on scene until after the disaster, and so initially rely on witnesses. Here, reporters seek the most dramatic

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 10.

stories of survival and endurance and they appear to be typical experiences within the disaster zone.

The fourth factor is the amount of coverage a disaster receives. Simply put, the more space given to coverage, the more room there is for myths.<sup>55</sup>

The final factor is disaster type. Research shows that natural disasters give rise to more coverage of myths than technological disasters do. This is because coverage of technological disasters, like chemical spills or nuclear accidents, is more likely to focus on the events leading up to and during the disaster, while coverage of natural disasters is more likely to focus on the events following the disaster. However, Fischer notes that “to the extent that technological news stories focus on interviews of survivors during the post-impact period, myths are perpetuated.”<sup>56</sup>

All five factors suggest that Hurricane Katrina was generally a fertile breeding ground for disaster myths. Not only is it a natural disaster, but this hurricane was a huge news story. Witnesses, both evacuees and low-level rescue workers, made up almost 60 per cent of the sources used in these articles. In addition, the parameters of my study limited the sample to the period immediately after the disaster, in a time-period known to breed disaster myths.

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<sup>53</sup> Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media & American Politics*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2006), 132.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

While my study did not determine the proportion of soft versus hard news stories, it is clear most of my sample fits Fischer's understanding of soft news. Many scholars distinguish soft from hard news based on the subject. Hard news is commonly understood to include business, economics, politics and/or foreign news, while soft news usually includes human interest stories or stories focused on social affairs and culture.<sup>57</sup> Fischer differentiates on the basis of the article's composition: "A hard news story is one which relates the basic factual information to the reader," while "a soft news story describes alleged behavioural aspects of the event."<sup>58</sup>

My study did not determine whether the sampled news stories constituted hard or soft news, but it is clear that, overall, most of the articles contain elements that indicate a soft news style. Again, this can be explained through source use. The majority of the sources used in the articles were evacuees or low-level rescue workers. Both groups were used by the reporter primarily to relay their own first-hand observations. While evacuees told their stories – what they had seen and heard – rescue workers were frequently presented in the context of a narrative. This is indicated by the high number that played the role of "narrative character" in the article.

Fischer looked not only for the articulation of myth, but also acknowledged the way those myths subtly shape media coverage. A study by the Disaster Research Center found that though only 10 per cent of stories reported disaster myths, in television the

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<sup>57</sup> See for example, Margaret Gallager, "Reporting on Gender in Journalism: Why do so Few Women Reach the Top?" *Nieman Reports* (Winter 2001): 64.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

overall presentation of stories is often consistent with the myths.<sup>59</sup> As my own research found, many articles subtly furthered rumours through the way they were written, as when articles about bodies implied that they littered the ground of the shelters and sniper attacks were cited in articles about generalized chaos in the city. This will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 5.

## **Conclusion**

Through the examination of how these three incidents were reported, I identified trends in disaster coverage that contributed to the reporting of inaccuracies. In many cases these trends were seen throughout the sample. But knowing that the potential for inaccuracy existed in almost all articles studied does not mean we can conclude that all reports were inaccurate. As demonstrated by this chapter's study of the three incidents (both the baseless rumours and their variation, the general rumours), relatively few articles reported the baseless rumours. By examining those articles further through linguistic analysis and determining both the form and content of these reports, I will chart the many variations in how these baseless rumours were reported and, from there, draw conclusions about the media's successes and failures and formulate recommendations to ensure accurate disaster coverage in the future.

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<sup>59</sup> E.L. Quarantelli, "Local Mass Media Operations in Disasters in the USA," *Disaster Prevention and Management* 5:5 (1996): 9.

## CHAPTER 5

### INVESTIGATING THE BASELESS RUMOURS

Through a focused linguistic analysis, I will map the variations in reporting styles and identify additional trends in coverage that impair accuracy. This part of my study marks a change from a broad focus, a look at the reporting of three incidents, to a narrow focus, the reporting of three baseless rumours. As mentioned in the first chapter, *incidents* is meant to encompass the many variations of the three rumours. For example, the *incident* of rape and murder will include any rape and/or murder at either shelter. The *baseless rumour* is that of a young child being raped and murdered. The broader focus of the last chapter allowed me to provide the context in which these baseless rumours were reported. This chapter will provide further exploration of inaccurate reporting and answer the question: how bad did journalists really do?

#### **Method**

Employing this method means deconstructing the many elements that go into the production of a text: individual word choice, the organization of words into a sentence, the way sentences are linked to form paragraphs and the larger structure that guides the formation of a text. Explaining the related method of critical linguistics, Deacon et al.

argue that this method allows the identification of a “preferred reading” that is “channeled” by the structure and composition of the text.<sup>1</sup>

Like any method of inquiry that focuses on the text rather than method of production or reader response, linguistic analysis cannot determine what the producers of the text intended nor what the readers understood. As Deacon et al. point out,

[C]ritical linguistics, for all its sophisticated capacity to discern patterns of meaning and to link a given text to the wider world of language use in social settings, suffers from the same limitations as any other form of content analysis applied in isolation. It cannot make safe assertions about the intentions of the text’s producer, nor can it validly infer the impact of the text on readers, viewers or listeners. All such analysis can do is offer provocative and productive hypotheses about these processes.<sup>2</sup>

Without accompanying research, linguistic analysis can be only provisional and hypothetical.<sup>3</sup>

As I am attempting to identify trends in the writing of newspaper articles from the disaster zone – *not* the intentions of reporters working in the disaster zone – the conclusions of this study will identify likely interpretations or readings of this text. In order to overcome the limitations of this method, I am grounding these likely readings in the findings of the accompanying content analysis. In the case of this study, these interpretations centre on the degrees of accuracy and transparency of the reports. The question that guides this linguistic analysis is: to what extent did journalists present these incidents as factual events? What was the degree of transparency in the reports?

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<sup>1</sup> David Deacon et al., *Researching Communications: a Practical Guide to Methods in Media and Cultural Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 181.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-182.

If accurate reporting is presenting facts that are correct in a truthful light, then transparent reporting is telling the reader where those facts originate and what gave the reporter cause to believe them. Kovach and Rosenstiel define transparency as a journalist's need to "be as open and honest with audiences as they can be about what they know and what they don't."<sup>4</sup> By being "honest about the nature of our knowledge," the two journalists argue, the audience can judge the validity of sources and the information presented.<sup>5</sup> This means presenting not only a source's credentials but also how that source knows what it knows. It is not enough to rely on the word of the police chief. Transparent reporting requires that you explain where the police chief got his information.

It is important to distinguish between increasing the transparency of news reports and total transparency. The practice of journalism is one of summarizing, abridging and, in many cases, generalizing. This is due to the time and space constraints that shape how journalists work and the products they produce. Deadlines mean journalists cannot turn every article into a research project. The costs of publication and circulation and reader appetite mean publishers do not allow articles to become research papers. Journalists should thus aspire to levels of transparency that communicate as much information to their readers as is possible within the constraints of their work environment. Journalists should question their sources but, in most cases, need not question their sources' sources. Rather than questioning everything a source says, journalists should focus on their main

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 183.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2001), 80.

<sup>5</sup> Kovach and Rosenstiel, 80-81.

point – the central statement that will guide the writing of their article. Journalists should question the unexpected, the sensational, and the dramatic. But they should also never take for granted the routine and seemingly normal.

## **Sample**

The linguistic analysis here draws upon only those articles that reported the three specific baseless rumours that are the focus of this study. This narrow definition provides 15 stories about reported snipers firing at rescue helicopters and four articles on the rape and murder of a young girl in the Superdome or convention centre. In the case of bodies at the Superdome and convention centre the specific rumour concerned the *number* of bodies in either shelter, not the mere *existence* of bodies. For this reason the seven articles that reported more than 10 bodies inside either shelter were analyzed. I also reviewed an additional 11 articles that didn't specify the number of bodies but did imply one or both sites were littered with corpses.

Each article was carefully read and deconstructed to determine the extent to which that whole influenced the reporting of the specific rumour. All of the elements described above were taken into careful consideration and patterns of reporting, as well as disparate elements, were carefully tracked. The findings are detailed below.

## **Results**

### *Rape and Murder*

As the content analysis indicated, reports about rape and/or murder contain the greatest questioning of rumour by journalists and their sources. When this sample was condensed to only those articles that report specifically the baseless rumour – the rape and murder of a young girl – it is clear that the journalists injected some element of doubt into their reporting and, overall, displayed a moderate level of transparency.

Used as a dramatic example of the horrors of these overcrowded shelters, the rape and murder of a child is often presented as an *unconfirmed* report or rumour. It is usually included at the beginning of the article and serves to set the scene for the detailed, source-supported information that follows. The source of the rumour is almost always clearly identified as multiple, unnamed evacuees living in the shelters. Often this paraphrased statement, attributed to several people, is followed by a quote from one named evacuee, attesting not to the rumour itself but to the general chaos and suffering in the shelters.<sup>6</sup>

An article in *The Dallas Morning News* illustrates the most common way in which the rumour is reported and questioned. The second paragraph of a front-page article reads,

They told horrific tales of human suffering in every ballroom and hall. Corpses draped in white sheets being pushed on catering carts and loaded into freezers. A 13-year-old girl raped and her throat slit. Old women

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Brian Thevenot, “Amid Chaos, a Rare Voice of Strength,” *Times-Picayune*, 4 Sept. 2005: page A:01.

having seizures. Puddles in the carpeting by the Starbucks stand. Hot, pitch dark ballrooms. Feces in the corner.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than outright reporting this as rumour, or listing the official sources that could not be reached to confirm the report, some doubt is conveyed through the use of the term “tales.” The transparency in this article comes from the identification of sources; however, it is compromised because the journalist does not specify if the incident is something the evacuees witnessed or simply heard about second-hand.

Those articles that quote named sources clearly state that the reports are only rumours. A *Times-Picayune* article, quoting a former journalist and evacuee, reads, “Payne said a teenage girl was the next to die, rumoured to have been raped and her throat slit.”<sup>8</sup> In one article, a journalist chronicled his walk through the convention centre with Arkansas National Guardsman Mike Brooks.<sup>9</sup> Through a running narrative the journalist shows the Guardsman shining the light on covered dead bodies. After describing the experiences of Brooks and some of his fellow Guardsmen in the shelter, the article reads, “One of the bodies, they said, was a girl they estimated to be 5 years old. Though they could not confirm it, they had heard she was gang-raped.”<sup>10</sup> Here the reporters have clearly identified their sources and the origin of their source’s information. This article displays a good level of transparency because it is clear the National Guardsmen have seen the body but merely heard that she was raped. Additional

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Grabell, “Tales of Horrors and Heroes Permeate New Orleans Center,” *The Dallas Morning News*, 3 Sept. 2005: page 1:A

<sup>8</sup> Tymaine D. Lee, “Seeking help in New Orleans, People Instead Find Death, Unrest,” *Times-Picayune*, 4 Sept. 2005: page A:05.

<sup>9</sup> Brian Thevenot, “Katrina’s Body Count could Reach 10,000; Bodies Found Piled in Freezer at Convention Center,” *Times-Picayune*, 6 September 2005: page A:08.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

transparency could have been achieved by identifying from where they had heard the rumour, though in situations like this it probably wouldn't be possible to be very precise.

### *Piles of Bodies*

Of those few articles that grossly exaggerated the body count at the convention centre, a *Times-Picayune* article emerges as one of the likely sources of the rumour. In the convention centre tour with National Guardsman Mike Brooks described above, the reporter notes, "Brooks and several other Guardsmen said they had seen between 30 and 40 more bodies in the convention center's freezer."<sup>11</sup> The article then puts these dozens of corpses in context: 10,000 bodies estimated by the Major and a city whose streets and buildings were reported to be filled with the bloated, floating bodies of the dead.<sup>12</sup> While the beginning and end of the article are written as a narrative, this rumour is clearly identified as something Brooks is telling rather than showing the reporter. This demonstrates the high level of transparency in this report. The reporter clearly identifies what the sources know, how they know it and how the reporter learned it.

Perhaps the greatest transparency is in a *San Antonio Express-News* article that takes the readers on the hunt for the bodies.<sup>13</sup> Through a narrative, complete with the reporter's own dialogue and observations, the article chronicles the search for bodies in the convention centre. The opening illustrates both that they are on a search to confirm

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Rod Davies, "Mystery in the Misery," *San Antonio Express-News*, 3 Sept. 2005: page 18:A.

potentially untrue rumours and that the reporter is taking the reader through the experience.

“I can show you where the dead bodies are.”

“Where?”

“In the freezer, in the kitchen, in the back.”

With that, Lester Denny Wilbert leaned hard on his walking cane and limped across the hot, damp, pungent and crowded length of the convention center here.

Rumours of dead bodies in the center, ranging from five to 12 were taken as truth by the thousands of souls contained in the cavernous center, most of the week. But no one had actually been able to verify the rumour.

Wilbert, a New Orleans resident who had been forcibly evacuated from his apartment near the Superdome on Wednesday, volunteered to show a reporter the truth.<sup>14</sup>

Through this article the journalist reveals both the successes and the roadblocks in his search for the bodies. Through attributed quotes from evacuees, he reveals the discrepancies in their stories. In the end, the article is inconclusive. After being turned away from the freezer by the National Guard, the reporter said, “The existence of the alleged bodies remained a mystery.”<sup>15</sup> In a later article in the *Orlando Sentinel*, two other journalists would sum up a similar experience. They wrote, “We stopped at the New Orleans convention center. Two days earlier, we walked with Texas medical personnel in search of a collection of bodies stored somewhere in the million-square-foot building. We found no corpses but a squalid shelter fit only for the dead.”<sup>16</sup> Presenting the rumour in this context results in a great deal of transparency.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Spear and Jim Stratton, “Tour of New Orleans Shocks ‘Combat’ Nurses; What We Saw...” *Orlando Sentinel*, 7 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

Limiting this sample to only those articles which grossly exaggerated the body count eliminates that much larger number of articles that, through the way they were written, merely hinted at large body counts. Most of these evoked this image to demonstrate how bad things were in the shelters and the magnitude of the clean-up. A vignette that ran in both the *Detroit Free Press* and *San Jose Mercury News* illustrates how a simple statement can suggest a shelter filled with bodies.<sup>17</sup> Here, the same reporters wrote, with slight variation, “A seething mass of people surged from the Superdome toward the few buses that arrived to carry them from a refuge transformed into a cinematic house of horrors: bodies, fires and piles of human excrement.”<sup>18</sup> Other articles quote witnesses who called the presence of the bodies “overwhelming.” The *Detroit Free Press*, in the first half of a front page article, quotes a National Guard sergeant, “It’s hard to put into words. The smell. The stench. The bodies. The garbage.”<sup>19</sup> Another article says simply, “Yolanda Sanders, who had been stuck at the convention center for five days, filed past corpses to reach the buses.”<sup>20</sup> While these articles cannot be chastised for reporting exaggerated body counts, the images they invoke have the same result. However, despite the fact that they powerfully evoke these images, they provide little transparency. While it is clear that the National Guard sergeant is the source of information in one article, the other two articles do not identify how the reporters know what they are reporting. Instead, they imply that the journalist was on scene, observing the events without clearly stating that. These rumours are thus presented as truths with little evidence in the text to back them up.

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Douglas Jr., Scott Dodd, and Martin Merzer, “Katrina’s Aftermath: Barriers Inadequate,” *Detroit Free Press*, 2 Sept. 2005: sec. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. And: Jack Douglas Jr., Scott Dodd, and Martin Merzer, “A Desperate SOS,” *San Jose Mercury News*, 2 Sept. 2005: page M:01.

### *Sniper attacks on rescue helicopters*

The first two rumours were reported in a way that revealed some doubt and contained a moderate degree of transparency. By contrast, most of the articles about sniper attacks on rescue helicopters unquestioningly accepted those attacks as fact. As the quantitative content analysis found, few of the reports cited unconfirmed reports or rumours as the source of their information and few questioned or denied the reports. The linguistic analysis found similar results.

Almost all construct the sniper attacks as a factual event, most through their writing style, and some through their use of sources. Half the articles demonstrate no transparency, mentioning sniper attacks on a list of examples of city-wide breakdown. The simple statement “snipers firing at rescue helicopters” is used again and again to illustrate how bad things were in New Orleans.<sup>21</sup> Passive sentence construction minimizes the transparency of the report by allowing the writer to provide little evidence for the truth of the events. From here, the journalist would go on to make a point about everything from the inadequacy of the president’s response to the sensational television coverage.

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<sup>19</sup> Jeff Seidel, “On Patrol in New Orleans,” *Detroit Free Press*, 11 Sept. 2005: 1.

<sup>20</sup> “As Exodus Continues, Bush Vows More Help,” *St Petersburg Times*, 4 Sept. 2005: page 6:A.

<sup>21</sup> For example see: “The Battle of New Orleans,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 Sept. 2005: page A:14. or Carpenter, “Desperation, Death Make Compelling Television.”

According to conventional definition, a sniper fires a gun from a hiding place at a specific target from a long range.<sup>22</sup> For many, a sniper is a well trained member of the military. Your Dictionary.com for example, describes a sniper as “a skilled military shooter detailed to spot and pick off enemy soldiers from a concealed place.”<sup>23</sup> “Sniper” is a term that includes both intent – willful shooting of a target – and the origin of the shot – a skilled, hidden shooter. By contrast, in most stories analyzed here, “sniper” is a label used to mean little more than “shots fired.” By identifying these shooters or “shots fired” as the work of snipers, journalists denied the possibility of alternative explanations for the gunfire.

Certainly, numerous reports make it clear there was gun fire in the city. It’s also clear there were sophisticated weapons in the hands of civilians. In one case, police turned up an AK-47.<sup>24</sup> But does this mean there were snipers? As noted in the second chapter of this thesis, none of the major government agencies have confirmed sniper attacks. It’s for this reason that Lt. Gen. Russel Honore, Commander of Joint Task Force Katrina, took exception to the term. Speaking to Fox News reporter Rick Leventhal, Honore said, “There are snipers in Baghdad. But if two guys get in an argument over the last eight or 10 days since this storm started, and a shot was fired, automatically it was a sniper. I mean, what the hell is that all about? I mean, all [of a] sudden, somebody is

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<sup>22</sup> For example see: “Sniper,” *Oxford Canadian Dictionary*, ed. Alex Biseet and Katherine Barber (Toronto: Oxford, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> “Sniper,” *Yourdictionary.com, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (USA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004) (18 Feb. 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Jim Dwyer and Christopher Drew, “Fear Exceeded Crime’s Reality in New Orleans,” *The New York Times*, 29 Sept. 2005: A:1.

shooting a weapon, they're just a sniper."<sup>25</sup> In the early days of the disaster, the media did report that hurricane survivors who were trapped on the roofs of their homes fired guns into the air to get attention. In the chaos of the disaster and the looting that followed there were, sadly, a multitude of reasons to fire a gun.

In some articles, the term "sniper" conjures up the image of the lone gun-man taking careful aim from a distance. A *Los Angeles Times* article describing the scene at the Superdome, where a sniper allegedly fired on rescue helicopters, illustrates this clearly.<sup>26</sup> According to the article, air evacuations were halted after "at least one shot was fired" and after "medical workers were shot and threatened by angry crowds."<sup>27</sup> While these two elements of the story are presented together, the "one-shot fired" stands in contrast to the mob-like actions of the surging and desperate crowd. The sniper is calculated while the crowd is out of control. This contributes to the construction of sniper attacks as both physically and metaphorically "above" the events on the ground and separate from the actions of evacuees. One *Boston Globe* article linked the actions of snipers to those of armed gangs.<sup>28</sup>

The same *Los Angeles Times* article also constructed an alternative version of events where the good guys, the rescue workers, were preyed upon by the bad guys, the snipers. The reporters wrote, "At nightfall, heavily armed police and National Guard troops took positions on rooftops, scanning for snipers and armed mobs as seething

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<sup>25</sup> Brit Hume, Trace Gallagher, David Lee Miller and Rick Leventhal, "Dewatering Process Begins in New Orleans," *Fox News: Special Report with Brit Hume*, 7 Sept. 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Ellen Barry, Scott Gold and Stephen Braun, "In Katrina's Aftermath: Chaos and Survival: New Orleans Slides Into Chaos, U.S. Scrambles to Sent Troops," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

crowds of refugees milled below, desperate to flee. Gunfire crackled in the distance.”<sup>29</sup> This struggle and the military imagery used to describe it is emphasized later in the article when National Guard troops were described as “outgunned” by snipers.<sup>30</sup> This is also illustrated by a later *Los Angeles Times* article whose opening paragraph introduces this conflict between opposition groups. It states, “National Guard Troops arrived in this broken city Friday, rolling through floodwaters to aid thousands of frayed evacuees and confront snipers still moving freely through unguarded streets.”<sup>31</sup> It is also important to note the way this passage clearly sets up the snipers as distinct from the evacuees. Indeed, later in the article the snipers are described as “armed civilians,” not victims.

As seen above, this failure to link the snipers or “shots fired” with the victims of the hurricane leads to the construction of these people as separate from those in need. One exception to this is a *Pittsburg Post Gazette* article that identified the snipers as ordinary people, though it is important to note it doesn’t explicitly refer to them as snipers nor offer much sympathy. The editorial bemoaned the state of the city. “Think about it: ordinary people were so locked in anarchy and helplessness they stole food as the more venal among them stole guns and shot at aid helicopters.”<sup>32</sup> As the use of the term “venal” indicates, this article makes no attempt to understand the snipers’ actions.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Joanna Weiss, “After the Food: The City That Was,” *The Boston Globe*, 4 Sept. 2005: page E:1.

<sup>29</sup> Barry, Gold and Braun, “Chaos and Survival.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Scott Gold, Alan Zarembo and Stephen Braun, “In Katrina’s Aftermath: Guardsmen Arrive in New Orleans,” *Los Angeles Times*, 30 Aug. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>32</sup> Dennis Roddy, “The President from Mars,” *Pittsburg Post-Gazette*, 4 Sept. 2005: page K:1.

The term “snipers” was used to identify those firing the shots as distinct from those in need. This was furthered through passive sentence construction that either referred to “snipers” or failed to identify the source of the gun fire. A *Los Angeles Times* article that describes shooters in all their incarnations – hidden in buildings, firing on hospital evacuations, taking aim at rescue helicopters –consistently described them as “snipers” or “shots fired.”<sup>33</sup>

Few articles offer a reasonable explanation or even attempt to understand the actions of the “snipers.” One such exception is a *New York Daily News* article that reported, “Coast Guard Helicopters were fired on by stranded survivors who have waited for days to be rescued from rooftops.”<sup>34</sup> This was backed up by a quote from a named Lieutenant Commodore of the Coast Guard explaining that people were shooting to draw rescue workers’ attention to their plight.<sup>35</sup> One other article that provided an explanation for sniper attacks cloaked that explanation in the experience of the individual. An article in the *Baltimore Sun* voiced the concerns of evacuee Rhonda Johnson. She offered a reasonable explanation for the sniper fire. “They were just trying to tell them, ‘come help us.’ But they weren’t shooting at anyone,” she was quoted as saying.<sup>36</sup>

Many articles employed rescue workers or authorities to back up their claims. Only one article questioned the report and offered transparent reporting. Significantly, this was a *Boston Globe* article written with the sole aim of questioning the mayhem in

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<sup>33</sup> Barry, Gold and Braun, “Chaos and Survival.”

<sup>34</sup> Nicole Bode and Corky Siemaszko, “Trapped in a Watery Hell,” *New York Daily News*, 2 Sept. 2005: 2.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

New Orleans. Here, the opinions of scholars and the Federal Aviation Administration are called on to cast doubt on the stories.<sup>37</sup>

### **Taking Stock of the Data**

As this linguistic analysis demonstrates, coverage of hurricane Katrina demonstrates a range of accuracy and transparency. Some journalists accurately covered the event, while others constructed a picture of the tragedy dominated by rumour rather than fact. In addition, further investigation of the reporting of sniper attacks will show how much of the coverage took the form of media hype – a pattern known to impair accuracy.

**Finding: Variations in accuracy and transparency indicate some failures and some successes.**

While many newspapers published stories about these general incidents, few propagated the three specific baseless rumours selected for study. Moreover, whenever the rumours were reported, it was not with a uniform level of certainty. Reports that a young child was raped and murdered at the Superdome or convention centre were almost always qualified as “rumours” or “stories” and sources were clearly identified as evacuees living in the shelter. Generally the same approach was taken with the reporting

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<sup>36</sup> Douglas Birch, Stacey Hirsh and Arthur Hirsch, “Ruined City Turns Violent: Thousands of Guard Troops Try to Restore Order,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 2 Sept. 2005: page 1:A

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Shea, “Up for Grabs: Sociologists Questions How Much Looting and Mayhem Really Took Place in New Orleans,” *The Boston Globe*, 11 Sept. 2005: page E:1.

of stockpiled bodies at the shelters; some articles went so far as to lead the reader through the different versions of the story by juxtaposing what evacuees were saying with what the reporter was able to find and what the authorities were doing. However, some articles did promote the rumour by including vignettes or descriptive phrases that hinted at the presence of many bodies; they provided no sources to support these claims.

In contrast, little transparency was presented in the reporting of sniper attacks; almost always the rumour was reported with great enthusiasm and little caution. When it came to reports of sniper attacks in the city, no journalists appeared to question in print the veracity of these incidents; most items featured the stories of rescue workers who were not witnesses to attacks but simply acted cautiously out of fear of snipers. The way these articles were written often elevated sniper attacks as the most glaring example of how chaotic and lawless New Orleans had become, and they excluded the possibility of alternate explanations for gunfire.

**Finding: Conditions were right for media hype.**

The sniper rumour was so accepted as fact that reporters exercised little to no caution in their writing about it. Examining the nature of media hypes will help us to understand these reports. This rumour cannot explicitly be identified as a media hype, but the similarities between this coverage and the concept of media hype will help to explain how accuracy of the story was obscured.

Vasterman describes media hypes simply as “self-inflating media coverage.”<sup>38</sup> A large amount of coverage on a specific issue floods the news causing reporters to hunt for new angles in order to be part of this “news wave.”<sup>39</sup> Vasterman argues, “In quick succession, events accumulate in the news, creating the impression that a situation has suddenly deteriorated into a real crisis.”<sup>40</sup> Media hypes are based around a disconnect between an actual threat and the construction of that threat in the media and actual news value and the attention paid to it by the media. Media hypes are usually big stories only because the media build them up as such. Through a media hype, Vasterman explains, “[T]he link between the number of incidents reported and the actual frequency of these incidents gets lost.”<sup>41</sup> Most often, media hypes centre around threats the people perceive to specifically affect them. Usually, they happen in relation to scandals or social problems.<sup>42</sup>

While rape, murder and sniper attacks were threats, they threatened a specific and limited population. Looking specifically at the reporting of sniper attacks, we see a media hype happening as part of a larger story begins to emerge. First, regular news coverage follows an event. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, this is seen on September 2, with the first reported sniper attacks on evacuation efforts at Charity Hospital. Following this, the coverage continues independent of the specific incident, reinforcing the importance of the story. This continued coverage is seen in subsequent articles that

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<sup>38</sup> Peter L.M. Vasterman, “Media-Hype: Self-Reinforcing News Waves, Journalistic Standards and the Construction of Social Problems,” *European Journal of Communication* 20:4 (Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Sage Publications, 2005): 508.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 509.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 509.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 510.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 516.

report on snipers hitting a range of other targets and often referring back to the hospital incident. This key event triggers a “positive feedback loop.”<sup>43</sup> An event starts to stand on its own as the symbol of a larger problem. In this case, it’s the social breakdown of New Orleans. This larger problem becomes a unifying theme that justifies follow-up reporting, which only reinforces the importance of the initial incident. This media-wide construction of the incident is seen in the many editorials and commentaries that cite the sniper attacks in reference to such larger issues as the chaos in the city and the inadequacy of government response. At this point there is a “lowering of the news threshold.”<sup>44</sup> This means that issues or events relating to the central theme are reported with little effort made to confirm the event. By buying into the central theme, reporters accept – without questioning – the validity of the incident. As a consequence, other facts and opinion are discarded and marginalized. As my linguistic analysis indicated, few alternative explanations of gun fire were included in the news reports. From here society’s response feeds the news wave, strengthening the news value of the story, only to have the news wave decline as interest wanes.<sup>45</sup>

Media hypes are a direct threat to accuracy and, as Vasterman argues, violate journalistic standards. Their self-reinforcing process means information is not questioned. The specific frame guides news production and excludes or trivializes dissenting information. It causes the media to inflate both probability and risk. It is a direct result of pack journalism, which research has shown to be rampant in the disaster zone.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 513.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 514.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 515.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 526.

## Conclusion

The differences in reporting indicate differing approaches to the same subject matter. While all reporters faced the same challenges and constraints of working in the disaster zone, not all reported these baseless rumours with the same degree of certainty. This is seen through a comparison of the rumours: while stories of rape and murder were reported as rumour, bodies in the city's shelters were either confirmed or unconfirmed and sniper attacks were overwhelmingly reported as fact. To a certain extent, these differences can be explained by examining the nature of the specific rumours. As noted in the previous chapter, source use and reporting style varied according to which incident was reported. Reporters wrote first hand about the presence of dead bodies because that is what they observed. Narratives and vignettes were used to reconstruct sniper attacks for the reader and rape and murder were overwhelmingly told through the mouths of evacuees or the comments of enthusiastic local officials. These differences then reflect a different relationship to the information on the part of both the reporters and their sources.

While further exploration of these differences is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to note that the criticism of inaccurate reporting was not deserved by the print media as a whole. Compared to the large amount of newsprint devoted to this issue, only 26 articles outright reported the baseless rumours and, as the linguistic analysis demonstrates, more than half of those questioned, investigated or dismissed them.

Reporters cannot stop interviewing average witnesses to disasters simply because their testimony threatens accuracy, nor can they refuse to report on a highly topical story for fear of building up media hype. Instead, reporters must be aware of these dangers and proceed cautiously. Knowing that these factors can contribute to inaccurate reporting, what can journalists do in the future? The next chapter provides some guidelines.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Building on the analysis of inaccuracies outlined in the two previous chapter, I shall now make recommendations for improved journalistic practice that are, on the surface, both straightforward and obvious. They draw not only from the rich body of prior research that informs this study but also from the instruction on disaster coverage provided by journalism textbooks. These recommendations aim to encourage the interrogation of disaster myths, discourage the presentation of the atypical as typical through careful use of sources and, overall, increase the accuracy of disaster reports.

They do not seek to change how journalists work in the disaster zone nor will they place unrealistic demands on the already strained time and resources of this fast-paced profession. Instead, they seek to improve writing. Given the constraints and challenges of covering disasters and the fact that information from all sources – whether official or eye-witness – is often of dubious reliability, writing is a most effective tool for improving accuracy.

In making this link between the scholarly study of journalism and the daily practice of journalists, I am attempting to provide a supplement or an addendum to current journalism textbooks. Most books that serve to instruct new journalists contain inadequate discussion of the challenges of the disaster zone. While some acknowledge the difficulties of covering disasters, few instruct journalists on how to overcome the lack

of reliable information or broken communication systems. Many lump disasters with accidents and crises. In doing this they fail to take into account the way a disaster disrupts the working of a community and, as a result, the reporter's usual newsgathering techniques. Scanlon explains that while these texts offer "lip service" to the lack of accurate information, they actually impair the accuracy of news reports by encouraging journalists to track down the type of information that is likely to be inaccurate, such as the number of dead or injured, and to chase story angles inspired by disaster myths.<sup>1</sup> The gap between mass communications and journalism textbooks shows that the lessons learned from the former are not often passed on to those who write articles or produce TV news segments.<sup>2</sup> Easy to understand and simple to apply, these recommendations should fill that gap, and contribute to the creation of more accurate disaster coverage.

While this thesis outlines the importance of accurate disaster coverage and highlights the many ways accuracy can be impaired, it also applauds the work of print journalists covering Hurricane Katrina. As detailed in the previous chapter, only one-sixth of the more than 150 sample articles propagated the three baseless rumours. Furthermore, as the linguistic analysis demonstrated, the majority of articles about the baseless rumours questioned, investigated or dismissed the rumour in question. This shows a remarkable journalistic achievement in the face of challenges. However, it does not, as it may appear, indicate overwhelmingly accurate reporting. As noted previously, the *general rumours* examined here are largely composed of vague, unverifiable accounts. They refer to rumours whose truth has not been examined. Thus, the jury is still out

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Scanlon, "The Search for Non-Existent Facts in the Reporting of Disasters," *Journalism and Mass Communications Educator* (Summer 1998): 52.

about the overall accuracy of reports from the disaster zone. There is – as always – room for improvement.

The scope of these recommendations is limited by the scope of my study. They do not address how to communicate urgent, late-breaking information to that public directly affected by disaster, for example. But they do outline how newspaper reporters can better serve their readers by providing more complete and more accurate disaster stories.

Another important element of these recommendations is that they are not aimed merely at the individual journalist working in the disaster zone. Newspaper articles are the product of a bureaucracy, not an individual journalist. It is hardly reasonable to expect editors, copy editors and other journalists processing text to understand how tentative the information from their colleagues on the ground is. By changing the wording of a sentence or the order of words, editors can inadvertently diminish the accuracy of an article. By cleaning the qualification from a clunky sentence, copy editors can convert a rumour into a fact. These recommendations are therefore not for field reporters alone, but for all who work on disaster stories.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 45.

***Recommendation 1: Recognize the challenge of accuracy in the disaster zone: Be clear about the nature of your information.***

Many textbooks say the facts and figures of a disaster are the most important information. The death toll comes ahead of eye-witness accounts and estimates of property damage in *News Reporting and Writing*.<sup>3</sup> *Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method* does likewise, acknowledging that these numbers can change constantly and providing simple guidelines on how to deal with this: Death tolls should be qualified as “estimated” or “at least.”<sup>4</sup> While the book does encourage transparent reporting, it does not encourage journalists to be clear about why those numbers fluctuate. Rather than advise them, as *The Professional Journalist: A Guide to the Practices and Principles of the News Media* does, that the numbers cannot be conclusive, *Writing and Reporting News* notes, “You don’t need to correct previous information. Readers know you haven’t made an error; you are just giving the facts as they become available.”<sup>5</sup>

Compared to other texts, *The Professional Journalist: A Guide to the Practices and Principles of the News Media* firmly instructs journalists to qualify their information:

[I]n the earlier years of the century reporters at least had time to do their work and weren’t often tempted to gamble. Under current circumstances, the safest thing for any reporter to do on reaching the scene of a disaster is to say frankly what people can see for themselves – that no one has any accurate casualty figures and that it may take some time to arrive at an accurate count.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Melvin Mencher, *News Reporting and Writing*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997): 405.

<sup>4</sup> Carole Rich, *Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2000), 470.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 470.

<sup>6</sup> John Hohenberg, *The Professional Journalist: A Guide to the Practices and Principles of the News Media* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 169.

The author argues that a swing in casualty figures within the coverage of the disaster is not justified and amounts to bad reporting.<sup>7</sup>

While these books acknowledge accurate information is scarce in the disaster zone, they assume it will be available eventually.<sup>8</sup> In reality, Scanlon argues, statistics summing up the scope of the disaster, such as the number of dead or wounded, are often *never* available.<sup>9</sup>

The recommendation here is thus two-fold. First, if a journalist cannot verify the information – something that is almost impossible following a disaster – he or she should be clear about the tentative nature of that information. This basic tenet is one many disaster scholars agree with.<sup>10</sup> Second, journalists should tell readers *why* this information is difficult to confirm. This means asking local officials why body counts are difficult to arrive at or, in the case of this study, why officials cannot confirm reports of rape and murder at the Superdome. This high level of transparency will enable readers to judge the information presented and draw their own conclusions. In being clear about the nature of their information, reporters are presenting a complete picture to their readers. This includes distinguishing between rumours and fact, to the best of their ability, by questioning sources as to the nature of *their* information.

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<sup>7</sup> Hohenberg, 170.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Scanlon, “Research about the Mass Media and Disaster: Never (Well Hardly Ever) The Twain Shall Meet,” no date, <http://www.training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/downloads/ScanlonJournalism.pdf> (15 March 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Lee Wilkins, “Conclusion: Accidents Will Happen,” in *Bad Tidings: Communication and Catastrophe*, eds. Lynne Masel Walters, Lee Wilkins and Tim Walters (Hillsdale, N.J. : L. Erlbaum, 1989), 169-170 And: Sue O’Brien, “Disasters and the Making of Political Careers,” in *Risky Business: Communicating Issues of Science, Risk and Public Policy*, eds. Lee Wilkins and Philip Patterson (NY: Greenwood Press, 1991), 195.

It is important to note that the qualification of questionable material is preferable to exclusion of such information. As Scanlon and Elliott argue, omission is likely to harm an information-hungry public. "Information," Elliott explains, "enables citizens to take control."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps excerpts of exemplary and less exemplary reporting will help illustrate these points.

*Don't*

Mayor Ray Nagin predicted that the death toll in New Orleans alone would be "most likely thousands."<sup>12</sup>

*Do*

After putting the estimated death toll at 100 on Tuesday, Spraggins pulled back the figure on Wednesday, saying it was wrong. He said officials knew the death toll was 40 as of noon on Tuesday, but a final figure was unavailable.

Part of the error was that officials had believed that 30 people were swept away at Biloxi's Quiet Water Beach apartments. While the complex was devastated, the death toll there probably was much lower, Spraggins said.<sup>13</sup>

***Recommendation 2: Use eye-witness accounts carefully.***

As we have seen, hurricane victims were frequent sources and served to support the unfounded rumours. Ordinary people can present a skewed or inaccurate view of the

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<sup>11</sup> Deni Elliot, "Tales from the Darkside: Ethical Implications of Disaster Coverage," in *Bad Tidings*, 170.

<sup>12</sup> Frank D. Roylance, Stacey Hirsh and Arthur Hirsch, "Desperation in New Orleans 'Most Likely Thousands' Dead in City, Mayor says Evacuation Under Way," *The Baltimore Sun*, 1 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

scope of the disaster by presenting their own stories as typical. Despite this potential to impair accuracy, eye-witness sources are fundamental to disaster coverage. As most journalism textbooks emphasize, getting the human story behind the disaster is essential.<sup>14</sup> One book calls the human interest or feature story a prime element of disaster coverage, urging reporters to tell stories about fires, disasters and accidents through people.<sup>15</sup> The importance of average people as sources is backed up by scholarly research. As Scanlon notes, average people are often the first responders to a disaster and, while they can't speak to its scope, they are often the only people able to explain what happened during and just after disaster struck.<sup>16</sup>

While emphasizing that average people are essential, journalism textbooks also acknowledge the threats to accuracy posed by these sources. *Writing and Reporting News: A Coaching Method* advises that while the best information comes from officials and eye-witnesses on scene, these “sources of information are disorganized and unreliable.”<sup>17</sup> The advice offered: “check back repeatedly.”<sup>18</sup> *The Professional Journalist* notes that “often, eye-witnesses turn out to be very inaccurate and biased reporters” and they “should be treated with care.”<sup>19</sup> *News Reporting and Writing* offers a list of questions designed to draw out the most complete, accurate story from the source.<sup>20</sup> *The*

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher Lee and Shankar Vedantam, “Assessing the Scope of Damage; Hunt for Survivors Continues as Officials Lower Death Toll; Residents Jockey for Supplies,” *The Washington Post*, 1 Sept. 2005: page A:10.

<sup>14</sup> Mencher, 407.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly Leiter, Julian Harriss and Stanley Johnson, *The Complete Reporter: Fundamentals of News Gathering, Writing and Editing* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), 288.

<sup>16</sup> Scanlon, “Research about the Mass Media and Disaster.”

<sup>17</sup> Rich, 463.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>19</sup> Hohenberg, 170.

<sup>20</sup> Mencher, 407. For example:

*Professional Journalist* cautions journalists to offer the precautionary statement that an eye-witness's story requires further verification.<sup>21</sup>

Journalists working in the disaster zone can overcome these risks, while reaping the benefits of ordinary sources, by carefully presenting those sources' words and experiences. By being clear about how sources know what they claim to know, journalists can clearly distinguish accounts from eye-witnesses versus those passing along rumours second hand. As my research revealed, this distinction was largely missing in much of the coverage of Hurricane Katrina. In making clear the relationship between a source and his information, reporters are increasing the transparency of their reports and giving readers the information necessary for making their own judgments. A recommendation from *The Professional Journalist* – journalists should caution readers that information has not been confirmed – is one that should also be incorporated here.

*Don't*

Evacuees said that seven dead bodies lay on the third floor. They said a 14-year-old girl had been raped.<sup>22</sup>

*Do*

Several residents said they had heard of children being raped, through it was not clear whether anyone reported such incidents to the authorities, and no officials could be found who could confirm the accounts.<sup>23</sup>

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1. Ask the eyewitness to reconstruct the incident "in general." Ask the witness to describe the scene. This will stimulate recall.
  2. Tell the witness not to hold back just because he or she thinks the detail isn't important. Report everything.

<sup>21</sup> Hohenberg, 170.

<sup>22</sup> "Relief Rolling in Soldiers Bring Ray of Hope to New Orleans," *Orlando Sentinel*, 3 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph B. Treaster, "At Stadium, a Haven Quickly Becomes an Ordeal," *The New York Times*, 1 Sept. 2005: page A:1.

**Recommendation 3: Use official sources with equal caution.**

As both my study and previous research indicate, local officials are not always reliable during a disaster. As the oft-quoted Police Chief Eddie Compass's experience demonstrates, local officials can pass along rumours and powerfully shape coverage. As Elliott recommends, journalists should know the context in which officials speak and be skeptical of the information they provide.<sup>24</sup> The recommendation for careful use of average people as sources should be equally applied here. Journalists should be clear about whether official sources know what they claim to know from first-hand observations, second-hand from witnesses, or from reports by lower level officials.

*Don't*

"We have individuals who are getting raped, we have individuals who are getting beaten," Police Chief Eddie Compass said. "Tourists are walking in that direction and they are getting preyed upon."<sup>25</sup>

*Do*

On Thursday, Governor Kathleen Blanco said she had no confirmation of corpses in the open at the convention center.<sup>26</sup>

**Recommendation 4: Interrogate disaster myths and avoid media hypes.**

Rather than help journalists fight disaster myths, reporting texts often assume those myths are true.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, one journalism text, in its checklist of things to cover in

<sup>24</sup> Wilkins in *Bad Tidings*, 169-170.

<sup>25</sup> Nicole Bode and Corky Siemaszko, "Trapped in a Watery Hell," *New York Daily News*, 2 Sept. 2005: 2.

<sup>26</sup> Brian MacQuarrie, "Waiting for Help, Officers Keep a Lonely Vigil," *The Boston Globe*, 3 Sept. 2005: page A:15.

<sup>27</sup> Scanlon, "Research about the Mass Media and Disaster."

disaster stories, includes looting as a key element.<sup>28</sup> Another lists crime as a key angle.<sup>29</sup> Scanlon sums it up: “A review of journalism textbooks suggests that the authors who deal with disaster coverage often state as fact what social sciences have shown to be inaccurate.”<sup>30</sup> He notes that “during disaster the media focuses on crime stories they would normally ignore.”<sup>31</sup>

The advice here is simple. Be aware of disaster myths and question reports. Is there an alternative explanation for the behaviour? Do the reports stem from *anticipation* of this behaviour (e.g.: reports of police preparing to fight looting) or *actual* reported incidents of this behaviour? Journalists should also explicitly include such information.

***Recommendation 5: Beware the dangers of band-wagon vocabulary: watch your wording.***

As the articles on sniper attacks demonstrate, the use of the term “sniper” served to narrow the explanation for what was known only as shots fired. By attributing those shots to snipers, reporters assumed they were deliberate intents to kill or injure rescue workers. As little evidence exists to prove snipers did fire at rescue helicopters, this appears to be little more than conjecture. Before using a loaded term, journalists should ask both their sources and themselves whether this is the most appropriate word and avoid using it simply because it has gained widespread acceptance.

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<sup>28</sup> Mencher, 406.

<sup>29</sup> Rich, 468.

<sup>30</sup> Scanlon, “The Search for Non-Existent Facts,” 45.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

*Don't*

“Medical personnel sent out cries for help, and helicopters started airlifting the most critical patients off the roof on Thursday – until snipers struck.”<sup>32</sup>

*Do (rewrite)*

“Medical personnel sent out cries for help, and helicopters started airlifting the most critical patients off the roof on Thursday – *until they heard gun shots.*”

**Recommendation 6: Call in the experts.**

In the days following Katrina, the story shifted from the hurricane to the social chaos of the devastated city. Experts – meteorologists and hurricane specialists – filled the news prior to and during the storm. Experts were not called on to comment on the chaos until almost two weeks after the hurricane struck. Expert sources play a vital role in disaster coverage. Conrad Smith’s study of two natural disasters and one man-made environmental disaster found that expert sources were fundamental to getting beyond the drama and putting the events into context.<sup>33</sup> In New Orleans, the drama of the story was all that was reported. But researchers cited throughout this thesis, for example, were equipped to contextualize and explain these contentious events.

Such sources can provide another angle on what is happening and can help journalists supplement the scarcity of information on the ground. Like any source,

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<sup>32</sup> Tamer El-Ghobashy, “A Boat out of Hell. Finally, Festering Hosp Cleared,” *New York Daily News*, 3 Sept. 2005: 7.

<sup>33</sup> Conrad Smith, *Media and Apocalypse: News Coverage of the Yellowstone Forest Fires, Exxon Valdez Oil Spill, and Loma Prieta Earthquake* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 161.

however, expert sources should be used with caution. Unlike the victims or witnesses or natural disaster or local officials, they are speaking from their professional area of expertise and are not working within the disaster zone itself. Like any source, moreover experts and academics have their own interests and expectations. But they may be able to put events or behaviour in context.

### *Do*

By now the images and stories of looting and mayhem in New Orleans – the resident “shopping” for nonessentials in an abandoned Wal-Mart, alleged rapes in the Superdome, a shot fired at a rescue helicopter – have been burned into the brain of every television watcher and newspaper reader in America. But do they give us an accurate picture of the aftermath of the flood? In fact, if criminal violence were indeed rampant in New Orleans after Katrina hit (setting aside the taking of food, water, bandages and other necessities of survival), that would contradict much of what sociologists have learned in a half century of research about such situations.<sup>34</sup>

### **Consequences of Inaccuracies**

In the days after Hurricane Katrina, terror from crimes seen and unseen, real and rumoured, gripped New Orleans. The fears changed troop deployments, delayed medial evacuations, drove police officers to quit, grounded helicopters... The rumour of crime, as much as the reality of the public disorder, often played a powerful role in the emergency response.  
- *The New York Times*<sup>35</sup>

Widespread rumours in the days following Hurricane Katrina had a concrete impact on when, how, even whether aid was delivered.<sup>36</sup> After hearing the sniper reports, fire halls in Andover, Massachusetts, refused to send their firefighters. The National

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<sup>34</sup> Christopher Shea, “Up for Grabs: Sociologists Questions How Much Looting and Mayhem Really Took Place in New Orleans,” *The Boston Globe*, 11 Sept. 2005: page E:1.

<sup>35</sup> Jim Dwyer and Christopher Drew, “Fear Exceeded Crime’s Reality in New Orleans,” *The New York Times*, 29 Sept. 2005: A:1.

Guard delayed aid to the convention centre after hearing reports of widespread violence and rape. Lt Gen. H. Steven Blum told reporters on September 3, “We waited until we had enough force in place to do an overwhelming force.”<sup>37</sup> Other police officers quit on the spot after hearing reports that armed looters – who never appeared – were advancing towards their town.<sup>38</sup>

The Superdome and convention centre turned out to be cyclical rumour mills. As Matt Welch describes:

[C]ell phones didn’t work, the arena’s public address system wouldn’t run on generator power, and the law enforcement on hand was reduced to talking to the 20,000 evacuees using bullhorns and a lot of legwork. Maj. Ed Bush, public affairs officer for the Louisiana Air National Guard, said “a lot of them had AM radios, and they would listen to news reports that talked about the dead bodies at the Superdome, and the murders in the bathrooms of the Superdome, and the babies being raped at the Superdome...and it would create terrible panic. I would have to try and convince them that no, it wasn’t happening.”<sup>39</sup>

Inaccurate reports filled the media in the early days of the disaster in New Orleans. But those mistakes can have a lasting effect. As Kelly McBride of the Poynter Institute, a school for professional journalists, explains:

I don’t think you can overstate how big of a disaster New Orleans is. ... But you can imprecisely state the nature of the disaster. ... Then you draw attention away from the real story, the magnitude of the destruction, and you kind of undermine the media’s credibility.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Matt Welch, “They Shoot Helicopters, Don’t They? How Journalists Spread Rumors During Katrina,” December 2005, <http://www.reason.com/0512/co.mw.they.shtml> (5 Jan. 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Welch, “They shoot.”

<sup>40</sup> Susannah Rosenblatt and James Rainey, “Katrina Takes Toll on Truth, News Accuracy,” *Los Angeles Times*, 27 Sept. 2005: page A:16.

By using Doris Graber's three stages of coverage of a crisis, I shall show how those reports had a lasting effect. In the first stage, the media are the primary source of information.<sup>41</sup> Here journalists are caught up in the process of reporting. Accurate information is hard to identify amidst the waves of conflicting reports. Journalists interview potentially unreliable sources, witnesses and victims who report, unfiltered, what they have seen and heard. Often, Graber argues, journalism can confuse rather than clarify.<sup>42</sup> In the next stage, the media – now armed with a fuller, more accurate picture of the disaster – are able to correct past errors and put the situation in the proper perspective.<sup>43</sup> Here the media rely on relatively hard data rather than estimates. The final stage overlaps with the previous two. During the first two stages of the crisis, the media are simultaneously attempting to place the crisis “into a larger, long-range perspective and to prepare people to cope with the aftermath.”<sup>44</sup>

My sample reflects the first stage of the coverage. Here the media were reporting about the disaster from the disaster zone. This thesis was inspired by the second stage of coverage – the correcting of past mistakes and the media self-examination that followed. By looking at Graber's three stages, it's clear that, though corrections were made, this first stage is key to the understanding of the crisis. These initial incidents, and their reporting, have a significant impact on the long-range understanding of the disaster. Inaccuracy in the early days can contribute to creation of an inaccurate picture that endures.

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<sup>41</sup> Xigen Li, “Stages of a Crisis and Media Frames and Functions: U.S. TV Networks Coverage of the 9/11 Tragedy during the 24 Hours,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New York, 2005: 229.

<sup>42</sup> Graber, 132.

The story of Hurricane Katrina is multifaceted. It's the story of human suffering, a government's failure to respond and media's swift response and flawed coverage. In exploring these inaccuracies, I have moved beyond this disaster to formulate recommendations to improve disaster coverage in the future. But Hurricane Katrina wasn't only a newspaper story. The images of the disaster were burned in the brain of television viewers and the voices of evacuees heard carried internationally by the broadcast media. Understanding inaccuracies in the print media means understanding one part of the story. As detailed in Chapter 3, pack journalism can mean media-wide mistakes and media-wide patterns in coverage. Significantly, television, as the first medium to carry the sights and sounds of the disaster is known to powerfully impact all coverage that followed. It was no less influential here. Creating accurate coverage from the disaster zone is a media-wide effort. Subsequent studies should look at the work of the broadcast media and formulate similar guidelines to ensure that these mistakes are not repeated.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 133.

<sup>44</sup> Graber, 134.

## APPENDIX I

The study sample was drawn from the Factiva database of Major News and Business Publications, which comprise the following:

Barron's	South Florida Sun-Sentinel
Business Week (Print and Online)	St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Charlotte Observer (N.C.)	St. Paul Pioneer Press
Chicago Tribune	St. Petersburg Times (Fla.)
Daily News (New York)	The Atlanta Journal - Constitution
Denver Post	The Baltimore Sun
Detroit Free Press	The Boston Globe
Dow Jones Business News	The Christian Science Monitor
Dow Jones News Service	The Dallas Morning News
Forbes	The Miami Herald
Fortune	The New York Times
Los Angeles Times	The News & Observer (Raleigh, N.C.)
Newsday (N.Y.)	The Philadelphia Daily News
Newsweek	The Philadelphia Inquirer
Newsweek - Print and Online	The San Francisco Chronicle
Newsweek Web Exclusive	The Wall Street Journal
Orlando Sentinel (Fla.)	The Washington Post
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	Time
San Antonio Express-News	Times-Picayune
San Jose Mercury News	USA Today
Seattle Post-Intelligencer	

## APPENDIX II

### Key Words and Search Terms

*These search terms were used in various combinations in order to cast as wide a net as possible and ensure that the results contained all appropriate articles.*

**Rape and murder in the Superdome and convention centre:** “convention center,” Superdome, rape\*, murder\*, kill\*, throat, “7 year old,” and 7 or seven.

**Piles of bodies in the Superdome and convention centre:** “convention center,” Superdome, bod\*, pile\*, and corpse\*.

**Sniper attacks on rescue helicopters:** Katrina, sniper\*, helicopter\*, and shot\*.

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