Blame and Responsibility: A Look at Media Coverage of Disasters

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Disasters are occurring more frequently in the world today and the media is more pervasive throughout our society. Public awareness is therefore increased and national aid efforts are influenced by the media coverage given to specific disasters. The media not only reports on these events but also functions to interpret and construct meaning for the public. Consequently, the media also may contribute to the construction of government blame and responsibility relating to disasters. Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill are two major disasters in recent history and both received major attention from Newspapers across the United States. The research questions I seek to answer are: Do the media frame perceived natural disasters and man-made disasters differently? How much of the media coverage of disasters references the government’s involvement? And, does the media cast outright blame upon the government or the president in regards to a given disaster? To answer this question, I use both a quantitative and quantitative research method. In the following section, I detail past research on similar questions.

Literature Review

Edelman writes, “To evoke a problem’s origin is to assign blame and praise” (1988). However, in the case of disaster reporting in the media natural disasters are framed differently. Acts of nature cannot be held accountable for destruction; however those who are expected to respond can be blamed. The media recognizes this ideology and constructs disaster coverage around that presupposition. In a way Edelman explains that the purpose of this conceptualization is in fact to provide legitimacy; “The disposition to accept official interpretation of publicized actions about matters remote from daily experience is a major source of legitimation” (1988). In the instance of technological disasters, though, there is a perpetrator who originated the problem. Yet, the media continues to invoke governmental responsibility. Perhaps the power structure of society is the reason for this, as Edelman affirms, “Proposals to solve chronic social dilemmas by changing attitudes and the behavior of individuals are expression of the same power structure that created the problems itself” (1988). Political leaders seem to have a bull’s eye for finger pointing in the media. Citizens want the governmental leadership to react when disasters take place. Media does not function merely to report on action or inaction but also purposely assigns meaning and value to that action or inaction. According to Edelman, “Leaders are ready symbols of good and evil, while historical trends, social conditions, relations of production and modes of discourse are not. Leaders become objectifications of whatever worries or pleases observers of the political scene because it is easy to identify with them, support or oppose them, love or hate them” (1988).

When disasters strike the public looks to the media to find out the answers to many questions. Button writes, “The outcomes of important questions – who is to blame, who is to be compensated, who suffers disproportionate risk exposure, and who should be involved in essential decisions such as remedial treatment and preventative policies – pivot on whose voices are heard” (2002). The media decides which stories are the most news-worthy and whose voices the public will hear. This is problematic considering what Button points out, “How the media packages information and participates in the construction of reality informs us of some of the ideological elements that seek to maintain the status quo in the wake of a disaster” (2002). Not only do the media function to provide news of disasters but also to reaffirm social ideologies that contributed to social order. According to Button, “the control of information in the media or in public discourse, as well as the attempt to control the social production of meaning, is an attempt to define reality in accordance a favored political agenda and therefore must be seen as a distinctly ideological process” (2002). Therefore, the political conversations that occur in the media based around disasters are legitimate, since the agents of politics and the media are linked by the power structures of society. Button (2002) observes, “It is unavoidable, then, that our discourse about disasters becomes a discourse about the politics of disasters.” Perhaps this is a valuable explanation for the patterns found in this research regarding media construction of political blame and responsibility regarding disasters. Button concludes that “The imposition of standardized frames over disaster events by the media and our popular culture undermines alternative discursive frames of explanation and precludes us from analyzing disaster in a way that would allow us to fully unpack the politically powerful world of social relations in which all disasters are grounded” (2002).

Theory

Based on previous research on this subject, I hypothesize that the media does frame perceived natural disasters and man-made disasters differently. It seems logical that the media should construct more political blame around man-made disasters because a particular human entity can be held responsible for the catastrophe. In the case of a natural disaster, it is plausible that the media would hold government agencies accountable for the effectiveness of the response. As to the amount of media coverage referencing government involvement in disasters, I theorize that a good majority of the newspaper articles on the disasters will make connections to the government in some fashion, in both cases of technological disasters and natural disasters. However, man-made disaster coverage may reference the government less than natural disaster coverage because human corporations can shoulder blame as well. Finally, I hypothesize that the media does cast outright blame upon the government and/or the president in regards to a given disaster. Empirical observation of general media coverage of disasters tends to trend towards a pattern of political blame construction around disasters.

Methodology

To answer these questions, an in-depth analysis of disaster coverage is needed and many terms and variables need to be defined. Major U.S. city newspapers provide an ample sample of coverage of both Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and, the BP oil spill in 2010. Six articles were collected for Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill based on the headlines. For both Katrina and BP, two articles were selected based on all text references to the government, two were selected based on all text reference to the president and the remaining two were out of the general heading search for the disaster (for a control group). In the context of this research, the BP oil spill is an example of a technological disaster. Technological disasters are caused by human manipulation and industrialization of the natural environment and cause devastation to human cultures and habitats as well as ecological systems. Natural disasters are normal catastrophic occurrences that cause devastation to human cultures and habitats. Hurricane Katrina is considered a natural disaster. The independent variable to consider is the type of disaster, natural or technological. The dependent variable is then the frequency of government references in newspaper articles. The individual government references are catalogued in tables 5 & 6 but are categorized into the following for statistical analysis: federal government, president, congress, justice department, military, federal agencies, and political terminology. This is nominal level data, thus chi-square statistical analysis is the appropriate tool to assess this type of relationship with these variables. One testable hypothesis is there is a relationship between the type of disaster and the frequency of government references in the newspaper media. Another hypothesis is there is a relationship between the type of disaster and specific categorical reference groups. The qualitative nature of the third research question is best assessed through narrative analysis. The newspaper media often blatantly points fingers at specific government entities. By framing disasters in this light, public opinion is influenced and or mirrored in the news.

Qualitative Research Results

The six articles covering Hurricane Katrina were analyzed in three groups. The first two were articles which did not mention the government or the president in the headlines. This group acts as sort of a control group for the research to test the validity of the conclusions of media constructed government blame. The second two articles were chosen based on the reference to the government in the headline and the third group of articles contained references to President Bush in the headlines.

The issues of race and class were the focus of one of the control group articles and still the references to government blame were present. Turnbull, Eskenazi, &King write, “Their voices joined with those from elsewhere in the country in criticizing the U.S. government’s slow response to the victims, the majority of whom are black” (2005).Turnbull, Eskenazi, & King were correct in assessing that “Many were especially critical of President Bush” (2005). They go on to report, “Samuel Hargrove of SeaTac blames what he calls a racist Bush administration and Jerry Lander, pastor of Cherry Hill Missionary Baptist Church in the Central Area, said Bush should hang his head in shame, with all the rest responsible for the failure to respond swiftly” (2005). So, although the article focuses on blaming “a combination of class and race” many citizens were quoted criticizing the government response efforts and called the response incompetent.

In the second control group article, Robinson blamed a lack of planning and swift mobilization for the tragic situation. He named FEMA and local authorities specifically and writes, “Many of the people in New Orleans sealed their own fate by not getting out, but thousands more are going to die because of the lack of planning” (2005).He personalized this piece by including his own accounts of evacuations through smaller hurricanes in the past. Robinson questioned why the people were not evacuating and casts blame on local government as well as federal agencies. This article was chosen as part of the control group which did not mention the government or the president in the headline and yet government responsibility is still called into question in this piece.

The headline of the next piece read “Government’s failures doomed many” and was chosen for this study based on that reference. The Knight Ridder Newspapers claimed, “But it’s already clear that a multitude of local, state and federal officials and agencies failed the people in Katrina’s path” (2005). The article continues, “But there was one step that the government had failed to taking in this new post-Sept 11 emergency system: issuing an incident of national significance declaration. That would make disaster recovery a national responsibility” (2005).The news of this catastrophic natural disaster which happened to the citizens of a particular area prone to this type of natural seasonal calamity is less about that reality and more about the “national responsibility.”Not only is the government in general blamed for the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina but President Bush in particular faced media scrutiny. Knight Ridder Newspapers defend President Bush to a certain degree “He was deeply engaged, issuing disaster relief orders, talking to the governors of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, and on the Sunday before landfall, urging citizens in Katrina’s path to seek safety” (2005). However, then they go on to write, “But no member of the White House staff was assigned responsibility for tracking federal actions, and no senior officials was given oversight responsibilities” (2005).The Knight Ridder Newspapers proclaims “Some agencies performed splendidly” and goes on to name only the Coast Guard. This article exhibits not only blame centered on the federal, local and state government but also the president. Although, two of the references to the coast guard and the president were positive, the overwhelming number of government criticisms precludes that sentiment.

In an article advocating the advantages of “big government” in the aftermath of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, Crawford draws on the battle between Democrats and Republicans. According to Crawford, “For the desperate people left behind in a flooded New Orleans, intervention by the forces of big government was the only thing that could save them” (2005). He also writes, “Unprecedented relief efforts have already begun and more relief is on the way” (2005). Crawford also references the president, Congress and FEMA in an argument for government legitimacy. These attempts to balance the scale of blame heaped upon the government and the president seem futile and in fact contribute to the rhetoric of government responsibility.

The following source was selected based on the headline which states, “Bush takes blame for slow federal response” (2005). Hillman reports “President Bush yesterday accepted blame for the sluggish federal response to the Hurricane Katrina” (2005).He goes on to write “And his administration has been roundly criticized for being ill-prepared for the magnitude of the disaster” (2005). Hillman argues that the government was at fault and as president, Bush is justifiably responsible. This article exemplifies the outright construction of blame upon the president for not fulfilling the government responsibility surrounding natural disasters.

The final article concerning Hurricane Katrina also references President Bush in the headline. The issue of race and class connected to relief efforts had direct effect on the president. The article is somewhat of a rebuttal of the accusations that the Bush administration was reportedly racist. Herman writes, “President Bush called on the nation Friday to use Hurricane Katrina as the starting point for reshaping racial relations in America” (2005). The president was quoted in saying, “Our nation must abandon all the habits of racism because we cannot carry the message of freedom and the baggage of bigotry at the same time - he said in the inaugural speech” (2005). Not only did President Bush shoulder blame for recovery efforts around one of the greatest natural disasters the nation has faced, but also faced responsibility for perceived racial discrimination charges in the media.

The six articles covering the BP oil Spill were analyzed in three groups in the same manner as the articles on Katrina. The first two articles do not mention the government or the president in the headlines, making up the control group. The second two articles were chosen based on the reference to the government in the headline and the third group of articles contained references to President Obama in the headlines. Examining these articles will allow for comparison of the media framing of technological disasters to that of natural disasters.

The control group articles in the case of the BP oil spill tend to focus on the oil industry as the villain of the disaster. Yet, Mufson & Fahrenthold write of the government involvement in the aftermath of this disaster, “Three major oil industry executives agreed on one thing in a pair of Senate hearings Tuesday: Someone else was to blame for the drilling rig accident that triggered the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico” (2010). According to this article BP, Transocean and Halliburton all blamed each other. This article framed the disaster as an “accident” attributed to human error unlike the framing of Katrina as a natural disaster. Mufson & Fahrenthold also pointed out, “Lawmakers who favor offshore drilling worried about the damage that could be done to public support – We need the oil that comes from offshore to keep this economy moving” (2010). So despite the technological nature of this disaster and the lack of a reference to the government’s direct responsibility, government entities were still present in this article.

The second article in the control group discussed an engineer’s report on the oil spill. Once again in spite of a lack of government terminology in the headline, this article assessed the disaster in relation to government agencies and personnel. Hammer claims, “But it is decidedly more critical of BP than a recent report from President Barack Obama’s National Oil Spill Commission, which accepted the company’s internal investigation report as “90 percent” accurate and shifted some of the blame to BP’s contractors, such as cementing specialist Halliburton” (2010). He also writes concerning the content of the report, “It also criticizes federal regulators at the former Minerals Management Service for not identifying the high-risk methods employed on Deepwater Horizon” (2010).The article also establishes the human cause of the technological disaster stating, “Industry groups such as the National Ocean Industries Association, claim the interim reports is proof that the Deepwater Horizon explosion was a one-time accident stemming more from human error than from any industry-wide shortcomings” (2010). The article does decidedly point fingers at specific breakdowns in the operations of the oil industry but also assesses how the government failed to monitor the industry effectively.

Secondly, the next two articles mention the government in the headlines along-side the oil spill. Daly reports the opinion of Wayne Stone, “The government should have stepped in and not just taken BP’s word” (2010). However, he goes on to reveal that, “After the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska, Congress dictated that oil companies be responsible for dealing with major accidents – including paying for all cleanup – with oversight by federal agencies” (2010).The government is therefore expected to monitor and hold companies responsible for their role in disasters. Coast guard commandant Thad Allen was quoted, “The basic notion is you hold the responsible party accountable, with regime oversight from the government” (2010). Although the oil companies are ultimately deemed responsible the government is also accountable for oversight and regulation. Daly included White House press secretary Robert Gibbs words, “There are no powers of intervention that the federal government has available but has opted not to use” (2010).

The next article establishes the importance of the justice department in the scope of the technological disaster. Associated Press reported, “The justice department sued BP and several other companies involved in the Gulf oil spill Wednesday” (2010). The article also points out that, “The lawsuit makes it possible for the federal government to seek billions of dollars in penalties for polluting the Gulf of Mexico, beaches and wetlands, and reimbursement for its cleanup costs” (2010). This article also establishes the importance of the government’s role in federal safety regulations. It is important to note that the federal court system and the justice department categorical reference are unique to technological disasters.

The president is also open to criticism in the wake of the BP oil spill as evident in the next two articles. Manker & Geib write, “President Barack Obama has been criticized roundly for a slow response to the BP oil disaster, in the Gulf of Mexico, but a check of his comments since the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig shows a clearly escalating rage” (2010). However, they go on to defend the president and squarely blame the oil company, “While BP is ultimately responsible for funding the cost of response and cleanup operations, my administration will continue to use every single available resources at our disposal, including potentially the Department of Defense, to address the incident. These are Obama’s first public words on the spill” (2010). Even the president is aware of the weight of the government’s role in these types of disasters. Manker & Geib reports the president’s pledge, “I take my responsibility. It is my job to make sure that everything is done to shut this down” (2010).The newspaper media clearly blames BP for the cause of the disaster but also strongly suggest the president also has responsibilities to respond to these disasters.

The final article on the BP oil spill continues to establish presidential accountability for the technological disaster. Feldmann argues, “Even if Obama has not received high marks for his handling of the Gulf of Mexico catastrophe, it remains but one of many elements that voters consider when asked their views of this job performance” (2010). He also points out that, “BP is the primary villain in this disaster especially after the release of documents showing that the company took shortcuts that may have led to the explosion of its Deepwater Horizon rig on April 20. The Obama administration picks up its share of blame, not just for the lax federal oversight of offshore drilling that was well-known when Obama took office but also because Interior Secretary Ken Salazar had not fully addressed the issue by the time the spill began” (2010). He goes on to defend Obama by claiming, “There is absolutely nothing that the American President can do about the ecological disaster in the Gulf, Washington Post columnist Anne Applebaum writes in arguing that the oil spill is not Obama’s Hurricane Katrina” (2010). This article also examines the effects of disaster analysis on the presidency by exemplifying President Carter’s fault in the Iranian hostage crisis and the negative effects of Hurricane Katrina on President Bush’s term. Fred Greenstein, a presidential historian, retorts, “The president is an almost automatic lightning rod for practically anything that happens” (2010). Feldmann concludes, “Crises… present opportunities for presidents to exert leadership – and the attendant risk of failure” (2010).

Quantitative Research Results

There are observable realities that establish a relationship between the type of disaster and the number of articles relating to the government. According to a search of the Newsbank database of major U.S. city newspapers, 746 articles were found with Hurricane Katrina in the headlines in 2005. When an all text search for “government” references was applied to the search criteria of those 746 articles, 29% (213/746) mentioned the government. Additionally, an all text search for President Bush within those articles on Hurricane Katrina revealed that 18% (131/746) referenced President Bush specifically (see table 1). Likewise, following the same methodology used above, a Newsbank search uncovered 420 articles headlining the BP oil spill and 49% (206/420) of those referenced the government and 39% (161/420) mentioned President Obama specifically (see table 1). These statistics seem to show that although oil spills are caused by industry, the government is more strongly tied to technological disasters than natural ones. It is also conclusive that a significant percentage of media coverage of disasters references the government’s involvement.

Additionally, in regards to Hurricane Katrina the percentages of categorical references present in the sample articles were relatively wide spread. Out of the 161 total government references the two largest categories represented were the federal government (33%) and president (27%). However, there were additionally 65 references to Congress, the military, federal agencies and general political terms. One important thing to note is that the justice department was not mentioned in the articles pertaining to the natural disaster Hurricane Katrina. Refer to bar graph 1, which illustrates the distribution of references to the different categories of government.

Moreover, the government references in connection with the BP oil spill paint a similar picture of newspaper media coverage. Of the 102 total references to the government contained in the articles on the oil spill number in the presidential category drastically outnumber all other categorical references at 45%. The federal government and Congress together make up 28% of the references (see bar graph 2). Although the justice department only accounts for 4% of the total amount of governmental references, it remains significant when compared to the references on Hurricane Katrina. Based on these statistics it is clear to impart that the president is significantly connected to technological disasters to a greater degree than any other governmental category. When compared to the references to President Bush and Hurricane Katrina, the president was referenced to a greater degree with the oil spill.

Chi-square statistical analysis of this data revealed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the type of disaster and frequency of government references in the newspaper media (see table 4). This provides evidence that the media does frame perceived natural disasters and technological disasters differently. References to the federal government in the articles on Hurricane Katrina considerably outnumber the references to the same in the BP oil spill pieces. The references to the president are similar in frequency values between the types of disasters but the proportions tell are more telling in relation to one another within the particular disaster. Overall Hurricane Katrina articles reference the military, federal agencies and political jargon more than BP oil spill articles. Conversely, the justice department and Congress are referenced more in the BP articles than the Katrina articles.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine the relationship between the types of disasters and the government responsibility constructed by the media. It is conclusive that the newspaper media frames natural and technological disasters differently. The newspaper media does reference the government and the president to a considerable degree in connection with both natural and technological disasters. In many cases, the newspaper media directly casts blame on the government and the president regarding disasters. Qualitative and quantitative data presented here establishes the validity of these finding. Given the findings of this research the media coverage is a contributing factor to the construction of government blame and responsibility relating to disasters.

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Tables

Table 1: Frequency of Government or Presidential references in Newspaper Articles Covering Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Disaster Articles mentioning the Government or President |  |  |  |
|  | Frequency | proportion | % |
| Headline: Hurricane Katrina 2005 | 746 |  |  |
| All Text: Government | 213 | 213/746 | 29% |
| All Text: President Bush | 131 | 131/746 | 18% |
|  |  |  |  |
| Headline: BP Oil Spill 2010 | 420 |  |  |
| All Text: Government | 206 | 206/420 | 49% |
| All Text: President Obama | 164 | 164/120 | 39% |
|  |  |  |  |
| \*Source: Newsbank - Major U.S. Cities - In Print |  |  |  |

Table 2: Categorical References to Various Governmental Terms found in Newspaper Articles on Hurricane Katrina

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Hurricane Katrina Article References | |  |
|  | frequency | % |
| Federal Government | 53 | 33% |
| President | 43 | 27% |
| Congress | 7 | 4% |
| Justice Department | 0 | 0% |
| Military | 12 | 7% |
| Federal Agencies | 20 | 12% |
| Political terminology | 26 | 17% |
|  |  |  |
| Totals | 161 | 100% |

Bar Graph 1: Representing Categorical References to Various Governmental Terms found in Newspaper Articles on Hurricane Katrina

Table 3: Categorical References to Various Governmental Terms found in Newspaper Articles on the BP Oil Spill.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| BP Oil Spill Article References | |  |
|  | frequency | % |
| Federal Government | 14 | 14% |
| President | 46 | 45% |
| Congress | 14 | 14% |
| Justice Department | 5 | 4% |
| Military | 7 | 7% |
| Federal Agencies | 8 | 8% |
| Political terminology | 8 | 8% |
|  |  |  |
| total | 102 | 100% |

Bar Graph 2: Representing Categorical References to Various Governmental Terms found in Newspaper Articles on the BP Oil Spill

Table 4: Chi Square Statistical significance

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| type of reference | Natural Disaster (Katrina) | Technological Disaster (BP Oil Spill) | Total |
| Federal Government | 53 | 14 | 67 |
| President | 43 | 46 | 89 |
| Congress | 7 | 14 | 21 |
| Justice Department | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| Military | 12 | 7 | 19 |
| Federal Agencies | 20 | 8 | 28 |
| Political terminology | 26 | 8 | 34 |
| total | 161 | 102 | 263 |

|  |
| --- |
|  |
|  |
| Pvalue =.01, = 41.01 |
|  |

Reject the null knowing that I can be wrong 1% of the time concluding there is a statistically significant relationship between the type of disaster and the frequency of government references in the newspaper media.