

How Journalists Cover Certain Ethnicities:
The Portrayal of African-Americans
In The Media after Hurricane Katrina.

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Abstract

My paper will consist of assessing the role that the media plays in mediating and cultural changing. This paper hypothesizes that the media treated African-Americans badly, by covering them poorly, as well as while reporting empathetic stories about whites. The stories aired depressed the legitimacy of old-fashioned racism (beliefs that African-Americans are inferior and should be segregated) versus the reality of racism (coming to terms that the media combined with the resentment to cover the truth at the continuation of terms for proper coverage on African-Americans versus Caucasians and their resources and sympathies) that was portrayed throughout several stories. The occurrences were not intentional; rather, what my paper suggests is that it was because African-Americans were the only ones left after the storm hit the Gulf coast due to a lack of resources.

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McNair Research Assignment
*How African-Americans were
Portrayed After Hurricane Katrina*

Introduction

The media is a powerful resource in America, especially in times of crisis or tragedy. In a televised speech in New Orleans, Bush told the nation "All of us saw on television, there is also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well" (Fox News August 30, 2005 *noon* live coverage). One criticism of the media is that the news portrays blacks as drug addicts, criminals, and other diminishing characters. African-Americans in the media are portrayed as violent and ignorant characters. Television, television shows, and movies take African-Americans and make them look like terrible individuals (Merritt, Russ 1997). As a journalist, I understand the criticism; my industry seems to report the bad and not the good. We should focus on the content of the story and reporting stories accurately to where we are not considered bias against anyone. The media should watch how they choose to report different stories so it doesn't become misleading or take away from the truth. Currently there is a negative image on African-Americans in the media because of the media and therefore should be some sort of change soon.

Purpose of this Study

On August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, including the city of New Orleans. Many poor people were affected because of their lack of their own resources as well as the city's. When Hurricane Katrina hit the New Orleans, poor people were unable to escape the area because they did not have cars or any money to go stay in a hotel. According to the 2000 U.S. census New Orleans has a population of 484,674 with 67 percent being African-Americans and 28 percent Caucasians. According to the daily news website, after Hurricane Katrina over 58 percent of African-Americans waited in line for assistance and 3 percent were white.

I would like to use this paper to focus on how African-Americans were represented in the media after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, specifically how the media represented blacks in comparison to whites. It is my intent to collect data and information of the unbalanced coverage of African-Americans after Hurricane Katrina. My hypothesis is that the media treated African-Americans badly, while reporting empathetic stories about Caucasians. By evaluating two major television news networks (CNN and MSNBC), and the *Houston Chronicle's* coverage of the crisis, using the problem-solving technique we will be able to clearly see how the media has portrayed African-Americans throughout the Hurricane Katrina crisis.

History of biased Media Coverage

In 1992 the L.A. riots sparked a lot of controversy in the media. Rodney King, and African-American, was brutally beaten by a police officer; and the entire situation was caught on tape by the officer's dashboard camera. When the officers were put on trial for the beating, an all white jury acquitted them; despite the widely circulated video

African-Americans and Latinos in South Central Los Angeles, gathered and protested against the acquittals and started a huge riot. Continuous television coverage, especially by helicopter news crews, riveted the country and shocked viewers around the world as parts of the city went up in flames, stores were broken into, innocent bystanders were beaten, and rioters shot at police. For example, Reginald Denny was a Caucasian truck driver who was almost beaten to death and robbed during the L.A. riots. The media as well as bystanders wanted to parallel this incident with the Rodney King situation. The four African-American men who entered pleas of not guilty in regards to beating Mr. Denny spent time in jail and were freed on bond as for the four Caucasian Police officers spent no time in jail (New York Times 1992). Although the riots played a significant role in how a community, race, and class could be affected because of the media and with my next point I would like to introduce a few trials that high profile individuals were portrayed.

Two years after the Rodney King incident the O.J. Simpson Trial raised many questions about whether or not the media played a role in how the case was handled. Throughout the last decade there have been several cases regarding high profile African-Americans that have caused the public to question the media's coverage of African-Americans. For example, Mr. Simpson mentioned on the stand, that the arresting officer had uttered a racial profanity, and it seemed to work in his favor (National Public Radio 10/13/94). Some say the most dramatic point in the trial was the playing of the Fuhrman tapes. "I'd never experienced a moment like it, when you could actually feel the words searing into the consciousness of the incredulous listeners. Most of us had never heard anything like the racist ranting of Detective Mark Fuhrman and would never have

believed a police officer could say such things. We forget that the jury never heard those words” (Gerald Uelmen, SCU editorial). Also this trial exposed deep rifts between African-Americans and Caucasians in the U.S. especially in the media. “The O.J. Simpson trial is best understood as a cultural phenomenon rather than a lesson plan. Any event that captures such widespread public attention for such a sustained period will have profound cultural repercussions (Uelmen 12).

In the 2004 Kobe Bryant trial it has been said that he was falsely accused of rape, because he was black. It has also been said that Michael Jackson case took the media attention away from the Kobe case. According to the daily press this case was mostly a race issue. In this case, just like the Bryant trial, there was a high profile African-Americans who was accused of many felonies.

Michael Jackson, 2005, was accused of child molestation with several children and other charges. The Michael Jackson trial was held in a very different location than the Simpson trial, upscale Santa Barbara County which played a key role in his trial. There were a lot of interesting pieces that could have determined Mr. Jackson’s verdict, but the role that the media played was significant as well. Newspapers in the US and Britain almost splashed the story across their front pages about Jackson’s verdict the next day. More than 2,000 journalists from around the world were present in and around the courtroom for the climax of the trial that day. U.S. and British TV stations carried the verdict live as did many other TV stations around the world. Many of the commentators on US TV were clearly taken by surprise by the outcome, with few predicting a not guilty verdict, judged by the speculation of the tense minutes before the announcement. (BBC

News June 14, 2005). There were speculations that Mr. Jackson got away with being sent to jail because of his prestige and class.

How do the media affect trial cases? The cameras could have been perceived as the tabloids, who viewed the trial as a source of entertainment and those members of the press corps who followed their lead. “Just as economists say bad money drives out the good, we saw bad journalism drive out the good,” said Al Sharpton. “Reporters tripped over each other to report every leak, giving credence to the wildest rumors.” To me both the print and television media demand a steady supply of stories, and when there was nothing new to report, we try to take the smallest piece of information and exaggerate with it no matter how insignificant it maybe.

Each case just mentioned involved men with power and prestige, also an area with severe poverty in regards to Los Angeles riots. One of the lasting criticisms of the Hurricane Katrina crisis is that the government was slow to move into the city of New Orleans and rescue those left stranded by the hurricane. The city of New Orleans was relatively built on slavery, racial segregation, and racial discrimination, but is the reason that it can't receive proper coverage during a tragic time? Media coverage during that time was also slow to show the American public the devastation in the region. Was the slow response from the media and the government because those left behind were mostly African-Americans?

The Role of the Media with the Coverage of Blacks

“Studies have shown that through antagonism, resentment, and anger toward African-Americans wishes, a lack of being informed about the culture, and not being able to relate that this causes problems to cover them appropriately” (Sears, 1988, p.57). The

media tends to believe that the individuals African-American fate is not determined by the treatment of African-Americans as a group, and that the demands for help and special favors should not be granted to African-Americans as a group” (Sears, 1988, p.57; cf. McConahay, 1986). After all, they believe, discrimination is largely a thing of the past, and African-Americans have the chance to fair well in coverage against those of other ethnicities.

Surveys continued to show only small minorities endorsing such traditional cultural bias sentiments as “African-Americans are generally not as smart as whites” or “It is a bad idea for African-Americans to marry Caucasians” (McConahay, 1986, p.108). On the other hand, Caucasians frequently endorse survey items intended to tap into how race coincides with how news mediums are bias in their coverage with different races. Several examples that were taken from a literature review in Sears, 1988. “African-Americans are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights in the media, it is easy to understand the anger they have. Over the past few years, the government and news media have shown more respect to African-Americans than they deserve.” “Also African-Americans have it better the government and news media have shown more respect to African-Americans than they deserve and they have it better than they ever had it before” Studies have shown both that such items comprise a psychometrically valid attitude scale (McConahay, 1986) and that scores on the scale predict policy attitudes and voting behavior at statistically significant levels (Sears, 1988). Not many scholars have researched my topic, but many have attacked the subject of African-Americans portrayal in the media overall and dealing with stereotypes. Some believe the real explanation for Caucasians hostility to African-Americans striving is not *racial* prejudice and conflict

(Bobo, 1988); these observers think that Caucasian resentment arises from competition with black groups over scarce resources. Others argue that Caucasians may oppose African-American politicians or government intervention in favor of blacks on conservative ideological grounds having nothing to do with racial animosity (Roth, 1990). Both arguments can be proven to be true. The most convincing argument would've been, through convincing evidence is the scores on the predictable behavior regarding African-Americans in the media. Based on this research my next step would have to be show through research how African-Americans previous activities dictates at times how they are covered and how it had an effect on their coverage with Hurricane Katrina.

MSNBC

It has been said that at times, the ethnic media have been more opinionated and outspoken, and in many cases have taken a more activist approach than mainstream news organizations and tried to help members of their ethnic groups who have suffered from Hurricane Katrina (MSNBC Brian Scokloff Sept. 12th 2005). In the Katrina Aftermath what I observed was that the majority of those that were left behind were the poor and were unable to leave as those with transportation. The poor tends to capitalize on any chance that arises that allows them to attain material ideas. The news coverage was 45 minutes long and I analyzed that about 86 percent of African-Americans appeared during this broadcast. Out of the few Caucasians who existed throughout the tape they were workers for the Red Cross and National Guard.

CNN

This special coverage profiled the Bryan family who had black molds throughout their home on the walls. The high water marks were inches from the ceiling. The

refrigerator was over turned. Floodwaters had rushed through the garage and ripped away plaster to expose weakened wooden beams. For about approximately 15 minutes of the tape other footage was shown which can be seen on the next few pages.

Houston Chronicle

In the Houston Chronicle I used the captions and images to look at how Hurricane Katrina was being covered. The choice of wording was not used accurately. For example, *looting* was used when an African-American was searching for food. *Finding* was used when a Caucasian was searching for food. A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans (August 30, 2005, Chart 10). Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store (August 30, 2005, Chart 11).

Time

On August 30, 2005 Time magazine displayed a picture of looters in a confrontation. New Orleans cops arrested suspect looters (see chart 1 and 2). As the bonds of civil society broke down, the flooded streets became canals of crime. An estimated one-third of New Orleans police officers fled the city in the first few days after the storm; their absence was a key factor in the breakdown of public safety. Some looters were opportunists caught stealing; others stole out of desperation, simply to survive and help others survive (Time Hurricane Katrina, The storm That Changed America, p.12-13). On the same day Time took a picture of Evelyn Turner who wept alongside the body of her common-law husband Xavier Bowie. Turner and Bowie, with no means of leaving New Orleans, had hoped to ride out the storm. Bowie suffered from Lung cancer and relied on an oxygen tank to breathe; he died when his supply of oxygen ran out and the

couple was unable to replace it (Time p.14, see chart 3). Unmoors from their homes, many New Orleans residents became human flotsam, adrift and alone, seeking shelter. Yet even when displaced persons reached such designated refuges as the Superdome and the city's Convention Center, they found themselves trapped for days in intolerable conditions. A woman wades through oil-slicked waters toward higher grounds (Time p. 18 see chart 4). There were so many individuals stranded throughout the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. On September 1st Time displayed a picture of four African-Americans who had broken the roof of their home surrounded by floodwaters, as they awaited rescue (Time p.22 and 23, Chart 5). They were considered to be the lucky ones. In certain cases rescue workers could hear people trapped in attics with no means of escape pounding on roofs from the inside, as the waters kept rising. On day two of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina Time reports that that New Orleans initially had seemed to have dodged major landfall (Time p.39). With most of the city under water two African-Americans are seen trying to escape a flooding vehicle, while saving an infant child at the same time (Time p. 39, Chart 6). As day five approached assistance seemed to be heading in New Orleans way and helping out as much as possible, but not enough help was provided. After five days had passed there were still some residents waiting for aid (Time p.44, Chart 7). According to Time flood victims were still trapped on rooftops. Evacuation began slowly at the Superdome. Federal officials claim to be ignorant of the desperate situation at the Convention Center, which most Americans have been following closely through extensive live media reports. Although African-Americans were covered in the media as individuals with lack of resources and criminals, Time covered the story of a 28-year-old maintenance worker who put forth a lot of effort to rescue the lives of others (Time p.52,

Chart 8). My research addresses majority African-Americans, but throughout Time's Hurricane Katrina book there were a few Caucasians that were covered as well. There was a David Keifer who led his sister Molly and his son across the flooded landscape of uptown New Orleans two days after Katrina passed through. The three rode out the storm's initial assault without evacuating, but as the floodwaters continued to rise, they were forced to flee. Officials estimate that some 20% of the city's 500,000 citizens did not leave the city before Katrina struck and were then trapped without power, food, or drinking water (Time p.8, Chart9).

My research material came from CNN and MSNBC for the broadcasting viewpoint. Then Time's *Hurricane Katrina the storm that changed America* by Wynton Marsalis was used in-depth to support my research. Also the *Houston Chronicle* was used to see how the print media portrayed African-Americans after Hurricane Katrina hit. I used a 5 day time period after Hurricane Katrina Hit.

Supportive Research

There have many individuals I have spoken with regarding my topic and all supported my research and opinions. "We're shocked by the reality of government both failing to get to people soon enough and then the racist and classiest nature of some of the media coverage" (Greg Palast). The media is stating how people in New Orleans were neglected to be rescued and how they were neglected funds to repair the levees. When I asked the Mayor of New Orleans about how he felt reporters were covering the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina he said, "You guys are not writing about people still needing resources right now at this moment." Ray Nagin went on to mention, "I want to send a message to you as black journalist tell this story and look for angles the boss may not

approve of black journalist, because the government is not helping, we need your help.” Rev. Al Sharpton, motivational speaker also responded to my research questions by saying, “At the beginning reporters did a good job and then it got somewhat competitive, they were getting too creative with the stories and then the facts got lost. It was awful African-Americans were defined as low-class individuals.

Future Research

There have been several media coverages since Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. Many have given input and opinionated statements towards the research project, which I was thoroughly grateful for. Hopefully in future research a journalist or a researcher will explore the context of wording. My paper primarily focused on images and the visionary aspect of individuals after Hurricane Katrina. Word selection is a huge avenue of journalistic coverage and should be researched and explored. This maybe one area that I would like to try and tackle in my graduate studies one day. It is very difficult, but it provides a challenge.

In conclusion, it has been a year since the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina swept through the Gulf Coast. At the time the citizens of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast really didn't know how severe Hurricane Katrina was going to hit, so they decided to stay and most of them lost their lives. As a result, those horrors illuminate the social division in our nation and the disproportionate burden of illness, injury, disability and death experience those at the bottom. Through this research paper I tried to analyzed and explore how African-Americans were portrayed. I had to rely on my own research because this topic hasn't been looked into. Currently many journalists are doing several things with the aftermath of Katrina. Documentaries, books, movies, and more are being

created through research. From my observation African-Americans were covered in a way that portrayed the race of one of low-income, criminals, and ignorant. Instead of covering them as victims they were.

Resources

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Chart 10



Chart 11