

## **‘Came Hell and High Water’: The Intersection of Hurricane Katrina, the News Media, Race and Poverty**

COURTE C. W. VOORHEES\*, JOHN VICK and DOUGLAS D. PERKINS

*Center for Community Studies, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, 230 Appleton Pl. Peabody #90, 130 Magnolia Cr., Nashville, TN 37203, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

The mass devastation and suffering left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in the US Gulf Coast brought the intersection of media and community into sharp focus. The news media played a pivotal role in almost every aspect of the disaster and its aftermath, and was harshly criticized for its depiction of minorities and for sensationalizing a human and environmental disaster. The literature suggests that media often represents minorities in a negative light, ultimately reinforcing existing social inequalities. This paper examines the portrayal of minority groups in the media during and after the storm. Data were coded from news media broadcasts to determine the nature of minority representation. Interviews were conducted with individuals from New Orleans who survived the disaster to understand issues related to media trust, the accuracy of media reports and perception of the media’s portrayal of minorities. The results indicate that minorities are disproportionately shown in a passive or ‘victim’ role and are rarely shown in positions of expertise. Further, storm survivors indicated a misrepresentation of minorities in media coverage of the disaster, as well as reporting low levels of media trust and accuracy. The broader implications of these findings in relation to media reinforcement of social inequities and media responsibility are discussed. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

*Key words:* disaster; media bias; news; television; poverty; race; racism; stigma; content analysis; flood

The deadliest hurricane in the United States since 1928 pounded across the Gulf Coast at the end of August, killing more than 1300 people in five states, devastating beach-front towns and cities and dislocating hundreds of thousands of people for months, if not years. Most of the deaths from Hurricane Katrina occurred in New Orleans, which was flooded when levees protecting the below-sea-level city were breached, making it almost impossible for people still in the city to leave or for rescue workers to get in. Perhaps as many as 50 000 New Orleanians, most of them poor and black, jammed into the Superdome and the city’s convention centre; there they awaited

---

\* Correspondence to: Courte C. W. Voorhees, Center for Community Studies, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, 230 Appleton Pl. Peabody #90, 130 Magnolia Cr., Nashville, TN 37203, USA.  
E-mail: courte.c.voorhees@vanderbilt.edu

evacuation for several days with little fresh water, food, sanitation facilities or medical care. Outside, looters marauded through the city for nearly a week before the situation was brought under control. Dead bodies were left floating in the floodwaters while the comparatively few rescue teams who could get into the city worked to remove those who were still alive (National Weather Service, 2005).

The news media played a pivotal role in almost every aspect of the Hurricane Katrina disaster and its aftermath. A shocked nation and world watched the drama unfold—the approaching storm, stranded families, daring rescues, lawlessness and inept relief management—live on television. The Bush administration used the media to spread disinformation about what caused the flooding, whether it could have been foreseen or prevented, and problems in federal disaster relief. Even though the media often seemed to know more than officials at the highest levels, many false claims went unchallenged (Media Matters for America, 2005). Regardless of people's suspicions of media bias or sensationalism, television coverage expanded from its normal role to become a lifeline for suffering communities. TV has its strongest effect on viewers during crisis situations when other means of communication break down and television becomes the primary or even sole source of information (Livingstone, 1998). Residents relied on the media for critical life-and-death information from storm and evacuation warnings. These television reports helped millions of evacuees locate family members, plan relocation, observe the destruction, monitor the condition of their homes and neighbourhoods and try to make sense of the catastrophe.

As events unfolded in the Gulf Coast, it swiftly became evident that African-Americans and people in poverty were either predominantly carrying the burden of suffering, or the media coverage was focusing almost exclusively on them. Jesse Jackson, Sr. stated: '... Katrina's impact was multiplied if you were African-American or poor—and so many facing the worst flooding were both' (Prah, 2005, p. 1). Despite the disparate race and class impacts blatantly visible on the news, almost no mention of this disparity surfaced in the mainstream media. Race and especially class played major roles in who was left behind and continue to greatly determine who is able to return to the Gulf Coast.

This paper reviews scholarly and popular literature about Hurricane Katrina, poverty, media and the intersection of these elements. Then research is presented based on (a) the experience and perceptions of two samples of New Orleans residents interviewed several months post-disaster using race, culture and poverty as theoretical lenses and (b) a comparison of that analysis with systematic content analysis of television news coverage during the disaster and its immediate aftermath. One group of residents who stayed or returned immediately to the city was interviewed during field research conducted in New Orleans. Another group was interviewed after their relocation to Nashville, TN. The media coverage of Hurricane Katrina has produced many opinions, but few have been answered with research. This paper reviews relevant research, examines opinions about the television coverage of Katrina—from the standpoint of survivors, critics, leaders and officials—and presents quantitative and qualitative data to verify or challenge existing positions in the debate.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF POVERTY AND KATRINA IN NEWS MEDIA

One example of purported media bias received widespread attention on the internet and among media critics: Two images of Hurricane Katrina survivors were paraded side by side

as proof that the news media was biased against African-Americans—one image shows a black person carrying supplies labelled as ‘looting’, while white people in an identical situation were labelled as ‘finding’ supplies. The fact that these images were from two different news sources was rarely mentioned and makes the direct contrast a little misleading. However flawed, these images became one of the sparks that renewed the debate over race and class bias in the media.

Once the waters finally receded and the slow house-to-house search process began, the full and immense scope of the human tragedies and property loss was revealed and gradually, story upon story, reported via the media. The media zealously publicized Officials’ over-exaggerated reports of weather conditions and violence in New Orleans, delaying the arrival of relief teams and volunteers that feared for their safety (Starks, 2006). Although the coincidence of race and class was starkly evident, it was poverty which primarily determined who lived in the most vulnerable, low-lying neighbourhoods (that flooded first and emptied last), who was uninsured, who was unable to escape the storm and flood (and thus who lived and who died), who had fewer choices in relocating and who did not have the resources to return and rebuild.

Contrary to the notion that ‘acts of God’ do not discriminate between rich and poor, natural disasters often amplify unfavourable outcomes associated with poverty and social disparity (Prilleltensky, 2003). Media coverage showing disproportionate impacts on poor minorities should have helped set a new political agenda to get at the root causes of poverty and disparity. President Bush was harshly criticized for the slow and inadequate Federal response to the disaster. He did, however, address poverty and the media’s role in revealing it in his address to the nation from New Orleans on 15th September 2005 (Bush, 2005):

Within the gulf region are some of the most beautiful and historic places in America. As all of us saw on television, there’s also some deep, persistent poverty in this region as well. That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action.

Bush’s identification of the historical and racist aetiology of poverty was annulled by his later statement that, ‘[i]t is entrepreneurship that helps break the cycle of poverty, and we will take the side of entrepreneurs as they lead the economic revival of the gulf region’. This solution places the responsibility of recovery in the hands of suffering individuals who are mere casualties of historical context. Bush’s response to Katrina prompted popular hip-hop artist Kanye West to provide an iconic sound bite during a Gulf Coast benefit concert, stating ‘George Bush doesn’t care about black people’ (de Moraes, 2005). Even after a presidential mandate to confront poverty, survivors of Katrina are left with the blame and responsibility to rebuild their own lives, as is often the case with people experiencing poverty (Prilleltensky, 2003).

## **THE GEOGRAPHY OF RACE AND POVERTY**

According to a report by the Brookings Institution, New Orleans had one of the highest concentrations of poverty and poor African-American residents in the US (Berube & Katz, 2005). Beyond New Orleans, the poverty rate in the damaged areas of the Gulf Coast (20.72%) is conspicuously above the national average of 12.4% (Congressional Research Service, 2005). The geographic concentration of people experiencing poverty—mostly African-Americans—has catalyzed a historic cycle of destruction and suffering. Katrina forced misery upon people from every segment of the social spectrum, but the poor and

unemployed, African-Americans, and those who rent their homes were especially affected (Logan, 2006). Due to this concentration of damage, the hurricane amplified preexisting disparities based on class and race. According to Logan (2006), residents in damaged areas were 45.8% African-American—as compared to 26.4% in the undamaged areas of the region, 29.9% were under the poverty line—as compared to 15.3% in surrounding undamaged areas and 7.6% of the residents in damaged areas were unemployed—as compared to 6% in nearby undamaged areas. The Congressional Research Service report for Congress (2005) states that those people that were barely getting by before the hurricane will likely now drop into poverty, due to lack of insurance and effective support networks. Losing one's home and belongings is horrific for anyone, but truly tragic for those who have no hope of rebuilding. Many of the desperate people seen plucked from their roofs on TV will never be able to return to their lives before Katrina.

## MEDIA

Television has a history of reifying the image of the poor and minorities as relatively powerless—if it includes them at all (Van Dijk, 2000). It also tends to organize people's beliefs in an oversimplified way, often dichotomizing issues, and serves to validate beliefs already held by the viewer (Livingstone, 1998). Graves (1999) found that minorities are severely underrepresented on television programming and when minorities do appear, their level of power and social status is significantly lower than their white counterparts. This representation of class and ethnic inequality might be accurate in some circumstances, but repeated television representation of this power imbalance reinforces stigmatized minority identity formation (Loto, Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Nikora, Karapu, & Barnett, 2006). Media—especially television—is also often the only source of information white people have about minorities; the images are often negative and minorities rarely have the ability to influence how they are portrayed (Graves, 1999).

Minorities are stereotypically represented in either a passive role as the mere targets of decisions and actions or as breaking norms and laws (Loto et al., 2006), that is, as being deviant and a threat to 'us' (the assumed white audience). Whites as a group are represented as victims or as taking vigorous action against such deviance (Van Dijk, 2000). This systematic negative portrayal of minorities contributes to, '...negative mental models, stereotypes, prejudices and ideologies about the others, and hence indirectly to the enactment and reproduction of racism' (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 48).

News media tend to reinforce the interests of dominant groups and symbolically reproduce and reinforce current social orders and institutions (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978). Chomsky (1998) asserts that the purpose of the media is to defend the agendas of privileged groups and reify the image of minorities as criminals and welfare leeches. He states that expecting the media to report disasters in a more honest and humane way on their own initiative—rather than reflecting the interests of the powerful—would be like 'expecting General Motors to give away its profits to poor people in the slums' (p. 42). Through constant abuse, news and other media create in-group cohesion for the elite and maintain dominance over minorities (Van Dijk, 2000).

During the coverage of Hurricane Katrina, the media overrepresented crime and panic and underrepresented acts of kindness (Tierny, Bevc, & Kuligowski, 2006). Although looting was commonplace, highly exaggerated reports of murder and destruction reified the existing image of total chaos in New Orleans (Prah, 2005). Pro-social behaviours were the

norm following Katrina, as Gulf Coast residents overwhelmingly chose to help others instead of harming them (Rodriguez, Trainor, & Quarantelli, 2006). According to Tierny and co-workers (2006), the pro-social behaviour of Katrina survivors is typical. Perhaps the negative skew to the media coverage is also typical.

In contrast to the criticism of the media, there have been distinctly positive effects from the Katrina coverage. Turning the lens on the national network of errors had momentary benefits; the world watched news reports of the American Gulf Coast in shock, as a shamed nation was forced to face issues of race and poverty (Roach, 2005). Partially as a result of media exposure, communities across the country welcomed displaced survivors and aid poured into the Gulf Coast (Greenya, 2006). These positive media effects grant a view of the potential good that the media could do for ailing communities.

## **KATRINA AS A LENS INTO MEDIA AND POVERTY**

Hurricane Katrina's landfall paved a vast space for the crossroads of media and poverty. Lewis (2005) paints a striking portrait of the media portrayal of poor African-Americans during the disaster:

There they were unsheltered, uninsured, unpossessed . . . yet still enduring and striving like all poor people anywhere. But, unlike their poor White analogs, [Blacks were] vilified, ridiculed and demonized by the national media as being almost congenitally depraved because they 'took' whatever they could to feed, warm and solace their families (p. 19).

National Public Radio's *On the Media* (2005) reported that media critics faulted the mainstream media for ignoring issues of race in the face of obvious ethnic disparity; according to media critic Jack Shafer: 'nearly every rescued person, temporary resident of the Superdome, looter or loiterer on the high ground, of the freeway seen on TV was black, with no questions about race asked or answered'.

Spriggs (2006) asserts that the television coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed African-Americans, women and children as the disproportionate face of poverty. According to a 2005 report by the Congressional Research Service (CRS), 38% of the children living in areas damaged by the storms and flooding are living with single mothers—as compared to a national rate of 20%. This increased rate of single female head of households—a family structure that is more than twice as likely to exist in poverty—contributes to the disproportionate and persistent concentration of poverty in damaged areas (Congressional Research Service, 2005).

## **FROM LITERATURE TO RESEARCH**

The media coverage and portrayal of Hurricane Katrina has brought many questions to the forefront, while granting us an excellent case to attempt the formation of answers. Beyond the suitability of Katrina as a venue for inquiry, the study of the media's treatment of class and race is a necessary part of a critical perspective on the big picture of the Gulf Coast disaster. Scholars have called for critical investigation of the news media's performance during Hurricane Katrina's aftermath—with claims of poorly informed and executed, racially insensitive coverage (Roach, 2005). This study aims to shed light on some of the many questions that have surfaced, while answering the call for critical investigation.

## METHODS

The data sources (*interview* and *broadcast*) and methods relate to two different purposes of this study. The first purpose is to sample (in a phenomenological, but not necessarily representative way) and synthesize the experiences and opinions of Katrina survivors, specifically related to media coverage. The second purpose is to examine the portrayal of poverty, minorities and gender during the coverage of Hurricane Katrina.

### *Data sources*

Qualitative and quantitative data from interviews with Katrina survivors and television news broadcasts were compiled, summarized and compared. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of 23 Katrina survivors in New Orleans, Louisiana and Nashville, Tennessee 6 months after the disaster. Researchers also coded and analyzed news broadcasts from the first 30 days of disaster coverage.

Due to the sensitivity and nature of this study, it is important to note the demographic details of the research team. The interview team consisted of four white males and one white female. The coding team was a subset of this team, consisting of two males. Although we made every effort to approach a diverse sample for interviews, we seemed less trusted by some respondents of colour and relative lower class—likely impacting our sample. Considering the disaster response and subsequent portrayal of this population, this mistrust is justified.

*Interview data.* All interviewees were residents of New Orleans before and during Hurricane Katrina. The 13 interviewed in New Orleans were chosen from 5 neighbourhoods with varying levels of damage. The interviewers used convenience and snowball sampling within each neighbourhood by approaching people in parks, cafes, bars, sidewalks and by knocking on the doors of homes. The 10 interviewed in Nashville were conducted with individuals staying in developments that are housing evacuees from New Orleans and had similar demographics to the New Orleans sample. Interviews were conducted in both sites to control for potential variance in perception based on differences in ability and opportunity to return to New Orleans, post-Katrina.

Demographically, 65% of respondents were white, 13% were African-American, 13% were Hispanic, 1 respondent ethnically self identified as a 'pot of gumbo', and 1 respondent refused to self-classify. Individual annual incomes were as follows: 35% earned \$10 000 or less; 17% earned \$10;000–\$20 000, 9% earned \$20 000–\$30 000; 22% earned \$30 000–\$40 000; 17% were in each of the \$40 000–\$50 000, \$50 000–\$60 000 and \$60 000–\$70 000 ranges; 13% earned above \$80 000. One interviewee chose not to answer. We acknowledge the relatively high number of white respondents as a limitation of the sample.

Interviewers used a semi-structured protocol with both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Interviews were conducted on the street or in front of homes in New Orleans and at respondents' apartments in Nashville. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and the interviewers took notes on non-audio detail. Interviewees were asked whether or not they had watched television broadcasts in the 30 days following the disaster, how they thought minorities and the poor were represented in the broadcasts, if the information in the broadcasts matched their experience, whether or not they trusted what the broadcasts were telling them about the disaster and demographic information.

Most of the themes from the interview results come directly from the organization of the interview protocol. The remainder of the themes flowed from the open-ended responses in the interviews. Responses were grouped by similarity and then tallied. Anomalous responses and especially representative or poignant quotes are included in the results section.

*Broadcast data.* Data were collected from 30 news broadcasts that aired on CNN between 29 August 2005 and 29 September 2005. We chose CNN because it is a 24-hour national news provider and Katrina survivors interviewed for this study cited CNN as their most watched news source for the 30 days following the disaster. A search of the CNN news archive database revealed 360 news broadcasts on Katrina in the 30-day period. A sample of 30 clips was drawn from these results using a random number generator. The sampled broadcasts totalled 174 minutes in length (mean clip length = 5.8 minutes).

We developed a coding procedure, adapted from standard video coding methods, to record data from broadcasts. A two-member coding team simultaneously recorded any identifiable information for each instance that a person was visible or audible. The coders cross-checked all recorded material concurrently for inter-rater reliability and consensus. Images and audio were coded each time they appeared, regardless of repetition. The quantitative variables include counts of the purpose of the broadcast (informative, personal interest, political, other), the subjective and objective conditions (5-point scale including Negative, Somewhat Negative, Neutral, Somewhat Positive and Positive) and demographics of all persons shown or heard during the broadcast (race, gender, age and social status). The coders recorded qualitative descriptions of social interactions and quotes relating to class, race and gender. The per cent of each race and gender represented in the broadcasts who were affected by the disaster were compared to the per cent race and gender of the population of the city of New Orleans and to the damaged areas of the Gulf Coast, excluding officials, rescue workers, police, military, etc.

Qualitative data were also obtained from the news broadcasts to provide more in-depth descriptions of situations related to authority, class, race and gender. The coders also recorded all situations where individuals in a position of authority interacted with individuals of lower social status or lower situational power to determine the treatment of ethnic and class minorities by those in positions of power and to determine trends in media representation.

## RESULTS

### *Interview results*

Ninety-one per cent of respondents watched television for the entire 30 days following the landfall of Katrina, with only one respondent never watching television coverage. Seventy-eight per cent of respondents watched CNN coverage of Katrina, two-thirds of whom also watched other cable and local coverage. Seventeen per cent watched only local news coverage.

Forty-three per cent of respondents did not trust what TV reports stated, while 26% were extremely cautious of information from Katrina coverage. Thirteen per cent of respondents trusted the coverage of the disaster. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents stated that the media coverage of Katrina was not representative of their experience of the disaster. Twenty-six per cent of interviewees felt that TV reports matched their experience of

Katrina, while 17% were either ambivalent or not sure. Thirty-nine per cent of respondents stated that the coverage simply didn't capture the reality—with excessive inaccuracy. Seventeen per cent felt that media coverage made the situation look worse than it was, while 13% thought the coverage was sensationalistic in order to attract more viewers.

When asked how the poor and minorities were portrayed in the media, 52% of respondents felt that people experiencing poverty and ethnic minorities were misrepresented—75% of whom felt that it was an unfavourable representation. Twenty-two per cent felt that media representations were realistic, but highlighted class and race problems that need attention. One respondent felt that media representation was accurate, while 13% were ambivalent or had no opinion. Although these figures illustrate trends in the interview data, the qualitative results that follow grant a deeper understanding of survivors' opinions and experiences.

We know from the previous figures that all but one of the interviewees watched television coverage of Hurricane Katrina. TV watching was a central activity for many of the respondents; one person stated that, 'the only thing that we were doing was watching television'. Although almost all watched television reports of the disaster, descriptive answers about levels of trust, perception of accuracy and responses to the representation of people experiencing poverty and minorities grant a richer perspective on survivors' experiences with the news media.

*Media trust.* Most respondents who had an opinion did not trust what the television coverage reported on Hurricane Katrina (52%). This was for a variety of reasons, including general media distrust, disparity between the media and personal accounts heard from others and disparity between the media and survivor's personal experience. Many second-hand stories from trusted sources led interviewees to see the media coverage as exaggerated, focusing disproportionately on the negative elements of situations being covered or simply erroneous. One respondent worked at a hospital that never flooded, but the news reported floating bodies inside the building.

Both the cautiously trusting (26%) and trusting (13%) respondents relied on the news for utility, feeling that they didn't have the luxury not to trust the coverage. Cautious respondents also didn't fault the news media directly; one person stated, 'I think they reported what they could report, but I think they were definitely censored'. Another cautious news watcher took the reports, '... with a grain of salt'. Regardless of their level of trust, the 39% of respondents who had moderate to high levels of trust felt that there were few or no alternatives to gather information about the Hurricane and its effects, making their trust in media reports necessary. With no other way to get needed information, distrust was not an option.

*Media reality.* Over half (57%) of respondents stated that the news coverage was not congruent with their experience of Katrina. The perceived reasons for the incongruence fall under three categories. These categories of responses are: (a) sensationalism in the media, (b) the repetitive and contained nature of the coverage and (c) the inability of the media to ever be able to capture such an experience. The most common reason (given by 22% of total respondents) for disparity between media coverage and personal experience was the sensationalistic coverage by television news reports. One person stated that, 'the media focused on the stories that would get the most attention and would be the most entertaining and would get the highest ratings'. This sentiment was echoed by all of the interviewees in this response category. One interviewee relayed an especially poignant example of how this



sensationalistic focus on violence and chaos directly affected their experience during the disaster:

... the coverage ... was completely useless for obtaining any information that you needed. It was a big sensational circus fest. I mean, if you listened to the ... news, you would think that the entire city was flattened—that they had droves and droves of vigilantes roaming the streets and shooting people in order to loot ... It was completely, utterly useless to us. We were trying to make decisions about when to come back, what we need to do ... thank God my parents were still in Metairie and we were still communicating with them ... They ... were like, 'there's still building and still roads', ... we were listening to the national news and we just thought that there was total anarchy and that the whole city was either flooding or burning down. The national coverage was a joke.

Seventeen per cent of respondents felt that their experience didn't match television coverage because the media was only able to access a few places and stories. This filled the round-the-clock coverage with repetitions of the same images and stories, even when conditions had changed or more important things were happening. In the words of an interviewed Katrina survivor, 'maybe they covered what they could cover, and where they could cover was the Superdome and the Convention center. As hard and as unbelievable as that was, I think outside of there was even worse'. This segment of the respondents were universally frustrated with seeing the same images over and over again, while they knew that other important events were being left out because the news media was sequestered in only a few locations.

The final 13% of the respondents who voiced a reason for the disparity between reality as they experienced it and media coverage simply felt that the institution of news media is incapable of capturing a phenomenon as complex as Hurricane Katrina. These people observed that the full sensory experience of the disaster is impossible to capture in a news clip; as one stated, 'you cannot get the impact unless you see it and feel it'. They also asserted that one cannot expect the media to accurately portray reality, as it is not possible for them to do so.

The remainder of the interviewees either felt that media coverage matched their experience (26%) or were indecisive (17%). One respondent praised the news coverage, saying, 'Yeah, I think it really reached out to a lot of people in other states who really didn't know what we actually are going through down here'. Another stated that the news media didn't report reality, but that, 'I don't think they should have'—as the reality of the disaster was too horrific and intense to show on television.

*Media portrayal of poor and minorities.* A slight majority (52%) of respondents believed that the media misrepresented the poor and minorities in their broadcasts. Of those respondents, three-quarters felt that the poor and minorities were unfavourably treated and one quarter felt that the poor and minorities were unnecessarily portrayed as victims, when their plight was no different than others. Twenty-six per cent of respondents felt that the news media accurately represented poor and minority residents of the Gulf Coast.

Thirty-nine per cent of respondents felt that the inaccurate media representation made people experiencing poverty and minorities appear, 'as the scapegoats, as the forgotten people'. A representative respondent stated that, 'their disparity was misrepresented as crime and evil'. This entire segment of responses spoke of the over-focus on looting—showing African-Americans as the sole face of post-Katrina crime. One person felt that it didn't matter whether or not they were looting, saying, 'I felt it was the wrong time to be

judgmental . . . if it was any other day I'd be like okay, that's stealing but these people are trying to survive'.

The remaining quarter of respondents claiming media inaccuracy felt that the treatment of the poor and ethnic minorities was excessively sympathetic. One respondent stated that the media focused almost exclusively on black people, and asserted that, 'most people were there because they chose to stay'. Another respondent added that, 'I think the perception that the media gave was that we're a third world country here in New Orleans and that we're populated with nothing more than poor people and minorities'.

Of the 26% of interviewees who felt that media representation of people experiencing poverty and ethnic minorities was accurate, all but one felt that this factual portrayal of the horrific circumstances brought class and racial tensions to the surface. One person described these tensions as, 'a New Orleans thing'. He went on to state: 'These are the poor areas of New Orleans . . . all the rich people live on high ground and all the poor people live on low ground. Obviously . . . they got devastated'. Another respondent claims that the media coverage showing mostly African-Americans and poor people actually slowed relief efforts, stating, 'If CNN's coverage at the Superdome and the Convention Centre was filled with a lot of white babies and white people . . . I don't think that would have gone on that long. I really don't. I think there were some real racial things that went on . . .'. The sole respondent who felt that media representation was accurate and without effects—an African-American man from New Orleans—firmly asserted that, 'a lot of fingers [are] being pointed at whose fault it was and why they didn't do this and why they weren't prepared for this and you know what man? Nobody was prepared for this. From the richest person down to the poorest soul, no one was ready for this'.

### *Broadcast news coding results*

The demographic breakdown in the news broadcasts is nearly identical to the population of the city of New Orleans, except for an over-sampling of males (65.3% compared to 46.5% in the population). This indicates a surprisingly accurate demographic representation of Katrina survivors by the news media.

We examined news broadcasts to determine the race and gender of those individuals who were shown in positions of authority (defined as officials, experts, rescuers, military, doctors, police, security workers and politicians). Results indicate a large disparity between Whites and minorities, as 89.5% of individuals in a position of authority are white, while minorities are only shown in positions of authority 10.5% of the time. When gender is examined, males are shown in positions of authority 86.1% of the time, compared to 13.8% for females.

In depictions of rescue and aid, two-thirds of the news reports showed only Whites helping only African-Americans. Six broadcasts showed white rescuers in helicopters rescuing African-Americans. There were also two instances where people helped others of the same race, and two scenes of racially mixed cooperative efforts, but these were by far the exception. There were no instances of African-Americans rescuing or helping Whites.

Both explicit and implicit clips of looting were also shown. Two explicit examples involved African-Americans carrying loads of clothing out of a store—shown six times in succession—as reporters specifically described their actions as looting. There were also two implicit clips depicting African-Americans carrying boxes, with no specific labelling as looters. All looting clips were of African-Americans, most of whom were males.

One extended media scene showed a makeshift prison set up to replace the flooded jail. The scene depicted 5 male white prison officials watching over 13 African American prisoners, expressing their satisfaction to each other regarding the successful operation of the makeshift jail.

There were seven quotes from the news broadcasts that addressed racial issues in some respect. One broadcast featured an interview with a white couple who claimed that they had directly observed racist actions by the police and other officials. They observed a police chief instructing officers not to allow a mostly African-American group to cross the Crescent City Bridge, because they would burn and loot the surrounding communities as 'they' were doing in New Orleans. A police official responded, saying, 'Our city was locked down for safety . . . race played no part in it. Safety played a part in it'. Race was also addressed in an interview with US Senator Barack Obama when he stated that, 'In the African-American community, there's a perception that inner city communities have generally been abandoned'. CNN journalist Anderson Cooper explained the poor treatment and living conditions of one group of evacuees, noting that, 'Most of these people are poor, they're Hispanic, they don't vote'. This was the only instance in the sample in which a reporter mentioned race as playing a part in the Hurricane's aftermath. In the same segment a white police official criticized a local African-American politician for allowing Hispanic evacuees to live in such deplorable conditions.

During another broadcast, results from a CNN/USA Today Gallup Poll addressed the role of race in the relief efforts. The poll (taken from 8–11 September, margin of error  $\pm 6\%$ ) asked 'Are efforts to help New Orleans slow because many victims were black?' White respondents overwhelmingly said no (86%), while the majority of African American respondents said yes (60%). Obviously, there is a racial divide in the perception of rescue and rebuilding following Katrina—although the broadcast did not elaborate on this disparity beyond presenting the poll results.

The reporters shown in the broadcast clips were overwhelmingly white (88.5%). The remaining 11.5% of the reporters were Hispanic (3.9%) and unknown ethnicity (7.6%). This means that an overwhelmingly poor and black population was being depicted in positions devoid of power by an almost all-white media. This message was received by an audience containing Whites who mostly believe that race has nothing to do with the slow response.

## DISCUSSION

### *Literature and public opinion in a new light*

Our interviews confirmed that New Orleans residents utilized television reports of Hurricane Katrina for numerous vital purposes. The coded news reports also showed evidence of the utility of the media beyond merely reporting news. One of these uses is evidenced by the reunited families that were exhibited on CNN broadcasts, showing the world the humanitarian side of television news. The efforts and successes of television coverage should certainly be applauded, but greater questions remain. If the minimal time spent on relaying communications between fractured families and pictures of lost children produced such positive and meaningful results, then why didn't news networks devote more time to these humanitarian efforts instead of replaying the same footage of looters and flooded houses in the lower 9th ward? By reaching otherwise inaccessible areas in times of national or local emergency with expensive communications equipment,

collecting valuable information and creating a national venue to convey this information, the news media is in a unique position to be a responsible part of the community from whom it is drawing its profits.

Unfortunately, Chomsky's (1998) cynical position (that the press will not move beyond self interest) is largely supported by the behaviour of the news media during the Hurricane. The biases in Katrina reports have wider implications than mere integrity of information; when the news media is one of the only—if not the only—means for obtaining information, does their purpose change enough to warrant a departure from *business as usual*? Is it the *responsibility* of television news reports to reign in their biases and ratings pursuit when disasters destroy most normal networks of emergency communication?

As in previous research (Graves, 1999; Loto et al., 2006; Van Dijk, 2000), this study suggests that minorities are portrayed by the media as relatively powerless. The data from news broadcasts portray a world where white people hold most of the power and are necessary to establish order and rescue minorities in trouble. Although there were no data available to determine the demographic makeup of rescue workers, police, officials, experts, etc., the disparity in race points to major divides in privilege. Not only is this supported by social status of Whites versus Blacks, but also in more subtle ways; even though the percentage of African-Americans shown on the news is accurate, the locations and conditions of survivors were starkly divided. Almost all white survivors were pictured as safe—in shelters, homes, at gas stations or in rescue boats. Although some black survivors were also shown in boats and shelters, many were shown on rooftops just above flood waters, being dragged through the sky by helicopters, wading through deep murky water, packed in the Superdome and the convention centre or looting stores. It can be argued that the media is simply portraying a reality in which a strong racial disparity exists; regardless of the accuracy of media representation, this imagery serves to reinforce those existing social inequities (Hall et al., 1978).

The focus on looting and destruction plainly visible in the media data corroborates findings by Tierny et al. (2006) that the media overrepresented crime and panic and Prah's (2005) assertion that media coverage reified chaos in New Orleans. The media distortions of behaviour following Katrina also downplay the prosocial behaviours that were typical following the disaster (Rodriguez et al., 2006).

The positive effects of the media noted by Greenya (2006), Roach (2005) and Spriggs (2006) are supported by interview and media coding data. Several respondents felt that media depictions were beyond the call of duty, stating that the coverage reached out to people across the world by showing the reality of Katrina's aftermath. The coded broadcasts showed several instances of families reuniting because of news reports, including a woman who had found her husband because a friend had seen him on CNN.

Allegations that the news media failed to address issues of class and race levelled by NPR (2005) and others were supported by the coded data. Although race and class were present in the content of news reports on several occasions—and quite obvious in all of the broadcasts—only one instance occurred wherein a reporter engaged with the issue. One sentence devoted to such an important factor in the damaging effects of the Hurricane essentially amounts to an omission by the news media as a whole.

Shafer (NPR, 2005) and Spriggs (2006) are not alone when they accuse the media of misrepresenting the African-American population affected by Katrina. Most interviewees feel that minorities and the poor were represented inaccurately, with some noting an over-sampling of African-Americans in the media coverage. The coded broadcasts showed

that representation of race in television reports were almost an exact match to data from the 2000 US Census. This contradicts the commonly held belief that the media skewed ethnic representation, but the previously raised subtler elements displaying powerlessness relative to Whites partially support Spriggs (2006) position that African-Americans, women and children are disproportionately shown as the face of poverty. This position is challenged by the fact that males were overrepresented by 20% in the broadcasts. In summary, the media accurately represented the racial distribution of the local population while covering Katrina, but fell short with gender and the representation of power and poverty.

### *New issues raised*

The poll shown on CNN outlining public opinion of Katrina response based on race brings up an issue worthy of exploration. Why would 86% of Whites think that the slow response to Katrina by rescuers and the government had nothing to do with race, while 60% of African-Americans believed that it was due to racial bias? This poll points to a vastly different perception of Katrina between races. Although neither position can be verified—due in part to the media's avoidance of race issues—further research might explore the causes of this disparity. The distinct racial divide in New Orleans mirrors a nation-wide divergence of perception that is similar to racial differences in response to the O.J. Simpson trial in the 1990s.

Fifty-seven per cent of survey respondents stated that their experience was divergent from what the world saw on television. This gap between individuals' empirical reality and the media's manufactured reality has implications that go well beyond the Katrina event and its aftermath. It was such a life-transforming experience—obviously for the city and region, but even for the nation and how we think of ourselves as a people—that it may have some lasting effects on the way Americans consume and respond to media.

In light of the interviews in this study we can conclude that most people received their information about minorities and the poor during and after Katrina from television. Based on Livingstone's (1998) assertions, we can conclude that people accept the image of minorities and those in poverty provided by the media—especially since the character of poverty is masked by media representation (Devereux, 1998). Van Dijk (2000) observes that for many Whites, the media is the only source of information about minority populations and is often negative. This would lead to the public reifying or enhancing the image of minorities as helpless criminals who must be controlled by the majority culture (Loto et al., 2006). Cottle (2000) adds that the minority population is continually labelled as the *other*, with this additional identity layer widening the power gap between classes and ethnicities.

The results of this study are consistent with the media study by Loto et al. (2006) in which Pacific Islanders are most often depicted in negative situations. Because of the central role of the news media in portraying this disaster, the negative image of minorities will likely have negative effects on majority and minority views of Katrina survivors, especially people of colour. Specifically—as in the study by Loto et al. (2006)—the social roles of minority survivors as non-experts and subjects rather than agents in power over their own lives will affect both the public and self image of the minority population.

## **CONCLUSION**

Hurricane Katrina was a complex and devastating event and a wake-up call for the entire nation. The whole world relied on television news to relay the reality of Katrina's wake, but

were sometimes disappointed in the accuracy of media sources. This study has shown that media representation varied—sometimes portraying the disaster accurately, while often misrepresenting or ignoring obvious race and class disparities.

One of the greatest lessons for the nation, the media and our communities is that we must prepare for nature's course. We cannot stop the path of a storm, but we can get out of its way. Spriggs (2006) artfully illustrates the failure in planning and the deadly results for people experiencing poverty during Katrina:

When the Titanic sank, people lost their lives, for the most part, not because of hitting the iceberg, but because there were not enough life boats. Those in steerage, the low-income passengers were condemned by a failure to plan for their safety. Hurricane Katrina showed us the same fault lines. People did not die because of the hurricane, they died because we did not have enough life boats (p. 19).

Television is generally less effective at providing specific accurate information than at setting the agenda and telling viewers what the issues are and how to think and act (Livingstone, 1998). With such power, if the media truly cares about their position in local and global communities, they will shift from merely reporting disasters to becoming a lifeboat in times of need.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Support for this research was provided by a research grant from Peabody College of Vanderbilt University. The authors thank William Partridge, Paul Speer and Isaac Prilleltensky for their contributions to the Vanderbilt Katrina project and this study. This paper could not have been possible without the constant contributions and support of Danica J. Brice and the work of the entire research team: Brian Christens, Michael Nelson and Rose Vick.

## REFERENCES

- Berube, A., & Katz, B. (2005). Katrina's window: Confronting concentrated poverty across America. Retrieved 11 August 2006 from the Brookings Institution. [www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20051012\\_Concentratedpoverty.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/metro/pubs/20051012_Concentratedpoverty.pdf)
- Bush, G. W. (2005). Address to the nation on hurricane Katrina recovery from New Orleans, Louisiana. *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* 41, 1405–1409. Retrieved 25 August 2006 from the Washington, D.C. National Archives and Records Administration. [www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/20050915-8.html](http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/20050915-8.html)
- Chomsky, N. (1998). *The common good*. Tucson, AZ: Odonian.
- Congressional Research Service. (2005). Hurricane Katrina: DOD disaster response. Retrieved 11 August 2006 from the CRS Report for Congress. [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33095.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33095.pdf)
- Cottle, S. (2000). Introduction: Media research and ethnic minorities: Mapping the field. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *Ethnic minorities and the media* (pp. 1–30). Philadelphia: Open University.
- de Moraes, L. (2005). Kanye West's torrent of criticism, live on NBC. *Washington Post Saturday*, 3 September 2005, C01. Retrieved 12 August 2006, from [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090300165.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/03/AR2005090300165.html)
- Devereux, E. (1998). *Devils and angels: Television, ideology and the coverage of poverty*. Luton, UK: University of Luton.
- Graves, S. B. (1999). Television and prejudice reduction: When does television as a vicarious experience make a difference? *Journal of Social Issues*, 55, 707–725.

- Greenya, J. (2006). National service. *CQ Researcher*, 16, 577–600. Retrieved 24 September 2006, from CQ researcher online library.cqpress.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/cqresearcher/cqresrr2006063000
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis*. London: Macmillan, library.cqpress.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/cqpac/cqresrr2006020300
- Lewis, D. L. (2005). Unchanged melody: The Negro and the flood. *The Crisis*, 112, 6.
- Livingstone, S. M. (1998). *Making sense of television: The psychology of audience interpretation* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Logan, J. (2006). The impact of Katrina: Race and class in storm damaged neighborhoods. Retrieved on 20 May 2006, from Brown University. [www.s4.brown.edu/Katrina/report.pdf](http://www.s4.brown.edu/Katrina/report.pdf)
- Loto, R., Hodgetts, D., Chamberlain, K., Nikora, L. W., Karapu, R., & Barnett, A. (2006). Pasifika in the news: The portrayal of Pacific peoples in the New Zealand press. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 16, 100–118.
- Media Matters for America. (2005). Media provide forums for administration officials and conservatives to spread falsehoods about hurricane relief efforts, 7 September 2005. Retrieved 28 January 2007, from <http://mediamatters.org/items/200509080002>
- National Public Radio. (2005). On the media: The unasked question, 2 September 2005. Retrieved 17 August 2006, from [http://www.onthemedialibrary.org/transcripts/transcripts\\_090205\\_question.html](http://www.onthemedialibrary.org/transcripts/transcripts_090205_question.html)
- National Weather Service. (2005). Historic documents of 2005. Retrieved 2 September 2006, from CQ Electronic Library, CQ Public Affairs Collection. library.cqpress.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/cqpac/hsdc05-429-18435-990305
- Prah, P. M. (2005). Disaster preparedness. *CQ Researcher*, 15, 981–1004. Retrieved 24 September 2006, from CQ Public Affairs Collection. library.cqpress.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/cqpac/cqresrr2005111800
- Prilleltensky, I. (2003). Poverty and power. In S. Carr, & T. Sloan (Eds.), *Poverty and power: From global perspective to local practice* (pp. 19–44). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Roach, R. (2005). Contemplating Katrina's chaos. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 22, 24–27.
- Rodriguez, H., Trainor, J., & Quarantelli, E. L. (2006). Rising to the challenges of a catastrophe: The emergent and prosocial behavior following Hurricane Katrina. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 604, 82–101.
- Spriggs, W. E. (2006). Poverty in America: The poor are getting poorer. *The Crisis*, 113, 14–16; 18–19.
- Starks, T. (2006). Katrina panel indicts response. *CQ Weekly*, 64, 00488. Retrieved 20 August 2006, from CQ Public Affairs Collection. library.cqpress.com.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/cqpac/weeklyreport109-000002052840
- Tierny, K., Bevc, C., & Kuligowski, E. (2006). Metaphors matter: Disaster myths, media frames, and their consequences in Hurricane Katrina. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 604, 57–81.
- Van Dijk, T. (2000). New(s) racism: A discourse analytical approach. In S. Cottle (Ed.), *Ethnic minorities and the media* (pp. 33–49). Philadelphia: Open University.