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Hurricane Stories, from Within

Wesley Shrum

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Before Hurricane Katrina, I remember saying it was the busiest semester of my life, that our video ethnography group was working at a 'near death' pace, and that my office looked like a 'hurricane hit it'. Three months later, none of that was so important. And other metaphors are better for describing work and disorganization.

The hurricane itself was a mild affair for me, working on a computer in Lake Charles, four hours from New Orleans and two hours from my home in Baton Rouge. Often when you evacuate – and even when you don't – the storm heads somewhere else and you have a holiday. 'Hurricane parties' are not often held during storms.

But when the images began to appear on television, life began to change. 'From within' the hurricane community, the most information I received – constant, voluminous, multi-sourced, and imperfect – was in the first two days after Katrina, *before* I returned to Baton Rouge. From within, there is often less time to collect, sift, and absorb mediated information about events as they occur than from without. You turn on the television, or radio – but there is not time to sit and watch. Too much to do. You receive email messages from people in far-flung places who know more (or, at least, think they know more) about what's happening than you do. I'm sorry for the emails I didn't answer. And for my insensitive friends who forgot to send one – believe me, you're off the hook.

'What's happening' is the issue, viewed from within, and there is a beautiful, collective effort to find out. The media are crucial – as WWL in New Orleans produced its live webcast, their disorganization was perfectly attuned to the state of the city. From without, it was possible to watch too much television and become depressed, but from within, there was just too much to do – including finding out 'what's happening'. Baton Rouge – the closest major city to New Orleans – began filling up with evacuees before the storm hit. Many of the faculty from New Orleans universities appeared in the halls of Louisiana State University (LSU). People opened their homes to the evacuees, the displaced; interpersonal communication channels that were non-existent or inactive were opened. Structural relationships were no longer good predictors of communication flow: complete strangers discussed important

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matters as though they were lifelong friends. For almost everyone, time was divided between taking care of local and specific matters, and communicating information about them to the outside. In the early stages, the failures of the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) were less relevant from within than from without. 'What's happening' questions did not reflect any deep interest in causes, blame, or explanation. These were discursive interests for the watchers, triggering responses by the hurricane community that were sporadic and haphazard.

Television conveyed local and specific slices of the world: during the storm, pre-positioned cameras showed wind and rain, and few if any were lucky enough to film an 'event'. Consider a comparison: we filmed several dozen continuous hours on Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras one year. Even then, it was often difficult to tape an event without a videographer directing the camera. Since hurricane images are momentary, and wind and rain make for boring spectacles, they are not looped (repetitively provided for the television audience). Until the second hurricane, 3 weeks later, neither wind and rain nor media representations of them were of much concern to me.

It is a different matter with looped looting. We will need a committed investigator to examine, through the thousands of hours of media footage that were taken in the week after Katrina, how many images of looters were *captured* on tape, how many were *shown* to the viewing audience, and how often. Such an effort would be welcome as a definitive analysis of news gathering and editorial choice, and many of us anticipate a key hypothesis: when it comes to looting and criminal activity, a few shots will serve a news feed for quite some time.

Three days after the storm, images of looting and lawlessness began to affect Baton Rouge. A senior municipal official, in his wisdom, stated that the 'thugs from New Orleans' would not take over our city. A senior university official, in his wisdom, decreed that 'confirmed reports of civil unrest' made it necessary to lock all the doors. When I went to my weekly tennis lesson, my coach noted that two carjackings had occurred at the intersection 50 yards away and that just down the road a gang of looters had run through the grocery store firing guns. (He was still teaching – thugs don't do tennis.)

Shortly after these stories had spread through the city – and then their dismissal as rumors by the Baton Rouge media – we first went to the field to film interviews. LSU had already turned into a storm center for news, analysis, and medical care for evacuees. Many of the faculty were housing displaced persons, and volunteering their services with the Red Cross. The desire to 'do something' was palpable throughout the city, as it doubled in size. A thought had been nagging at me – expertise, which we believe we have in STS, could actually be useful. A doctor volunteers as a doctor – not only to carry sandbags. Why weren't we 'out there' doing what we do best – finding out what is happening in the world? Since late 2002, our group at LSU had become interested in digital video as an ethnographic tool, shooting several hundred hours of footage in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In retrospect, the most important thing we did was not to think too much about this, and to get into the field as soon as possible. A hurricane is no time to review the literature and ponder the kind of argument that will fly with *Social Studies of Science*. Moreover, the LSU faculty members who could actually claim hurricane expertise were absolutely overwhelmed with fielding so many calls from reporters throughout the world that it was virtually impossible for them to work. Our advantage, if one could call it that, was simply that we had the equipment, the experience in video ethnography, and the time. We determined that our contribution would not be a sandbag, but an archive. We knew that the media would lose interest as the people were rescued from houses and shelters were emptied. Based on decades of work in STS, we could guess that there would be controversies over the humanly constructed technologies designed to protect New Orleans from water, and over the social practices that were expected to facilitate smooth rescue and recovery.

Many people wanted to tell their stories. During the first 10 days, when there were 5000 individuals passing through the largest Baton Rouge shelter, 1000 members of the press came to interview and film. Those few individuals who happened to be in certain locations received far more than their 15 minutes of fame – they got media burnout. But the consequence was that the media neglected the other half-million people who were dramatically affected by the storm; who also had their opinions and their own accounts of escape and loss. They were eager to talk – and they told you when they did not want to talk.

We designed some guiding questions for displaced persons and took several camera setups to a variety of locations during the following weeks. Usually we went with six to eight doctoral students and often one or two undergraduates. We interviewed individuals in parking lots, as they shopped for provisions; we worked with the Red Cross to locate individuals in the main shelters. Nearly everyone we interviewed was videotaped, but a few individuals preferred ‘audio only’ (leave the lens cap on), and a small number did not want to be recorded at all. The interviews occurred in a social context that was partially captured, whether or not the videographer was thinking much about context. We went to the Ninth Ward on the first day residents were allowed to return, and conducted several interviews with those few people in the area – in the Lower Ninth Ward, armed guards still blocked every entrance and there was no one to interview. What seemed critical was the visual record – we placed notes with my contact information on the houses and shot all the footage we could. Flexibility in equipment and its use is important for thinking on your feet with your gear. Video ethnography is important for the STS bag of tricks, because the data collected in an audiovisual stream can also be the raw material for presentation. Much in the same way that the field notes of an ethnographer are excerpted for text-based arguments, audiovisual data are cut into a movie.

It was not long before we became part of the information flow, but we did not take calls from reporters. Several times, we met after the day’s work and tried to formulate a consensus summary of what we had learned,

knowing that we would experience different slices of the ground. Twice we broadcast these as emails to various colleagues, friends, listservs, and websites. We quickly learned that there was no easy answer to the looting and crime issue that was part of our initial motivation. (Had our neighbors really become animals?) Yes, people did enter stores and exit with products they had not paid for – some of these were survival-related provisions and some were not. (In case of confusion, beer *is* considered a ‘provision’ in Louisiana.) Sometimes the police were involved in breaking into stores. Was police behavior or the crime rate *worse* than it had been before the hurricane? The vast majority of the people we interviewed were not much concerned with crime and had not seen any. The crucial contextual factors were that New Orleanians considered themselves sophisticated with regard to crime and risk, and that New Orleans police were considered relatively harsh and corrupt (and effective at crowd control) before the hurricane. Often the accounts of rapes and murders that we heard were, on further probing, unwitnessed, second-hand stories. Insofar as the people we interviewed were representative of the New Orleans metropolitan area, there was simply no evidence that looting and crime were widespread during the immediate aftermath of the storm.¹

Three weeks after Katrina, Hurricane Rita arrived. Because Houston was evacuated, and the Ninth Ward flooded once again, the media coverage continued. The eye passed over south-western Louisiana. The house in Lake Charles where I had watched Katrina was now uninhabitable. Many of the hurricane representations were blatantly wrong, in the straightforward sense that audio commentary and subtitles pertained to a location in Texas, while the video clip showed waves lapping at Lake Charles. Many of the reports were highly misleading, in the sense that audio commentary about flooding was paired with video of the lake itself. The impression was that the city might already be submerged, as New Orleans had been a short time ago – when few neighborhoods experienced any flooding. Most video clips simply showed a *lake* with high water and wind.

It is tempting to say that experiencing the second hurricane gave new meaning to my study, or provided some nuanced understanding of loss and aftermath, or any of the other formulations that emphasize the element of *participation* over that of *observation*. Three months later, I was convinced that it made little difference. The diversity of experiences associated with the hurricane provided an identity as a full member of the hurricane community, whether or not your house was damaged. You were part of the hurricane community if you were there for the aftermath. Yes, FEMA was part of it too, though the people may have been from other places. If there is a single phrase that characterized our early interviews with displaced people it is this: ‘I’m one of the lucky ones’, followed by an account of their losses. Stories of escape and support expressed commitment and sharing, and an appreciation for the well-being of others. In more social scientific terms, the question of relative welfare was weighted towards an appreciation for those at the bottom, rather than envy of those at the top.

In Lake Charles, returning to the affected areas was strictly forbidden, but you could easily get in – this was the biggest surprise of the entire experience for me. From the first day after Rita, radio and television broadcasts made it clear that barricades were raised, Interstate exits were closed, and that anyone attempting to enter the city of Lake Charles would be turned back. Not only was this untrue, it was not even the case that only residents were admitted. Every day for the first week, we drove to Lake Charles in the morning and back to Baton Rouge at night. We were stopped, indeed, by guardsmen and police, but briefly – it did not seem to matter whether you were bringing supplies, wanted to see your house, were checking on a cat, or any other thing. No one ever asked for identification, and sometimes simply driving up to the police was sufficient for them to wave you through. There were two possible reasons for this. One was that governmental authorities actually had no knowledge about (or no influence on) ingress and egress. That reason seems unlikely, however, given that it was almost impossible to avoid discovering the critical fact that people could readily get in. I tend to believe the other reason, that the authorities wanted a small proportion of residents in the city to begin the cleanup and to guard property – but not so many as to overwhelm the shattered infrastructure and limited facilities in operation. The solution, it seems, was to rely on that small proportion of the population that disbelieved the authorities, did not listen to news, or distrusted and dismissed the government: in short, surveillance by the disaffiliated.

Word of our video ethnography began to circulate at LSU, and we were asked to join a group of engineers ('Team Louisiana') investigating the New Orleans levee breaks that had been identified, after some resistance by the Corps of Engineers, as the proximate cause of the flooding. As in many technological controversies, multiple teams with different expertise and funding sources sought the causes of 'failure' in the historical, political, organizational, and engineering practices that constructed and maintained the extensive levee system in south Louisiana. The ostensible reason for our participation was to record the times on electric clocks that had stopped near the five main breaks along the Industrial, London Avenue, and 17th street canals. However, to its credit, Team Louisiana was more interested in documenting 'what happened' to the people – a subject that had little direct bearing on the levee breaks but everything to do with the social history of the city and the aftermath of what virtually all New Orleanians anticipated in advance and knew after the fact to be a humanly constructed disaster.²

The final lesson pertains to the traditional wisdom of social scientists about community solidarity in the wake of disaster. Rescue and recovery workers describe a sequence of phases in the public response, moving from appreciation to indifference to hostility. By December 2005, when residents finally returned to the Lower Ninth Ward, security was increased due to the threat of violence. But at the interpersonal level, my own experience was that the three months after the hurricane had been nothing short of amazing, in terms of helpfulness, affability, and human companionship under

conditions of duress. The reduced population of New Orleans had been generous and friendly. Lake Charles, while it now looked like the poor southern town it never was, was rich with love and hope. There was indeed a moment, after the storm, when social life worked the way it was supposed to – it had nothing to do with whether FEMA helped you or not.

Please remember. These hurricanes on the Gulf Coast were not just a bad event – they were a *disaster*. The force of that term has been exhausted through repetition and application to small events. Please remember. Take the time to enjoy your work – it is truly a blessing to have a *place* to do it. And your office – when papers and books are strewn about? A hurricane didn't hit it.

Notes

1. My strong sense is that looting was much higher in the months after the storm than it was during the immediate aftermath. The absence of people in many areas of New Orleans, and the presence of valuable objects, particularly on the second stories of houses, made looting easy. Many report being looted multiple times.
2. I would love to tell you more about this team, but I have never met any of these colleagues, which gives some idea of scientific collaborations after Katrina. 'What's happening' gave way to 'what happened'. It will be a very long time before one can assess this in any full and systematic way.

Wesley Shrum is Professor of Sociology at Louisiana State University and Secretary of the Society for Social Studies of Science. His primary research focus before the hurricanes was the effects of new ICTs on science in Africa and Asia.

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