

TV Images of the Katrina Disaster

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During Hurricane Katrina I was trapped in downtown New Orleans without access to the news. Six days later I reemerged into the world of round-the-clock major network news. At once I began analyzing the media images from the perspective of having “been there.”

Shaping the Story of History

News reporting shapes events and how we remember them. Reporters narrate the story of events as they become history. Television viewers, who filter the news through their own anxieties and opinions, often remain transfixed to the television set as newscasters tell them how to feel about an event. The news reporter fulfills such an important role in shaping events in history that we allow the possibly objectionable ethical implications of entering a disaster area simply to film and report.

I found many viewers felt anger at people who had not evacuated pre-hurricane, people portrayed largely as daredevils. These viewers failed to analyze the complex psychological, socio-cultural and economic reasons for not leaving: feeling familiarity with hurricanes, seeking comfort by staying at home and cooking, pro-

tecting property, staying behind as permitted exceptions to the mandatory evacuation, such as hotel guests, choosing not to leave life as one knows it, denial, faith and poverty. Viewers' compassion and anxiety for refugees was often resolved with media images of “healing” people receiving FEMA debit cards, although only a small number of refugees in Houston did.

News reporters had different experiences than refugees. The news worker searches for and produces images of their choice. Although news workers may be impressed and impacted by scenes, they understand based on previous experience. Under the pressure of time, images, sounds and commentary are quickly constructed. As a result certain images become reoccurring markers of an event. Analyzing the news days after experiencing life as a refugee, I identified three repeated images: the National Guard hugging babies, the “black and poor” hurricane survivor, and the Houston Astrodome as representative of a refugee camp.

A Friendly National Guard?

The National Guard was repeatedly filmed either hugging babies or handing MREs (Meal Ready-to-Eat) to small children. In contrast, refugees perceived the Guard as ominous. While surviving in New Orleans, the group of people I was with tried to signal a National Guard vehicle to rescue us. Although they had space on their boat, the initial guardsmen in downtown New Orleans seemingly were concerned with securing the area and not rescuing people. Comments among the hurricane survivors included fear of signaling to the guardsmen too much, because of their large AK-47 guns. Five days later, the guardsmen we saw at the Superdome seemed intent on keeping order, avoiding eye contact or conversation with refugees. Refugees at the Superdome commented feeling the Guard eyeing them as diseased or contaminated. The Guard provided limited



CNN coverage from Houston, Texas, showed viewers an American Red Cross debit card worth up to \$1,500, depending on family size. The Red Cross made the cards available on September 8, while FEMA debit cards, limited to Houston shelter residents, weren't available until later.

water to the dehydrated survivors, encouraging looting for water. People sat in the hot sun for days without proper sanitation; neither shade nor Port-a-Potties were provided by the Guard. Refugees expressed anger at the Guard for not attending to elderly people first. The Guard provided no explanations to refugees where they were going or what would happen. Many people left the Superdome because of fear of the National Guard; rumors spread about medical tests, family separations and disease treatments more horrific than returning to a flooded home. The National Guard would improve its humanitarian work in the future, if they employed consulting anthropologists.

Survivors: “Black” and “Poor”?

Absent any sociological survey of refugees, the news media immediately created an image of the New Orleans hurricane survivor. Ethnicity and class were important in the portrayal. Why were the words “poor” and “black” used in the same sentence? The emphasis on blackness excludes other ethnicities. New Orleans has large Vietnamese-American, Honduran-American and Mexican-American populations. Eastern New Orleans, the neighborhoods hardest hit by the flooding, include areas where Vietnamese-Americans, black Americans and white Americans lived. One of the areas hardest hit by the flooding, Chalmette, was a poor and middle-class white area. The natural disaster did not discriminate. At the Superdome, I saw people of all races. The emphasis on poverty explained why

some people were unable to evacuate before the storm, but the flooded neighborhoods requiring evacuation had diverse average income levels. At the Superdome, I met professionals, like myself, something not represented on television screens. Perhaps “othering” victims helps viewers maintain distance from a calamity and preserve a feeling of security.



Clean, Orderly Camps?

Images of traumatized hurricane survivors resting on clean cots in public arenas like the Houston Astrodome were transmitted with regularity on the news networks. In the pressing need for shelter, however, many other public places were converted into refugee camps. After promises from the National Guard of hot showers, private rooms and comfortable beds, an evacuation bus took me and 49 others to the Dallas, Texas jail. As mothers and babies waited to be “processed,” I left. Other refugees were housed near open water in Corpus Christi, producing anxiety and deepening the trauma. The ubiquitous fights and suicide attempts resulting from traumatized survivors receiving limited mental health care in camps were hardly depicted in the media.

These images and commentary repeated on the major news networks become archetypal in viewers' consciousness and are now written into history. Swirling weather maps, titles such as “hurricane and healing” and ominous-sounding musical soundtracks announced Katrina news. Viewers in faraway states stayed glued to news channels, and advertisers hawked products between images of National Guardsmen hugging babies, the “poor and black” refugee and the resolution of the crisis in clean and orderly refugee camps. But refugees' experiences were more complex; surely mine was. Reporters located behind the National Guard barricades on the clean side of the Superdome, and with access to communication and electricity, produced inauthentic images, ones that in many ways have come to represent the history of the aftermath of Katrina. ☐

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See p 55 for a related story.—Ed.



Nevada Army National Guardsmen work a security checkpoint outside the New Orleans civic center where an aid station and evacuation point had been established, September 8. While television crews and others repeatedly filmed the Guard assisting small children, many refugees perceived the Guard's first priority to be security rather than assistance. Photo courtesy of US Department of Defense