

Hurricane Wash-Out

For the Media, Harvey Was No Katrina Redux

By W. Joseph Campbell

Twelve years ago, newspaper headlines across the United States told of chaos and anarchy that supposedly was sweeping New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina's devastating landfall.



W. JOSEPH CAMPBELL

"Anger, Anarchy, Desperation," declared the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle of Sept. 2, 2005.

"Crisis to Chaos," said the Scottsdale Tribune in Arizona. "Toward Anarchy," cried the Waterbury Republican in Connecticut. "Descent into Chaos," asserted the San Diego Union-Tribune.

"Snipers fired on cops and rescue workers" in New Orleans, reported the New York Daily News. "Gangs of looters took anything that wasn't nailed down."

In New Orleans, the Times-Picayune newspaper declared on its front page of Sept. 2, 2005, that "chaos and lawlessness rule the streets."

The horror and mayhem that news organizations so widely reported 12 years ago proved highly exaggerated, but it had the effect of tainting a city and its residents at a time of their great vulnerability.

As I noted in my media-mythbusting book, "Getting It Wrong," the reporting of Katrina's aftermath was no high, heroic moment in American journalism, despite some attempts to characterize it as such.

"In the days following Katrina's landfall," I wrote, "news reports described apocalyptic horror that the hurricane supposedly had unleashed. They reported snipers firing at medical personnel. ... They told of bodies being stacked there like cordwood. They reported that roving gangs were preying on tourists and terrorizing the occupants of the Superdome [where hundreds of storm evacuees took shelter], raping and killing. They said that children were victims of sexual assault, that one 7-year-old was raped and her throat was slit. They reported that sharks were plying the flooded streets of New Orleans.

"None of those reports was verified or substantiated." Little of it was true.

D-minus was a grade none too severe for the post-Katrina coverage.

"Americans depend on timely and accurate reporting, especially during times of crisis," a bipartisan select committee of the House of Representatives later said in a 600-page report about the hurricane's

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aftermath, adding that “accurate reporting was among Katrina’s many victims.

“If anyone rioted,” the report declared, “it was the media. Many stories of rape, murder, and general lawlessness were at best unsubstantiated, at worst simply false.”

It is useful now to recall the erroneous and exaggerated coverage of Katrina’s aftermath because the destructive sweep of Hurricane Harvey in southeast Texas at the end of August — and coverage of Hurricane Irma’s wrath in September — gave rise to little such egregious misreporting and produced few if any examples of the media having “rioted” in their storm coverage.

For news organizations, Harvey was no Katrina.

Here are some reasons why:

- **Reasonably competent public officials.** In Texas, state and local officials — including the mayor of Houston — were more credible, knowledgeable and restrained than were senior public officials in

New Orleans. Ray Nagin, the then-mayor of New Orleans, and Eddie Compass, the then-police commissioner, were sources for some of the most gruesome yet erroneous reports of lawlessness in Katrina’s immediate aftermath.

At one point, Nagin asserted that “hundreds of armed gang members” were terrorizing evacuees inside the Superdome. The mayor said conditions there had deteriorated to “an almost animalistic state” and evacuees had been “in that frickin’ Superdome for five days, watching dead bodies, watching hooligans killing people, raping people.”

Compass spoke of other horrors. “We had little babies in there, little babies getting raped,” the police commissioner said of the Superdome where, he claimed, police officers had been shot and wounded.

Their accounts of violence in New Orleans were widely reported — but were almost completely without foundation. (Months later, Compass said he passed along rumors of violence because he “didn’t want people to think we were trying to cover anything up. So



TEXAS NATIONAL GUARD SOLDIERS ARRIVE IN HOUSTON, TEXAS TO AID CITIZENS IN HEAVILY FLOODED AREAS FROM THE STORMS OF HURRICANE HARVEY. PHOTO: LT. ZACHARY WEST, 100TH MPAD

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I repeated things without being substantiated, and it caused a lot of problems.")

By contrast, Houston's mayor, Sylvester Turner, projected an image of even-tempered authority. He spoke often to the news media, typically in measured and sedate tones. He didn't preen for the cameras, and certainly didn't mischaracterize his city as having been seized by violence and lawlessness. The only significant controversy to swirl around Turner was whether he should have ordered a

mandatory evacuation as Harvey approached from the Gulf of Mexico.

• **No narrative-shifting surprises.** Katrina's aftermath was marked by a surprising and decisive turn after the storm had passed: Not long after it appeared the city had been spared the hurricane's worst effects, levees protecting the city began to fail, sending floodwaters across much of New Orleans. That development abruptly shifted news coverage of Katrina from having escaped a close call to something more grim and devastating. New Orleans was mostly under water and rumors of social disintegration, many of which made their way into news reports, soon were circulating.

Harvey was forecast to drop upwards of 50 inches of rain on parts of southeastern Texas, predictions that proved largely accurate. Journalists, at least in broad terms, knew what to expect; the absence of a narrative-altering surprise allowed them to keep story lines trained on storm victims, rescues and evacuations, without having to chase bleak rumors of mayhem and violence.

Principal controversies that arose about post-Harvey coverage focused on questions of media ethics — whether it was appropriate for a reporter to send Twitter messages about what he considered looting, and when a reporter should pull back from an on-camera interview of a clearly distraught storm victim.

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left-leaning and 57 were right-leaning. Among the top “left-leaning” phrases were “LGBT,” “bigotry” and “voting rights act”; among the top “right-leaning” phrases were “bureaucrats,” “overreach” and “illegal immigrants.”

Then, the researchers analyzed the usage of these terms in journalists’ news content to scale how left- or right-leaning their coverage was.

While the researchers found “a clear correlation between the ideology of the journalist’s Twitter network and the ideology of his or her writing,” they underscored several notable outliers.

For example, The New York Times reporter David Sanger focuses heavily on national security and military affairs and wouldn’t be characterized as particularly partisan among media observers. But the researchers’ analysis put Sanger among the most right-leaning media producers, even though his Twitter network leaned left. There were “a substantial number” of other journalists, the researchers said, whose content leaned right but whose Twitter followership leaned left.

What’s more, the researchers wrote, the study can’t fully account for “confounding variables” such as a journalist’s beat — which would demand the reporter be embedded deeper in specific ideological communities as part of his or her sourcing and research.

The authors noted that previous research has suggested journalists as a whole tend to lean more left and that reporters are generally concentrated in metropolitan areas, which tend to vote more liberally. These factors could help explain why their social networks skew in that direction.

Not surprisingly, the data showed that overall journalists from left-leaning outlets have a left-leaning followership, and the same was true for reporters at right-leaning news organizations.

The researchers added that the findings give tentative evidence to impartiality remaining strong in journalistic culture, despite criticisms that journalists are mostly liberal and are therefore biased.

“The relationship between social networks and work output of journalists is complex and evolving, and the moderate correlation and obvious exceptions found point to that reality,” they wrote. ■

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• **Dubious memes were quickly debunked.** An image of a shark plying floodwaters in Texas received a brief and apparently credulous mention on the Fox News Channel, but the photograph soon was exposed as fake. For a time, the Washington Post’s “Intersect” blog kept a running list of storm-related hoaxes and exaggerations that appeared on social media. Such compilations helped keep a lid on the over-the-top stuff.

Social media platforms — most of which hadn’t been developed in 2005 — seemed to have performed fairly well, overall. Notably, Facebook and Twitter became in Harvey’s aftermath lifelines for storm victims and their families.

• **Stirring images.** Some of the most memorable photographs of Harvey were not of agony and grim misery (like the Times-Picayune front page of Sept. 2, 2005) but were heartening — such as the one of a Houston police SWAT officer striding in knee-deep flood water, carrying woman who was cradling her 13-month-old son. The image was taken by an Associated Press photographer and became “a symbol of the storm and rescue efforts,” as a Houston television

station described it.

The AP photographer, David J. Phillip, captured another memorable image of the storm — a panorama of a flooded Houston boulevard where a swarm of human forms confronted the waters in a tableau of evident grit, resilience, and aquatic rescue. The photo at once testified to turmoil the hurricane had created and to an absence of turmoil in response.

The post-landfall coverage of Harvey may not have been magnificent, but in all it didn’t merit a D-minus.

I’d give it a B, at least. ■

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