

---

# Reporting in Hurricane Katrina

---

The Importance of  
Verification and  
Passion

---

Michael Roppolo  
Rochester Institute of  
Technology  
[mar7120@rit.edu](mailto:mar7120@rit.edu)

---

Journalists, according to Charles Overby, are responsible for “the first draft of history.”<sup>i</sup> It is understandably so, for their training is what usually allows them to report correctly and objectively. Being that it is the “first draft,” this also means that journalists are not infallible. In times of crisis, journalists are responsible for reporting the truth to the public and dealing with whatever emotions they may have afterwards. “Emotions can twist a fact if you let it,” explained Shepard Smith in an interview with Overby. During Hurricane Katrina, some journalists’ training was ignored as they themselves became subject to the same conditions and emotions as those that they were reporting on. Some news correspondents became just as desperate as the victims around them. It was this fear and desperation that led them to do some good reporting, amidst some bad reporting, in the aftermath of Katrina.

When Hurricane Katrina was set to strike the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, some networks sent their journalists down south to report. When the storm finally struck, it had reportedly “packed winds of 145 miles per hour...brought vast flooding to New Orleans and devastation along coastal Mississippi and Alabama. More than 970 people were killed in Louisiana, most of them in New Orleans.”<sup>ii</sup> After the physical storm had passed, many journalists proclaimed that “New Orleans dodges the bullet,” but overnight the story would surely change.<sup>iii</sup> Reporters soon descended on the devastated regions, reporting of “a drowned city, gripped by chaos, bordering on anarchy.”<sup>iv</sup> These reports would soon be found false, as well. Journalists were working around the clock to provide coverage, often going for days without “much of a break, sleeping little and toiling amid despairing conditions.”<sup>v</sup>

The reporting seen throughout this particular crisis can best be described as advocacy journalism, not traditional journalism. In advocacy journalism, reporters often grow passionate about the subjects they cover. This is true, especially when we consider the horrors some saw. Brian Williams of NBC recalled, "I saw women menstruating. I saw adults who on Sunday had their dignity, and by Wednesday, had been forced to defecate on themselves. I saw babies reusing diapers...It was paralysis; it was the degradation of human life." Covering the aftermath of Katrina in Pass Christian, Mississippi, Biloxi Sun Herald reporter, Josh Norman and a photographer came upon a woman. "She sat outside her ravaged home with the body of her dead baby laying on a stool in the nearby shade...I walked away and just started to cry."<sup>vi</sup> It was those sights of life post-Katrina that would compel so many journalists to action, reporting the truth with such a passion.

Some journalists, like Shepard Smith, were able to keep their composure throughout most of the time spent in New Orleans in order to report as effectively as possible. However, at the end of day four, one can see Smith was starting to get emotional. On Hannity and Colmes, he said, "You know what they're doing now? And I'm not blaming anyone - I'm telling you what is happening - they have set a checkpoint at the bottom of this bridge...it's the only way out; it's the connection to the rest of the world. And anyone who walks up out of that city now is turned around."<sup>vii</sup> Smith was sharing his frustration at how incapable the federal, state and local governments appeared to be of helping those who truly needed it; some journalists felt that showing their emotion rallied viewers, and officials, to action.

Acting out of desperation and fear, journalists showing emotions helped to voice the concerns of the thousands of victims in the aftermath of Katrina. There was no other

journalist that showed his or her emotion more effectively than Anderson Cooper. “I’ve got to tell you, there are a lot of people here who are very upset and very angry and very frustrated. And when they hear politicians...thanking one another it just – you know, it kinds of cuts them the wrong way right now...there was a body on the street of this town...being eaten by rats because this woman had been laying on the street for 48 hours,” Cooper told Sen. Mary Landrieu.<sup>viii</sup> Like Perkins and Izard suggest, it was that anger that proved critical in “establishing a bond between reporters and their audience.”<sup>ix</sup> According to a USA Today/CNN Gallup Poll, a majority of Americans, including 78 percent of African-Americans and 76 percent of whites, believed the media acted “responsibly” in covering Katrina and its aftermath.<sup>x</sup>

For American journalists, passion is key in the search for the truth, because if they become indifferent, reporters could be susceptible to manipulation by politicians, as well as the government. Yet, some journalists would let their emotions run high in the crisis, resulting in some grave errors. Initially hailed as “one of the quintessential moments in television news,” we find this statement, in part, a major understatement, as argued by W.J. Campbell, the author of *Getting It Wrong*.<sup>xi</sup> Campbell writes that American journalists had erred badly on crucial details, unwittingly helping “slow an already slow response and further wound an already wounded population.”<sup>xii</sup> With reports of snipers firing at medical personnel, of bodies being stacked at the Convention Center like cordwood, and of children being sexually assaulted, it was sounded like something out of *Lord of the Flies*. In a sense, at least for journalists and civilians in New Orleans, it was. Yet, the media “cannot abandon their mantra of ‘accuracy, accuracy, accuracy.’”<sup>xiii</sup>

According to international journalists, the American media tends to “cover natural disasters as events and focus on immediate developments, instead of larger issues such as preparedness or hazard mitigation.”<sup>xiv</sup> According to the study published in *Journalism II*, critics felt that the level of accuracy, diversity, and skepticism of the US media coverage did not meet their expectations, and that “their country of origin would have done a better job in responding to the disaster.”<sup>xv</sup> Other questions in the study were ultimately excluded, because there were little to no difference in the opinion of international expectations were not met in terms of the amount of diversity, skepticism and public dialogue present in American Hurricane Katrina coverage. Ultimately, of all respondents, “43.9 percent said their overall expectations were met and 37.7 percent said they were not, while 18.5 percent remained undecided.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Live television and lack of communication would cause many reputable news sources to repeat rumors and heresy as fact. In a New York Times article, reporters said, “evacuation measures were inadequate, leaving far too many city residents behind to suffer severe hardships and, in some cases, join marauding gangs.” The wording in this statement may make it seem that it was unsafe in New Orleans. In addition, there had been several reports published suggesting that the levees might not hold. Yet, the Times quoted President Bush, without verifying, as saying “I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees.”<sup>xvii</sup> Fox News had reported that President Bush had called both New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Gov. Kathleen Blanco on August 28 to plead for evacuations. In fact, massive evacuations from the city had begun the day before and Gov. Blanco stated that the President had called her prior to a press conference, according to Perkins and Izard.

In the Washington Post, reporters spoke of National Guard troops beginning to pour into “the region in an attempt to quell the unrest, but large swaths of New Orleans and other sodden areas remained essentially ungoverned.”<sup>xviii</sup> In an editorial, the newspaper insisted, “...looters and carjackers, some of them armed, have run rampant. Bodies floated in the toxic water that covered four-fifths of the city, and corpses were filmed amid the refugees around the downtown convention center, where thousands of people awaited buses to evacuate them.”<sup>xix</sup> As shown by the language in these many of false reports, the picture that emerged was one of “masses of flood victims resorting to utter depravity, randomly attacking each other, as well as the police trying to protect them and the rescue workers trying to save them.”<sup>xx</sup>

As many journalists would argue, these false reports had been done on the basis of confusion, which would later turn to misinformation. As Aaron Brown explained, "It sounds like there was almost a giant game of post office being played," he said. "One person believes to have seen one thing, tells someone else, and as it goes down the line, it keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger. Before you know it, you have hundreds of deaths."<sup>xxi</sup> In this way, so many journalists with credible sources had gotten the story wrong. However, stories published during Hurricane Katrina were not pure fiction, as people were saying these statements as fact. Rather, it was a complete lack of verification on the journalists' part.

In an essay for the American Journalism Review, Brian Thevenot explained three tools that could have been used to limit these errors. One tool was the persistent questioning of sources. In times of emergency, such as a natural disaster, this is especially important, when one considers the number of “reliable sources” used in post-Katrina

reporting. A second tool is the inclusion of a simple sentence that says: "this account could not be independently verified." In letting the audience know that this statement may not be true would be preventing the so-called "chaos" that Campbell describes in *Getting It Wrong*. A third tool that Thevenot explained was the adaptation of an attitude that "embraces the correcting of major news stories as news itself, not something to be buried in a corrections box." In doing so would allow news sources to regain their credibility, while allowing the public to make sense of what was fact and what was myth.

In spite of the massive errors made by reporters, good reporting did happen during Hurricane Katrina. Local newspapers that were forced to evacuate, but some reporters stayed behind to help with the reporting of the storm. In the aftermath, however, flooding and destruction led to limited printing, as journalists turned to the Internet as a means to get out the news. First, came the Times-Picayune news blog, that continually updated the public on what damages the city had sustained when Hurricane Katrina hit. "Hurricane Damages: Collapsed buildings, massive flooding," read the headline, as the article detailed what had happened: "In New Orleans, water topped a levee along the Industrial Canal. The city's 911 emergency system was out of service and Charity Hospital was on emergency power and windows had been blown out on five floors."<sup>xxii</sup> Later articles would help chronicle the federal response and recovery.

Many of the Times articles nominated for the Pulitzer Prize had a shared focus on local coverage, as well as deeper insight to what people were feeling: shock, horror, fear and desperation. For example, "In the Bywater, a supply store sported spray-painted signs reading 'You Loot, I Shoot' and 'You Bein Watched.' A man seated nearby with a rifle in his lap suggested it was no idle threat. At the Bywater studio of Dr. Bob, the artist known for

handpainted 'Be Nice or Leave' signs, a less fanciful sentiment was painted on the wall: "Looters Will Be Shot. Dr. Bob."<sup>xxiii</sup> In addition, when one reads these poignant articles, it clearly becomes evident that journalists were risking their lives being out in the field.

As the chaos subsided in the weeks that followed, reporters Brian Thevenot and Gordon Russell tried to set the facts straight once and for all. In an article, they assured readers that "while conditions were squalid for the thousands stuck there, much of the violence never happened." By interviewing many sources, including police, military and medical workers, just as they should have in the beginning, Thevenot and Russell were able to paint a more accurate picture of what happened in the aftermath of the storm. Presumably for conceding their fallacies and for good reporting in times of bad reporting, the Times-Picayune and Sun-Herald shared a Pulitzer Prize for their coverage.<sup>xxiv</sup>

In today's world, a journalist has many responsibilities: to allow the public access to information, to report fairly and accurately, to verify information and to act as a watchdog on the American government. In times of crisis, the seemingly infinite amount of information creates a vacuum, where any so-called "fact" is deemed important. Oftentimes, as a result, many of this is reported without any type of in-depth verification. However, good reporting was done on the basis of passion. Reporters who were overwhelmed and lost in the horrors that they, and thousands others, faced, grew frustrated and traded objective reporting for advocating on behalf of those that couldn't. In doing so, journalists had become a voice for the voiceless, restoring the relationship between them and those they covered.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> *Media Coverage of Hurricane Katrina*. (2010, August 26). C-SPAN Video Library. C-SPAN. Retrieved from <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/295195-1>
- <sup>ii</sup> Campbell, W. J. (2010). *Getting it wrong: Ten of the greatest misreported stories in American journalism*. (pp. 163). Berkley, California: University of California Press.
- <sup>iii</sup> Perkins, J., & Izard, R. (2011). *Covering disaster: Lessons from media coverage of Katrina and Rita*. (pp. 34). New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- <sup>iv</sup> Perkins & Izard, pp. 71.
- <sup>v</sup> Campbell, pp. 168.
- <sup>vi</sup> Alvarez, M. T. (2005, September 18). Covering Katrina's Aftermath. *Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma*. Retrieved January 20, 2013, from <http://dartcenter.org/content/covering-katrin-as-aftermath-0#.UPxZfKFU64e>
- <sup>vii</sup> Katrina Files - Shepard Smith and Rivera - Locked In. (2005, November 5). *Hannity and Colmes*. Fox News. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gESX9Yu4GA>
- <sup>viii</sup> Perkins & Izard, pp. 6.
- <sup>ix</sup> Perkins & Izard, pp. 16.
- <sup>x</sup> USA Today. (2005). *USA Today/CNN Gallup Poll* (Poll). Louisiana: USA Today/CNN. Retrieved from <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/polls/2005-09-12-poll-blacks.htm>
- <sup>xi</sup> Campbell, pp. 166.
- <sup>xii</sup> Campbell, pp. 169.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Perkins and Izard, pp. 10.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Kalyango, Y., & Eckler, P. (n.d.). International journalists' expectations from the US media coverage of Hurricane Katrina. *Journalism II*, pp. 283. doi:10.1177/1464884909360920
- <sup>xv</sup> Kalyango & Eckler, pp. 278.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Kalyango & Eckler, pp. 287.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Shane, S., & Lipton, E. (2005, September 2). Government Saw Flood Risk but Not Levee Failure. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/02/national/nationalspecial/02response.html>
- <sup>xviii</sup> Coates, S., & Eggen, D. (2005, September 2). A City of Despair and Lawlessness. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/01/AR2005090100533.html>
- <sup>xix</sup> From Bad to Worse. (2005, September 2). *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/01/AR2005090101952.html>
- <sup>xx</sup> Campbell, pp. 168.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Thevenot, B. (2006, January). Myth-Making in New Orleans. *American Journalism Review*. Retrieved January 20, 2013, from <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=3998>
- <sup>xxii</sup> Online Times-Picayune news blog. (2005, August 29). *The Pulitzer Prizes*. Retrieved January 21, 2013, from <http://www.pulitzer.org/archives/7072>
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Thevenot, B., Spera, K., & MacCash, D. (2005, August 31). Old West has nothing on Katrina aftermath. *Times-Picayune*. Retrieved from <http://www.pulitzer.org/archives/7075>
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Thevenot, B., & Russell, G. (2005, September 26). Rape. Murder. Gunfights. *Times-Picayune*. Retrieved from <http://www.pulitzer.org/archives/7087>