

**More Words, Less Action:
A Framing Analysis of FEMA Public Relations Communications During
Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav**

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This study comparatively analyzes the Federal Emergency Management Agency's crisis public relations communication leading up to and during hurricanes Katrina and Gustav to determine what, if any, changes FEMA made to its communication strategy. Employing framing analysis, the authors discovered that, aside from an increase of more than double the number of words devoted to its Gustav crisis communication, the action statements within FEMA's crisis rhetoric had significantly decreased since that before and during Katrina.

INTRODUCTION

“FEMA doesn't evacuate communities. FEMA does not do law enforcement. FEMA does not do communications...Many may be surprised to learn that, guess what, FEMA doesn't own fire trucks. We don't own ambulances. We don't own search and rescue equipment. The people of FEMA are being tired of being beat up, and they don't deserve it.”
(Michael Brown, 2006)

The above quote was spoken by former Federal Emergency Management Agencies (better known as FEMA) Director Michael D. Brown during a congressional hearing in January 2006. “FEMA does not do communications.” Interesting, as any visitor to the FEMA website will see many types of communication. Many members of the general public are familiar with receiving both audio and visual communications from FEMA. Simply put, obviously FEMA does indeed do communications among its

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many roles. According to the FEMA website (www.fema.gov), its mission is:

DISASTER. It strikes anytime, anywhere. It takes many forms -- a hurricane, an earthquake, a tornado, a flood, a fire or a hazardous spill, an act of nature or an act of terrorism. It builds over days or weeks, or hits suddenly, without warning. Every year, millions of Americans face disaster, and its terrifying consequences.

On March 1, 2003, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) became part of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The primary mission of the Federal Emergency Management Agency is to reduce the loss of life and property and protect the Nation from all hazards, including natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other man-made disasters, by leading and supporting the Nation in a risk-based, comprehensive emergency management system of preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation.

The literature review that follows includes a brief history of the development and landfall of Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav, FEMA's crisis rhetoric during this timeframe, an overview of crisis communication management, and finally a review of framing as the theoretical framework of this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the National Hurricane Center, between 1851 and 2004 the United States has been hit by three Category 5 hurricanes, eighteen Category 4 hurricanes, seventy-one Category 3 hurricanes, seventy-two Category 2 hurricanes, and one-hundred nine Category 1 hurricanes (National Weather Service, 2005). It is an established fact that, in a case of any hurricane disaster there are going to be people who will evacuate and those who will stay behind without evacuating. The latter may eventually need to be evacuated and provided aid and shelter (Brodie, Weltzien, Altman, Blendon, Benson, 2006).

Hurricane Katrina started as a tropical storm off the coast of the Bahamas and over seven days developed into a powerful Category 4 hurricane that hit Florida and finally the Gulf Coast in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. Its August 25, 2005 landfall in New Orleans would take the lives of over 1,300 people. This disaster remains the most ferocious and destructive natural disaster ever to be recorded in American history (Townsend, 2006).

Almost exactly three years later, Tropical Storm Gustav was building hurricane strength winds. Hurricane Gustav formed from a tropical wave from the coast of Africa

and made progress towards the United States (Beven & Kimberlain, 2008). On Saturday, August 30th the National Weather Service warned:

DATA FROM AN AIR FORCE RECONNAISSANCE AIRCRAFT INDICATE THAT GUSTAV HAS CONTINUED TO STRENGTHEN AND NOW HAS MAXIMUM WINDS NEAR 145 MPH...230 KM/HR WITH HIGHER GUSTS. THIS MAKES GUSTAV AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS CATEGORY FOUR HURRICANE ON THE SAFFIR-SIMPSON HURRICANE SCALE... (National Weather Service, 2008).

Gustav, though forecasted as a Category 4 storm, made landfall as a Category 2 storm in southern Louisiana on September 1, 2008 (United States Government Accountability Office, 2008). Its landfall attributed to 53 deaths and over 1.1 million people lost power in Louisiana and Mississippi (Cutter & Smith, 2009).

As mentioned in its mission statement, FEMA's role is largely to manage emergencies. To understand how they might accomplish this, it is helpful to define crisis management and determine its importance.

Coombs (1999) defines crisis management as "representing a set of factors designed to combat crisis and lessen the actual damage inflicted by the crisis" (p. 4). In other words, crisis management seeks to put measures in place that will help reduce the impact of a crisis, essentially protecting an organization, stakeholders, a country or state from considerable damage (Coombs, 1999). Gilpin and Murphy (2006) also see crisis management as a way for organizations to avoid crisis or reduce the impact of a crisis if/when it does strike. The underlying philosophical assumptions of crisis management, according to Gilpin & Murphy (2006), indicate the possibility to influence events and help directly reduce the impact of a crisis. Most crisis management scholars agree that the most effective way to do this is to create a detailed plan in advance [planning] and follow it when the need arises [management] (Coombs, 1999; Smith & Millar, 2002). An important component of crisis management involves an organization and its various stakeholders – stakeholders whose perceptions create and maintain the reputation of stems said organization. In the cases of Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav, many of these stakeholders were potential victims whose lives and safety were in jeopardy, while FEMA (and other government agencies) were considered the organization with whom the relationship was shared. FEMA needed to administer measures to help reduce the impact of these disastrous hurricanes, administer aid, and hopefully save lives.

Finally, it is crucial to document the process in order to learn lessons from such crises in order to better plan for future problems. Certainly the citizens of the United States hoped that FEMA and the federal government had learned from Hurricane Katrina by the time Hurricane Gustav appeared three years later.

In fact, the United States Department of Homeland Security created a 217 page detailing the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina and what could be done to avoid similar mistakes in a future disaster. The report outlined the need to improve the current homeland security framework to be able to manage 21st century threats (Townsend, 2006). Also the defragmented nature of the national and state responses to Hurricane Katrina contributed to the ineffective “marshalling of federal, state, and local resources to respond to Katrina” (Townsend, 2006, p. 52).

This paper compares FEMA news releases leading up to the landfalls of both Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Gustav to analyze how such “lessons” affected the communications. It attempts to discover if FEMA communications pertaining to Hurricane Gustav were in fact more effective at communication. In order to accomplish this, framing was used.

Framing in mass communication is the process by which communicators, intentionally or unintentionally, construct a point of view that helps foster a particular interpretation of a given situation (Kuypers, 2006). The roots of mass communications framing can be traced to Walter Lippman’s landmark *Public Opinion* (1922), in which Lippman contended that the news media are a primary source of “the pictures in our heads,” an enunciation of his belief that the public’s media-fostered images of the external environment do not reflect the world as it truly is (Lippman, 1922). Bernard Cohen famously expanded upon this thesis when he announced that “while the media may not tell us what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p.13).

But it was not until McCombs and Shaw’s seminal study of mass media effects during the 1968 presidential campaign that the speculations of those like Lippman and Cohen would finally be tested. What has come to be known as the “Chapel Hill Study” (McCombs and Shaw were young professors at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill at the time), demonstrated that the mass media set the agenda of issues for the campaign by increasing the salience of issues among the public. In short, issues most covered in the media, after a certain lag period, became the issues deemed most important by voters (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Thus was born agenda-setting, a heuristically vigorous theory that has spawned hundreds of follow-up studies throughout the world. Initially, most focused on first-level agenda-setting—the salience of *objects*, or those things toward which our attention is focused or that we have an opinion about. In traditional agenda-setting, objects usually refer to public issues, but as the theory has expanded, “the kinds of objects that can define an agenda in the media and among the public are virtually limitless” (McCombs, 2004, p.70).

And agenda-setting research continues to expand. Indeed, where first-level agenda-setting is concerned with the transfer of object salience from the media agenda to that of the public, second-level agenda-setting focuses on the salience transfer of *attributes*, or “those characteristics and properties that fill out the picture of each

object...the entire range of...traits that characterizes an object” (McCombs, 2004, p. 70). Again, the kinds of attributes that can be identified are virtually limitless, ranging from such basic physical characteristics as “blonde” or “tall” to more abstract traits like “competent,” “dishonest,” “chaotic,” “virtuous,” etc. In short, where object salience tells us which issues to think about, attribute salience tells us about which *aspects* we should think. Revisiting Cohen’s famous declaration about media influence, McCombs raises an important question:

The second-level of agenda-setting further suggests that the media not only tell us what to think about, but that they also tell us *how to think* about some objects. Could the consequences of this be that the media sometimes do tell us *what to think?* (McCombs, 2004, p. 71).

Indeed, scores of second-level agenda-setting studies since the 1970s, many of them focusing on attribute agenda-setting regarding political candidates, seem to support the notion that the news media influence how we think about issues. Several studies, including the 1976 U.S. and 1996 Spanish presidential campaigns found that the media successfully transferred its attribute agenda concerning presidential candidates to the public (Becker & McCombs, 1978; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981; McCombs, Lopez-Escobar & Llamas, 2000).

Agenda-setting, both first and second level, can be seen as the parent theory from which framing is derived. A frame is the “central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” of certain attributes (Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss & Ghanem, 1991). Facts are neutral until “being embedded in a frame or storyline that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others” (Gameson, 1989, p. 157; Hall, 1982, p. 59). While a frame can sometimes be a single attribute, not all attributes can be considered frames. Instead, it is perhaps better to think of a frame as a *bundle* of certain attributes—sometimes referred to as the “central theme” of an issue—with “the power to structure thought, to shape how we think about public issues, political candidates or other objects in the news” (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001, p. 11).

Framing, then, involves the selection and emphasis of some aspects of an issue (and the exclusion of others) in such a way “as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing can be said to be a step beyond second-level agenda-setting, whereby the media not only transfer attribute salience, but begin to provide “contextual cues or frames with which to evaluate those subjects” in question (Johnston, 1990, p. 337). Indeed, “whereas agenda-setting would allow us to count the instances of press comments on [a] topic, framing analysis allows us to discover how the comments shape our perceptions of the topic,” (Kuypers & Cooper, 2005, p. 2).

When we frame facts or events in a particular way, we encourage others to see those facts and events in that same particular way. In this sense, framing can be understood as taking some aspects of our reality and making them more easily noticed than other aspects. (Kuypers, 2006, p. 7).

An examination of Entman's (1991) study of the news coverage surrounding the shooting down of two civilian airliners during the 1980s provides an excellent example of the power of framing. Employing comparative framing analysis, Entman compared news coverage of the downing of Korean Airlines flight 007 by the Soviets in 1983 with news reports of the USS *Vincennes*' shoot down of Iran Air 655 over the Persian Gulf in 1988. On each flight, all aboard were killed. Entman found that the KAL incident was framed as a moral outrage and emphasized the evil, crass nature of the Soviet Union while de-emphasizing the fact that flight 007 had strayed into Soviet airspace. By contrast, the Iran Air incident was framed simply as a tragedy and emphasized the technical problems experienced by the *Vincennes*. These findings demonstrate how selective framing can impose a particular interpretation of the events in question. When some relevant attributes are emphasized at the expense of others, a dominant frame is created which can render contrary information of "such low salience as to be of little practical use to most audience members" (Entman, 1991, p. 21).

In another example, a study involving the coverage of a Ku Klux Klan rally not only analyzed for frames, but measured audience response to the different frames discovered (Nelson, Clawson & Oxley, 1997). The first news story framed the rally as a free speech issue, with heavy use of quotes and background information that emphasized the Klan's right to march and speak. The second story, by contrast, framed the issue as one of public disorder, which emphasized the often violent and disruptive nature of Klan marchers. Again, the results demonstrate the power of frames: "Participants who viewed the free speech story expressed more tolerance for the Klan than those participants who watched the public disorder story" (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 567).

Indeed, as Kuypers and Cooper (2005) write:

When journalists frame, they construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be interpreted in a specific way. Thus, journalists can, knowingly or unknowingly, guide the interpretation of readers toward a particular point of view. (Kuypers & Cooper, 2005, p. 2)

Similarly, an organization can attempt to fulfill this "journalistic" function through use of framing within communications that it has designed. Such frames can be especially valuable during crises due to the high value placed on controlling communication during crisis scenarios. Analysis of FEMA news releases during both

Hurricanes Katrina and Gustav reveal distinct frames. This analysis is explained in the following methodology section.

METHODOLOGY

This study comparatively frame analyzed the Federal Emergency Management Agency's crisis rhetoric leading up to and during hurricanes Katrina and Gustav to determine whether the agency's communication strategy differed between the storms. The news archive at FEMA's Web site was accessed, with 8 news releases for Katrina and 13 for Gustav found. The authors analyzed the entire text of all news releases found in order to determine the frames advanced by FEMA. Frames were identified by searching for two broad criteria: FEMA Action Items (action FEMA would take) and Public Action Items (action FEMA suggests the public should take). Each news release was analyzed to measure both action items as well as attributes chosen for emphasis and the relative number of words the news releases devoted to Katrina and Gustav, respectively.

A succinct name is assigned to each dominant frame. These labels are arbitrary and represent only our best attempt to boil down the frames into manageable packages. Again, the operative word is *dominant*. As explained in the literature review, there can be several frames within a given narrative. But this study is concerned only with those frames that are prevalent and recurrent – in other words, only frames sufficiently dominant to plausibly influence readers' interpretation of events. For example, if FEMA chose to primarily emphasize attributes and emphases that stress the need for the public to make preparations for the approaching storm, the dominant frame was labeled "**Public Responsibilities**." Conversely, news releases that possessed an overwhelming emphasis on action taken by FEMA were labeled as "**FEMA Responsibilities**" frames. Examples of Public Action Items include statements such as: "plan a safe evacuation," "identify safe shelter," "have disaster supplies on hand, including..." "focus their attention on," "urged to pay attention to the latest storm information," etc. Examples of FEMA Action Items include statements such as "FEMA will mobilize equipment and resources," "establish shelters," "supporting emergency medical needs," "meeting immediate life-saving and life-sustaining human needs," "protecting property," "funding is available...for debris removal and protective procedures," etc.

FINDINGS

The framing analysis produced several intriguing findings. Based on the "lessons" that the government claimed to have learned from the Hurricane Katrina disaster, it was expected that the news releases leading up to Hurricane Gustav would be more communicative. This was anticipated due to the public outcry that FEMA had not performed adequately in 2005. At first glance, it seemed that FEMA had certainly increased its communications. In fact, quantitatively it had. Before Hurricane Katrina had made landfall, FEMA had issued eight news releases that contained a total of 3,086 words (an average of 386 words/release). Leading up to Hurricane Gustav's landfall, FEMA had increased both totals by issuing thirteen news releases that contained a total

of 10,511 words (an average of 809 words/release). Even looking at the averages initially seemed impressive with the average Gustav news release containing over twice as many words (Appendix A).

Further inspection, however, would prove that these numbers were deceiving. Framing analysis identified two dominant frames within the FEMA news releases. Clearly identified actions – labeled Action Items – were contained within each of the communications. These frames, **FEMA Responsibilities** and **Public Responsibilities**, were clearly delineated between either FEMA or the public citizens. The eight news releases during Hurricane Katrina contained a total of 78 FEMA Action Items and 63 Public Action Items (averages of 10 and 8, respectively). During Hurricane Gustav, the thirteen news releases contained a total of 83 FEMA Action Items and 12 Public Action Items (averages of 6 and 1, respectively).

These Action Item numbers indicate that, while Hurricane Gustav news releases were more than twice as verbose as their Hurricane Katrina counterparts, they actually contained far less information on how to prepare for the crisis or what FEMA's role would be. Interestingly, two of the Hurricane Katrina news releases indicated step-by-step instructions on how to prepare (which even included details lists of supplies to gather) while no news release containing this information was ever put forth by FEMA leading up to Hurricane Gustav.

DISCUSSION

Crisis communication has quickly become an issue that affects us all. This is especially true in life-and-death scenarios like the hurricanes examined in this paper. The “lessons” that the FEMA claimed to have learned after Hurricane Katrina do not prove to be that effective. Certainly the injury and death tolls were much smaller during Hurricane Gustav but that was still an unknown at the time of FEMA's news releases. It definitely looked as if a Category 4 hurricane might make landfall in almost the same location on almost the same date as it did three years prior. While the fact that the hurricanes were not both Category 4 when they made landfall is a potential weakness of this study's design, the perception that Gustav might be another Katrina was a very real fear at the time.

Further research should consider analyzing additional hurricane communications. It would also be interesting to discover if the same news release qualities were present in FEMA communications about other types of disasters, natural or otherwise. Additionally, future research could analyze all messages from the initial threat through the recovery phase. It should be noted though, that it could prove difficult to identify a definitive “end point” in order to maintain study consistency.

Finally FEMA, as well as organizations of all types, might want to consider the actual content of the messages they disseminate. Certainly more is not *always* better, reminiscent of the classic “quantity vs. quality” argument. And, to counterpoint, the messages should not necessarily be simply eliminated. Organizations have the

responsibility to evaluate the messages to their publics for quality and content. FEMA owes it to its public. Part of its mission states that it is dedicated to “protect the Nation from all hazards.” - which should include using fewer words, more action.

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APPENDIX A
Framing Analysis

<u>News release</u>	<u>Release date</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Word count</u>	<u>FEMA Action Items</u>	<u>Public Action Items</u>
1-K	8/25/05	Officials urge preparedness as Katrina intensifies	596	4	30
2-K	8/26/05	DRC operations temporarily suspended until Katrina passes	235	4	1
3-K	8/27/05	Emergency aid authorized for Hurricane Katrina emergency...	262	13	0
4-K	8/28/05	Officials again urge preparedness as Katrina intensifies in the...	613	3	28
5-K	8/28/05	Emergency declaration ordered for Mississippi	244	13	0
6-K	8/28/05	President declares major disaster for Florida	305	6	0
7-K	8/28/05	Emergency declaration ordered for Alabama	235	15	0
8-K	8/28/05	Homeland security prepping for dangerous Hurricane Katrina	596	20	4
KATRINA TOTAL:			3,086	78	63
KATRINA AVERAGE:			386	10	8
10-G	8/27/08	Federal government steps up preparations for Gustav	579	6	1
11-G	8/28/08	Before the storm	360	9	1
12-G	8/29/08	President declares emergency federal aid for Louisiana	226	6	0
13-G	8/29/08	Federal aid programs for Louisiana emergency disaster recovery	371	5	0
14-G	8/29/08	Federal support as states act in advance of Gustav	1,117	10	2
15-G	8/29/08	President declares emergency federal aid for Texas	293	4	0
16-G	8/30/08	President declares emergency federal aid for Mississippi	216	4	0
17-G	8/30/08	Gustav: Federal agencies support states, evacuees	1,967	12	2
18-G	8/30/08	President declares emergency federal aid for Alabama	216	7	0
19-G	8/30/08	Federal aid programs for Alabama emergency disaster recovery	371	4	0
20-G	8/30/08	National emergency family registry and locator system and...	264	3	2
21-G	8/31/08	Federal support for states facing Gustav	2,217	5	1
22-G	9/1/08	Gustav strikes: Federal resources ready to respond	2,314	8	3
GUSTAV TOTAL:			10,511	83	12
GUSTAV AVERAGE:			809	6	1