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Covering Katrina: Trends in Katrina Media Coverage

Initial Analysis from the Top Ten National Newspapers and Ten Gulf Coast Newspapers

Partnership for Public Service

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INTRODUCTION

This analysis provides support for several conclusions about news coverage of Hurricane Katrina.

First, coverage of Katrina far surpassed any natural disaster seen in recent memory, illustrating the enormous magnitude of the devastation caused by the storm and the challenge of responding to it. Other recent natural disasters, even the four successive hurricanes to strike Florida in 2004, did not generate even one-tenth the coverage of Katrina. Yet media coverage over the course of the study, even for an event as momentous as Katrina, was limited. As with other disasters, the attention of the media and the public outside of the affected region did not remain on the story for long. The attention of readers and viewers moved on to other topics.

Anecdotal evaluation of Katrina coverage might suggest a preponderance of stories about waste and fraud. This analysis indicates that such was not the case generally. Waste and fraud stories made up only a small portion of the coverage. However, waste and fraud was twice as likely to be covered in articles that examined the role of the federal response agency, FEMA. The correlation between stories about FEMA and stories about waste and fraud quite likely fed the highly negative perception of the federal response.

Third, the initial attention paid to the disproportionate burden Katrina placed on poor communities and the need to address the challenge of urban poverty has also faded. For example, poverty was never seen as a larger topic than fraud and waste at either the national or regional level. As time progressed, the percentage of Katrina stories dealing with poverty fell more quickly than did that for fraud and waste coverage.

A final conclusion can be drawn less from what was covered than from what was omitted. There has been little discussion of the lessons learned and the specific remedies to the challenges encountered during the response. There is, for example, very limited coverage of issues regarding improvements to the effectiveness of the civil service, intra- and inter-governmental coordination, or long-term disaster mitigation planning. This presents a major opportunity, and a significant challenge, for media in the years ahead.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the media coverage from the top ten U.S. papers (by circulation) and a sampling of ten Gulf Coast newspapers near areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. The analysis covers the time period between August 24, 2005, a few days before the storm made landfall, and July 21, 2006. Some of the key findings include:

- ***Katrina Received 10x the Coverage as Florida Hurricanes.*** The top ten papers in the country published 13,901 articles mentioning Hurricane Katrina in the eleven months following the storm. The ten selected Gulf Coast papers published 23,348 articles during that time. By comparison, all four of the hurricanes that struck Florida in 2004 drew less than 10% of coverage of Katrina in both the top ten and the Gulf Coast newspapers.
- ***Stories Were More Likely to Connect FEMA, Government with Fraud, Waste.*** ‘Fraud’ and ‘waste’ are more than twice as likely to appear in articles that mention FEMA as in those that do not. About 9% of the stories in the top ten papers and 11% of the stories in the Gulf Coast papers that mention FEMA also mention waste or fraud.



AN URGENT NEED FOR ACTION

- *Poverty and Lessons Learned Received Little Coverage.* Poverty coverage was initially very limited and even less sustained than overall coverage. By November 2005, less than 4% of national coverage and less than 2% of Gulf Coast coverage mentioned poverty. Discussion of issues related to governmental reform and lessons learned from the event were even less a part of the stories. Overall, less than 1% of the Katrina stories in top-ten or Gulf Coast newspapers mentioned ‘lessons learned’.

METHODOLOGY

The data are derived from a search of news articles from two different sets of daily newspapers. The data were gathered for the dates of August 24, 2005 to July 21, 2006. The first group captured was the top ten circulating daily newspapers in the U.S. which have a combined total circulation of over 12 million. They include:

- *USA Today*
- *Wall Street Journal*
- *New York Times*
- *Los Angeles Times*
- *Washington Post*
- *Chicago Tribune*
- *New York Daily News*
- *Philadelphia Inquirer*
- *Denver Post/Rocky Mountain News*
- *Houston Chronicle*

Also included in the analysis are is a sampling of ten Gulf Coast newspapers, affected by the Hurricane and its aftermath, which include:

- *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi)
- *Hattiesburg American* (Mississippi)
- *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana)
- *Shreveport Times* (Louisiana)
- *Baton Rouge Advocate* (Louisiana)
- *News-Star* (Monroe, Louisiana)

- *Birmingham Post Herald* (Alabama)¹
- *Birmingham News* (Alabama)
- *Anniston Star* (Alabama)
- *Houston Chronicle* (Texas)²

The search was conducted using the Factiva search engine, a service of Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive, LLC. Searches were conducted using keywords in the full text of news articles. In all of the searches, both the terms ‘hurricane’ and ‘Katrina’ were used. When searching for articles on waste and fraud, both of the terms ‘waste’ or ‘fraud’ were used along with ‘hurricane’ and ‘Katrina.’ The search for poverty only contained the keyword ‘poverty’ because using the word ‘poor’ and searching for words that are also homonyms may generate false hits such as the articles that refer to the “poor response” to Katrina. Searches for FEMA included both the abbreviation and the full name of the agency. Searches for ‘lessons learned’ looked for the single phrase rather than the two individual words.³

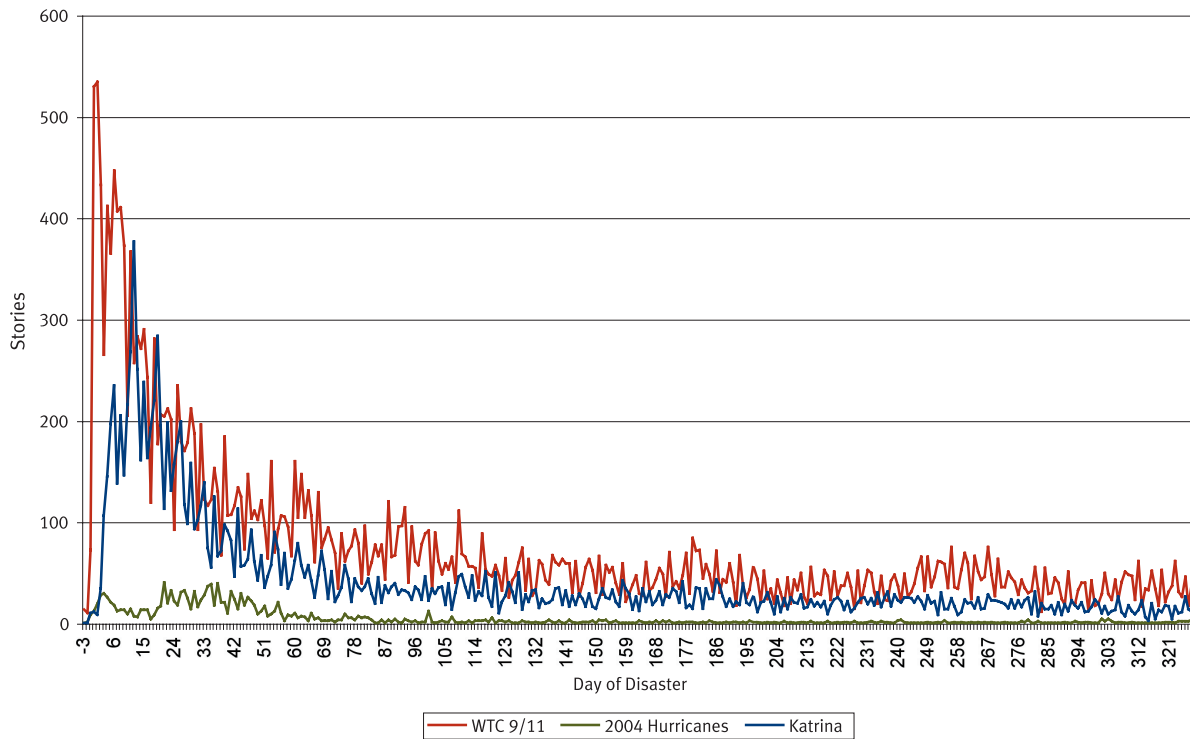
Using the Factiva Boolean language, a search for fraud and waste in articles that mention Hurricane Katrina in the top ten papers in the US would look like: “(rst=HOU OR rst=TRIB OR rst=NYDN OR rst=DNVR OR rst=LATM OR rst=NYTF OR rst=PHLI OR rst=J OR rst=WP OR rst=USAT) AND hurricane AND Katrina AND (FEMA OR Federal Emergency Management Agency) AND (fraud OR waste).”

It is important to note that this type of media search is at best an imperfect indicator of the media coverage. Some articles which are not relevant, corrections, and reprint articles in draft and final form will be present in the results. In addition, it does not distinguish between stories on the front page versus casual mentions of the key terms in the back pages of the paper.

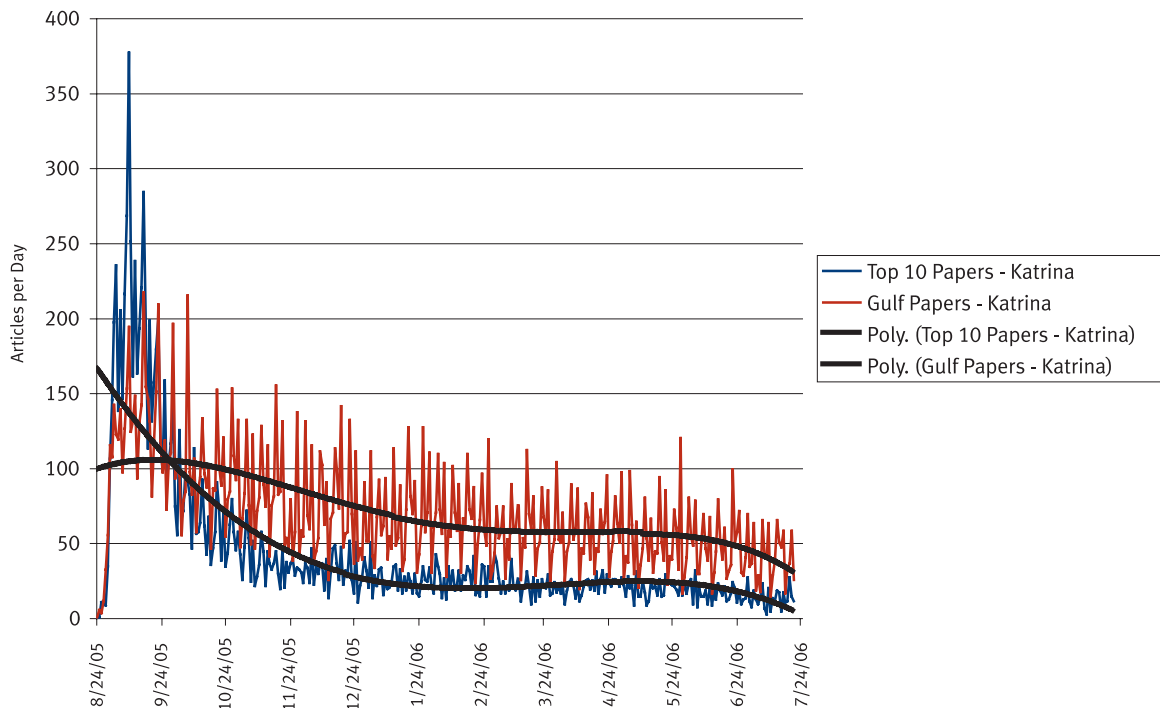


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Media Coverage of 9/11, Katrina, and the 2004 Hurricanes in the Top 10 U.S. Newspapers



Katrina Coverage: Top 10 U.S. Papers vs. Gulf Coast Papers





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TOTAL COVERAGE

While the top ten papers in the U.S. had the highest initial spike in stories mentioning Hurricane Katrina, the Gulf Coast newspapers selected had significantly larger number of articles over the eleven month period.⁴ Among the top ten papers in the U.S., 13,928 stories were written that mentioned ‘hurricane’ and ‘Katrina.’ In the Gulf Coast papers selected that number was 23,348.

Because their audience has been more personally affected by the disaster than the nation as a whole, it is unsurprising that the Gulf Coast papers have sustained a much higher rate of coverage over time than the major U.S. papers. The top ten papers published less than 25% of the number of stories about Hurricane Katrina in June 2006 as they did in October 2005.⁵ The ten Gulf Coast papers published nearly 50% as many articles about Katrina in June of this year as they did in October of last year.⁶

Compared to other recent events, Hurricane Katrina ranks very highly, though not as high as September 11. The 2004 hurricane season had four large storms make landfall in Florida, but coverage of the four storms put together (Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne)⁷ did not draw nearly as much media coverage as Katrina alone. The national newspapers published 1,170 stories on the four hurricanes over a similar 11 month period.⁸ The Gulf Coast papers published slightly more over the same period, 1,476, this represents 8% and 6% of the coverage of Katrina, respectively. The September 11th attacks however, received almost double the coverage of Hurricane Katrina after the first eleven months of the event. In the top ten U.S. newspapers, 25,318 stories were written after 9/11.⁹

COVERAGE TOPIC: WASTE & FRAUD

The topic of waste and fraud, while not an overwhelming portion of overall Katrina coverage, is substantially more prevalent in articles that also mention FEMA. The correlation between the two topics (“FEMA” and “waste” or “fraud”) suggests a negative tone of coverage regarding the lead federal

agency. In stories appearing in the top ten papers that do not mention FEMA (either as the abbreviation or spelled out), waste and fraud is only mentioned 3.9% of the time. However, in the stories when FEMA is mentioned, 9% also mention waste or fraud or both—more than double the frequency of stories that do not discuss FEMA. A similar doubling effect is seen in coverage in the Gulf Coast papers, where FEMA is mentioned in 21% of the Katrina stories, and waste and fraud is mentioned in 11% of those.

Waste and fraud has also been a slightly more common story for the national media than it has been for the Gulf Coast papers. While in terms of absolute numbers the Gulf Coast papers have published more articles on the topic, it has made up a slightly smaller percentage of the total coverage. In the Gulf Coast papers, 5.1% of the stories written have included the key terms either fraud or waste. Among the top ten national papers, that number is 5.5%.

Waste and fraud has also been a relatively stable component of the coverage. In approximately the first two months of Hurricane Katrina, from August 24 to November 1, 2005, 5.2% of the coverage from the top 10 papers mentioned waste or fraud. Subsequently, from November 2 to July 21, 5.8% of coverage related to waste or fraud. In the Gulf Coast papers, that trend is reversed, from 5.4% to 5%.

COVERAGE TOPIC: POVERTY

In the top ten U.S. newspapers, poverty was not covered with much frequency, even initially. Over time, the amount of Katrina coverage devoted to poverty fell even further. In the first two months, poverty was mentioned in 5% of the news coverage about Hurricane Katrina. After November 1, 2005 poverty appeared 3.6% of the stories, compared to 5.2% and 5.8% for fraud and waste, as mentioned above.¹⁰ In the Gulf papers, poverty coverage was more stable but still constituted only a small portion of the coverage. In the first two months, Gulf newspapers mention poverty 1.7% of the time, falling to 1.6% of the time after November 1, 2005.



AN URGENT NEED FOR ACTION

COVERAGE TOPIC: LESSONS LEARNED

A topic that received next to no attention at all was that of the lessons learned from Katrina and the potential solutions to the challenges presented by the storm. A search for 'lessons learned' among all Katrina stories published by the top ten newspapers only returns 88 stories, 0.6% of the total Katrina coverage. Likewise, a similar search among Gulf Coast papers indicates that lessons learned was a topic in only 118 stories, 0.5% of the total coverage.

Additional anecdotal evidence also indicates that there has been very little coverage of suggestions for improvement beyond very cursory attention to structural and leadership changes at FEMA. Controlling for the stories focused on the appointment and resignation of Michael Brown as head of FEMA, coverage of substantive improvements to the government's emergency management ability has been next to non-existent.

CONCLUSION

The statistical analysis of the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina reveals that coverage was intense and sustained as would be expected given the storm's magnitude. However, those stories have failed to draw attention to significant topics such as the lessons learned or the prospects for improving the federal government's role in emergency response. In fact, this analysis demonstrates that coverage of the federal government's role in response to the storm constituted a significant factor in relation to negative storylines such as waste and fraud.

It remains to be seen whether coverage in the future and surrounding the one-year anniversary of the storm will focus on what lessons were learned and what needs to be done in crucial areas. These topics include issues such as improving human capital management, emphasizing better collaboration and coordination between government agencies and among government and non-government organizations during a disaster, and focusing on long-term prevention and mitigation strategies that reduce the likelihood of another disaster like Katrina.

1. Publishes Monday-Friday with a joint paper between it and the *Birmingham News* on Saturday.
2. This paper is included in the study both as one of the highest circulation newspapers in America and as a paper in the affected Gulf Coast region.
3. Expanding the range of keywords to include 'solutions,' 'lessons,' or 'reforms' does not appear to significantly alter the results.
4. It is unclear whether initial Gulf Coast coverage from news outlets that were directly affected by the storm, like the *Times-Picayune* and its change to online reporting was captured by the Factiva search. This may make the initial Gulf Coast coverage appear to be less than the actual coverage.
5. 491 to 2011 stories, or 24.4%
6. 1477 to 2992 stories, or 49.4%
7. The search query was 'hurricane AND ('Charley' or 'Frances' or 'Ivan' or 'Jeanne').
8. The coverage was taken from three days before Hurricane Charley made landfall to three days short of 11 months later, the same number of days for the Katrina search. (8/10/04 to 7/7/05).
9. Taken between 9/9/01 and 8/6/02. Search included three terms, September 11, 9/11, and world trade center to capture all the stories after the event especially immediately afterwards when the phrasing '9/11,' had not yet entered the popular lexicon.
10. As mentioned in the methodology, the 'poverty' search did not include the term 'poor' due to possibility of error, which will also decrease the total number of hits related to poor Americans.