

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Hurricane Katrina: An Argumentative Analysis Of Race And Gender Issues In The Media Coverage Of A Natural And National Disaster

✘ On August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina, one of the strongest hurricanes to make U.S. landfall in the last hundred years, struck the central Gulf of Mexico U.S. coast. With gusts of up to 125 miles per hour, the storm wrought havoc and devastation on the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama (National Climatic Data Center December 29, 2005). The city of New Orleans suffered the worst effects of the storm. The combination of a rainfall at the rate of an inch per hour, powerful sea swells and breeched levees resulted in the flooding of 80% of the city. Thousands of residents who had not or could not heed the order to evacuate were trapped and survived in squalor without adequate food, water, shelter or sanitation as they awaited rescue. Over 1,500 people died in the three states struck by the hurricane. The national and international media were there broadcasting the tragedy to audiences across the world. Everywhere people could see the world's sole superpower dealing ineptly with the crisis.

There are many issues concerning this tragedy worthy of investigation: the failure to assure the integrity of the levee system, the inadequacy of evacuations, the delayed and incompetent rescues. This paper examines the argumentative frames presented through the media coverage of the hurricane and its after effects. We utilize a narrative approach and seek to illuminate issues of race and gender raised by this coverage. We argue that the media's coverage can be profitably considered in phases, each employing its own narrative focus and argumentative lens. These phases are admittedly overlapping and imprecise; nevertheless the phases share certain characteristics that we believe are of significance to scholars of argument. Through an explication and analysis of each phase of the media's coverage of Hurricane Katrina we argue that the media distorted the narrative and distracted its audience from the lessons that should have been learned.

1. Phase one: Hurricane Katrina as a “natural” disaster

Media coverage of Katrina began well before it devastated New Orleans. The National Hurricane Center of the National Weather Service issued its first advisory on tropical depression Katrina on August 23. By August 25, 2005 the Tropical Storm Katrina had become Hurricane Katrina; a category 1 storm on the Saffir-Simpson scale. Shortly thereafter it crossed the southeast coast of Florida. As the hurricane lingered over the warm Gulf of Mexico waters it developed into a Category 5 hurricane. By the time it struck the shore it had diminished to a category 3 hurricane (National Climatic Data Center 2005). Each of these steps was covered by the national media.

The narrative focus of the media in this initial phase of the story was on the fury of nature. Winds and rains and the devastation that nature can cause were the storylines. Many citizens boarded up windows and drove away from the coastline. Ray Nagin, the mayor of New Orleans, declared a state of emergency and ordered a mandatory evacuation on Sunday, August 28 (CNN.com 2005). Less than twenty-four hours later, Katrina swept ashore.

The media’s coverage at this point was typical of that of any such storm. Prior to landfall, most national media charted the predicted path of the hurricane and it was common to see on-site reports on the preparations undertaken by those threatened. As the storm came ashore, reporters often braved the elements to report on the devastation wrought by wind and rains. Throughout the storm, individuals trapped in homes and cars were shown being rescued by emergency personnel.

The argumentative frame employed by the media was that this was a natural occurrence. Hurricanes are a part of nature. Humans must learn to accommodate such events if they choose to live in those parts of the world where storms of this magnitude occur. The advantage humans have when it comes to hurricanes, as compared with tsunamis, earthquakes, landslides and volcanoes is that hurricanes develop slowly giving us adequate time to prepare. The heroes in such a frame are those who take precautions and those risking their own lives to assist the needy. The villain, if it could be called that, was nature itself. Dramatists, such as Kenneth Burke (1966, p. 53), differentiate between motion, movements that do not result from human choice, and actions, those that do. Consequently, casting wind and rain as villains in a narrative may strike some as a stretch. Nevertheless, we believe that the history of personification of nature, captured in the title, “Mother Nature” permits such a designation. Those individuals who

were overwhelmed by the onslaught of the weather were depicted appropriately as the victims of humankind's battle with the elements.



National Geographic News
Photography - August 25, 2005

We believe that this argumentative frame largely, though not completely, absolves humans from responsibility. Acts of nature are generally understood to be beyond our control. Western notions of guilt assume chosen actions are causally relevant to a guilt creating outcome. Guilt, in the Burkeian notion (1969), cannot be assigned if the villainy is caused by an inanimate agency. There are those victims, however, who perhaps warrant attributions of guilt because their actions invite victimhood. The “fool” might be such a character. Through their inane actions, fools deserve what befalls them. The guilt for their status as victims is thus earned by the fools themselves. On the other hand, if a fool does not “know” better, how can he/she be held accountable. For this reason Frye argues that the fool is “no more deserving of what happens to him than anyone else would be” (1957, p. 41).

In this case, the argumentative frame assigns contributory guilt to those who refuse to take necessary precautions. Those who choose to live on lands repeatedly struck by hurricanes and those who chose to ride-out the Katrina with “hurricane parties” are assigned some level of guilt by this frame.

Alternatively, the media might have focused more directly and more frequently on the effect that global warming has on hurricanes and that scientists have

predicted more frequent and more severe storms as a result of warming. Or the media might have considered the folly of building so close to the shoreline, draining the wetlands that had provided a buffer for New Orleans or the need for better predictive capabilities for meteorologists. Such constructions would have changed the assignment of the roles of hero, villain and victim. They might also have prompted more explicit debate over environmental policy that the “natural” disaster frame obviates.

2. Phase two: the “unnatural” consequences of Hurricane Katrina

Media coverage on the days immediately after Katrina struck focused largely on the devastation wrought by the storm. Buildings had been blown down, cars and buses tossed around like matchsticks, and many were stranded by flooding. Smiley N. Pool won a Pulitzer Prize for his aerial photographs showing the magnitude of the flooding in New Orleans (Lang August 31, 2005). Block after block of homes with water up to the roofline, bridges destroyed, and highways covered with water. These pictures reveal a city practically destroyed by winds and inundated by water.

Photographers also sought to show the human toll. Typical of the coverage is a photograph taken on August 29th by Douglas R. Clifford of the St. Petersburg Times.



Photo by Douglas R. Clifford. St. Petersburg Times - August 30, 2005

This photo, distributed by the Associated Press, appeared on the 30th on the front page of more than two dozen newspapers. It shows dozens of residents of New Orleans wading down a street in Orleans Parish through chest-deep waters (Lang

August 30, 2005). Other pictures tragically showed bodies floating in the brackish waters filling the streets dramatically showing that not all residents had been rescued in time.

Then came revelations that there were still thousands in the city. While 80% successfully evacuated prior to the storm hitting, approximately 30,000 of individuals made their way to the Superdome, a location designated as a “refuge of last resort” and another 25,000 huddle together at the city’s Ernest N. Morial Convention Center (Dyson 2006, p. 59, 95). Others were left stranded on freeway overpasses or in the attics of their homes. None of these people had sufficient food, water, shelter or sanitation. The Superdome had no stockpile of food and no cots. The disaster relief agencies, especially the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was not succeeding in addressing the needs of the people.

The initial narrative focus of the media during this phase was of coping with the disaster and of how emergency personnel were attempting to rescue or supply residents, but that was to quickly change. As with all tragedies, the press sought to put a human face on the tragedy and one thing almost anyone noticed immediately was that the face of the individual suffering in New Orleans after Katrina swept through was unquestionably an impoverished black person.



Photograph: James Nielsen:
Getty/AFP - August 29, 2005

In picture after picture it was poor black people being rescued from rooftops, poor black people stranded on freeway overpasses, poor black people at the Superdome and Convention Center. Jack Shafer of Slate.com scolded

broadcasters for their initial failure to point out that race and poverty may have contributed to the failure to evacuate New Orleans, “I can’t say that I saw everything that the TV newscasters pumped out about Katrina, but I viewed enough repeated segments to say with 90 percent confidence that broadcasters covering the New Orleans end of the disaster demurred from mentioning two topics that must have occurred to every sentient viewer: race and class” (Shafer 2005). Yet it really was impossible to ignore.



Photo by National Geographic News - September 1, 2005

The race of the residents left behind was so overwhelming black that it led one CNN news anchor to ineptly blurt out “As Jack Cafferty just pointed out, so tragically, so many of these people, almost all of them that we see, are so poor and they are so black, and this is going to raise lots of questions for people who are watching this story unfold” (Blitzer 2005).

Questions were indeed raised.

Black activist Al Sharpton expressed what many were thinking: the reason for the delay in helping the stranded residents of New Orleans was racism. “I feel that, if it was in another area, with another economic strata and racial makeup, that President Bush would have run out of Crawford a lot quicker and FEMA would have found its way in a lot sooner” (Taranto 2005).

These sentiments were echoed by civil rights activist Jesse Jackson who told CNN’s correspondent Anderson Cooper “We have an amazing tolerance for black

pain,” contending that race was “at least a factor” in the delay in the recovery efforts.

Today I saw 5,000 African Americans on the I-10 causeway desperate, perishing, dehydrated, babies dying. It looked like Africans in the hull of a slave ship. It was so ugly and so obvious. Have we missed this catastrophe because of indifference and ineptitude or is it a combination of the both? And, certainly I think the issue of race as a factor will not go away from this equation (Cooper 2005).

Perhaps the most famous public statement about Katrina and race was made by rapper Kanye West who stated during a live broadcast to raise funds for the hurricane victims, that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” (CBSNew.com).

This critique was so frequent and inflammatory that both President Bush and the Bush administration’s most visible and highest ranking black, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice held press conferences denying race had anything to do with the suffering caused by the hurricane (CNN.com September 17, 2005).

We believe that the shift in narrative focus from coping with a natural disaster to confronting the unnatural disaster of racism had three significant consequences. First, focusing on race became an enabling fiction, permitting and evoking a myriad of assumptions about the hurricane survivors. The first consequence of this fiction was to dredge up stereotypes of poor urban blacks turning to violence.



Allegations of looting, snipers shooting at relief workers, rapes and thuggery were reported on the news without corroboration. Zizek (2005) contended that:

Non verified rumors were simply reported as facts by the media. For example, on September 3, the Superintendent of the New Orleans Police Department told the New York Times about conditions at the Convention Center: ‘The tourists are waling around there, and as soon as these individuals see them, they’re being preyed upon. They are beating, they are raping them in the streets.’ In an

interview just weeks later, he conceded that some of his most shocking statements turned out to be untrue: 'We have no official reports to document any murder. Not one official report of rape or sexual assault.

Similarly, according to Pierre and Gerhart (2005) CNN reported that a helicopter had been fired in the city, but this was later denied by the Louisiana National Guard (p. A8).

One of the most frightening rumors relayed by Pierre and Gerhart was of bodies discovered at the superdome.

The New Orleans Times-Picayune reported that National Guard troops found 30 to 40 bodies decomposing inside a freezer in the convention center, including a girl whose throat was slashed. The newspaper quotes a member of the Arkansas National Guard, which was deployed in the building. Other news organizations then passed the information on. That, too, was untrue (p. A8).

Yahoo! News created a global firestorm when it displayed two photographs taken in New Orleans showing individuals wading through water carrying foodstuffs. One, image A, showed a black, the other, image B, two whites. Image A carried a caption labeling the individual a looter. The other caption said the whites had found their foodstuffs (Harris & Carbado 2006). That two similar photographs could lead to two such disparate and loaded conclusions is certainly troubling. The photographers involved later reported that they had observed different events. One recalled seeing people go into a shop and come out with goods as a result he wrote that the individual he photographed was looting. The second photographer reported that he observed several people finding foodstuffs floating out of a flooded market (Kinney 2005).



From Flickr.com - (Originally posted on Yahoo! News, but later removed.)

We agree with Harris and Carbado when they argue that the captions really aren't the issue.

The loot-or-find problem of image A and image B cannot fully be addressed with reference to the individual intent of those who either took the picture or produced the accompanying interpretive text. Indeed, it is entirely plausible that had the photos appeared without any captions, they would have been read the same way. This is because while neither 'loot' nor 'find' is written on either image, in the context of public disorder, the race of the subjects inscribes those meanings" (p. 90).

The pictures framed the narrative as seen and understood by many viewers: blacks loot, whites find. Such perceptions are fed by portrayals in the entertainment industry that reinforce stereotypes of people of color as pimps, prostitutes and criminals (Wilson, Gutierrez & Chao 2003, p. 108). The result, argues Russell-Brown (2006) is that most Americans, whether white or black, fear black men (p. 113). Russell-Brown also contends that when confronted by the term "crime" Americans envision street crimes: muggings, thefts, robberies, rapes, even kidnappings. She links these two assumptions and concludes that "What we have is a collective, acute, national fear of black men engaging in acts of violence" (p. 113).

One can argue that the media was merely reporting the facts as it knew them, but the quest for twenty-four hour coverage resulted in the endless repetition of limited news footage and the reporting of rumor as if it was fact. Dyson (2006) in his thorough analysis of Katrina contends that "The media's role in blacks as outlaws and savages achieved a rare blatancy when it endlessly looped on television the same few frames of stranded blacks 'looting' food or other items, largely for survival (p. 166).

When the media switched its narrative frame about Katrina to a consideration of racism, it invoked these long harbored collectives and enabled the fiction of violent looters, rapists and murderers stalking the flooded denizens of New Orleans. This fiction not only fed this national fear, it slowed the rescue of those most in need because relief workers were diverted from rescue efforts to restoring order (Pierre & Gilbert 2005).

Another similar consequence of seeing the Katrina story through the racism lens is that many of the pictures showed the poor blacks of New Orleans as helpless

victims desperately in need of saving by white society. Those who flew the helicopters were white, those dangling below were black. Those who piloted the boats that went house to house searching for stranded survivors were white, those who crawled out onto roofs and waved signs pleading to be saved, were black.

These visual images frame the event in terms that have significance well beyond this event. Social conservatives have long argued that the poor in America languish in this condition due to their own failures and that government largess merely perpetuates this dependent status. The American right-wing argues for a strict parental response to the poor and they will move themselves out of poverty (Lakoff 2004). Framing the aftermath of the hurricane in terms of race reifies such stereotypes. We also believe that it rekindles racial prejudices.

The antebellum South was an era of persistent slavery. Apologists of that era argued against abolition partially in terms of the adverse effect freedom would have on the morally and mentally inferior slaves (Cooper 1834). These arguments carried such sway that, when they were not portraying blacks as thugs and whores, Hollywood movies of the twentieth century continued to depict blacks as intellectual inferior and subservient to whites (see, for example, Wilson, Gutierrez and Chao 2003). Visual images that depict contemporary blacks in situations of helplessness which necessitate being saved by wiser, more well-prepared whites recall this characterization.

The focus on race also changes the locus of Burkeian guilt. If what transpired in New Orleans was the result of racism, then blacks were the victims, racists were the villains, and the heroes were those who oppose racism. The unfortunate consequence of such labeling is that very few individuals, black or white, consider themselves racists. Blaming racism however absolves everyone but the racist of guilt. Proclaiming that racism is bad even makes people feel good about themselves, i.e., heroic, for not being one of the racists who caused the problem in the first place. As a solution however, identifying racism is ineffectual or as Adolph Reed, Jr. (2006) argues, “wrongheaded and at best an utter waste of time” (p. 64). Reed takes this position because he considers the language of racism too imprecise to lead to meaningful discussions. Racism can mean a multitude of conscious or unconscious actions. It is this very inexactness that makes the label futile. “The category [of racism] is too porous, it doesn’t really explain anything. Indeed, it is an alternative to explanation” (p. 65). The ambiguousness of the term

permits most people to righteously demand that others should not be racist, while ignoring their own culpability of the situation. Who were the racists that caused so many poor blacks to be left behind in New Orleans? Was it Bush? The white Governor? The black Mayor? Would a different president, governor or mayor really have resolved the intractable poverty that really lay at the root of the problem?

The poor were left behind in New Orleans because they had no way to leave the city. There are 297 metropolitan areas in the U.S. New Orleans ranked fourth from the bottom when it came to percentage of the population with cars (Dyson 2006, p. 5). The three cities with fewer cars per person are all cities in the New York area, an area with extensive mass transit. The poor who lived in New Orleans didn't evacuate because they lacked the means to do so. They also lacked the financial wherewithal.

Mississippi and Louisiana are the two poorest states in America and more than 90,000 people in the hurricane's path made less than \$10,000 per year (Dyson 2006, p. 5). The current federal minimum wage is \$5.15 per hour. It was last raised in 1997. Some states have elected to set minimum wages above the federal level. Neither Louisiana nor Mississippi nor Alabama chose to do so. An individual who works forty hours a week every week of the year would earn only \$10,712. For a family of four the poverty line, an income measure differentiating those living in poverty from those who are very poor, is any family earning less than \$20,000 (U.S. Health and Human Services 2006). It would be wrong to think of the poor that were stranded in New Orleans as people who did not work. They worked. They simply did not earn enough to escape poverty.

In addition to being poor, many of the people who suffered and perished in New Orleans were elderly. In fact, nearly forty percent of the 1500 people who died were over the age of 71 (Cornish 2006). It should surprise no one that the elderly are the least able to evacuate with less than a day's notice. Many were infirmed and had limited mobility. Others refused to abandon their homes or leave their pets (Smith and Ritter 2005). Government officials provided some buses and trains to evacuate citizens willing to flee the city, but not nearly enough.

The manifestation of reframing the effect of the hurricane on New Orleans as an issue of racism is that the core issues of entrenched poverty and elderly neglect are largely ignored. Yet these are the issues that require focused attention.

3. Phase three: the return to “normalcy”

Even though the media coverage of Hurricane Katrina became centered on race, in the aftermath reporters did deal with other issues. One article attempted to address a topic that “transcends the boundaries of race, class, and age.” The article, titled “Beauty in the Eye of Katrina” asked the question: *How were women dealing with the aftermath of Katrina?* The answer, apparently, was beauty salons. The article, featured prominently in the Los Angeles Times, outlined the surprising popularity of beauty salons just two weeks after Katrina (Huffstutter 2005). It was an explicitly gendered piece, one that develops a problematic image of its female subjects. The article can be viewed in two sections, each troubling in varying ways and degrees. The first section defines its subjects solely in terms of traditional femininity; the second encourages them to limit themselves to those stereotypes.

The concept of femininity has existed for hundreds of years. Femininity describes a collection of traits that have historically been associated with women—sensitive, passive, nurturing, emotional, domestic, and beautiful. Since a woman can just as easily display counter-traits (logical, active, and so on), modern conception holds that these traits are not inherent to one’s gender. Thus, femininity is a social construct. Nevertheless, it remains useful in describing society’s expectations of how women ought to be. The women of the article, through their preoccupation with their appearance, are traditionally feminine. They feel a strong need to maintain a flawless appearance and, therefore, are visiting newly opened beauty salons. Deanna Dartez, one of the article’s salon patrons, stated that beauty treatments were simply “part of the process of learning to be a woman” (as cited in Huffstutter 2005). Thus, these women see their actions as feminine, an attempt to maintain their womanhood.

It is no surprise, then, that these traditionally feminine women are attending beauty parlors, for femininity has always necessitated strict disciplinary practices. The preservation of beauty, as one of most readily perceptible of feminine traits, requires a host of rigorous and constant rituals to maintain. This is by no means a new phenomenon. Mary Wollstonecraft, an author and early feminist, wrote in 1792, “Genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection” (Wollstonecraft 1995. p. 115). The idea that women must ‘slave’ over their appearance may translate to jokes about how long it takes for women to get ready nowadays. Yet the efforts to maintain a feminine appearance require

strict discipline. For the face, a variety of products are necessary: moisturizer, toner, foundation, blush, mascara, eye shadow, blush, bronzer, lip liner, lipstick, lip-gloss, and so on. There are strict standards for each part of the body. Sandra Lee Bartky (1998) described just some of the practices necessary to keep one's skin hairless:

Hair must be removed not only from the face but from large surfaces of the body as well, from legs to thighs, an operation accomplished by shaving, buffing with fine sandpaper, or applying foul-smelling depilatories.... Eyebrows are plucked out by the roots with a tweezers. Hot wax is sometimes poured onto the mustache and cheeks and then ripped away when it cools" (p. 31)

Bartky's list barely scratches the surface of the primping required for a woman to look good. Violating societal norms, and thus ignoring these disciplinary practices, is not a viable option; to deviate from the mainstream is to be isolated. The women in the article, then, are simply fulfilling the expectations of a society that Charles Reagan Wilson, director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, stated stressed the importance of "performing roles" (as cited in Huffstutter 2005). Thus, these women go to salons for waxes, dye-jobs, and shampoos in order to comply with the standards of the role of feminine women.

Clearly and most significantly, these women are preoccupied with how they look despite a life-altering tragedy. It is the context of the women's need for looking good that makes it noteworthy. Even though her husband, and common sense, argued that no one would care how she looked, Deanna Dartez says she still felt that she needed to put on make-up before going to Home Depot (Huffstutter 2005). So, why do these women insist on fulfilling standards of beauty when they are all but irrelevant? The answer relates to the way that society perpetuates standards of beauty in modern society. Michel Foucault (1980) conceptualized power as fluid, rather than emanating from a single, authoritarian entity. He called the pervasive power that enforces society's expectations, such as the standards of femininity, the gaze. He contends, "There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself"(p. 155). Each person, then, is incessantly subjected to the gaze of others, and this gaze becomes the method of enforcing society's rules. Through her life, a woman ascertains society's norms and is brought in line with the group

through constant monitoring. Darteze experienced such socialization; she began accompanying her mother on her weekly visits to the salon when she was seven years old (Huffstutter 2005). Through that educational experience, she learned how to fulfill societal expectations.

Foucault continues that, once the gaze is habituated, it becomes internalized so that actual surveillance is no longer necessary. Individuals begin to monitor themselves, self-regulating their behavior to comply with expectations. The article's women have adopted the standards of traditional femininity as part of society's expectations. Even when society is in crisis, and lapses on the gaze, the women continue their disciplinary practices in accordance with the usual expectations. When asked why she came to the beauty salon, one woman interviewed, Amy Haulsee, stated that it gave her a sense of normalcy (Huffstutter 2005). Since the gaze has hitherto been constant, she notices its abatement. Its absence brings confusion. Moreover, she has so internalized the message that she continues to comply even when the expectations are lifted. By continuing to practice their beauty regime, these women can ignore the fact that their appearance is suddenly irrelevant.

The main problem of this section of the article is its selection of topic. The article positions these women as traditionally feminine. It ignores their personalities outside of their desire for beauty. Additionally, by choosing a group of women that can fit female stereotypes, it suggests that their femininity is representative of the female population in general. It creates a homogenous image of women, which diminishes diversity and discourses. Moreover, Susan Bordo (1993) argues that homogenized images normalize: "they function as models against which the self continually measures, judges, 'disciplines,' and 'corrects' itself" (p. 25). When women see these images of femininity as normal, they will not question the disciplinary practices needed to achieve the strict standards of beauty. The preoccupation with appearances continues. The article effectually contributes to the social reality that caused these women to be so preoccupied with their appearances in the first place. It perpetuates an unfortunate and constraining cycle.

As the article continues, however, its narrative changes from merely disappointing to truly disturbing—when it reports on the women at City Hall. The paragon of this section is Bonnie Irby, a demure 38-year-old who, while waiting at City Hall, succeeds in achieving beauty despite the circumstances. She has a

“peaches-and-cream complexion;” her eyebrows beautifully drawn in with pencil. The other women, sweaty in their baggy, wrinkled T-shirts, view Irby with “undisguised envy.” For her part, Irby recognized that the other women failed to achieve a pristine appearance and, “her heart went out to them.” She lamented that “we just don’t have the tools to maintain our dignity” (as cited in Huffstutter 2005).

These passages trivialize the women at City Hall, save for Irby. It suggests that, despite the tragedy, the authors of the article are still judging women by their appearances. To praise Irby as admirable, that is to cast her as hero at the expense of the others, means that she is superior. And to say that the other women cannot, in the situation, maintain their dignity implies that beauty and self-worth are somehow linked. The other women are guilty and lacking because they did not focus on their appearance.

The problem with this perspective is immediately obvious. Besides the fact that it is an invalid conclusion—dignity and aesthetics are not synonymous—such a position has rhetorical consequences. It further entrenches traditional femininity (and the ceaseless rituals that accompany it) into societal conceptions of women. The article concludes not only that women are concerned about how they look, but that they should be that way. Such media reports stand as argument for continuous self-regulation. Moreover, suggesting, albeit unintentionally, that a woman’s worth is determined by her appearance rather than the more common standards applied to men (intelligence, morality, etc) demeans women. It trivializes these women by suggesting that they have no more to contribute than their looks.

A story focusing on women, and their reaction to the hurricane was not inherently a bad idea; its handling, however, made it damaging rather than worthwhile. The choice of topic could have been more appropriate. The authors of the article did not need to choose a topic relating women to beauty or consumption. Thinking outside of feminine stereotypes would have led to a better topic, and produced a better article. In fact, the women described amongst Bonnie Irby provide the perfect example of an intellectual group of women struggling to rebuild after Katrina. They were attempting to gain permits to build business and homes in the aftermath. Such an article would have shown its subjects (the women) as productive, determined, and strong, even if their appearances were messy.

Even with the chosen topic, there were alternatives to portraying women as stereotypically feminine; the reporters could have represented a more complex, less problematic picture. At the very least, the article should not have praised Bonnie Irby for her success at maintaining her appearance. First, the segment is the most troubling because it leads the authors to equate dignity with beauty. Second, Irby does not deserve praise. As the article explains, she is the only woman at City Hall not actively pursuing a business license. Instead, she waits for her boyfriend to acquire a permit. While her waiting meets the traditional ideal of female as passive, it demonstrates a dependency on others that should not be glorified. The other women at City Hall are bustling—racing around nosily as they attend to their business, unconcerned about their appearance. They are focused, determined, and assuming control—traits that are perhaps more important than Irby’s “dewy face” and “straight, clean hair” (Huffstutter 2005). The section of the article about Irby, furthermore, was unnecessary. It made the article more shamefully problematic and did not even relate to the article’s initial topic of beauty salons.

Finally, the article could have asked deeper questions about its topic, rather than simply opting for superficial treatment. It is in part the shallowness of the article’s perspective that makes it so troubling. Central questions (Why do these women feel such a compelling need to go to the beauty salon? What does it say about our society that women are so concerned with their appearance that they will worry about it amidst chaos and death?) are ignored. The article’s position that the women acted for a sense of normalcy is insufficient; men did not react in similar way. They did not engage in gendered pastimes as a method of coping. A meaningful article would have analyzed the deeper issues surrounding this issue. Deeper analysis would have allowed the topic to be insightful, rather than insipid.

4. Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that the narrative frames employed by the media in its coverage of Hurricane Katrina shaped and directed how the events were understood by American audiences. Initially, the hurricane was a “natural” event, its tragic effects then became a manifestation of racism, and ultimately, at least selectively, it became a condemnation of women who didn’t conform to gendered expectations. Each frame situates the guilt and depicts the heroes, villains and victims differently. We have identified the adverse effects of these depictions and argued that alternative constructions could have yielded more positive and lasting

results.

Societies, like individuals, must learn from their mistakes. Just as people grow by dealing with life's challenges, societies can benefit from scrutinizing the causes and consequences. The ferocity of Hurricane Katrina provided a moment when Americans might have addressed the causes of poverty and addressed the plight of the elderly. It also provided an opportunity to view each American, man and woman, as individuals facing the fury of the weather as individuals, not as gendered segments of society. We argue that unfortunately this did not occur. As a result, the issues of classism, ageism and sexism remain unaddressed.

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