

Hurricane Katrina:
A Disaster of Both Nature and
Communication

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Given the fact that during a natural disaster communication is typically shut down, the importance of communication between a government and the people is most critical before and after natural disasters. Hurricane Katrina is an instance in which communicative breakdown was one of many reasons excessive lives were lost. Before this storm, messages advising citizens to evacuate were vague and misleading; after the storm it became known that information about the state of the levees had been hidden due to monetary corruption. The failure of care, consensus, and crisis communication due to vague wording, corruption, and misinterpretation shows that while communication experts are looking for ways to improve communication technology during natural disasters, much of the problem still is how and why certain information is communicated, while some is not.

Pre-Katrina Communication Failures

There are other reasons besides technological failure that caused many people not to evacuate New Orleans before the storm when they should have. These reasons have to do with the failure in care, consensus, and crisis communications. Care communication, according to Terri Cole and Kelli Fellows, authors of "Risk Communication Failure: A Case Study of New

Orleans and Hurricane Katrina,” from *Southern Communication Journal*, can be defined as “risks already known to the audience or appropriate experts, and risks for which management processes are scientifically determined and accepted by the audience.” Basically, care communication is the risk warnings meant to inform the public of possible hazards. An example used by Cole and Fellows is the “National Hurricane Center advisories about the track and intensity of a hurricane or geological findings regarding weaknesses in New Orleans’ levee system.” Care communication should use strong, enforcing language in order to persuade people of possible risks.

It is understood that one reason many people did not evacuate New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina hit was because the warnings were not persuasive. Though the warnings were easily available to the public, the language was not strong enough to convince people that the damage would be so bad. Steven Venette, author of “Risk as an Inherent Element in the Study of Crisis Communication” from the *Southern Communication Journal*, explains, “If people fail to see the probability of the negative consequences in their lives, they are extremely unlikely to change their behavior based on risk communication.” In his article, he states that one’s own construction of reality can be stronger than any risk communication. If a person cannot fathom great damage and loss of life, it is common for them to not accept this idea. As Venette puts it, “Any argument that clashes with the dominant construction of reality must overcome presumption to gain acceptance.” This is why it is so important for risk communication to use strong language without qualifiers. According to Cole and Fellows, the care communication was “detectable, easily heard or seen, and decodable,” yet, this “data did not demonstrate specific information about what steps should be taken to avoid or to reduce

the risk.” In this way, care communication proved unsuccessful before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

Care communication was not the only type of communication proven ineffective before the storm. Consensus communication, which “is essentially a problem-solution oriented, dialogical process designed to achieve agreement between stakeholders and decision-makers regarding risk management, the adoption of specific behavior, or courses of action,” also failed to communicate the amount of damage Hurricane Katrina could have on New Orleans (Cole). Cole and Fellows provide one good example of consensus information: “the acknowledgement that local residents should not drink tap water during a flood.” The major flaw of consensus communication before the storm was the failure to acknowledge the probability of the New Orleans levees breaking. Cole and Fellows explain that the Army Corps of Engineers and other experts had been urging for repairs of the levees after they failed several storm tests: “While experts were petitioning decision makers for action, the responses were consistent cuts to budget requests directed towards levee repair and upgrading” (Cole). This is proof that consensus communication was insufficient. As the government failed to recognize the urgency of levee repairs, storm surges easily tore weak levees apart, causing increased flooding and excessive loss of life.

One reason Louisiana’s government should have known better than to ignore the possibility of levees breaking is that two months before the storm hit, “270 officials from all levels of government *did* participate in a FEMA-funded, weeklong simulation of a Category 3 Hurricane, called Hurricane Pam” (Brinkley 18). Douglas Brinkley, author of *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*, explained that during this

simulation, government officials learned that “the total number of people left stranded in toxic water ‘may approach 500,000’ if residents did not properly evacuate,” as well as the fact that “a monstrous storm such as Pam would leave 30 million cubic yards of debris—not counting human remains—spread out over thirteen parishes in southeast Louisiana” (18-9). Information such as this should have motivated government officials to make necessary repairs and relevant plans for evacuation. However, as Clancy Dubos, publisher of the Louisiana *Gambit* said in an interview, “They just weren’t going to take it seriously until it happened” (Brinkley 19). While the failure to repair the levees was a tremendous mistake, it was not the only way that consensus communication failed before the storm hit.

Another area in which consensus communication failed was with weak, qualified evacuation messages. Going along with Venette’s theory of constructing one’s own reality, after citizens of New Orleans saw the feeble care communication messages warning them about possible risks they faced from Hurricane Katrina, they then saw weak and qualified evacuation messages, helping them to confirm that evacuation truly was unnecessary. As Cole and Fellows explain, “the evacuation language at both pre-Katrina levels and in the hours preceding landfall itself was vague and uncertain. The levels of evacuation were not uniform from parish to parish and evacuation mandates were characterized with terms such as ‘precautionary,’ ‘voluntary,’ ‘recommended,’ ‘highly recommended,’ and ‘highly suggested.’” Because evacuation was never “mandatory,” many people did not take it seriously. In this way, consensus communication was insufficient.

The weak language was only one of the major reasons the evacuation messages were ineffective. Another reason was that news reporters constantly compared the predicted results

of Hurricane Katrina to the damage done by Hurricane Camille in the 1960's. This was another ineffective approach due to the fact that many people may not have been alive for this storm, and if they were, they may not have been able to recall the amount of damage it caused in the way the warnings intended. As Venette explains, warning messages "often relied on comparing the imminent threat to 1969's Hurricane Camille. If community members viewed Camille as causing few deaths or serious injuries, they would have little reason to accept evacuation as better than staying." The failure of consensus communication was a precursor for the failure of crisis communication because it gave Louisiana citizens a firm reason not to take the hurricane seriously.

Crisis communication "alerts the audience to the danger and provides options to minimize the risk. Specifically, it serves a motivational, time-critical persuasive function in an emergency situation" (Cole). The main error of crisis communication before Hurricane Katrina was that it failed to provide information on what people should do, and how they should evacuate. As Cole and Fellows explain, "No information was disseminated specifying how individual citizens or Parish officials should execute the evacuation." One major flaw with the fact that there was no pre-planned way for all citizens of New Orleans to evacuate was that government officials did not take into consideration the number of low-income residents who did not own cars and depended on public transportation. An example provided by Cole and Fellows is: "New Orleans community leader Dyan French asked the Select Bipartisan Committee, 'Why would you get in the public media and ask a city, where 80 percent of its citizens ride public transit, to evacuate? What [were] they supposed to do? Fly?'"

A Post Katrina Communication Breakdown

Directly after Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans suffered a virtual communication pandemonium. Conspiracy theories and news media stories of corruption ran rampant while improvements to care, crisis and consensus communication were worked on by government agencies that were tasked to prevent future communication disasters.

Celebrities such as Spike Lee and Kanye West circulated detailed conspiracy theories claiming that the NOLA (New Orleans, LA) government purposely blew up the levees to direct the water towards the lower income Ninth Ward, thereby saving the more expensive properties where the middle to high class citizens resided. Tempers flared and congressional hearings were held. Race wars were started. On a Red Cross fundraising show, West went completely off script on a diatribe accusing the media and the government of racism. He said:

I hate the way they portray us in the media. If you see a black family it says they're looting; if you see a white family it says they're looking for food. And you know it's been 5 days because most of the people are black and even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I tried to turn away from the TV because it's too hard to watch. I've even been shopping before even giving a donation so now I'm calling my business manager right now to see what's... what is the biggest amount I can give and... and... just to imagine if I was... if I was down there and those are... those are my people down there so anybody out there that wants to do anything that we can help with- with the set-up the way America is set up to help the uh-uh- the poor, the-the black people, the uh- the less well-off as slow as possible, I mean this is- red cross is doing everything they can. We-we already realize that a lot of the people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way and they-they've given them permission to go down and shoot us.

Racism was cited as the reason why help had not come faster. "NBC News... reported... six out of every 10 black New Orleans residents said if most of Katrina's victims were white,

relief would have arrived sooner." In fact, "Of five black evacuees who testified (in the hearings), only one said he believed the sluggish response was the product of bad government planning for poor residents — not racism." (MSNBC) The media contributed greatly to the breakdown in communication by "exaggerating lawlessness, tolerating racial profiling, and underreporting disaster management" (Barnes). Every television station portrayed the helicopter rescue of people in the ninth ward, but the rescue effort itself was thoroughly scrutinized.

Operation Communication: How Can We Prevent Such Disasters in the Future?

The communication was bad before Hurricane Katrina, and while it is still in need of vast improvement, it has improved to a point since the storm. Federal government agencies and the NOLA government continue to struggle to right what went wrong. In taking care, consensus, and crisis communications into account, each problem has been dissected and a solution proposed. However, some argue that it was too little, too late.

Eerily, the subcommittee considered the ramifications of a hurricane hitting New Orleans two months (prior to Hurricane Katrina.) In testimony on June 29, Senator David Vitter [R-LA] rattled off scenarios of what would happen, ranging from a Category 3 hurricane, which he said would deposit 14 feet of water in New Orleans, to a Category 4 storm, which would leave 18 feet, he said. Katrina, a Category 4, has left much of New Orleans and the surrounding area under as much as 20 feet of water, as levees broke.

"This isn't a simulation of World War Three, or The Day After movie, or of Atlantis -- although one day it could be Atlantis," Vitter said at the time. "This is a real, computer-generated, model of the impact of a hurricane hitting New Orleans." Vitter complained that Congress wasn't willing to spend the millions necessary for disaster prevention but typically rushed to spend billions after a tragedy struck. (Javers)

Something had to be done to rectify the issues with care, consensus and crisis communication.

As previously stated, the biggest issue with care communication was the need for strong, enforcing language. After all, "the objective of care communication is to alert an audience to the presence of a risk and to advise appropriate risk avoidance behavior" (Cole). Therefore, stronger wording needed to be used to portray the importance of evacuations. Three years later when Hurricane Ike struck the Texas coastline, the orders to evacuate used the words "certain death" (CNN). Apparently, care communication was restructured and used appropriately. "'Do not take this storm lightly,' Michael Chertoff, secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, said ... 'This is not a storm to gamble with. It is large; it is powerful; it carries a lot of water'" (CNN). This was a far cry from the communications given to Katrina's victims.

Consensus communication was in need of uniformity. Katrina's biggest struggle was the lack of consistency with evacuation methods. "Mayor Nagin's broadcast advice to the citizens of his city, first 'recommending' evacuation and later urging 'voluntary' evacuation while at the same time urging residents to stock up on water, batteries, and other necessities, added to the confusion" (Cole.) To rectify this situation, it was necessary for a larger agency to step in to urge mandatory evacuations in the future. Also, the nationwide Emergency Alert System (EAS) was upgraded and consolidated so that alert messages would go out with more uniformity. In fact, a 61 page revision of the EAS upgrades was circulated and approved.

While crisis communication is and was in need of a vast improvement, without a natural disaster the likes of Katrina since Katrina, measurement of such communication has been difficult. However, improvements are being made in simply paying more attention to warnings and becoming more pro-active in disaster management. Where the reason for the demolition of the levees was more likely the sub-par work done by the Army Corps of Engineers and the overlooking of requirements by the inspectors than the blowing up of the levees, the standards for rebuilding have been raised and investigations have removed those who allowed shoddy workmanship. The FEMA staff has received a complete overhaul, trying to weed out corruption and win back the faith and support of the American people.

While the country still has a way to go before it is determined whether or not these changes can remain sufficient in the long run, they are kept in place and practiced with the hope that another natural disaster the likes of Hurricane Katrina does not happen. However, nature is a fickle creature and as long as we remember to stay alert and ready, the crisis of communication should not get the best of us again any time soon.

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