

Media in Crisis: Journalistic Norms in Natural Disaster Coverage

An honors thesis by

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

Media in Crisis: Journalistic Norms in Natural Disaster Coverage

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Nearing the end of 2017, the United States and the Caribbean were struck with back-to-back natural disasters that left the country in shock and turmoil. Among the three hurricanes that struck sequentially, Hurricane Harvey landed in Texas approximately on August 25th, 2017 and Hurricane Maria hit the Caribbean and Puerto Rico around September 20th, 2017. These disasters were a test for the new presidential cabinet of how they would handle their first natural disaster. Hurricane Maria and Hurricane Harvey caused similar levels of destruction, with Maria being a category five storm and Harvey a category four. However, the media reacted differently to the crisis that unfolded in Puerto Rico in comparison to Texas. This study focuses on how journalists and the news industry covered both disasters and compares and contrasts the manner in which they were done. Pulling in media industry knowledge, rhetoric and cultural theory, the study uncovers how disaster communication was influenced by societal values involving culture and examines how the narrative journalists participated in affected the coverage, in turn shaping public knowledge.

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Introduction

When disaster strikes, a media frenzy begins, aiming to cover the event and remove the public from their state of unknowing and fear. Journalists are among the first responders, however, instead of serving the victims, they serve the public awaiting information. Journalists have the objective of providing “citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments” (American Press Institute, 2013); they are at the center of how our society functions. With this duty, journalists have an obligation to hold themselves to high moral and ethical standards. This study explores the role journalism plays in crisis events in the world, focusing on natural disasters. With a case study on Hurricanes Harvey and Maria, it explores crisis media coverage, asking how cultural concepts can have an impact on crisis coverage, in turn, affecting the public.

This paper compares the differences between the news coverage of Hurricanes Harvey and Maria, storms that struck the United States and the Caribbean on August 25th, 2017 and September 20th, 2017, respectively, occupying the news for months. The study examines the coverage by analyzing factors that determine how events become news, issues that arise in reporting crises and how reporters covered the two different events based on these notions. This paper uncovers the depth of journalists’ decisions in covering news and how their decisions influence what the public sees. The main question this paper addresses is how do news values and other external factors affect the coverage of crisis events by news organizations and how does the way the reporting is done affect the issue or story they cover?

This thesis will be increasingly relevant as time progresses, as global warming increases, causing more natural disasters across the country and the globe (United Nations Special Climate

Report, 2018). Media plays a fundamental role in how these events are perceived and understood. The culture of news favors reporting immediately and covering quick-developing stories. However, one must question if this ignores the complex, continuous issues that need reoccurring coverage. Infrastructure and climate change are factors that have life and death consequences, which these two storms brought to light. In a time where news reports are being questioned and called “fake news” by political figures, this study provides an understanding of how journalists chose to cover events in crises and the effect it can have on society. In this study, findings showed that journalists are affected by political and cultural factors amongst news values when choosing what to report. While these factors determine what is chosen to be newsworthy, political and cultural influence could also have unknowingly affected the reporting style for both the storms. The way in which the storms differed in reporting could also have left a perception about who is of value, with more coverage on Hurricane Harvey creating the image that those affected by Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico are less important. This research has broad relevance as it affects societies at a global scale. It will be useful to understand how news organizations work and to understand the impact they have on the public.

Methods

This thesis uses descriptive research methods including an in-depth newspaper study involving content and textual analysis. I will also be referencing previous scholarly studies that have been conducted on journalism’s impact on public memory, the history of journalism, disaster communication, the history of Puerto Rico and the United States as well as cultural theory. One part of this study examines Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico and the role of imagined cultural difference and its relationship to structural issues that were touched upon by the media’s coverage of the storm. This section focuses on the role colonialism and culture, "the distinctive

ways of life, the shared values, and meanings, common to different groups nations, classes, subcultures and historical periods” (Bocock, 1996, p. 3), played in the impact and aftermath of the natural disaster. The study relates this to Hurricane Harvey, where there were fewer cultural barriers to the coverage, leading to more detailed information presented to the public. Together, the case study provides an example of the media’s actions and role during a crisis and how these choices may have a durable impact on the public agenda.

For the front-page analysis, I conducted research on newspaper front pages using an analysis program, PageOneX, created by Rey-Mazón and Costanza-Chock. PageOneX is an open source tool that allows users to “track, code, and visualize major news stories based on the proportion of newspaper front pages that they take up” (Rey-Mazón and Costanza-Chock, 2016). It is a tool that is aimed to better understand the media and its priorities (Rey-Mazón and Costanza-Chock, 2016). The creators of the program state that, “newsrooms spend massive time and effort deciding which stories make it to the front page. Communication scholars have long used column-inches of print newspaper coverage as an important indicator of mass media attention” (Rey-Mazón and Costanza-Chock, 2016). The program has streamlined the investigation communication scholars had to do previously, including obtaining physical copies of newspapers and measuring by hand the coverage on the front-pages, to then input measurements into a database to conduct an analysis.

For this study, the program was used to first perform a content/coverage analysis of both natural disasters from one week prior to the event until to two weeks after landfall. The time period was chosen to include an overview of coverage of the event, allowing a view at how both hurricanes were treated before and after they struck land. While there are many choices for coverage, I focused on four newspapers; *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The*

Washington Post and *USA Today*. The aim of this selection was to examine widely circulated newspapers in the United States, each with small differences in reporting style. While the first three are regarded as professional and business-oriented, *USA Today* has a broader audience. Excluding *The Washington Post*, the three newspapers are the top circulating periodicals in the United States (Milosevic, 2016). Originally, this thesis aimed to compare local and national coverage. However, PageOneX was unable to find local sources for both events. This resulted in aiming my study towards national-level discourse and how it was conducted. For future studies, a comparison between local-national coverage could provide further insight into coverage differences and similarities. After the initial content analysis was conducted on the front-pages of the newspapers, a more in-depth textual analysis was conducted to seek out similar or dissimilar themes and coverage points. For the textual analysis, I utilized the method of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory is “an inductive methodology that provides systematic guidelines for gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing qualitative data for the purpose of theory construction” (Charmaz, 2001). It utilizes ‘coding’ to create distinct categories based on concepts. These are then compiled together to provide a theoretical explanation that concerns the main objective of the study.

In this study, this process was used to identify categories within the news articles to find patterns which give us more information on the content and discourse. The textual analysis process began by searching for all the articles contained on the front-pages provided by PageOneX. After recording the titles that corresponded to the provided images, I used LexisNexis Academic, a database that provides news resources, to search for each of the relevant front-page articles. There were limitations to this process, since the database did not contain all the articles that were featured on the front page. Another limitation was that the database did not

include *The Wall Street Journal*. After exploring other databases with meager results, there was not enough content to have a substantial corpus for *The Wall Street Journal*. Thus, I was unable to include these articles in the textual analysis; however, they were used for the front-page analysis. For Hurricane Harvey, *The Wall Street Journal* contained 38 articles on the front-pages. Out of the 101 articles in *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, 53 articles were downloaded and analyzed. For Hurricane Maria, *The Wall Street Journal* contained 12 articles on the front-pages. Out of the 46 articles covering Hurricane Maria in *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*, 25 were examined in the textual analysis. This provided me a corpus of 78 articles, equivalent to 152 pages for the textual analysis.

After all retrievable articles were downloaded and printed, the articles were put into two categories: Hurricane Harvey and Hurricane Maria. From here, they were divided by each publication and placed in chronological order. Following grounded theory, all the articles were read once through to gain an understanding of the material and to begin familiarizing myself with the data. After the initial read-through, each individual article was analyzed in detail to identify familiar patterns and themes relevant through the text. The categories that emerged during this process were as follows: culture and infrastructure, imagery and language, weather details and current conditions, quotes and personal interviews, political references and President Donald Trump, call for help and assistance, and other important details that do not directly fall under the other categories. Each category was given a corresponding color. The process then entailed highlighting the important keywords or phrases within the articles with the corresponding color to the category the text went under. After every article was coded with the category's color, they were reviewed once again to see the prevalent themes that were most

predominate throughout each section. Together, the content and textual analysis outline a comprehensive understanding of the coverage that took place during each natural disaster.

How does journalism impact the public?

Newspapers are a critical part of the American news landscape and were the reference point of coverage for Hurricanes Harvey and Maria. In 2017, U.S. daily print newspaper circulation was estimated to be 31 million for weekday papers and 34 million for Sunday (Barthel, 2018). Even as this is a decline of 10-11% from 2016, it is still a sizable figure when considering that the U.S. population is approximately 328 million, with a portion of that figure containing those who are not literate (Census, 2018). Another factor to consider is the influence newspapers have on other news outlets that perhaps have larger audiences. Newspapers are important in investigating and first-hand reporting that later is utilized by other media outlets. This means that circulation numbers may not fully reflect the impact newspapers have on the public (Gabbat, 2016). With a wide-reaching circulation, journalists' decisions regarding what is important to relay to the public is vital. By journalists and news organizations choosing news based on external factors, such as the industry and political impact, the selection itself involves some manner of bias.

On a daily basis, Americans absorb the information from these papers, including both the images and text. As individuals, we rely on newspapers to help us understand what is going on in the country and world, particularly in moments of crisis. With this in mind, one must question the role that newspapers and journalists have in forming memories and impacting public opinions and society. Studies conducted on journalists' coverage and its impact on the memory of specific events were conducted by Brown and Kulik in 1977. The study introduced the concept of flashbulb memories, which is a "detailed and vivid memory of the reception context

of a public emotional event" (Lanciano, Curci & Semin, 2010, p. 473). Brown and Kulik (1977) suggested that individuals can preserve knowledge of an event in an indiscriminate way, in analogy with a photograph that preserves all details; "people have vivid recollections of when they heard the news, where they were, what they were doing and with whom" (Lanciano, Curci & Semin, 2010, p. 474). The central idea of a flashbulb memory is that an individual will have a detailed and durable memory, leading to experiencing surprise and perceiving a news item to be consequential (Conway, 1994). These studies suggest that how people consume the news can have a neurological effect on memory of events. In the case of hurricane coverage, the photos and articles written on front pages would have an impact on the viewing audience. Where there was a difference in photo coverage and content published for the two hurricanes, this, in turn, could have had an effect on people's memories of the events and which was more important.

The Evolution of Journalism's News Values

To understand the task journalists face today when pursuing their duty to inform the public, I researched the timeline of American news coverage to uncover the beginning of journalism ethics and values. On September 25th, 1660, the first appearance of a publication resembling news in the United States was published by Benjamin Harris, titled "Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick" (Daly, 2012). His publication focused on the daily occurrences happening in the town and was the first appearance of our news today (Daly, 2012). In 1704, one of the postmasters, John Campbell, published what is regarded as the first newspaper, "Boston News-Letter" (Daly, 2012). During the expansion of the news industry, Benjamin Franklin contributed as he articulated the view that journalists should serve the public and not be judged for their opinion on the stories they published (Daly, 2012). His thoughts on journalism and the news industry were early formulations of news values and the ethics and

responsibilities involved with the industry (Daly, 2012). Franklin's approach towards the news industry argued that journalists should be no bias in reporting and its main purpose was to keep the public informed and the country in check (Daly, 2012).

In the 19th century, the news industry began to expand to keep the public informed, particularly during the Civil War as battles were occurring, such as the Battle of Gettysburg (Hastings, 2008). From here, the 20th century began the investigative reporting era, where journalists were fulfilling their duty of serving the public by extensively researching and reporting on topics that were not common knowledge (Hasting, 2008). Now in the 21st century, we see a mix of the past reporting, with journalists covering terrorist attacks, natural disasters and internal conflicts in the United States, among local news. We see the news industry reflecting its origins of covering events to inform the public, following the original mission by Benjamin Franklin. The industry has flourished, with proliferating avenues to cover daily events and ongoing news stories. With a fast-paced industry and constant change occurring in the world, those in the news industry face a dilemma in deciding what is the most important to cover. While grappling this decision of what to cover, the question that arises is what is worthy of covering to inform the public? Another question that holds value is how the industry affects coverage, with a focus on the end-goal of making a profit. Galtung and Ruge (1965) first studied the factors influencing these decisions, labeling them "news values". The goal of the study was to identify how events become news (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). They identified 12 factors that seem relevant when considering events as news. The factors include frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to persons and reference to something negative (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). These factors are items that journalists consider when choosing which stories to cover.

Not all items are considered relevant in each case, however, each factor could influence what story a journalist will cover; in the case of a natural disaster, the data in this study show that the factor of unexpectedness, reference to elite nations, and reference to persons have particular relevance.

From these factors, Galtung and Ruge (1965) state three items for consideration. First, regarding selection, the more an event satisfies the criteria mentioned, the more likely that it will be registered as news. Second, what makes the story newsworthy is according to the factors listed above, and third, both the process of selection and the process of distortion will take place at all steps in the chain from event to reader (1965, p. 71). Journalism inherently involves “the application of values we use to judge things” (Clark & Campbell, 2005, p. 12). These elements are fundamental to understanding the coverage that took place during Hurricanes Harvey and Maria. Hurricanes are a disrupter to the natural news cycle, which makes them an important story to cover. These types of disasters also affect the people and normally have a negative association around them due to the death and destruction. Due to the impact, they have on the country, they have meaning to citizens and the government. These all encompass some of the factors that Galtung and Ruge (1965) discuss when choosing news. By using this research, we can understand the coverage better by analyzing what content was covered and the influences that affected what was chosen.

Journalism Narratives

Galtung and Ruge (1965) news values give the framework for how news becomes news. Along with this, journalists have a tension between their duty to inform the public, but also their job to sell their coverage (Clark & Campbell, 2005, p. 26). This creates a difficult agenda for journalists, forcing them to rely on their ethics, “about truth-telling, the duty to inform the public

in a compelling way on significant issues...about independence, our responsibility to guard the stewardship role of a free press in an open and democratic society" (Clark & Campbell, 2005, p. 88). However, there are preconceptions about issues and people that influence the framing and coverage, "from the first interview to the last edit" (Clark & Campbell, 2005, p. 113). These are among other issues involving economic and socio-cultural influences. These issues will come forward in the study of both hurricanes Harvey and Maria, seeing that some journalists were influenced from outside pressures or cultural bias, rather than adhering to their duty and ethical standards.

Disaster Coverage in the News

The mass media, including newspapers, play a fundamental role in the dissemination of information in disasters (National Academy of Sciences, 1980, p. 46). Previous data show that specifically regarding hurricanes, newspapers were among the top three sources for information (National Academy of Sciences, 1980, p. 244). During times of crises, news values play a fundamental role and include two other factors: the extent of human impact in terms of death and suffering and the extent of property damage (National Academy of Sciences, 1980, p 94). Besides this, factors such as economic, political, technological and organizational influences affect the flow of news (National Academy of Sciences, 1980, p. 88). The Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media Commission state, "the news value and the time of day a story breaks are two important variables influencing news diffusion by mass media as opposed to interpersonal channels" (1980, p. 107-8). This is significant because the manner in which journalists select and cover a story have an impact on the diffusion by mass media. Relating to the study, the coverage by the newspapers had a larger impact than solely from the readership of the publications. With Hurricane Harvey having more overall front-page coverage in comparison

to Hurricane Maria, the difference in coverage would have different results for the diffusion by broadcast media.

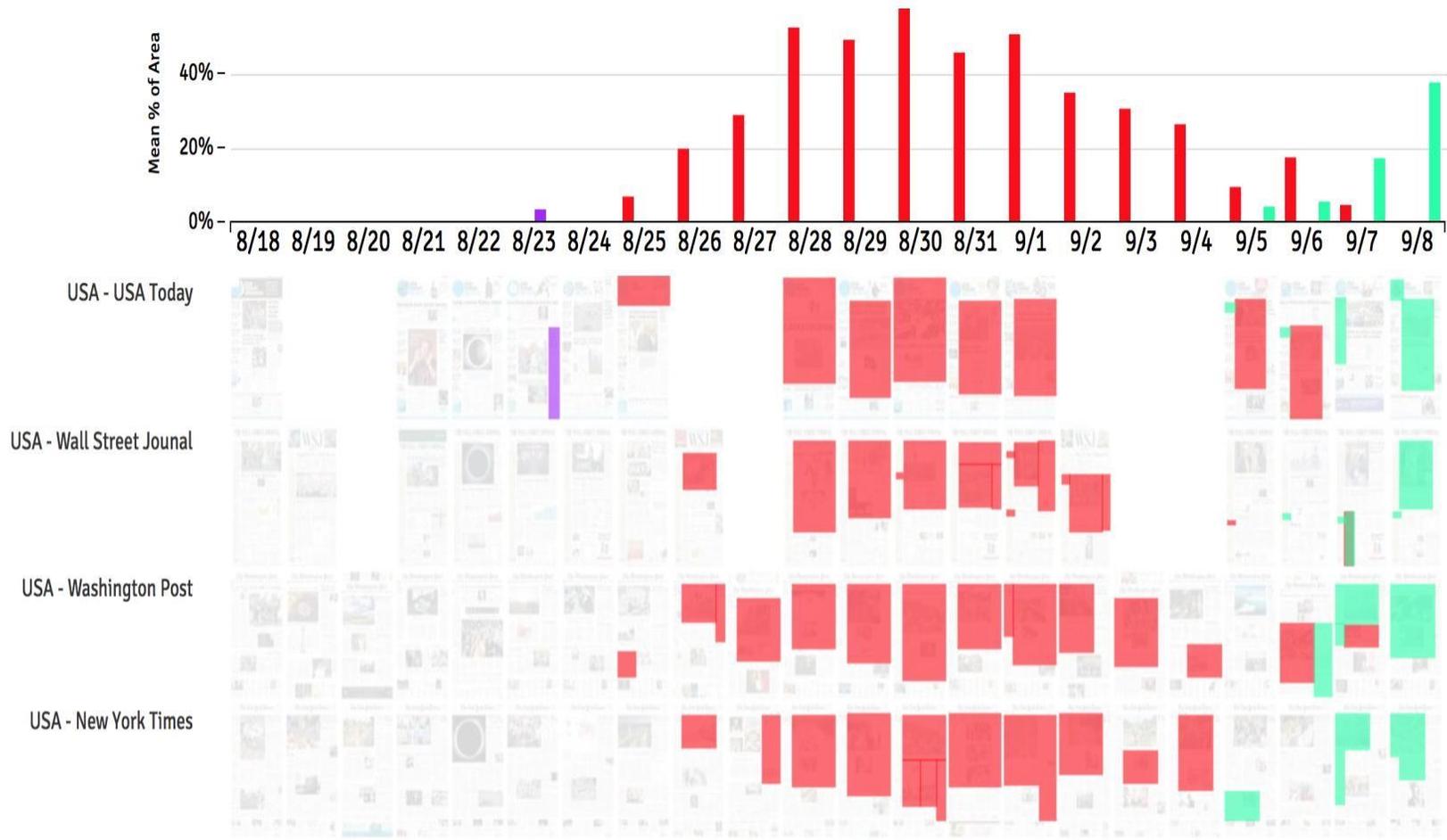
Referencing back to the impact on society journalists have, the committee reported that “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (National Academy of Sciences, 1980, p. 111). While news organizations jobs are to provide unbiased reporting, the selection of coverage sets an agenda for society regarding what is important during a specific time. Disasters also have a unique influence on media, needing extensive coverage from reporting the actual event and the recovery and long-term effects it will have (National Academy of Sciences, 1980). During coverage, it is important that reporters never sensationalize the disaster (National Academy of Sciences, 1980, p. 239) because it will create more dismay and disregard the importance of the facts. In the instance of this study, it was important to not sensationalize Hurricane Harvey or Maria in order to disseminate correct facts about the storm and the danger people were in.

Analysis

The analysis for the project begins with an overarching representation of the trends of media coverage for the hurricanes, representing more coverage for Hurricane Harvey than Hurricane Maria. Using Page OneX, I gathered the front pages of *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post*. For each hurricane, I chose a week prior to landfall and the following two weeks. PageOneX then gathers the front pages and presents them in chronological order. Hurricane Harvey struck the United States first, making landfall approximately on August 25th, 2017. The PageOneX data corpus ranges from August 18th to September 8th, 2017. Hurricane Maria approximately hit land on September 20th, 2017.

The data corpus for this hurricane ranges from September 12th to October 3rd, 2017. Once the newspaper pages were pulled for the date ranges, I examined each cover in order and coded for articles and photographs covering Hurricane Harvey, Maria, Irma and natural disasters in general that provided me with a quantitative measure of the front-page space dedicated to coverage on each topic. Hurricane Irma was a hurricane that struck the United States approximately between August 30th and September 13th. Each category received a color, with Hurricane Harvey red, Hurricane Maria blue, natural disasters in general purple and Hurricane Irma turquoise. Figures 1 and 2 display these colors overlaid on sections of the front pages of the newspapers for the periods of Hurricanes Harvey and Maria respectively.

Figure 1



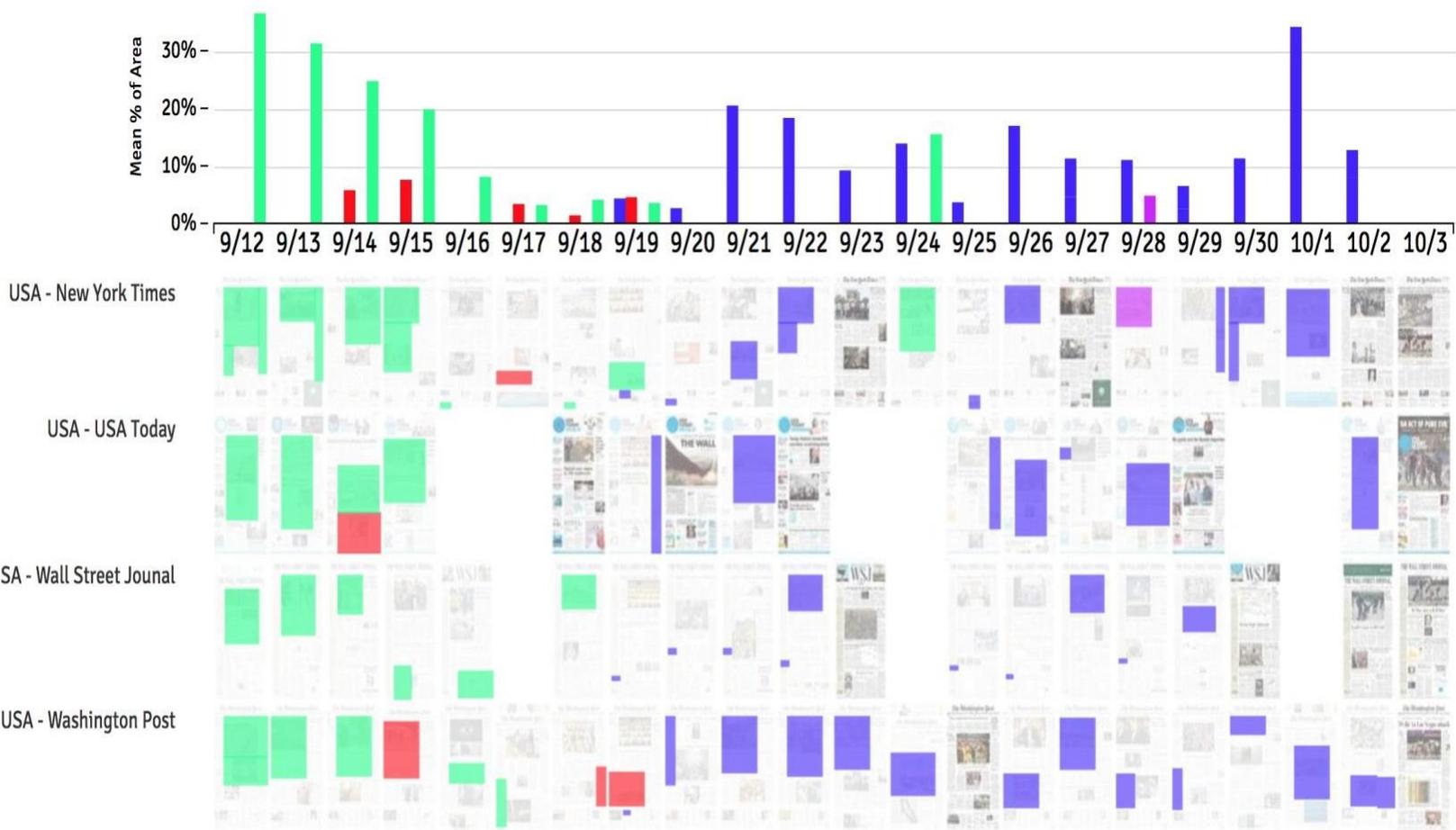
17

Hurricane Harvey News Coverage

Fri, 18 Aug 2017 - Fri, 08 Sep 2017

Harvey Maria Natural Disasters (General) Hurricane Irma

Figure 2



18

Hurricane Maria News Coverage

Tue, 12 Sep 2017 - Tue, 03 Oct 2017

- Hurricane Maria
- Hurricane Harvey
- Natural Disasters (General)
- Hurricane Irma

The overlaid sections of corresponding colors signify the area of the front page is addressing the topic, whether in photos or text. In the same graphic, you will also notice missing front-page images from some of the newspapers for specific dates, primarily because *USA today* does not release editions on Saturday and Sunday, and *The Wall Street Journal* is only published six days a week. Other blank spaces were undiscoverable to the program and would not load the copy. With these factors in mind, the corpus has almost complete data for the dates under examination.

To begin the detailed analysis, I first examined the color blocks with the corresponding topics on the front pages. On August 25th, the media began giving attention to Hurricane Harvey; it was covered in both the *Washington Post* and *USA Today* as it began making its way towards landfall in Texas. From this day to September 7th, you see consistent coverage on all front pages of the newspapers, only beginning to diminish coverage on September 5th for *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Looking only at the red color blocks on the front pages, it is evident that Hurricane Harvey was widely discussed and covered by the four newspapers. Statistically, the percentage of front-page space increased until August 30th and then began a decline to September 7th with few dips in coverage in between. The following table shows the mean percentage of area covered on the front pages that covered Hurricane Harvey.

Date	8/25	8/26	8/27	8/28	8/29	8/30	8/31	9/1	9/2	9/3	9/4	9/5	9/6	9/7
Mean % of Area Covered (Harvey)	6.6	19.5	28.6	52.2	48.9	57.5	45.5	50.4	34.6	30.3	26.1	9.2	17.2	4.3

From examining the mean percentage of the front page covered for each day, the coverage creates a bell-like curve when displayed in the bar graph. The lowest coverage received

is 4.3% and the highest is 57.5%, with more than half of the front pages on average dedicated to Hurricane Harvey. The coverage on the front pages also consisted of multiple articles, rather than just one. Out of all the front pages containing Hurricane Harvey content, only one page did not contain a photograph. Many of the front pages also contained more than one photo, depicting the crisis taking place to accompany the article text and bold headlines. Also, almost all of the newspapers with Hurricane Harvey content had the topic as the first article on the front page and then trickled down to smaller articles.

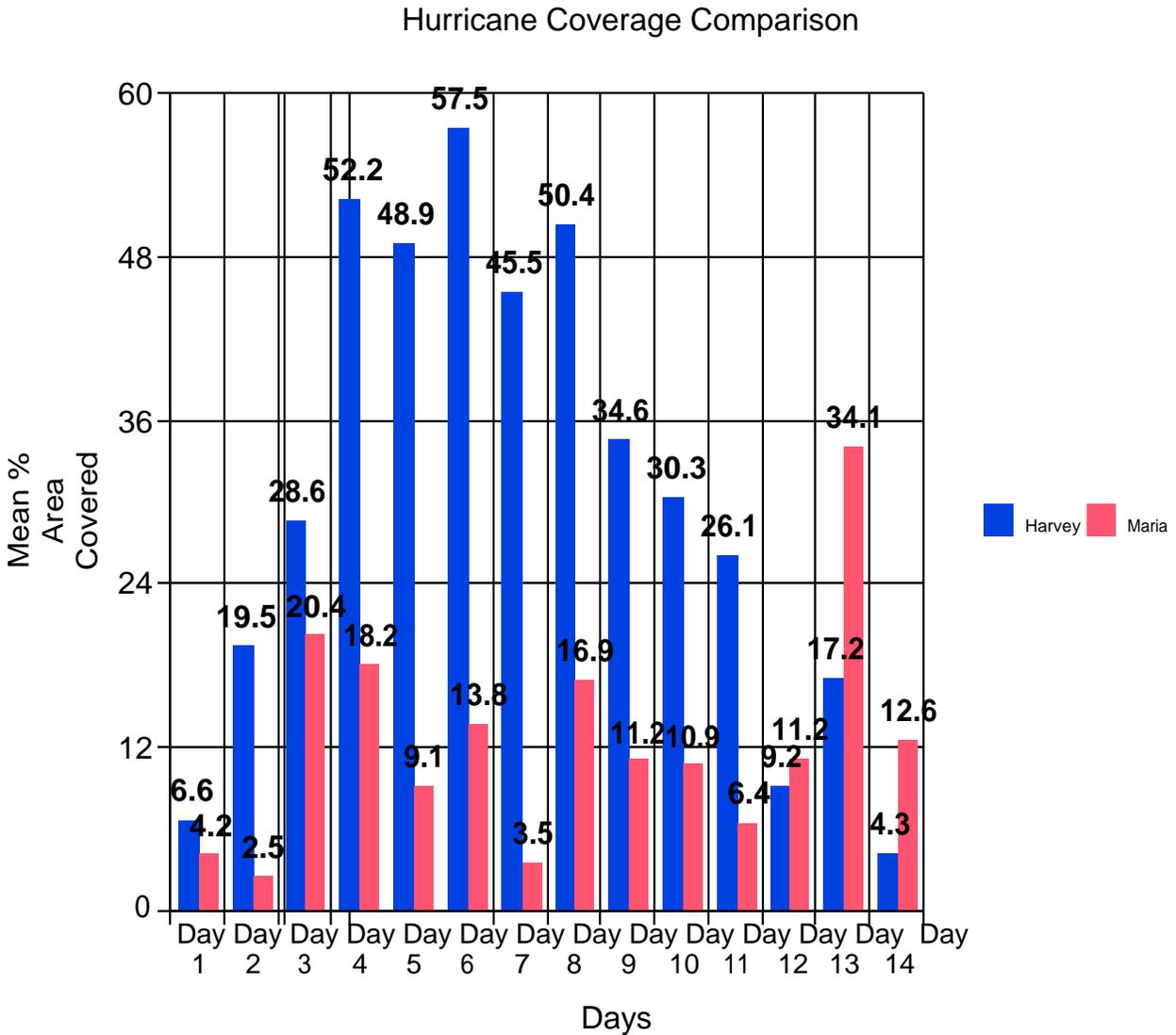
After the data from Hurricane Harvey was completely analyzed, the data from Hurricane Maria was completed¹. As was the case with Hurricane Harvey, the gap in coverage in the front-page images of Hurricane Maria are due to the issues outlined above. Upon first look, the visual data for Hurricane Maria looks quite different than that of Hurricane Harvey. One noticeable difference is the color blocking before the first week of Hurricane Maria’s landfall. Unlike the other data set, there is no clear pattern or bell-like curve. The coverage is also not as extensive, as is visible with the following table showing the mean percentage of area covered on the front pages during the three-week period.

Date	9/19	9/20	9/21	9/22	9/23	9/24	9/25	9/26	9/27	9/28	9/29	9/30	10/1	10/2
Mean % of Area Covered (Maria)	4.2	2.5	20.4	18.2	9.1	13.8	3.5	16.9	11.2	10.9	6.4	11.2	34.1	12.6

Most noticeably, the highest mean percentage of area covered by Hurricane Maria news is 34.1% and the lowest is 2.5%. In the bar graph below, you can see the comparison of coverage between Hurricanes Harvey and Maria, with Maria lacking in coverage in comparison to Harvey.

¹. A difference to note in the visual images of the Hurricane Maria data is the different order of newspapers. In Hurricane Harvey, the order is as follows: *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. However, in the Hurricane Maria data, the order is as follows: *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post*. This discrepancy did not affect the data and analysis but may alter the perspective upon first glance of both visuals

Figure 3



It is important to also note that on October 1st where the mean for Hurricane Maria was 34.1% (labeled Day 13 in Figure 3), there were only two newspapers that were in the data set for Maria which may have skewed the percentage to be overly high, since the remaining papers had extensive coverage. These numbers alone show that Hurricane Harvey received far more coverage than Hurricane Maria during the equivalent three-week periods.

Another interesting point gathered from the visual data is the way Hurricane Maria was covered in terms of article space, type, and pictures. The coverage of Hurricane Maria in *The*

Wall Street Journal was mainly limited to the small rectangle sections on the left side featuring news briefs; there were only three stories on Maria covered in the middle front-page section. Similar coverage also occurs in *The New York Times*, although there are two more “above the fold” stories on their front pages than on *The Wall Street Journal*. Lastly, it is important to consider on October 3rd, 2017, the Las Vegas shooting occurred, causing another crisis that competed for coverage on the front pages.

While the data is significantly different, with Hurricane Harvey's coverage dominating in comparison to Hurricane Maria, there are some similarities in the coverage on the front pages. Both datasets in the week leading up to landfall have minimal coverage of the hurricanes. Hurricanes and other natural disasters alike are unpredictable in nature, so this could be a factor in the lack of coverage. However, both storms may have been discussed in other sections within the papers, perhaps only making an appearance on the front page directly prior to the storm hit. Another similarity between the two is following the first week after the hurricanes made landfall, coverage shifts from the front and center towards the sides and bottoms of the front pages. Over a similar period, other stories begin to take precedence over the hurricanes.

Front-Page Textual Analysis

Through the initial research process clear themes emerged, such as specific details repeated throughout articles and the focus on destruction in both data sets. In the coverage of both storms, there are parallels but also distinct differences. Hurricane Harvey received more extensive coverage and involved more reporters on the scene compared to Hurricane Maria, with a rough average of more than three reporters per story for Hurricane Harvey. Comparing both corpuses, the total number of reporters working on Hurricane Harvey was 108, whereas for Hurricane Maria there was a total of 41. There were more than double the number of reporters

who were on site and contributing to the coverage of Hurricane Harvey versus that of Hurricane Maria. Other differences include the high levels of personalization and number of different perspectives given in the coverage of Hurricane Harvey versus Maria. The personalization can be seen in many areas, such as when reporting deaths, there is an attempt to acknowledge each individual name and story for Hurricane Harvey, but not in most instances for Hurricane Maria. For Hurricane Harvey, there are articles that update the status of Texas through reporting on recovery efforts, however, there is a lack of this in Maria, which merely gives data from weather reports and does not report on the progress of recovery in the articles.

Beginning with Hurricane Harvey, after reading through the articles from the three newspapers twice through, there were many first-person accounts and interviews, with input from others besides victims of the storm, as FEMA workers, first responders, and political figures. There were also many numbers and statistics reported to emphasize the scope and severity of the storm. The news coverage involved the storm's destruction of land and resources, but also how it affected the individuals from Texas and how it affected those who weren't directly hit by the storm. The language used created images for readers to support the images that were on front pages, such as “Rescuers- in many cases neighbors helping neighbors- in fishing boats, huge dump trucks and even front-end loaders battled driving rains to move people to shelter. Some used inflatable toys to ferry their families out of inundated neighborhoods, wading through chest-deep water on foot while the region was under near-constant tornado watches” (Sullivan, Samuels, Wax-Thibodeaux, 2017) and “[residents] holding pets and soggy wedding and birthday party photographs” (Wax-Thibodeaux, Horton, Wang, 2017). The coverage provided different angles and perspectives, such as not only the current situation on-site in Texas but also how the storm affected the American oil industry and how other Americans were

coming to the rescue of Texans from near and far. Another noticeable finding was the repeated reference to Harvey in comparison to Hurricane Katrina in 2008 due to the amount of destruction and the praise of the presidential cabinet for their response to the storm.

The first-person accounts, multiple people interviewed and different perspectives on articles for Hurricane Harvey of articles news coverage were bold contrasts to what was discovered in coverage from Hurricane Maria. On the first readthrough, all three newspapers' breaking news consisted of the state of Puerto Rico's infrastructure, accompanied by statistics of the category of the storm, wind speed, and power outages. As days passed, there was still an emphasis on this data as well as increasing statements of help needed from the local government. While Hurricane Harvey coverage had on-site reporting and first-person accounts, there was a significant lack of this in Hurricane Maria. The coverage of Maria heavily emphasized and quoted FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) and President Trump's responses. Multiple articles repeatedly used the same quotes by these figures. In this instance, by hearing only from government officials, there was a lack of personalization and focus on the individuals affected by the storm. By doing so, there was emotion taken out of the storm and the articles only gave readers a factual standpoint on the damage of the storm. While this can be beneficial, it removed coverage of how the victims were doing and made it seem as if those impacted didn't hold enough importance to be covered.

News Values in Play

Referencing back to Galtung and Ruge (1965) news values, these findings reflect their theory about the selection of news. While the storm itself is a disrupter to the natural news cycle and has negative impacts on people (both factors of news values), Hurricane Harvey and Maria differ in two other specific factors: *reference to elite nations* and *reference to persons*. Amongst

these factors that will be highlighted, journalists and their editors face an inherent bias in the process, also creating a tension between their duty to inform the public and their job to maximize profit (Clark & Campbell, 2005, p. 26). With the selection of news shadowing biases of those in the industry, it can affect their duty of properly informing the public.

Reference to elite nations is the factor that states that the actions of elite nations are seen as more consequential than the actions of other nations (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). These elite nations are culturally, politically and economically determined and there is a “universal agreement” that the United States is among the elite (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). Regarding Hurricane Harvey, the storm was seen as a direct impact to the United States in the south, so evidently was one to be extensively covered. However, with Puerto Rico (a US territory), the outlook was not the same as Texas (a state) due to the perceived distance and different cultural identity. Puerto Rico is part of the United States, but it is not directly connected to the land mass of the States, causing a separation that is real in distance, but also in perception. According to Galtung and Ruge (1965), this would be explained by reference to elite nations, stating that Texas as part of the United States was more important than the territory of Puerto Rico, which is not part of the elite nation.

Another concept that explains this difference in news coverage is the factor of *reference to persons*; news has a tendency to present events as the actions of named people rather than a result of social forces (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). For Hurricane Harvey, articles that referenced President Donald Trump included praise for his quick response, with comments and quotes such as: “The surprise hurricane is poised to be the first major test of disaster response for the Trump Administration” (Achenbach, Mufson & Samenow, 2017) and “The federal government is promising a muscular response” (Turkewitz, Fernandez & Blinder, 2017). Details highlighted the

federal response to the disaster with the support from FEMA and money being allocated by the government. Articles commented on President Trump's "tweets of support" and "praise for the work being done" in Texas for the response of the storm. In Hurricane Maria articles, however, the response was different by criticizing President Trump for reprimanding Puerto Rico. In a tweet, President Trump stated, "poor leadership ability by the Mayor of San Juan, and others in Puerto Rico, who are not able to get their workers to help...they want everything to be done for them when it should be a community effort" (Bacon, 2017). Another article reported the backlash President Trump received from his succession of tweets and statements by the Minority leader from the U.S. Senate, Charles E. Schumer with the statement, "With all due respect, President Trump, the relief efforts are not doing well, they're not close to good enough" (Wagner & Somahekhar, 2017). Articles were also found to also be commenting on lack of resources and communication from the federal government, "a sense that the American government is not mobilizing anywhere near enough to match the calamity that has befallen its own citizens" (Rojas, 2016). At the end of this statement, we see the word choice of citizens to remind President Trump and readers that this storm, like Hurricane Harvey is also a problem for the federal government to solve.

In Hurricane Maria articles, we see recognition of the political pressure President Trump was under for his response, or lack thereof. In the Hurricane Harvey articles, we see praise of his response by contrasting it to the poor quality of government response and action from Hurricane Katrina in 2008. An interesting aspect to also mention is the powerful influence media played in the recovery efforts of Hurricane Harvey. Multiple articles referenced the impact social media played in rescues for victims of Hurricane Harvey and how it played a role in saving many lives.

It is important to consider how this was not even possible in Puerto Rico due to the aging infrastructure and the power grid being completely shattered by the storm.

Focusing on Galtung and Ruge's (1965) news value factor of *reference to persons*, we see the difference in coverage between Hurricanes Harvey and Maria by presenting the events as actions of President Trump rather than a bigger societal/social issue. The news in the case of Hurricane Harvey is praising President Trump in his reaction to the storm and the recovery efforts it received. However, in the case of Puerto Rico, we see the news showing President Trump blaming Puerto Rico as if the problems with recovery from the storm is their fault. In this, we see a twofold of blaming of persons instead of a societal issue, one instance with blaming President Trump, but also the news in pinning the focus on the president rather than the underlying issues in society that caused the recovery from the storm in Puerto Rico to be worse off than in Texas.

Another factor that plays into journalist's writing of events is the manner and format in which they do so. News reporting follows a specific structure and can resemble narrative theory, constructed by Tzvetan Todorov (2013). The theory argues "a narrative plot consists of a movement from a state of equilibrium to a state of disequilibrium and back to a state of equilibrium again" (Taghizadeh, 2013, p. 7). Todorov's (2013) observation predicts the format we see in disaster coverage. Following Galtung and Ruge's (1965) selection process, a hurricane is a disrupter among other factors that grabs the attention of media to report on. However, there is a certain normalcy of reporting that takes place that one must return to. In both hurricane coverage, we see the attempt to return to normalcy. For Hurricane Harvey, reporting that takes place after the storm on the recovery efforts that resembles this phenomenon. In the *Washington Post*, one article opens with, "After days as a city under siege, Houston turned into a city in

recovery on Saturday, as more and more residents began salvaging what little they could of their flooded homes and lives” (Hernandez, Syrluga, Wan, 2017). The article further goes on to discuss victims returning to their homes and the rebuilding process they will take part in. Another article in *USA Today* was describing the scene in shelters and covered the hopeful emotions from the victims, ironically stating that the coloring book one girl had was titled ‘Keep Calm and Color On’. For Hurricane Maria articles, we also see this movement towards normalcy with one article in the *Washington Post* stating, “Hurricanes kill and destroy... hurricanes can also revive and renew” (Faiola, Schmidt & Fischer, 2017). Here, it is evident that the article is using the hurricane to show that Puerto Rico will move on from the storm and rebuild what was damaged. Lastly, with Hurricane Maria having less coverage than Hurricane Harvey, we see a bigger push to return to normalcy than the consistent coverage Hurricane Harvey had. By following this narrative, journalists are focusing more on the sensationalizing of the event rather than deeper issues that may be involved with it. Galtung and Ruge (1965) also discussed that contexts such as industry pressures impact what makes a news story worthy. This sensationalizing of a natural disaster, specifically the hurricane, is what will gravitate an audience more than will deeper societal questions from the media. The overarching question this theory brings to the surface is how can fundamental changes be tackled if there is a narrative forcing the topic back to normalcy?

To briefly summarize the trends before going further, Hurricane Harvey articles in *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* had reoccurring topics on the specifics of destruction and personal accounts and stories of the storm with different coverage angles. Hurricane Maria coverage had reoccurring themes of official statements from governments and debate about politician/government response, infrastructure, and specific details about the current

state of Puerto Rico and the destruction of the storm. A key difference between these two coverage accounts was the implementation of personalization to show the damage the storms caused to the humans involved.

Use of Culture in Newspaper Coverage

Another factor that impacts the selection of news and affects disaster communication is pressure from the external environment, including institutional, social and political factors. Disasters encompass those caused by nature and man-made. While hurricanes are natural disasters, the reaction and recovery period are human issues. The ability to recover as a community and country is affected by the government's allocation of resources and distribution of them. While the disaster was caused by nature, the recovery is done by man and is impacted by inequality in its proceedings. These inequalities are legitimated through ideas distributed throughout the nation of cultural difference and who is evaluated as a valuable member of society (Jordan & Weedon, 1995). While the first disaster was natural, the second was done by man when those with power created the determinant of who and what was relevant.

Regarding Hurricanes Harvey and Maria, there was an idea of separation between Puerto Rico and the United States that creating a distance in coverage. In this instance, culture was being used to justify the separation and create a difference. This is not the first time we have seen culture being used in this manner. After the terrorist attack of September 11th, 2001 there was a monumental impact on developments in the country regarding security, but more important in this case, the response by the media. Barbie Zelizer (2011), a scholar who studied these topics in her book, "Journalism After September 11", addressed how trauma shapes the news and the use of culture to shape the way we think about subjects. Zelizer (2011) stated that critical events etch themselves in collective memories (p. 260) and after September 11th, there was a creation of 'us'

versus 'them' in the media's reaction. In the case of Hurricane Maria, this 'us' versus 'them' mentality also came to light in the response to the disaster by President Donald Trump and in the way that journalists addressed the disaster. The framework of the articles and response by President Donald Trump used culture as a way to create distance from the issue and disconnect the United States from full responsibility for Puerto Rico. Zelizer (2011) also states, "the dominant narratives of western media tend to refuse this acknowledgment of difference, on the one hand, incorporation on the other annihilation, both literal and symbolic. This polarization is enhanced of course, in times of crisis, but it is not limited to such times" (p 79). This means that the dominant narratives that are found in news coverage of our media either clump all cultures and people together or disregard a specific group.

She later continues, that when faced with unusual events, journalists respond by falling back on set patterns of information gathering and reporting. Zelizer (2011) stated, "dominant cultural and religious worldviews of society are critical in shaping these cognitive structures with which we make sense of ongoing events" (p. 131). The emphasis is that "politics and identity mold the way we regard the pain of others" (Zelizer, 2011, p. 261) and we must separate ourselves from this in order to make progress (Zelizer, 2011, Taylor, 2005). This is fundamental in the differences we see in coverage between Hurricane Harvey and Maria. In covering the disaster, reporters for Hurricane Maria were molded by the politics Zelizer (2011) discusses. Due to this, reporters focused on mere statistics rather than connecting and reporting on the individuals that were affected. This, in turn, results in the public not being able to connect on a personal level with the victims like they were able to in Hurricane Harvey. If we do not recognize the politics involved in how we shape identity, then we will continuously impact the public through flashbulb memories, creating "a detailed and vivid memory of the reception

context of a public emotional event" (Lanciano, Curci & Semin, 2010, p. 473). These flashbulb memories will only exist for the events from personalization by the reporters, increasing the likelihood of a strong memory for Hurricane Maria to be nonexistent in the collective memory of Americans.

Another comparison to the political and cultural barriers tied to the reporting coverage of both hurricanes can be supported by the previous newspaper study conducted by Fabienne Darling-Wolf (2014) in *Imagining the Global: Transnational Media and Popular Culture Beyond East and West*. While the study examines newspaper coverage at a cross-national level, there are similarities to this study on Hurricane Harvey and Maria. Similar to Zelizer (2011) reference on falling back on familiar in reporting styles, Darling-Wolf (2014) states, "reporters struggling to make sense of a foreign environment in the limited time allotted to cover a story are also more likely to draw on familiar paradigms to interpret what they are witnessing" (p. 40). This provides an explanation to reporters covering the disaster in Puerto Rico; while it is part of the United States, the territory status creates an unequal partnership with other states, along with a difference in the culture in terms of speaking different languages and way of life. Through this study, it is evident that reporters treated Puerto Rico more like a foreign environment than a part of the United States. By having pressure to have coverage fast, reporters draw on their familiar paradigms of the cultural ideas the U.S. implements on Puerto Rico.

Darling-Wolf's study also found that in all coverage, the press did a better job at identifying other nations' failures than recognizing ones 'at home' (2014, p. 44). The finding that the press does not identify failures by their own country is important. In the case of Hurricane Harvey and Maria, there was a lack of judgment and insight on how the government was failing to treat the storms evenly. In the case of Puerto Rico, due to not recognizing that there was a

fundamental issue with the foundation of Puerto Rico's structures and electrical grid relating to the government rather than the natural disaster, there was a lack of coverage and on the structural issues. In this instance, journalists covered the topic without further investigating the main cause of the problem. The key issue, in particular, is that news organizations did not relate these structural issues and the recovery efforts due to a failure in part by the government.

A Different Approach to Culture

So far in the coverage of Hurricane Maria, we have seen culture being used as a tool to distance Puerto Rico from the United States and create an 'us' versus 'them' frame of mind. Rather than using culture to separate, it should be used to create connections and fundamentally understand why things are as they are presented. Gupta and Ferguson (1992) in "Beyond "Culture": Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference", discuss culture and identity in relation to space and place. Place is the imagination of something, whereas space is something you can measure (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). They argue that cultures are based on the unproblematic division of space and that space becomes, "a neutral grid on which cultural difference, historical memory, and societal organization are inscribed" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 7). This is the issue we see present in the coverage of Hurricane Maria, where the space (more imagined than physical) from Puerto Rico to the United States mainland further problematizes the relationship.

Further evidence is suggested in the articles covering Hurricane Maria, where at times there is an attempt to close this space that some journalists have recognized. Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States; meaning that they are United States citizens just like the victims of Hurricane Harvey. An article attempting to close the imagined and physical referenced relatives in New York, trying to create a connection to the island that seems so distant. One article even states, "For Puerto Ricans, who are U.S. citizens" (Faiola, Schmidt & Fischer, 2017), as if it is

necessary to remind the public that they are a part of the country. This statement shows that journalists feel it is important to make this distinction, as it may not be common knowledge.

Another article discusses the fundraising efforts for Puerto Rico and summarizes the issue of blaming “the other” in one quote from a professor of American Culture at the University of Buffalo, stating, “[People] who have seen the horror in Houston and Miami unfold and might have paid less attention to Puerto Rico, could all of a sudden feel that jolt of interest and motivation [from personal attributions being made due to President Trump’s lack of response]” (Bacon, 2017). This quote states that the public paid more attention to the disaster “at home” (Hurricane Harvey) because it was closer in distance than Puerto Rico. These articles are examples of how culture can be properly used to show a connection between the two places, however, this type of reporting is few and far between, with the case that most journalists are unknowingly affected by the overarching cultural frame of mind that is ingrained in society. Rather than identifying the differences between Puerto Rico and the United States, as a country, we should be identifying the connections between the country and its territory. To begin to understand the current issues of today, one must examine the historical context that connects the two lands.

The History of Puerto Rico and the United States

The history of Puerto Rico and the United States, while not recognized at a larger level, has an influence on the coverage of Hurricane Maria through the media. Colonialism is a “political-economic phenomenon whereby...nations explored, conquered, settled, and exploited large areas of the world” (Webster, 2018). Julian Go (2008) provides an understanding of the cultural differences, where the U.S. during occupation utilized the difference in the culture between the natives and those taking control. In 1898, the United States took possession of

Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War (Little, 2017). During colonialism, the United States not only sought to govern their territory but also to transform it, by implementing American ideas and institutions. (Go, 2008, p. 1). The U.S. utilized the idea of racial difference to convince the people in the United States that Puerto Rico was not fit to rule its own land by constructing the United States as a white country and Puerto Rico as a racialized 'other' (Go, 2008, p. 28). Images of Puerto Ricans as desperate for external authority were displayed in the U.S, painting a clear image of savages unable to govern themselves for Americans to see (Go, 2008, p. 56). When taking control of the island, America presumed they had a better understanding of the local needs and interests than the inhabitants of Puerto Rico themselves, causing industrial problems with the construction done by the U.S., including infrastructure (Go, 2008, p. 34).

As the U.S. was taking control, the island had to adjust to the new U.S. authority. In 1917, Puerto Ricans became U.S. citizens under the Jones-Shafroth act, which allowed the U.S. to deploy Puerto Ricans for World War I (Little, 2017). While Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, they cannot vote for president or elect voting senators or representatives to the U.S. Congress (Little, 2017). The underlying problem is that Congress does not have power for legislation relating to Puerto Rico, therefore, Puerto Ricans have no say in what happens to their territory. Later in 1952, Puerto Ricans adopted a new constitution, which outlined their local government and established the Commonwealth. While the constitution defined the local government, the federal government stated there would still be federal control over the local governance (Puerto Rico Report, 2018). The new constitution in 1952 established new rights and political institutions, but it also formalized and consolidated the federal government's control over the construction of Puerto Rican policy, which changed the economic climate (Baver, 1993, p. 42).

The U.S. involvement in policy led to Puerto Rico's status based on federal needs and disregarded what the inhabitants of the island wanted (Baver, 1993, p. 133). While Puerto Rico's local government is similar to that of other states, they have limitations to their power and are controlled more by the federal government (Rodríguez Díaz, 2018).

Hurricane Maria caused substantial damage to the infrastructure of the island, including the power grid and destruction of its buildings. The power grid and construction of the buildings in Puerto Rico were not constructed to withstand the type of weather the island would face due to its location. Where the construction of the island was dominated by the U.S. government rather than local communities, it led to the unprepared condition of the island. Due to Puerto Rico being in debt to the United States from trying to grow its economy with U.S. involvement, the Commonwealth couldn't update their island's infrastructure before the storm (Ferré-Sadurní & Hartocollis, 2017). After the storm damaged the entire electrical grid, they were faced with an even greater budgetary crisis.

Along with the infrastructure being ill-equipped for the weather conditions of the island, the Jones Act, passed in 1920, gave the United States control over Puerto Rican ports, which restricted non-US boats from trading with Puerto Rico (Rodríguez Díaz, 2018). This act has been a burden to Puerto Rico for its economy, but specifically relating to the storm, it inhibited Puerto Rico from receiving help from any other entity other than a U.S. permitted transport. Also, PROMESA, a 2016 law passed by the federal government with an aim to restructure the debt and progress the procedures for approving critical infrastructure projects (114-187 Congress, 2016), limited the Puerto Rican government's ability to respond after the disaster by restricting the amount of resources they could use locally for crises (Rodríguez Díaz, 2018). According to Rodríguez Díaz (2018), the economic and social circumstances imposed by the United States

made it impossible for Puerto Ricans and their government to be prepared for hurricanes and their aftermath. While the Jones Act was lifted for ten days only from public pressure, it didn't help alleviate the burdens of the economic dependency and debt caused by colonialism in Puerto Rico (Catalina M. de Onis, 2018).

Almost every article in the Hurricane Maria corpus referenced the debt that Puerto Rico faces and comment on the poor infrastructure, with phrases such as, "Puerto Rico's bankrupt electric company- knocking out power for the entire island and imposing costly repair burdens on a utility that was already struggling.... There is little Commonwealth budget for emergencies" (Mufson, 2017), and "communications were in many places non-existent... the scope of Maria's damage was still unknown" (Schmidt, Somashkhar, Zezima, 2017, Ferré-Sadurní, Alvarez & Robles, 2017, Ferré-Sadurní & Hartocollis, 2017). However, while the articles mentioned the debt that Puerto Rico faced, there was no further elaboration on these issues. There was a disconnect between the issues and their causes, including the relation between the U.S. government's construction/ruling of Puerto Rico, which was a root cause in the island's struggles post-disaster.

From this new cultural perspective, the construction of news coverage should model the framework of Gupta and Ferguson (1992) who try to use culture as a connection, rather than the reporting style we see today that shows a disconnect. Referencing previous studies on disaster coverage, The National Academy of Sciences (1980) state that disaster coverage plays a unique and important role, with the need for extensive coverage and unbiased reporting. They also state political factors can affect the flow of news. This is seen by journalists providing numerous first-person accounts with multiple reporters contributing to Hurricane Harvey coverage, but not in the case of Hurricane Maria. It is not a matter of actual distance that inhibits journalists from

doing the same in Puerto Rico, rather the idea of distance both culturally and geographically. All of these factors then are then pushed onto the public.

Rather than using the dominant cultural framework, there needs to be a transition into the mindset of seeing the connection and ignoring the distance that may be physical and/or imagined. Journalists need to understand this concept in order to affect the way society views the issues. In "The Problem of Culture" in *Cultural Politics in a Global Age*, Henrietta Moore (2008) states the media "plays a powerful political role in setting the terms of debate" (Moore, 2008, p. 7). As Moore (2008) stated, the way in which the two events were covered by journalists, not even considering the language, showed the public what the important terms of debate were. Looking at the structure of the articles and the language, they did not follow the news pyramid but rather followed the structure of a story instead of a news report. Todorov's (2013) narrative theory argues that the narrative plot moves from a state of equilibrium to disequilibrium and back again. The idea is to return back to normalcy in a story. This format was followed in both news coverage of Hurricane Harvey and Maria, by giving statements of hope and perseverance throughout the articles or summarizing it in the end. By following this format, there is no platform to address the tough questions of culture and world issues. If the goal is to return back to normalcy and ease public anxiety, there can be no real work done on issues of culture, policy and climate change. This, in turn, touches upon how this coverage affects the public and its perception, memory of such events and why the framework of the news industry should begin changing.

Issues to Study

While conducting this study, there were disrupters that could perhaps have affected the results. As previously stated, not all the newspaper front pages were able to load on PageOne X

which inhibited the statistics to be completely correct. Another issue regarding the newspaper collection was the program, LexusNexus, did not have all the front-page articles in their archive. This prevented the textual analysis of *The Wall Street Journal*, which could have given a different perspective in reporting styles.

Conclusion

This study focused on how journalists and the news industry covered the disasters, Hurricanes Harvey and Maria. The hurricanes sequentially hit the United States in August and September of 2017. While the hurricanes struck different parts of the United States, the coverage that occurred appeared as if the storms hit our country and a foreign nation. From media industry knowledge, rhetoric and cultural theory, the study uncovered that disaster communication was influenced by societal values involving culture. In comparison to Hurricane Maria, coverage from Hurricane Harvey followed through the recovery period of the storm, had more personalization and had more reporters contributing to the stories. From the narrative journalists participated in, the coverage of the events was conducted differently and in turn shaped public knowledge. It was evident that there is bias in how journalists and their news organizations choose what is worthy to make the news and the idea of cultural distance was a factor in the coverage. Following Todorov's (2013) narrative theory, the coverage that occurred attempted to return back to normalcy from the disaster. Due to this, the fundamental questions of how our society views those who are different and who classifies as important were not brought to attention and discussed in the media. From this study it is important to see that the structure of our news system has a flaw that when a crisis occurs, it relies on the backbone of the ideas engrained in our society from years of reinforcement of cultural issues. Moving forward, it is important to look past what is at the surface and question the deeper issues that are underlying in

the problems that are occurring in the world. We cannot be passive citizens and accept what is given to us at face value. As citizens, it is our duty to hold those in power and our society as a whole, responsible for issues that occur. It is only through discovery and intellectual debate that problems can be addressed to create a fundamental change to a system that may be broken or flawed.

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