



Hurricanes, Media, and Government Response

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Abstract

This project aimed to investigate the disproportionate impacts of hurricanes on people of color and poor people, using a collection of photos from four different hurricanes. I identify some key themes in the media's photographic representations of the hurricanes, and I attempt to connect these themes to the government responses to each storm. I conclude that there were specific media narratives, related to the government's response and goals, pushed in some of the cases and not others.

Research Focus

My project used both an essay component and a photo collection component to investigate the following questions:

How are natural disasters in different locations characterized and responded to, and why do such differences in response/characterization exist?

What are themes within the photography used to present each storm to the public? How do these themes relate to the way government responded to the storm?

I consider:

- Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans
- Hurricane Sandy in New York
- Hurricane Harvey in Houston
- Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico



This photo shows rubble crushing a car in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in front of a mural of children which says "la niñez tiene derechos" (children have rights). Although this mural surely started out as a statement about children's rights in general (to education, food, shelter, etc.) it is an interesting backdrop to this photo from Hurricane Maria, considering the countless children who suffered in the storm and its aftermath, partially due to a lack of commitment from the U.S. government to its own citizens.

Images & Themes

The project utilized around 5-7 images for each hurricane. I qualitatively analyzed the images and their captions and encapsulating articles to identify themes among them. Here are some themes I found:

Hurricane Katrina

- Criminalization/policing of Black people within a militaristic environment
- People (generally Black people) in distressing circumstances – standing in high water or stranded outside their homes



Hurricane Sandy

- Military/police not visibly armed, actively helping people
- No media narrative of looting or increased violence



Hurricane Harvey

- Emphasis on high water and flooding
- Not as much military or police in photos
- Less emphasis on people in distress



Hurricane Maria

- People in distressing circumstances – collecting water from a trickling spring, finding belongings among wreckage
- Huge physical devastation
- Inadequacy of government response



Conclusions

- The media narrative of violence and looting after Hurricane Katrina was purposefully pushed in conjunction with a government response that was ineffective and was targeted against people of color.
- The government response to Hurricane Sandy was more organized and less racialized; police and military still glorified in media, but their images tend to show them helping out.
- Not as much focus during Hurricane Harvey in the media on government response and police, more on the scope of flooding.
- During Hurricane Maria, media seemed to take on a role of advertising the humanitarian crisis that was not being addressed adequately by the federal government.

Future Work

- Selection of images in a more systematic way, such as choosing from several specific media sources known to have different political leanings, etc.
- Consider how use of images could be analyzed in a quantitative fashion



References

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