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Vulnerability

Real, Imagined, and Displayed Fragility
in Language and Society

In collaboration with Hanna Acke, Carsten Junker, Charlotta Seiler Brylla and
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With 8 figures

V&R unipress



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ISBN Print: 9783847117049 – ISBN E-Lib: 9783737017046

Interdisziplinäre Verortungen der Angewandten Linguistik

Band 14

Herausgegeben von

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Die Bände dieser Reihe sind peer-reviewed.

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über
<https://dnb.de> abrufbar.

Gedruckt mit großzügiger Unterstützung der Universität Warschau. / Published with the generous
support of the University of Warsaw.

© 2024 Brill | V&R unipress, Robert-Bosch-Breite 10, D-37079 Göttingen, ein Imprint der Brill-Gruppe
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ISSN 2749-0211

ISBN 978-3-7370-1704-6

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Natalie Rauscher

In the Face of Disaster – Narratives of Community Vulnerability and Resilience in Media Coverage of Natural Catastrophes in the USA

Introduction

The last few decades have seen enormous rises in costs and damages from natural catastrophes around the globe (SwissRe, 2018). In the United States, natural disasters are frequent and often more damaging compared to other developed regions, for example in Western Europe. Several factors play a role including climate change but also population movement into disaster-prone areas such as the Gulf Region or the West and a myriad of policy failures on the local, state and federal level which includes the ineffectiveness of government programs (e. g. the National Flood Insurance Program, NFIP) (Colten, 2021; Rauscher & Werner, 2022). Extreme weather and disaster events are affecting everyone in a given place, yet, in relative terms, there are members of a community that are more affected by these events than others. They are thus more (socially) vulnerable to disaster events and natural hazards. Social vulnerability to disasters and the (lack of) resilience need to be studied in order to arrive at a more nuanced picture of the impact of natural disasters in the United States. In this equation, not only institutions and governments play a role, but public discourse does as well.

Public and political discourses, and narratives commonly used in these discourses, reflect disaster events in multiple ways. Several studies in different fields such as Economics (e.g. Robert Shiller) or Social Sciences (e.g. Taylan Yildiz et al., 2018) have shown that discourses and narratives play a role in reflecting events and attitudes by different stake-holders but they also have the ability to reinforce the status quo or bring about change. Narratives include elements from lived experience or can be based on myths, rumors or even falsehoods (Shiller, 2017, p. 968). But through their dispersion and popularity, narratives can form and influence public and political perception about a given topic. This shapes people's attitudes and awareness of certain events or issues and can ultimately even impact their behavior. The use of language deserves special attention when studying the "Kulturtechnik des Erzählens" (Yildiz et al., 2018, p. 136) as Yildiz et al. have put it, as certain strategies of language use can be as effective to shape

public discourse as the power of the better argument (cf. Yildiz et al., 2018, p. 136).

Media discourses can play a crucial role in framing the perception of disaster situations. Mass media takes on different roles in a disaster event, from issuing warnings, information, description of events, or “even contributing to individual and community recovery and to community resilience.” (Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Rosenholtz, 2012, p. 607) In media depictions of disasters, news media often focuses little on any causal explanations but rather emphasizes dramatic descriptions of events, and that only for a short time span (Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Rosenholtz, 2012) with a focus on the affected region only. Given this dynamic, it seems clear that media discourse plays a role in the lack of effective (local and national) disaster mitigation in the U.S. and therefore also the lack of community resilience to disasters, which will be examined in this chapter.

Media coverage has the power to draw attention to and “normalize dominant cultural assumptions” as well as “influence social attitudes [...]” (Cox et al., 2008, p. 470). Thus news and print media influences the cultural understanding of a crisis event and the role people have in it (Davis & French, 2008, p. 243). People also evaluate the response to the disaster (Cox et al., 2008, p. 470) and how they ultimately recover from it. Thus the study of discourses in this chapter can illuminate if and how disaster risk reduction policy in the United States – or the lack thereof – is presented and evaluated. First, this chapter will introduce common understandings of social vulnerability and resilience as well as risk perceptions. Then a specific case study¹ of media sources will be presented, which will illuminate how media coverage represents disaster events in affected communities.

By doing so, this chapter argues that media discourses play a role in the cycle of failed disaster risk reduction in the U.S. By analyzing the portrayal of vulnerable communities in media discourses around natural disasters in the U.S., this chapter finds that the media focuses heavily on ‘resilience’ as well as ‘re-occurrence’ narratives that display local sacrifice in the face of disaster and local communities ultimately prevailing over and over again. This leads to a focus on resilience of communities rather than a reflection of underlying causes for high vulnerability among certain societal groups. This is contributing to the lack of awareness of why some communities are hit by disaster repeatedly and could reinforce the widespread unwillingness to support more effective mitigation policies on all government levels. The focus on resilience seems to be consistent with a larger shift in the political debate and in the agendas of government

¹ For the case study different textual corpora based on media outlets were compiled. The corpora include articles from *The New York Times* and news transcripts from *ABC News* as well as from *Fox News Network* between 2017 and 2020.

institutions (Cutter et al., 2008, p. 598). Nevertheless, there are underlying reasons why a growing number of people are affected by natural disasters in the U.S. today and a sole focus on resilience rather than vulnerability obscures the underlying history of structural problems in disaster risk reduction policy in the U.S. This seems to be consistent with findings from risk studies that perception of risks is crucially influenced by underlying cultural ideals which can lead to overoptimistic views in the face of complex situations and underlying uncertainty that natural hazards and disasters represent.

Social Vulnerability and Resilience to Natural Hazards

Although a catastrophic event affects the whole population in a given region in absolute terms, certain groups in a community are much more affected in relative terms. These groups are socially vulnerable to natural hazards. Vulnerability as a concept is used across many fields including disaster management, development, economics, sociology, anthropology, geography, health, global change, and environmental studies (cf. Bergstrand et al., 2015, p. 392). This chapter uses the definition of the term utilized in risk management literature, for example by researchers like Susan Cutter who focuses on conditions that make communities vulnerable to natural hazards such as social systems, development level, infrastructure, demographic structure and more generally the socio-economic make-up of a community (Bergstrand et al., 2015, p. 392). Additionally, vulnerability as defined in this chapter focuses on the human element in this theory, meaning that all disasters originate in human agency and therefore the question of social support after a disaster is especially crucial (Zakour & Gillespie, 2013, p. 12).

Compared to vulnerability, resilience “refers to coping with and recovering from a hazard that has already occurred.” (Bergstrand et al., 2015, p. 392) Just like the term vulnerability, the idea of resilience is used and studied in a lot of fields such as economics, ecology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, public health, geography or disaster management. When talking about resilience, one often hears phrases such as “bounce back” or “build back better” (UNDRR, 2017), which can be understood as a focus to prepare and build capacity in order to prevent disasters from leading to a long-term downturn of progress in a given community. Resilience capacity includes, for example, technological capacity, high skill and education levels, high economic status, quality of the natural environment and resource management institutions, stable political structures, adequate infrastructure or flows of knowledge and information between political levels and inside communities (UNDRR, 2017).

Apart from ideas of vulnerability and resilience, understandings of uncertainty and risk (perceptions) are crucial in the area of natural disaster miti-

gation. The sheer complexity of certain problems – such as natural hazards or climate change – leads to uncertainty (Wakeham, 2015, p. 716). For example, uncertainty about how to make sense of hazards or prepare for them. This can be true for both decision-makers and the population. Risk and uncertainty are often combined as concepts. While risks are generally understood as ‘known’ potential negative outcomes of a course of action, the perception of large risks are more likely to produce uncertainty about possible action (Wakeham, 2015, p. 717). If it is unclear in what way a situation will develop, it is difficult to decide a course of action which could potentially be costly. In the face of very complex risk situations the level of uncertainty is therefore higher. Cultural ideology plays a strong role in perception of risks – in this case, natural hazards. Often, a certain culture can prevent “people from anticipating the worst possible outcomes, skewing their perceptions to be overly optimistic.” (Wakeham, 2015, p. 720) In this context, uncertainty continues to loom in the background and culture “shapes what areas of uncertainty receive more attention with a given social context, and thus, what areas of uncertainty people may fail to see coming.” (Wakeham, 2015, p. 720) Cultural ideals of individualism, self-reliance, the “pursuit of happiness” and limited government – underlying societal and cultural norms that are strongly intertwined with American culture and society (Cullen, 2003) – are a factor in risk reduction and mitigation measures in the United States (Nietfeld, 2023). It seems likely that these ideals can skew the perception of looming risks towards being “overly optimistic.”

Vulnerability to natural disasters has changed over the last decades and there are certain communities that are more affected by frequent and recurring natural catastrophe events than others. In the U.S., the most vulnerable communities are those that are located in dense (urban) areas, are racially and ethnically diverse and have a lower socio-economic status than the average population (Cutter & Finch, 2008). Although there are efforts by local groups to achieve more effective “community resilience,” the sheer magnitude of some disaster events demands the support and responsibility of the (local, state, and federal) government. Understanding how communities differ when it comes to disaster risk and recovery preparedness is central to understanding how communities will react to a disaster event: “Social vulnerability and community resilience are two essential concepts for evaluating both communities’ risks and coping capacities when dealing with hazards.” (Bergstrand et al., 2015, p. 392)

Interestingly, U.S. government institutions have seemingly shifted their focus away from “disaster vulnerability” towards “disaster resilience” which is associated with “a more proactive and positive expression of community engagement with natural hazard reduction.” (Cutter et al., 2008, p. 598) A focus shift like this, while certainly meant to address challenges and develop better strategies, might lead to negligence in addressing the factors behind disaster vulnerability of

certain communities. It might thus add to policy failures in this field which are not adequately addressed. While resilience strategies must certainly be part of any well-rounded strategy to address natural hazards, vulnerability as a concept taking a back seat will steer away the focus from fighting underlying structural problems that are likely to lead to disastrous situations again and again.

Given the complexity of hazards and developments like climate change as well as underlying cultural factors in the U.S., (community) resilience to hazards seems difficult to achieve. In this context, it is crucial to communicate risks in an effective way. But what is effective communication of risks and uncertainties and how can citizens be reached and skewed perceptions of risks overcome? One aspect is the reflection of risk in the public – for example through media portrayal and reporting. Yet, as this chapter will show, the media discourse on natural disasters in the U.S. is unlikely to play an effective role in the communication of risk or the enhancement of resilience to natural disasters.

Narratives of Community Vulnerability and Resilience in Media Discourses

Media discourses reporting on natural disasters are taking part in portraying risks, vulnerability and resilience to disasters in affected regions. Studying how natural disasters are portrayed as well as the role vulnerable communities play in this portrayal is significant because it influences the way the population views their own position and capabilities in recurring disaster situations. Despite the fact that ‘community’ as a term might not be easily defined and that in today’s politically polarized America “locality, affinity, and community often seem to be at odds with one another” (Duclos-Orsello, 2018, p. 183), there is no denying that certain groups in specific regions in the U.S. are more vulnerable to catastrophic events than others. As said before, inside these regions those groups with a lower socio-economic status, a certain demographic make-up and a heterogeneous ethnic background are even more vulnerable than others. In the field of disaster management and natural hazard research ‘community’ is defined as “the totality of social system interactions within a defined geographic space such as a neighborhood, census tract, city, or county.” (Cutter et al., 2008, p. 599)

Past studies on media coverage of natural disaster events have suggested that the recovery processes in a given community after an extreme event can be even more challenging than the impact of the disaster itself (Flynn, 1999, In Cox et al., 2008, p. 470). In this context, discourses are the “social practice of disaster recovery.” (Cox et al., 2008, p. 470) Studying these discourses as part of disaster recovery and with a focus on community, responds to the increasing “complexity

of the recovery process and a growing salience to individual and collective well-being.” (Cox et al., 2008, p. 470) The examination of media discourses and the role of local communities in them can thus help to understand the vulnerability to natural catastrophes in more detail. For example, if communities are portrayed as resilient rather than vulnerable, could this influence the willingness or likelihood to prepare and mitigate disasters?

Methodology²

The following case study uses several different news outlets (*The New York Times*, *ABC News*, *Fox News Network*) between the years 2017 and 2020 as source material to investigate media discourses and narratives of vulnerability and resilience around natural catastrophes in the U.S. Using these outlets, more mainstream liberal but also conservative viewpoints are included. By using national news outlets and print media, the case study investigates an external perspective on local communities. These news outlets reference a broader perspective on natural catastrophe events in the USA and influence broader perspectives on disaster events and local regions. The case study addresses questions such as: How are natural disasters in affected regions portrayed and which narratives dominate the discourse? Are the discourses concerned with catastrophic events and their immediate effects or do they also reflect underlying weaknesses in the prevention of natural catastrophes? What role do vulnerable communities themselves play in their portrayal?

In Graph 1 the different corpora used for this discourse study are displayed. The sizes of the different corpora rank from 250,822 tokens³ (*ABC*), to 1,606,677 tokens (*NYT*) and 2,594,117 tokens (*Fox*).⁴ As a reference corpus, a sample

2 In this chapter, the analysis of discourse will focus more narrowly on hurricane events in the Louisiana region of the United States which is hit frequently by these severe storms and flooding. The state is severely impacted by disaster and faces a “land loss crisis” (Colten, 2021) that will only exacerbate through climate change. The textual corpora are based on articles compiled through the search terms ‘hurricane’ and ‘Louisiana.’ The data was collected over the Nexis Uni platform. Hurricanes and the consequent flooding are one of the most frequent and common natural disaster events to occur in the USA every year. Floods also continue to be one of the costliest natural disaster events in the USA. Louisiana is frequently hit by these events and some of the biggest disaster events of U.S. history devastated New Orleans (Hurricane Betsy, Hurricane Katrina) which triggered national discussions over vulnerability and resilience in the region and in the USA more widely. Louisiana also continues to be one of the poorest states and thus displays high levels of socially vulnerable groups (low socio-economic status, dense urban areas, mixed ethnic and racial make-up of the population).

3 Token refers roughly to ‘word.’

4 Although the corpora have different sizes, measures like word frequency can be displayed in relative terms which makes it more comparable. We also see different amounts of articles and

Corpus of the COCA (Corpus of Contemporary English) was used (approximately 9 million words). COCA stands for what can be considered ‘regular’ use of the English language. Using the COCA sample corpus as a reference point, it can be determined whether a certain keyword occurs more or less often in the investigated discourse than in ‘regular discourse’ which can then inform about significant points in the discourse.

Outlet	Number of articles/transcripts	Corpus Size
NYT	829	1,606,677 tokens
ABC News	266	250,822 tokens
Fox News Network	317	2,594,117 tokens

Graph 1: Textual Corpora.

In a first step, the corpora are analyzed quantitatively using the corpus linguistic software LancsBox (Brezina, Timperley, & McEnergy, 2018). The quantitative study of discourses in this chapter focuses on frequency of keywords. In a second step, the corpora are investigated qualitatively looking at text samples.

Quantitative Discourse Analysis: Frequency Analysis

The corpora were first examined using a list of keywords⁵ divided into different keyword categories. In the following, only one key word category, “Local Communities,” will be portrayed in more detail. In Graph 2, the different thematic keywords are displayed showing their frequency in the textual corpora (bars). The COCA-line indicates the frequency of these terms in ‘ordinary’ English discourse.

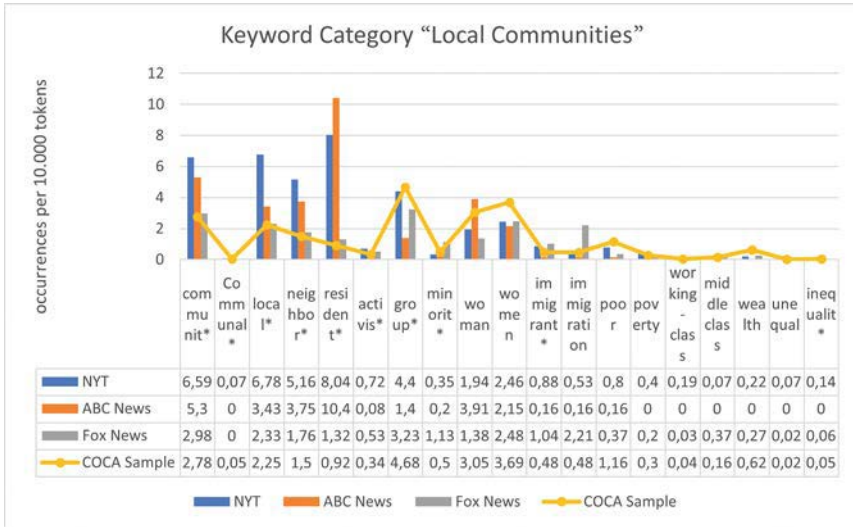
When we look at Graph 2, we generally see that local communities are definitively a strong focus point in the discourse around natural disasters exemplified in the investigated textual corpora. The most significant terms showing this are neighbor* or resident* which occur much more frequently in the corpora than in general English, indicated by the COCA line.⁶ Especially the *NYT* and *ABC* material show a high relative frequency of terms that refer to local communities which shows that these outlets are more concerned with integrating the portrayal of local communities in their reporting on natural disasters. *Fox News* displays

transcripts. This is due to the fact that written articles (*NYT*) are shorter than TV segments. *Fox* segments are also longer than *ABC News* segments and therefore the total size of the *Fox* corpus is larger than the others, although the number of segments is comparable to *ABC*.

5 The keyword list was informed by close reading of text samples from the corpora, as well as through the engagement with natural hazard literature.

6 * refers to so-called wildcard terms, taking into account different forms of the same word e.g. flood, floods, flooding, etc.

the lowest frequencies of these terms and also the keywords local* and communit* are significantly less frequent in the Fox News material than in the other two outlets. Overall, this could indicate that Fox News speaks less frequently about local communities in the context of natural disaster events than the other two outlets.



Graph 2: Keywords Local Communities.

All other terms here seem less significant. There seems to be less coverage of specific groups or minorities in the context of natural disasters such as women, immigrants, working class, or middle class. The topic of poverty and (wealth) inequality also does not seem to play a large role in the coverage around natural disasters although the material focuses on the region of Louisiana, one of the poorest states in the United States, and vulnerability to disaster is increased through low socio-economic status. In fact, ‘wealth’ as a keyword occurs even slightly less frequent than in contemporary English discourse. This might already indicate that underlying structural factors in social vulnerability to disaster – such as the socioeconomic make-up of a region – do not feature strongly in the investigated discourse.

Qualitative Discourse Analysis: ‘Resilient’ communities in the face of recurring disaster

The following qualitative analysis will focus on the specific term ‘community’ in more depth. The term community appears in many different instances in the different corpora. In the *NYT* material there are 600 separate instances, 91 occurrences in the *ABC News* material and 488 instances in the *Fox News* material. Not all of the instances directly refer to communities in natural disaster events but the following analysis focuses on these contexts in particular. The occurrences of the term are grouped around two narratives that occur most often in the reporting: The “resilience narrative” and the “re-occurrence narrative.”

Resilience Narrative: Tight-knit and resilient communities despite devastation

One of the strongest themes around community and natural disaster events in the U.S. is that local communities are portrayed as tight-knit entities that come together despite disasters. This narrative is woven through the discourse by different actors. As the outlets investigated here are national outlets, there is always a national and external perspective which talks about the community. Here we see statements by national political actors or (academic/business) experts who are praising the resilient nature of the affected communities. For example, federal agencies are quoted in the outlets saying:

Federal Coordinating Officer FEMA: [...] Survivors are able to not only have us help them, but they’re able to help their community as you saw during the response. It was Texan helping Texan. In fact, we had folks from Louisiana, the Cajun Navy, coming over and helping during the response. (*ABC*)

After the flooding after Hurricane Harvey in 2017, we see a lot of coverage, especially on *Fox*, about the whole (American) community coming together:

[...] We are also seeing the better side of America in these images as celebrities and athletes, politicians and regular folks pitch in with money, supplies, and hard work to help. (*Fox*)

In another instance, President Trump is quoted about local communities, saying:

Together we will help them all recover from this tragedy. We will renew our hope and community and we will renew our hope and rebuild those homes and businesses and schools and places of worship with a strength and vigor that comes within ourselves. (*Fox*)

Expert voices who are quoted include academics who talk, for example, about environmental history concerning the Gulf region or the issue of settlement in these communities:

It's a struggle that every community is facing in South Florida [...] there is a constant battle between our ability to prepare for hurricanes and the pressure for urban expansion. It's a great place to live. But it does come with some risk. (*NYT*)

Apart from quoting expert and political actors, the media outlets themselves also play a role in talking about communities and painting a picture of the regions affected by disasters. When it comes to specific disaster events, there is a lot of dramatization in media reports. Especially TV audiences are presented with pictures of devastated regions:

Dramatic before and after photos showing the inundation's swallowing roads, entire neighborhoods. (*Fox*)

The communities on the ground are then portrayed as responding to these events in a brave fashion:

Yeah, because we're here in Louisiana with a look at the toll this hurricane season has taken along the Gulf Coast, and the unbreakable community spirit is here, as well. (*ABC*)

ABC reporters on the ground are commenting on what they experience inside the communities, painting a vivid picture of community resilience:

[...] I know this town, I know this community. It's a community of faith, family, and boy, they like to have fun, but it hasn't been that way the past two months, pandemic, hurricane, resurgence of the pandemic, another hurricane. Even this self-reliant community needs help. (*ABC*)

Everyone in the community is portrayed as doing their best to help each other:

It's also just the local community at large. You look at local businesses like mattress matt [...] bringing people in, feeding them, giving them water. You look at the role of churches opening their doors serving food and water, taking people in. You look at even corporate, big corporate giants like Wal-Mart donating \$20 million. [...] Churches, so it's not just about government. I think this actually underscores your point the individuals as well stepping up and local communities as well. (*Fox*)

On *Fox News*, veterans play an important role in individual disaster response and they are mentioned over and over, serving their community – after already serving their country:

Veterans are amazing people who are giving to their community. I was so proud to be with them today and to be able to see this firsthand. (*Fox*)

On *ABC News*, there is a recurring segment called *Hometown Heroes* which portrays locals “working to help the community get their comeback.” (*ABC*) All

these segments reinforce the idea that communities themselves can and are taking the lead when disaster strikes and emphasize the individual responsibility and capability to address disaster.

Interestingly, there are also some segments where the media coverage of disasters is discussed critically, albeit lacking any self-reflection. For example, after disaster events media attention often quickly shifts to new things, which leaves communities struggling for help long term:

An unimaginable loss for so many in this hard-working community [...] they're coming together to clean up after all this catastrophic damage that has been left behind, and their hope is to not be forgotten. (ABC)

Communities are hoping not to be forgotten – yet *ABC News* and other media outlets are themselves taking part in ‘forgetting’ about these communities by shifting away attention. On another occasion on *Fox News*, a guest on the show argues that the media is the ‘loser’ in the reporting on disaster events, not because of reporting falsely but because of shifting focus away from affected communities:

Again, hurricane coverage, this is what the media lives for. By and large the coverage was good and a lot of uplifting and heart-wrenching stories about the resilience of the community. But the media always manages to overstep, and they did with his obsession about Melania Trump's stiletto heels, writing in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* the fashion section, it was just a disaster. (Fox)

We thus see that occasionally the problematic dynamics of the news cycle are briefly mentioned – yet without any self-reflection on the part of media outlets themselves. Moreover, it is not only the loss of interest but the focus on “uplifting and heart-wrenching stories” that plays a part in the problematic portrayal of affected communities by media actors. Media outlets focus on the uplifting stories from local communities, but they are not talking about underlying causes of why these communities are hit by disaster again and again – the resilience narrative takes precedence.

Apart from many outside perspectives on local communities in the news outlets, members of the community also play a role in their own portrayal, albeit one that is narrowly defined by the resilience narrative. Often there are local political actors like city managers commenting on the situation:

We want our community to be sustainable should we have another major hit from a hurricane. (NYT)

Facing disasters or threats, local political actors are often quoted talking about their efforts to address and prepare the community. For example, the mayor of Galveston, TX is quoted:

If that hurricane had come into Galveston, it've been devastating to this community. [...] it would have ruined everything residential and commercial. So, we're fortunate. We were prepared. We evacuated. We did everything we could to prepare for it and thank heavens it didn't come this way. (ABC)

Apart from local political actors, there is a lot of portrayal of local residents, especially in TV segments. Most residents report on working in relief efforts in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. Many give what they can – money or their time – to help others. Media outlets thus emphasize how horrific the disaster was, but that nothing can really destroy the community spirit because hard working Americans take their fate into their own hands. The *Hometown Heroes* segment shows this most strongly. Here, local residents of destroyed regions are featured on news segments, mostly acting in a hands-on fashion with anything they can organize:

[ABC:] ... what do you want them to know about this community, your community? [...] the community of Lake Charles is truly a melting pot. We work together, We're a blue collar community and we do everything we can to try to help each other. And this a time where our resilience will be tested but as the 15 White Coats say, resilience is in our DNA and I know the city of Lake Charles will bounce back. (ABC)

Another Hometown Hero, a veteran, is also featured saying:

I did this because it's my community, I live here. This is my backyard. This is my home. (ABC)

These Hometown Heroes want to keep the attention on their communities after disaster and want to prevent the news cycle from moving on:

[...] when you see the country rallying around your community, how does that feel? [...] it's a feeling that we've been longing to feel here in Southwest Louisiana, in Lake Charles because we, you know, the press cycle was so short on the coverage, people didn't even think it happened. Every street looks like a bomb blew up on it. It's devastation everywhere, no facilities, no power, no water, and the world has moved on. So the fact that y'all are here, it means everything to the people in this area. [...] (ABC)

Apart from TV segments, the insistence on bravery and strong community resilience can also be found in other outlets such as the *NYT* where (former) local residents are quoted. For example, a letter to the editor after Hurricane Laura is called "I take everything back I said about Southwest Louisiana" and speaks about resilience and community spirit of the people living along the coasts especially in the Cajun and black community which stands together across ethnic boundaries. This portrayal of local communities also shows that local residents often do not believe they are valued or understood outside of their communities, which is why they themselves have to work together, knowing best what to do in the face of disasters:

The policymakers ‘n’t do place value on anything but the money, not the longevity of these communities, not the culture’, said Tracy Kuhns, 64, a longtime resident of the Barataria community across the bayou from Jean Lafitte. (*NYT*)

Local sacrifice in the face of disaster – but also the resilience of communities that are ultimately prevailing – is a narrative that is emphasized again and again. Local community actors thus play a role in their portrayal in the media, but they are framed as part of the resilience narrative most of the time. The purpose of their appearance is thus to make the events relatable but also serves to show community spirit and strength of a community despite devastation.

Apart from these ‘ordinary’ voices of community actors, first responders from different organizations and institutions such as the fire or police departments, the Red Cross, community organizations, local cultural actors but also the National Guard are mentioned repeatedly and complimented intensively. They are portrayed as the ones who actually keep the ball rolling on the ground – much more so than any other outside actors such as the (federal) government.

Re-occurrence narrative: Communities threatened by disaster again and again

Another narrative that is apparent in the reporting on natural disasters in the media – which is connected to the resilience narrative – is the “re-occurrence narrative”. Many communities are hit by disaster repeatedly and although the community spirit is strong, there is some allusion to the fact that some regions face the same problematic situations again and again. Apart from allusions to climate change, the re-occurrence of drastic consequences of natural disaster events seems to be a puzzle that the media outlets are incapable of truly addressing. In many instances, media outlets are again focusing on local community actors getting back on their feet and local politicians claiming that they want to restore the communities to the way they were. This is of course an understandable sentiment, but it also reveals a problematic aspect about the reporting on disaster-prone regions. Some of these communities are hit again and again by the same events without changing course in any way. This is not discussed critically to any large extent in the media, which makes it seem that some communities are just ‘naturally’ vulnerable and that there is in fact nothing wrong with past reactions to disasters.

One such community, Lake Charles in Louisiana – regularly hit by major weather events – is discussed on many occasions. For example, the local sheriff is quoted about the members of his community:

Some of them don't have insurance, some of them can't afford the high deductibles that they're going to pay for their insurance, so hopefully they can get some type of assistance, either from the federal government or from private sources. We want our community back the way it was. (ABC)

On another occasion in the *NYT* there is the insistence that the way of life along the coasts should be preserved the way it has always been:

In the years since Hurricane Katrina, he had grown weary of being rebuffed in his quixotic campaign to encircle Lafitte with a tall and impregnable levee. He could rhapsodize all he wanted about preserving his community's authentic way of life. [...] (NYT)

There are also some local political actors who talk about a different way of rebuilding but rather in general terms – again insisting that the community is actually very resilient. The Governor of Puerto Rico is quoted saying:

[...] after this catastrophe, we need to rethink how to build and how to make our community safer and how to prepare for some of these disasters. [...] So I think the people of Puerto Rico are very resilient. You'll see. We'll be standing up, [...] in the long run as we start building through the process of reconstruction, our focus should be to rebuild better than ever, using technology and being, being very innovative. (ABC)

Quotes like these reinforce the notion that the resilience of communities is the overarching theme and that there is not much fundamentally wrong with (local) societal or political approaches to disaster mitigation. In some instances, there is even the claim that things have actually improved:

[Fox host:] [...] we've just gotten so much better as a country with how to respond to this from a federal government, from a state government, and really, again, a community level. (Fox)

At the same time, there is also the call for help from the federal government once disasters strike the communities – which happens again and again:

Damages are already in the billions much of that, especially for private residence, may not be covered because some 80 percent of the victims we're told did not have flood insurance. They will be turning to the government for help. [...] (Fox)

Or another quote from the *NYT*:

The magnitude of our destruction is so huge we cannot come back as a community on our own. We cannot restore our homes on our own. We need the help of the American public, if we can get it. (NYT)

In many instances, there is no reflection of the fact that there might be something wrong with the self-repeating cycle of a people living in extremely hazardous areas, the lack of effective disaster risk reduction policy and calls for the federal government to step in whenever disaster strikes. The media is rather reinforcing

the notion that this is the federal government's role. While this is of course part of the role of government, there is no discussion of the problematic cycle of a lack of preparedness, devastating events and rebuilding in the same places over and over again. Only in recent years, there seems to be some reflection that this cycle of destruction and rebuilding is unsustainable, especially in written material like the *NYT*:

With local officials incentivized to replicate the past, experts in disaster relief say changes in federal law and regulations may be needed to reorient the system to reflect climate realities. Yet the Trump administration, if anything, is moving in the opposite direction. (*NYT*)

Yet, a real reflection of the underlying causes and remedies for the situation are still rarely featured despite even some voices on *Fox News* highlighting disaster relief priority shifting under the Trump Administration:

And now you have a situation where in the President's budget, he's cutting funding with things like insurance for people who live in flood zones. He's cutting back on community, the bill and block grants that will help people rebuild. So may the power of seeing this, the real measure of empathy [...] his ability to say, I'm going to help you and give help in terms of funding or other federal aid [...]. (*Fox*)

Rather surprisingly, *Fox* is even briefly mentioning the issue of the ineffective system of flood insurance:

[*Fox News* host:] You know what a really boring segment would be but in fact, one that people have to know about is flood insurance. [Other segment follows] The whole controversy behind flood insurance is absolutely astounding. The types of repeats floods and what happened and how much is paid out. It would bore you to tears but it is probably one of the most important stories out there. (*Fox*)

Here, one can see that the underlying problems of disaster risk mitigation more generally are not adequately represented for audiences. Even when reporting turns to an aspect that is crucial, the flood insurance system, TV hosts actively turn away from the issue because it is deemed too boring. This exemplifies how discussions of effective risk mitigation policy is absent from media portrayals of disasters in the U.S. This seems especially true for TV outlets.

Apart from that, the *NYT* features some articles that try to report and explain certain disaster response policies. In 2017, the *NYT* features an extensive article called *When Rising Seas Transform Risk Into Certainty* (*NYT*). The article talks in great detail about the ineffectiveness of the National Flood Insurance Program:

As storm damage becomes more costly, it has left the NFIP tens of billions of dollars in debt and federal officials scrambling to bridge the divide between the rapidly growing expense of insuring these properties and comparatively tiny, taxpayer-subsidized premiums that support it. (*NYT*)

The article goes on to explain that the program has led to the wrong incentives in disaster mitigation across vulnerable regions and communities:

The NFIP was meant to encourage safer building practices. Critics argue that instead it created a perverse incentive – a moral hazard – to build, and to stay, in flood-prone areas by bailing people out repeatedly and by spreading, and that way hiding, the true cost of risk. (*NYT*)

Apart from this crucial issue with the NFIP, another problematic element is discussed in this article, namely that disaster risk mitigation is often unpopular with local communities as it demands drastic measures:

“When you go out to the end of the century, some of these neighborhoods don’t exist, so it’s hard to get community engagement,” he said. “Nobody wants to talk beyond where the dragons are on the map, into uncharted territory.” (*NYT*)

Although this is a detailed article in the *NYT*, pieces going into detail on the history, problematic aspects and wrong incentives of federal disaster programs are a very rare occurrence both in written media as well as in TV segments. Yet, at least in the *NYT*, there are some articles talking about possible disaster risk reduction policies including “managed retreat” measures that states like Louisiana have been contemplating. All of these articles seem to be rather recent, especially from the year 2020, and talk about the ‘unavoidable’ relocation of entire neighborhoods:

Louisiana issued a sweeping strategy for its most vulnerable coastal parishes, laying out in great detail which parts would likely be surrendered to the rising seas, and also how inland towns should start preparing for an influx of new residents. (*NYT*)

In the context of relocation plans, there are some local political actors quoted arguing that there has been a shift in perspective of how to address disasters in the region:

That’s not a conversation that we were comfortable having, as a state or as a series of vulnerable communities, say, five years ago. [...] It’s now a conversation that we can have. [...] We don’t have ready-made solutions, Mr Sanders said. But talking openly about retreat, he added, can produce better outcomes than if we do nothing. (*NYT*)

Other articles, however, still show that there are many communities who want to go back to normal and advertise their communities for tourism and business despite the recurring risk of disaster. This is exemplified in an article about Lake Charles in the *NYT* from 2020 called *How Do You Advertise a Town Ravaged by Hurricanes?* (*NYT*)

Discussion of Results and Conclusion

Looking at the discourse data, one can infer that media portrayals of catastrophic events are dominated by “resilience narratives” as well as “re-occurrence narratives” that fail to illuminate the actual reasons behind vulnerability to natural disasters. We see the continuous emphasis on the sacrifice of local tight-knit communities and their resilient spirit rather than allusions to the reasons such as policy failure or moral hazard that lie behind the rising damages from natural disasters in many communities in the U.S.

Overall, we can see that the strongest narrative surrounding the portrayal of local communities in media discourses is the “resilience narrative.” Brave locals are coming together as a community and they know best how to address the disaster they are facing. Ultimately, they will prevail. The focus on this narrative obscures, however, that many events are so massive that individuals are not capable of truly alleviating their situation. Additionally, the focus on sensationalism of immediate catastrophic events and heart-warming stories about locals also lacks any reflection of the underlying causes for the vulnerability of these communities and what factors have led to or are exacerbating their vulnerable state.

We also see a strong presence of the re-occurrence narrative in the media outlets without reflecting on underlying causes for this re-occurrence of disasters. The way of life of many communities along the coast are portrayed as threatened through continuous hazards. We see that many want to “go back to normal” and just rebuild the communities the way they were. Here we again see the discursive focus on the consequences of disasters for communities but little reflection on the reasons why communities are so vulnerable in the first place. There is rarely any deeper analysis or explanation about the causes of vulnerability in these communities including the population development as well as the lack of effective measures by local households themselves (e.g. insurance coverage) or by the (federal, state, local) government. From time to time, there is an allusion that political polarization also plays an additionally negative role in disaster aid policy today, but these allusions still do not go into detail or reflect on the long history of failed disaster risk reduction policy in the U.S.

In some more recent articles in the *NYT*, there seems to be some effort to introduce policies to address vulnerable communities including managed retreat or (very rarely) an article about the purpose of the National Flood Insurance Program. Often these programs are portrayed as detached from and unpopular with local communities who dislike high insurance premiums, falling house prices and having to face the abandonment of their community. Even more so than in the written content analyzed here, some TV segments mention policies like flood insurance before immediately turning the attention elsewhere. This is

emblematic of media coverage of disaster events and affected communities. The focus rests on immediate sensationalist coverage as well as ‘feel-good’ stories emphasizing the general bravery and sacrifice of local communities that supposedly satisfy audiences. What is not included in media discourse is a discussion of the necessity of federal programs to mitigate major disasters, their purpose as well as weaknesses and much needed reforms of these programs and institutions. This is in line with other studies on the subject, which for example show that much needed reform of the NFIP is very seldom covered by mainstream media (Strother, 2018, p. 470). Strother and others have argued that the very technocratic nature of disaster policy makes it a policy area “without a public” (Strother, 2018, p. 468) of which details and complexities are not salient among the public and policy-makers. The more important it would be that issues around disaster policy, factors for high vulnerability and possible improvement of resilience, would be covered more intensively in the media. But this is not the case, as this chapter shows. Thus the emphasis on the resilience of communities rather than on any discussion of underlying vulnerability factors actually furthers the failure of the U.S. society and political system to adequately address natural hazards and mitigate disasters in vulnerable communities.

There is very little to no analysis of the fact that people have systematically moved into the disaster-prone areas and that government policy has failed to change this or make communities more resilient (with some articles being the rare exception). Overall, written sources are more detailed in the analysis, while TV segments focus on dramatization and (often short-lived) on-the-ground reporting to provide visual evidence from devastated regions. This means that in general, very little reflection of underlying causes of disasters is reaching American media audiences. Additionally, because large parts of the U.S. population have traditionally turned to TV/news media⁷ as their main source for information (Pew-Research-Center, 2016), this effect is even more pronounced for the large majority of Americans who rarely consume print media.

As indicated before, the findings of this chapter are consistent with other studies on media coverage of disasters which found a lack of reflection of causal explanations for disasters (Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Rosenholtz, 2012, p. 620). Thus, mass media seems to be largely unable to play a crucial role in enhancing community resilience either locally or for other places around the U.S. that lie outside of the most frequently devastated regions. Media coverage is mostly focused on specific regions without making larger societal or political inferences (Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Rosenholtz, 2012, p. 620).

⁷ Meanwhile, many people turn towards digital sources more often but TV remains among the top news sources for many (Pew-Research-Center, 2021).

Overall, the case study in this chapter shows that resilience narratives framing local communities as pulling themselves up by their bootstraps seem to be among the most common features of mass media reporting on communities during natural disaster events in the U.S. today. This shows how underlying cultural ideals in the U.S. such as individualism and self-reliance play a strong role in possibly underestimating the risk of natural hazards. These ideals can also lead to favoring limited government ideas and therefore to a general distrust in the (federal) government's ability to play a positive and effective role in mitigating disasters. Media outlets are not doing much to alleviate this notion as underlying causes or solutions to more effective disaster risk policy are not discussed to any large extent. It can only be inferred that this, among other factors such as political polarization, also between Southern and Northern regions of the U.S. (Hochschild, 2016), and the technocratic nature of disaster and mitigation policy (Strother, 2018), plays a role in the lack of awareness of vulnerability to natural hazards in disaster-prone communities as well as nationwide. This could exacerbate the unwillingness to support more effective disaster mitigation among Americans in the future. In this way, media discourses play a part in the vicious cycle of ineffective approaches to disaster risk reduction in the U.S. today.

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