Superhero, Instructor, Optimist: FEMA and the Frames of Disaster in Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

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Using framing theory to examine hundreds of press releases posted to the Web by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), this study asserts that FEMA provided useful information on survival and assistance, but that the organization emphasized good deeds and optimism while essentially ignoring social, political, and cultural issues that publicly defined the hurricanes and damaged FEMA’s image.

On August 23, 2005, the National Hurricane Center in Miami reported a dangerous weather pattern off the southeastern coast of the Bahamas. Three days later, now christened Katrina, the Category 3 hurricane blew through southeast Florida and picked up momentum over the Gulf of Mexico. Six days later, much of the Mississippi Gulf Coast and parts
of the Louisiana coast were destroyed by Katrina, which reached Category 5 before landfall. Seven days later, levee breaches in New Orleans inundated the city. Within a month, on September 24, Hurricane Rita hit the Louisiana and Texas coastlines as a Category 3 storm, causing extensive wind and water damage. The two storms devastated towns and neighborhoods between Beaumont, Texas, and the Florida Panhandle. A sizeable stretch of that coastal area was hit by both Katrina and Rita.

In the days preceding and weeks following these storms, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) produced more than 600 press releases. This qualitative study examines these releases, and demonstrates that FEMA consistently framed messages in an optimistic manner and generally did not acknowledge the critical events surrounding the hurricanes. The findings strongly support the perception that FEMA was out of touch with the public’s needs and concerns throughout the disasters.

This study does not attempt to measure how these releases influenced the news. Rather, it examines the content of the releases and how FEMA public relations staff framed their messages. We also review and summarize the news events of the day to provide context for the releases. Although this study does not examine the influences of these releases on the news, the releases are noteworthy for several reasons. First, these are historical documents that may propagate the notion that FEMA’s response was more effective than it really was. Archival theorist Brien Brothman (2002) called this an “afterglow” of its actual performance, blurring borders between record (glow) and evidence (afterglow) (p. 313).

Such a study also provides a narrative—both current and historical—of the organizational viewpoint, or at least the viewpoint that was likely intended to be projected to the public. Moreover, it is especially instructive to learn that a large organization undergoing tremendous scrutiny and criticism would ignore this criticism in its press releases and, even more important, to see that it would do so with an air of optimism.

There is no evidence indicating that any of the releases are inaccurate. In fact, most provided helpful information, particularly those classified in the “instructor” frame. The releases, however, do avoid the tremendous criticism surrounding the agency in the fall of 2005. Clearly, FEMA leaders spent a great deal of time planning, writing, and producing these releases. And studies such as this one can help people better understand how complex federal bureaucracies manage time and money. Moreover, the releases suggest misplaced priorities that help solidify the fact that FEMA failed to prepare “the nation for all hazards” and initiate “mitigation activities” as the boilerplate appearing on many of these releases states (General news releases, 2005). The fact that Katrina killed 11 people in south Florida on
August 25 and that FEMA issued a release on Michael Brown speaking about terrorism that day is suggestive of organizational denial in the face of a devastating disaster. Moreover, the irony of an August 26 release urging New Yorkers to purchase flood insurance continues to suggest that FEMA priorities were misplaced. Examples such as these appeared throughout the study, and provide an important and recorded narrative of FEMA’s organizational voice.

**FRAMING CONCEPTUALIZATIONS**

A number of concepts in framing theory can be applied in a qualitative examination of press releases. This study uses framing in public relations as a broad foundation to focus specifically on framing theory that identifies categories in which FEMA’s messages can be analyzed. Those categories, then, are used to sort the types of messages FEMA presented in its press releases throughout the crises.

Public relations scholars have traditionally studied the content and effect of press releases, often using this staple of public relations practice to measure how organizations frame themselves, successfully or unsuccessfully, for the news media. Today, digital press releases have a secondary function of providing information directly to the general public via an organization’s Web site. Moreover, these releases, when digitally archived, serve as a historical record for the organization, helping to build a perception that can sustain the organization’s image for historians (and journalists) through years and decades of retrospective study. Although this study is limited to a qualitative examination of the releases, these new digital placements suggest the need for more research regarding the function, placement, and effectiveness of press releases beyond the traditional media relations scope. Clearly, FEMA’s public messages were not limited to the press releases. But the releases do provide a significant historical record, and they do strongly suggest that FEMA avoided taking responsibility for the inadequate response to the hurricanes. In today’s world, these releases are available to anyone who cares to look at them, not just the journalists who receive them. As such, they provide an important and longstanding documentation of FEMA’s response, regardless of what state, local, or federal agency was responsible for any of the mistakes.

Much of the literature concerning framing involves the news media, but more and more scholars are considering the organizational tool from a public relations standpoint. In her analysis of the National Organization for Women, for example, Barnett (2005) concluded that organizations use
digital press releases to organize ideas and, just as important, to “correct journalistic frames” (p. 1). Zoch and Molleda (2006) argued that

along with the media’s framing of events and issues, public relations practitioners who act as sources...also contribute to the framing of a story as presented in the media. They do this by highlighting or withholding specific information about a subject or issue from those covering the story. (p. 283)

Research suggests that framing is an organizational tool for journalists that can help readers and viewers understand the issue and build upon familiar concepts. Zoch and Molleda (2006) noted that for public relations practitioners, frames have four functions: (a) to define problems or causation, (b) to determine the source of the problem, (c) to make “moral judgments” about the situation causing the problem, and (d) to propose remedies to the problem (p. 282).

Knight (1999) observed, as in this research, that “frames represent powerful mechanisms through which public relations practitioners can mediate debates related to public policy” (p. 184). On point to this study, too, is the assertion by Andsager and Smiley (1998) that government officials frequently “employ public information offices to communicate their frames” (p. 198).

In a political example, Flowers, Haynes, and Crespin (2003) examined the 1996 Republican presidential nominee press releases and subsequent news stories, concluding that media, in general, were more receptive to information-oriented messages than issue-oriented messages. They noted, however, that state press organizations were more receptive to issue-oriented messages. In another politically oriented analysis, Miller, Andsager, and Riechert (1998) suggested that candidates presented distinct images and positions and were “differentially successful in getting news media to reflect their positions” (p. XX). Rohlinger (2002) studied the abortion debate by examining how two opposing organizations used frames to attract media coverage and determined that media strategy, although important, is almost always influenced by organizational structure. An examination of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) media messages surrounding the 2000 presidential elections (Perkins, 2005) found that the media generally ignored the organization’s framing efforts. This article also brings attention to the need to study the role of organizational messages that do not appear in the media but that are still effective and persuasive.

As these studies indicate, framing relies on identifying and using persistent and consistent communication patterns, organizing arguments by using cognitive or cultural constructs, identifying and building a
community of relevant actors, and noting the dynamic development of
the issue or situation at stake. Framing, the way information is presented,
influences cognitive processes and meaning (Reese, 2003). Scheufele and
Tewksbury (2007) noted: “Frames ... become invaluable tools for pre-
senting relatively complex issues ... efficiently and in a way that makes
them accessible to lay audiences because they play to existing cognitive
schemas” (p. 12).

Reese (2003) noted that frames can be organized cognitively and cultu-
really. Cognitive framing organizes information in a way that appeals
“to basic psychological biases” by emphasizing positive or negative aspects
or presenting information in a specific sequence or pattern, whether they be
episodic or anecdotal (p. 12). Cultural frames, with appeal beyond a single
story, “are the ‘strategic’ frames that speak to a broader way to account for
social reality” (p. 13). An important attribute of frames, especially in the
study under question, are the way they structure understanding. They
“impose a pattern on the social world” (Reese, 2003, p. 17). Frames can
be tremendously important in the early days or hours of an issue or event.
The way the frame is structured can gain in complexity and efficacy over
time (Reese, 2003).

Hallahan (1999, pp. 210–221) developed a typology of seven framing
models: situations (i.e., “relationships between individuals in situations”),
attributes (i.e., “characterization of objects, events, and people”), choices
(i.e., “individuals must not merely evaluate attributes but must make a
choice between two independent options when some level of uncertainty
or risk is present”), actions (i.e., “focuses on persuasive attempts to
maximize cooperation in which no independent options or choices are
involved”), issues (i.e., “a dispute between two or more parties, usually over
the allocation of resources or the treatment or portrayal of groups in
society”), responsibility (i.e., “who should be credited or blamed for
events”), and news (i.e., “how news stories are portrayed or framed by
the media in an effort to explain complex or abstract ideas in familiar,
culturally resonating terms”).

Zoch and Molleda (2006) called for public relations research to focus not
only on framing from the standpoint of the receiver but also from the per-
spective of the source: “More work needs to focus on how framing theory is
used by public relations practitioners, or sources in general, to influence not
only media coverage, but the building of media agendas on particular
issues” (p. 302). This research attempts to address Zoch and Molleda’s chal-
lenge. By examining and analyzing the messages presented in press releases,
we can draw important conclusions about how an organization builds its
media agenda, and how that media agenda can be arranged and organized
to influence how the organization’s history is told.
Since its creation in 1979 during the administration of President Jimmy Carter, FEMA has faced scandals regarding the appointment of inexperienced people to high-level emergency planning positions. In fact, the first FEMA director with actual disaster management experience was not appointed until 1993, when President Bill Clinton named James Lee Witt, the former Arkansas state emergency manager, to head the agency (Gavira, Smith, & Fanning, 2005).

In 2001, George W. Bush appointed campaign manager Joe Allbaugh as FEMA director and Michael Brown as general counsel. Despite budget cuts and inexperienced personnel, FEMA worked well after September 11, 2001. In the wake of those terrorist attacks, Bush created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and FEMA became a subdepartment rather than an independent agency. Allbaugh left the agency in March 2003, and Brown took over soon after (Gavira, Smith, Fanning, 2005).

Under Brown’s leadership, FEMA ironically rehearsed for a Category 5 hurricane a year before Katrina struck, only to have the exercise aborted by budget cuts. Final planning decisions were not made and much was “left to be determined.” Even so, in a July 2004 press release (Hurricane Pam, 2004), FEMA Regional Director Ron Castleman said the exercise illustrated “great progress:” “Disaster response teams developed action plans in critical areas such as search and rescue, medical care, sheltering, temporary housing, school restoration and debris management” (Hurricane Pam, 2004).

Despite that “great progress,” the Hurricane Katrina response, especially in New Orleans, was generally inadequate and defined by a good deal of finger-pointing between state, local, and federal officials. While residents waited without food, water, or adequate shelter, it took 6 days to get National Guard troops to the area. Two weeks later, in a nationally televised speech, President Bush declared that “the nation will learn the lesson of Hurricane Katrina” (Gavira, Smith, & Fanning, 2005).

Then, less than 4 weeks after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, Hurricane Rita hit Florida, Texas, and Louisiana. FEMA officials had promised a more organized response, but evacuation efforts created mayhem and further damaged FEMA’s image.

We conceptualized this research to answer a number of questions about the government’s handling of press releases before, during, and immediately after the disastrous 2005 hurricanes. Drawing on framing theory and the emergent literature on its uses in public relations research, this study systematically examines the public relations process as practiced by FEMA in its conception, construction, and publication of its press releases related to these traumatic crises.
This work complements, enhances, and augments the mounting research on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Thus far, scholars have examined mediated crisis communication through the Internet (Procopio, 2007), government-press relations (Durham, 2006), social marketing in disaster management (Guion, Scammon, & Borders, 2007), corporate philanthropy during a crisis (Greer & Moreland, 2007; Mishra, 2006), public relations practitioners (Lundy & Broussard, 2007), health communication messages (Vanderford, Nastoff, Telfer, & Bonzo, 2007), and marginalized publics in crises (Waymer & Heath, 2007).

Just one study thus far (Gallagher, Fontenot, & Boyd, 2007) has dealt with the use of press releases by FEMA and other government agencies during the hurricanes. Gallagher et al. analyzed how press releases were used to formulate and define the contentious relationships between FEMA and state and local governments; whereas this study focuses on broader themes and frames.

Although all of the studies contribute in some way to the knowledge of crisis communication and how messages affect behavior, this research seeks to determine the role of FEMA’s public relations efforts in its routine process of issuing press releases. By casting these press releases in categorical characterizations according to framing theory, we address a relatively small but important part of FEMA’s public relations effort during the storms. The study also produced findings that illustrate, subtly and overtly, the concepts of framing theory.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The review of literature leads to the following research questions:

RQ1: How did FEMA frame the response to Hurricane Katrina?
RQ2: Did FEMA frames change over time?
RQ3: Were frames predominately cognitive or cultural?
RQ4: What framing models (i.e., situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news) are evident?

**METHOD**

This study examines news releases posted on FEMA’s Web site from August 24 (5 days prior to Katrina hitting the Gulf Coast) until October 31, 2005. During this period, the releases focused extensively on the hurricane disasters. Although the storms remained newsworthy for months (and still are), news coverage began to significantly decline after October 31.

The cut-off date was based on the fact that the number of hurricane-related news releases began to decrease. The September analysis is more
descriptive, and the October analysis provides a broad overview of frames without a detailed news timeline comparison. The releases offer insight into how FEMA responded to the catastrophic events and suggest that FEMA’s press releases provided relevant information but also ignored major events of the day while continually maintaining an air of optimism.

To examine the releases, two three-column matrixes were built. The first consisted of the date, the major hurricane-related news stories of the day, and the FEMA press release headlines. Categorization of 584 of 607 releases was clear-cut, because several were created in an almost template style. The emerging themes included:

- FEMA helps those in need and/or grants money (233);
- President declares emergencies (60);
- Disaster centers open and close (114); and
- Instructions for dealing with Katrina and Rita (177).

These and other minor themes, along with analysis of the release content, formed the foundation of the frame identification. The second matrix listed the release headlines alongside the major headlines of the day, allowing comparison of the two.

Grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) research principles involve incorporating change throughout the research process. Certainly, the 2005 hurricanes presented daily change. As the releases were examined, patterns emerged indicating two ongoing framing categories: instructor and superhero. A broader conceptualization—the optimist—was the overall positive tone of the releases. Moreover, the fact that the releases generally ignored the news of the day suggests a tone of denial throughout the duration of the study. The dispersion of frames and themes followed the events of the storm. For example, the instructor frame was more common in September, and declined in August. The superhero frame, consisting largely of FEMA granting large sums of money or doing substantial work, was far more common in the last week of August, yet it remained consistent during September and October. The optimist frame surrounded the vast majority of releases throughout the study.

Along with assuming inherent change, grounded theory rejects the notion of determinism and assumes that those involved do have control of their situations, even if they do not always exercise those controls. This study uses grounded theory to examine how the FEMA public relations staff responded to the hurricanes via their press releases. The releases provide a window into FEMA’s communication emphases and strategies, while also being a descriptive base for message and framing patterns. Most were no more than a page in length and most followed a standard inverted pyramid formula.
FINDINGS

RQ1: How did FEMA Frame the Response to Hurricane Katrina?

Two subframes—superhero and instructor—were clearly identified. A broader frame—optimism—appeared throughout the releases.

The instructor. The most common theme within the instructor framework addressed logistical matters related to the opening and closing of disaster relief centers. One hundred and thirteen releases addressed this topic. All of these releases were practical and straightforward, indicating time and date of openings and announcing that disaster victims could register first via phone and come to the center to address additional questions and “meet face-to-face with recovery specialists.” (Disaster Recovery, 2005.) In addition, the releases generally indicated that written instructional materials and state, federal, and volunteer agencies, along with Small Business Administration loan offers, would be available (Disaster Recovery, 2005). Related releases addressed the number of people served and the accomplishment of some of the centers.

Other instructional topics addressed frequently asked questions, how to apply for assistance, housing, safety guidelines, fraudulent disaster assistance claims, and emergency matters that were not related to the hurricanes. These releases informed readers on issues related to the application process, types of available assistance, checking the status of application, and assistance for undocumented immigrants (Frequently asked, 2005).

A release with the headline “Safety Our #1 Concern” (2005) focused on debris removal and the FEMA partnership with Mississippi’s Task Force Hope. The release included a list of safety guidelines and quotes the task force public affairs director: “Safety is our number one concern as heavy equipment and crews move from street to street removing debris.”

Additional teaching themes included instruction of arranging “home inspections without going home,” applying for crisis counseling, the availability of FEMA-sponsored one-way travel tickets to get people out of Texas shelters, and using care when spending grant money (Colorado Evacuees, 2005). The counseling releases noted that “seeking emotional help is smart and practical,” and that FEMA had approved more than $1.5 million for mental health assistance in Alabama.

Another unusual release format that fell into the instructional frame was one “two-part series” concerning misunderstandings related to disaster aid. The releases (Misunderstanding, 2005) stated “misleading rumors, half-truths and misunderstandings about available assistance may cause some hurricane-struck residents to miss out on much-needed help” and offered a list of myths and facts...
to assist hurricane victims. Most of these misunderstandings were about benefit qualifications and insurance.

**The superhero.** Many of FEMA’s releases took on a congratulatory tone and repeatedly announced the many generous contributions of the organization along with explanations of how FEMA will correct problems or mistakes. These releases framed FEMA as a superhero capable of taking care of everyone.

The most common theme appearing within the superhero frame is the announcement of the amount of money that FEMA had granted to specific states for hurricane recovery. Seventy-two releases addressed this topic with the notion that FEMA was solving problems by providing money. Many of these releases were cast in a celebratory tone, suggesting that the agency would continue to provide money to the affected areas. For example, on September 30, FEMA issued five releases indicating that between $8 million and $37 million had been distributed to various states to assist Katrina evacuees. These releases noted that funds provided “food, shelter, clothing, medical and dental care, funeral expenses and other emergency needs” and “housing assistance to those persons who are eligible” and that evacuees should contact FEMA to register for assistance (FEMA Provides, 2005). These releases also suggested that evacuees contact the Red Cross for additional assistance and lauded the organization and other volunteer agencies for their efforts (FEMA Provides, 2005).

A second theme within the superhero frame involved the president’s declaration of emergencies for states hosting hurricane evacuees. Forty-four releases made such announcements. Each generally noted that federal aid would supplement the local response to provide relief to evacuees who were now residing in states across the country (President Approves, 2005). Moreover, a few releases referred to the declaration of “major disasters” in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. The assistance under this declaration included “grants to help pay for temporary housing, home repairs and other serious disaster-related expenses.” (President Declares, 2005) The releases also noted that small business loans were available to cover residential and business losses (President Declares, 2005).

A September 7 hero-framed release declared that more than 1,200 FEMA inspectors were working to reach Louisiana residents (Community Relations, 2005) and a September 29 release chronicled the use of “battlefield technology” during “operation blue roof,” which described the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, operating under a FEMA mission assignment, installing blue plastic tarpaulin roofs on damaged homes. The technology used aerial photography to determine what homes to save (Corps of Engineers, 2005).
The optimist. Headlines throughout the releases included phrases such as “back to business,” “opportunity sessions,” “bringing hope to hurricane victims,” and “reaching out in many languages.”1 With very few exceptions, the FEMA releases were optimistic and forward-looking. One headline, in an out-of-place bargain basement tone, declared, “Hit Twice? Register Twice!” The body copy, however, retained the formal, but friendly FEMA qualities.

FEMA also registered some concern regarding the awarding of contracts to multinational corporations, but the agency did so within an optimistic frame. FEMA sent an October 8 release stating that the agency “solicits small, local and minority-owned businesses for Katrina-related contracts” and that “small business account for 72 percent of contract dollars for Katrina recovery” (FEMA Solicits, 2005). The release also noted FEMA conducted “outreach events” in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi so that they could “share contracting information with small, local and minority-owned businesses” (FEMA Solicits, 2005).

The overriding air of optimism continued. An October 11 Rita and Katrina summary release, for example, congratulated the agency for a slew of accomplishments, including the opening of recovery centers, the number of grant applications, shelters, trailers, inspections, blue roof installations, meals served, commodities shipped, and the amount of debris removed (Hurricanes, 2005).

RQ2: Did FEMA Frames Change Over Time?

The three emerging frames in this study strongly suggest that FEMA was out of touch with the news and events surrounding the disaster. An examination of the events and the topics addressed in FEMA releases reinforces this concept and suggests the agency did not have a grasp of the public’s needs and concerns.

It is important to note that many FEMA releases concerning logistical matters and instruction were, indeed, useful. People in the affected areas were in desperate need of information regarding assistance applications and disaster relief. And to a great degree, these press releases likely provided this important and essential information.

But from a broader perspective, the releases simply did not acknowledge the dramatic events surrounding the hurricanes or the dramatic controversy that consequently surrounded FEMA. For example,

1All press releases are available on the FEMA web site at: http://www.fema.gov/news/archives.fema
Katrina hit South Florida on August 25 and killed eleven people. The day’s releases noted that Brown spoke at the Colorado governor’s conference (FEMA’s Michael Brown, 2005). He mentioned that the country was prepared for natural disasters—”We are prepared for all-hazards disasters, man-made and natural”—but he focused on terrorism rather than the hurricane threat, stating:

The President knows what we at the Department of Homeland Security know, and what all of you know—the strength of our response capabilities has the power to take the terror out of terrorism. And when all response entities work together, we provide a stronger, more effective response.

Other August 25 releases noted that FEMA had provided $59 million for Hurricane Dennis (an early July hurricane that hit a lightly populated area in the Florida panhandle) and $6.5 million for winter storm aid. The organization also took on the instructor role and posted one notice urging Katrina preparedness featuring a list of “actions to undertake and supplies to gather.” Actions included evacuation, securing the home, and stocking up on emergency supplies (Officials Urge, 2005). Ironically, the agency used a superhero frame to applaud itself for providing $3.1 million to Oklahoma to buy flood-prone homes and construct a “flood detention facility.” Brown was quoted: “Mitigation projects like this are wise investments in communities vulnerable to regular flooding.” (Officials Urge, 2005).

The next day, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco declared a state of emergency. FEMA releases only mentioned the hurricane in the context of the suspension of disaster relief centers in the Florida panhandle that were operating as a consequence of previous hurricanes. Instead, topics fell within the instructor frame and addressed the need for New Yorkers to buy flood insurance, disaster planning in Oklahoma and Florida, and the need to use disaster checks “wisely.”

Two days before Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, FEMA authorized emergency aid for Louisiana. The release (Emergency Aid, 2005) stated:

Bush authorized the aid under an emergency disaster declaration issued following a review of FEMA’s analysis of the state’s request for federal assistance. FEMA will mobilize equipment and resources necessary to protect public health and safety by assisting law enforcement with evacuations, establishing shelters, supporting emergency medical needs, meeting immediate lifesaving and life-sustaining human needs and protecting property.

FEMA issued three press releases on August 28, the day Katrina reached Category 5 status. One declared emergencies in Florida, Mississippi, and
Alabama, and two addressed preparedness issues. By this time, there were approximately 25,000 people at the Superdome. The National Hurricane Center predicted levee breaches and 28-foot storm surges, and reported that much of the Gulf Coast could be uninhabitable for months to come.

Hurricane Katrina’s eye struck Buras, Louisiana, at 6 a.m., Monday, August 29. Brown appeared on CBS’s Early Show, saying he was pleased with preparations and would send aid to affected areas. Blanco also appeared and seemed satisfied with efforts. Both later noted concerns about flooding.

When Lake Pontchatrain breached the Industrial Canal, flooding more than 40,000 homes, FEMA issued eight releases in a day. Three were disaster declarations, one concerned a Nevada fire, and another noted that disaster relief centers (set up for previous hurricanes) would reopen in the Panhandle. The two most notable releases instructed first responders to wait for orders before dispatching to the affected areas (First Responders, 2005):

Michael D. Brown, Under Secretary of Homeland Security for Emergency Preparedness and Response and head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), today urged all fire and emergency services departments not to respond to counties and states affected by Hurricane Katrina without being requested and lawfully dispatched by state and local authorities under mutual aid agreements and the Emergency Management Assistance Contract.

The second such release asked for cash donations (and provided a list of organizations), and urged potential volunteers to stay away from “affected areas unless directed by a voluntary agency” (Cash Sought, 2005).

The August 30 Times Picayune headline announced “Catastrophic … Lakeview Levee Breach …” That same day, the New Orleans Convention Center became the second New Orleans shelter and the I-10 overpass served as the transportation waiting area with no supplies. Flooding had reached 80% of the city. One August 30 release instructed evacuees to “stay put” and away from damaged areas (Evacuees Cautioned, 2005). Eight more releases that day announced the deployment of medical teams to the Gulf States. The releases (i.e., Nevada Disaster, 2005) quoted Brown: “FEMA is coordinating the mobilization of all available federal resources to help residents affected by this dangerous storm.”

The next day, FEMA issued five releases. One listed federal response activities such as the mobilization of trucks, rescue workers, and supplies (Life Safety, 2005). The others noted deadlines for Dennis assistance, advice for avoiding shady contractors, and disaster assistance center logistics. Meanwhile, the news media reported on FEMA’s plans to bus people to Houston’s Astrodome; Bush’s declaration that New Orleans is “under
water;” increasing lawlessness in New Orleans; the escalating situation at the Convention Center; and the destruction of the Mississippi coastline.

FEMA reminded its Florida constituents on September 1 that it would continue long-term efforts in their state while addressing the needs of Katrina victims and instructed hurricane victims in logistical matters regarding paperwork requirements. The list of news events that day included:

- Bush told Diane Sawyer that a transportation lift was getting people out.
- Chertoff and Brown declared that they were not aware of Convention Center conditions.
- Superdome evacuation was suspended due to violence.
- Bush held a press conference with his father and Bill Clinton.
- Chertoff held a press conference and said the Superdome was secure.
- New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin sent a “desperate SOS” on CNN, saying he needed resources and buses. Nagin also lost his temper in a WWL radio interview and called for a moratorium on “God damned press conferences.”
- Blanco issued a “shoot to kill” order regarding looters. (Beefed up, 2005).

The events of September 2 were equally eventful and contentious. But again, the FEMA press releases largely ignored the news, even news that pertained to the agency. Amid chemical explosions, overturned buses, hospital evacuations, and press conferences praising FEMA, releases discussed disaster aid centers, fuel restrictions, and the delivery of supplies.

Instructions for FEMA hurricane victim registration ran alongside news of emergency declarations in Arkansas and Texas and the deployment of search and rescue teams on September 3. News headlines, on the other hand, noted that Blanco hired former FEMA director James Lee Witt to help in Louisiana, and those evacuations that were beginning at the Convention Center. The Superdome was mostly empty, and Chertoff expressed confidence in Brown, blaming state and local officials for the inadequate disaster management.

Six days after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, FEMA releases noted that housing plans were under way and that cruise ships would be available to some evacuees. A “Katrina Recovery Update” listed accomplishments, including the evacuation of more than 22,000 people from New Orleans, the opening of 563 shelters, the shipment of military meals-ready-to-eat to affected areas, and the dispatchment of medical and rescue professionals (Hurricane Katrina, 2005). Despite these apparent accomplishments, the Times Picayune declared that “Every official at FEMA should be fired, Director Michael Brown especially.” (Editorial blasts, 2005).
One week after Katrina hit, Barbara Bush toured the Astrodome in Houston, implying that many evacuees housed there were better off than they were before Katrina. FEMA releases noted that more emergencies were declared, more centers were opening, and more supplies were arriving. Similar FEMA messages addressing disaster recovery centers appeared on September 6, when news stories reported that firefighters were still in Atlanta waiting for FEMA dispatch orders, that FEMA had denied journalists’ requests to ride in rescue boats, that senators introduced legislation to separate FEMA and DHS, and that forced evacuation orders were being carried out in New Orleans.

The following day, FEMA issued 15 press releases. Most of these concerned disaster declarations and the recovery centers, along with releases announcing Hurricane Dennis assistance deadlines and accolades directed to community organizations and FEMA for helping in affected areas. The releases (Community Relations, 2005) quoted Ron Sherman, federal coordinating officer for FEMA recovery operations:

> Despite our best efforts, some residents may have unmet needs. . . . These specialists build on existing community networks, use local forums and, in many cases, go door-to-door in hard hit neighborhoods to encourage residents to get in touch with us about their losses.

News stories addressed contaminated floodwaters, the announcement of an investigation into relief efforts, and the distribution of money to FEMA, the Defense Department, and the Corps of Engineers.

On September 8, Bush suspended the Davis–Bacon Act of 1931, allowing workers to receive less than prevailing local wages in hurricane-affected areas, and questions arose regarding Brown’s résumé. FEMA releases ignored these issues and, instead, focused on the availability of legal, housing, and debris removal assistance.

Over the next two days (September 9 and 10), Brown was first removed from the relief effort, although retaining his directorship, and then completely removed from duties. Thad Allen was now in charge of the relief effort. CNN filed a suit against Brown for a “zero access” media policy, which was overturned the next day. None of these personnel or legal issues appeared in FEMA releases. Rather, the agency sent messages regarding disaster centers, emergency declarations, announcement of aid and money for affected areas, warning of fraudulent prices, and instructions for managing mold and preparing for an upcoming storm.

Allen made headlines on September 11 while working to coordinate recovery efforts in Louisiana. The next day, Brown resigned and R. David Paulison was appointed FEMA director. FEMA releases did include a short statement by
Brown. But there was no mention of the personnel change or Paulison in the reports. The text of Brown’s brief statement follows (Statement by, 2005):

Today I resigned as Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. As I told the President, it is important that I leave now to avoid further distraction from the ongoing mission of FEMA. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve this President and to work shoulder to shoulder with the hard working men and women of FEMA. They carry out an unusually difficult task under the harshest of circumstances. My respect for these dedicated professionals and this organization is unyielding. There is no other government agency that reaches people in a more direct way. It has been the best job in the world to help Americans in their darkest hours.

On September 13, Bush acknowledged personal responsibility for FEMA failures, but FEMA releases that day noted the declaration of disasters, as well as the distribution of money for 12 more states, along with more advice about hurricane preparation and applying for assistance. Similar patterns of releases followed for the next week as recovery efforts continued along the Gulf Coast.

By September 20, Hurricane Rita was a Category 2 in the Florida Keys, heading toward Galveston, Texas. FEMA messages, as well as news stories, focused on the potential disaster. Nagin suspended his plan to bring New Orleans residents home and told those who were there to leave again. Bush praised the work in New Orleans, and told reporters that FEMA would be better prepared for Rita.

Amid emergency declarations and the announcement of recovery centers, FEMA sent releases urging preparedness for Rita and announcing that the agency had shifted to “high gear.” The release quoted Paulison, declaring that FEMA was “working very closely with all of our federal, state, and local partners.” (Preparations, 2005). Other releases noted FEMA activities included the distribution of water, ice, and food, and the dispatching of rescue and medical teams (Preparations, 2005).

The infamous Texas traffic jam began on September 21 and intensified on September 22. Other than issuing the usual releases about disaster center closings, storm preparation, and announcements of emergency aid for Rita-affected areas, FEMA made little mention of the impending disaster.

The day before Rita hit near the Texas/Louisiana border, 24 nursing home residents died in a bus crash and five FEMA groups carried on with search-and-rescue efforts in New Orleans. One FEMA release addressed Rita preparation.

Hurricane Rita created floods in Louisiana and Texas, knocked out power for 1.2 million people, and created an estimated $5 billion in damage. Two releases that day addressed FEMA assistance services in Alabama. Others announced disaster and recovery efforts. FEMA also addressed
frequently asked helpline questions such as: Does it take longer for my FEMA application to process if I apply online? Can I get assistance without having a Social Security number? How will I receive any information mailed to me if I am unable to return to my home right away? I have received my funds for disaster assistance. Do I have to use these funds in a certain amount of time? (FEMA Addresses, 2005).

Throughout the remainder of September, FEMA continued to use the optimist, instructor, and superhero frames. As usual, most addressed disaster center logistics, the distribution of funds, how to apply for assistance, and the dangers of returning to flooded areas and misusing FEMA money. With the exception of an even-more optimistic tone, the overall frame and nature of October releases mirrored that of previous weeks.

Although FEMA remained in the news on a daily basis, the breaking stories had generally subsided until October 20 when Brown defended the agency, blaming the failed Katrina response on state and local officials. Promising to “re-engineer” preparedness, Chertoff said he recognized flaws in response, but also defended the agency. There was no mention of these speeches in FEMA releases, which, instead, urged Hurricane Wilma (an impending storm) preparedness and instructed hurricane victims regarding repairs and assistance.

RQ3: Were Frames Predominately Cognitive or Cultural?

As noted previously, cognitive frames, according to Reese (2003), emphasize positive or negative aspects or present information in a specific sequence or pattern, whether they be episodic or anecdotal. Cultural frames have appeal beyond a single story. Cultural frames “are the ‘strategic’ frames that speak to a broader way to account for social reality” (Reese, 2003, p. 13).

The frames in the FEMA releases were predominately cognitive—they presented information in a nearly template format, appealing to basic needs, rather than addressing more specific cultural issues. The tidy cookie-cutter model of FEMA releases suggest an accepted episodic pattern related to disaster communication. Examples of such releases included 113 announcements of disaster centers opening and closing; 72 announcements that FEMA had provided money to areas in need; 44 releases announcing emergency declarations in states housing evacuees; and 55 releases instructing readers on how to manage hurricane-related circumstances.

RQ4: What Framing Models (i.e., Situations, Attributes, Choices, Actions, Issues, Responsibility, and News) are Evident?

FEMA themes were analyzed following Hallahan’s (1999) typology of framing models relevant to public relations practice. Despite Hurricanes
Katrina and Rita being tremendous news events, FEMA did not use news frames. They did not link agency information to the surrounding national news events. They also lacked news frames in addressing the personnel turmoil and criticism surrounding the agency in the face of these disasters. Surprisingly, despite the fact that there was finger-pointing in all directions among politicians, FEMA did not employ issue or responsibility frames with much regularity during this process.

The dominant framing model was the action frame. Action frames focus on “persuasive attempts to maximize cooperation in which no independent options or choices are involved” (Hallahan, 1999, p. 215). FEMA framed its messages in a clinical and paternal way—telling victims how to register for assistance, for example. FEMA also used some situation, attribute, and choice frames, although they were not dominant.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the FEMA boilerplate that concludes several of the press releases examined (General News Releases, 2005), FEMA described itself as a pro-active agency that “prepares the nation for all hazards and manages federal response and recovery efforts following any national incident.” Its mission statement says it “initiates mitigation activities, trains first responders,” and “works with state and local emergency managers” (About FEMA, n.d.). In effect, it envisions its role as preparer, protector, and rescuer, but the frames its press releases displayed during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were superhero, instructor, and optimist. It is surprising to learn the FEMA press release writers generally ignored the controversy surrounding the organization in the wake of the storms. Rather, the agency repeatedly announced its generosity and presented a paternalist view toward the victims in the releases. Omission is practically customary.

Zoch and Molleda (2006) asserted that public relations efforts such as FEMA’s should contribute to the framing of stories carried by the media, that revelation or concealment tactics often help control or shape the messages. Addressing some of those issues with messages that carried more meaning might have helped the agency shape its image in a more positive manner. Doing so also might have positioned the agency to mediate the public policy debates (Knight, 1999) or to better organize the government’s ideas and “correct journalistic frames” (Barnett, 2005).

In Zoch and Molleda’s (2006) listing of four functions of public relations framing, FEMA’s releases did define problems and they did, in a very basic and practical sense, propose remedies. But in the far deeper functions of determining causation or making moral judgments, the agency fell short. In effect, the agency leaned heavily toward the information-oriented
messages preferred by most media (Flowers et al., 2003), and the press release writers kept their focus on the cognitive, preferring to present information in sequence, rather than seeking the “‘strategic’ frames that speak to a broader way to account for social reality” (Reese, 2003).

In effect, FEMA straddles the objective and subjective to create a strong claim on its history, a position that, Brothman (2002) asserted, becomes possible when it becomes a representation of evidence as incontrovertible truth. As historian Paul A. Cohen (1997) has said, “What comes after cannot influence what comes before” (p. 62).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As with any research, this study has limitations. Although the purpose was to examine FEMA press releases, we acknowledge that FEMA was conducting numerous other public relations efforts simultaneously. Nonetheless, we argue that the press releases provide insight into the public relations culture and frames of FEMA. Linking FEMA releases to media content would provide more insight to framing efficacy. We acknowledge that there may have been releases that were not posted to the web site.

This research does lay a foundation for additional framing scholarship. Future scholars may conduct direct comparative analyses between government public relations efforts and their attendant press coverage. Finally, this scholarship lays a foundation for future research in an important and understudied area—public relations as conducted by government entities. Although this study looked at framing at a federal level, future studies might look at framing and public relations practices at state or local government levels, thereby extending the research and expanding both practical and theoretical applications in an important area—government public relations.

REFERENCES


