

# The Role of Information and Communication in Disaster Response: An Overview

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*Well, I think first of all there was a failure to have real, clear information at our disposal. There was a real lack of situational awareness. We didn't have the capabilities on the ground to give us real-time, accurate assessments of the physical condition of the city.*

—Michael Chertoff

Only recently has emphasis (at least in words if not deeds) on the information element of power surfaced as a key contributor to strategic success. In fact the United States is just getting around to coming up with an acceptable term to describe the way the nation wields information as power: Strategic Communication. The government is still arguing about the pure definition of this term, but, in order to establish a baseline, consider the definition from the Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defense Review. Strategic Communication is defined as:

*Focused United States Government (USG) processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other elements of national power.<sup>1</sup>*

In its simplest form, strategic communication in disasters and catastrophes serves several purposes: first, prior to the event, it can

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1. Department of Defense, QDR Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 25 September 2006), 3.

serve to manage the expectations of the public regarding the capabilities and potential assistance provided at all levels of government; second it provides public information prior to and during the event to facilitate the safety and security of U.S. citizens; and finally, it can, if proactively and effectively used in conjunction with visible ongoing relief efforts, serve to increase the credibility of government and serve as a calming influence to the citizenry. Strategic communication during domestic disasters also serves a foreign policy role. Effective USG strategic communication can portray the United States as a capable, efficient and effective responder to the needs of its people and so send a message to emerging democracies regarding the role of government toward the needs of its citizens. On the other hand, poor USG strategic communication can contribute to the opposite perception world-wide.

### **Katrina: A Strategic Communications Timeline**

Hurricane Katrina provides an excellent example of the impact of strategic communication on the perceptions of victims, the U.S. domestic population and foreign audiences. Consider the communicated reports and images as reflected in the following timeline:

- Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005 as a Category 4 hurricane.
- AP (The Associated Press) reported mass looting in the French Quarter on August 30th.
- August 31st: The Los Angeles Times reported that tens of thousands were trapped in the Superdome. “A 2-year-old girl slept in a pool of urine. Crack vials littered a restroom. Blood stained the walls next to vending machines smashed by teenagers.”
- September 1st: The AP reported: “Storm victims were raped and beaten, fights and fires broke out, corpses lay out in the open, and rescue helicopters and law enforcement officers were shot at as flooded-out New Orleans descended into anarchy Thursday.”
- September 1st at 2 p.m. Michael Brown said on CNN: “I’ve had no reports of unrest, if the connotation of the word unrest means that people are beginning to riot, or you know, they’re banging on walls and screaming and hollering or burning tires or whatever.”

I've had no reports of that." The following day President Bush publicly praised Brown: "Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job."<sup>2</sup>

- September 3rd: CNN reported that New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin called Lieutenant General Russell Honore a "John Wayne dude" who can "get some stuff done. He came off the doggone chopper, and he started cussing and people started moving," Nagin said in an interview.<sup>3</sup>
- Also on September 3rd the Superdome was fully evacuated. But by the 9th the damage was done. Michael Brown was removed as the lead federal officer and replaced by Coast Guard Admiral Thad Allen. By the 12th Brown had resigned as the head of FEMA.<sup>4</sup>

Were the reports accurate? Did Brown get it wrong? Why didn't he see what the major media reported? What is the role of the media vs. the role of the government in communicating to the various audiences described above? The answer to these questions must start with an examination of the information environment in which the government, media and public communicate today. This information environment provides the context to understand the strategic impact of the time gap described above: a gap where the government's voice was not heard thus creating a vacuum that was quickly filled by other voices.

## The Information Environment

*Information is the oxygen of the modern age. It seeps through the walls topped by barbed wire; it wafts across the electrified borders.*

—Ronald Reagan

Traditionally power has been defined as the ability to influence. This can be done in many ways. Certainly military power influences through coercion. But, information as power co-opts by shaping the percep-

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2. This timeline extracted from: Think Progress, "Katrina Timeline"; available from <http://thinkprogress.org/katrina-timeline>; Internet; accessed Nov. 28, 2006.

3. CNN, "The Latest on Katrina's Aftermath," September 17, 2005 [newswire service on-line]; available from <http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/09/16/news.update/index.html?eref=sitesearch>; Internet; accessed November 28, 2006.

4. Think Progress, "Katrina Timeline."

tions of others.<sup>5</sup> One must consider the challenges of the current information environment on the U.S. government's ability to shape it. News comes from many sources, from mainstream broadcast and print journalists, to someone on the street with a camera cell phone and text messaging, or a blogger with a laptop and Internet service. Images and stories (both accurate and inaccurate, rumor and innuendo) can be transmitted inexpensively and in real-time. Where once nation-states freely wielded information as power, now any one individual, anywhere in the world can strategically impact a nation-state's policies. The role of this "new media" has become so important that it will become a separate portfolio in a proposed reorganization within the office of the Secretary of Defense.<sup>6</sup> So Thomas Friedman was right: "The world is flat," and when discussing the information environment the world is not only flat, it is shrinking...and rapidly.

The U.S. government (and its military) speaks of information superiority in its doctrinal and policy documents, but this environment not only precludes that superiority, but arguably only allows a government to dominate it for a short, finite period of time. It should be reasonable to expect, however, that the nation as a minimum *manages* the information environment effectively and efficiently. To do so it must proactively tell its story using key influencers as spokespersons and respond to mis- and dis-information rapidly and credibly. It must be available and respond at the beginning of a story. Failure to manage the environment results in what can be referred to as the "genie in a bottle" syndrome. Once the genie is out it's difficult, if not impossible, to get her back in. Likewise, once a story is out in the information environment, especially accompanied by powerful images, it is difficult (but not impossible) to counter. The period of August 29th through September 2nd, 2005, was a critical period in which the government lost its ability to shape perception. To be sure the government's situational awareness based on the significant communication architecture breakdown severely hampered the effort but the bottom line is that the genie was out of the bottle...and, while things would get better, the attitudes of the

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5. Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 2.

6. Based on a discussion with the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Joint Communication) on October 26, 2006.

American people and the world were already irrevocably impacted. The U.S. government review spoke to the problem in its lessons learned:

*Without timely, accurate information or the ability to communicate, public affairs officers at all levels could not provide updates to the media and to the public...federal, state, and local officials gave contradictory messages to the public, creating confusion and feeding the perception that government sources lacked credibility.<sup>7</sup>*

It is through the lens of this information environment, then, that the role of the government and its military in strategic communication during domestic disasters must be examined and that the specific lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina must be viewed.

### **The Mainstream Media: Filling the Gap**

*I learned that in addition to enjoying words for the way they could evoke emotion, I also loved them for their usefulness in conveying information.*

—Pierre Salinger

It is important to discuss the actions of mainstream media during Katrina through that information environment lens, for it has significantly impacted the business of journalism today. Note that the role of the media as a conduit of public information was filled admirably on the local level by the New Orleans Times-Picayune for their reporting on Katrina. Their heroic coverage under the most difficult of conditions resulted in a Pulitzer Prize for meritorious public service. But, the role of the U.S. broadcast and print media in filling the gap described previously with news reports on the ground cannot be overemphasized. The focus here is on national broadcast outlets, major newspapers and news services for that's where many Americans and foreign news sources get their information. Reporters, no longer acting as objective observers, instead became emotionally immersed in their stories in the midst of the catastrophe. Many Americans will remember Anderson Cooper's coverage of Katrina. Recall Cooper, of CNN, interrupting

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7. The White House, "The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned," February 2006, available from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/reports/katrina-lessons-learned.pdf>; Internet; accessed November 28, 2006.

Senator Mary L. Landrieu, a Louisiana Democrat, who was thanking federal officials for their help: “Excuse me, senator,” interjected Cooper, “I’m sorry for interrupting. I haven’t heard that, because, for the last four days, I’ve been seeing dead bodies in the streets here in Mississippi. And to listen to politicians thanking each other and complimenting each other, you know, I’ve got to tell you, there are a lot of people who are very upset, and very angry, and very frustrated.... There was a body on the street in this town yesterday being eaten by rats because this woman had been lying in the street for 48 hours.”<sup>8</sup> Many other reporters followed suit. This is not to imply that Cooper’s report was not true, or that it was not important. It is, however, reflective of emotive reporting in isolation that seems prevalent today in contrast to the more objective (yes, balanced) reporting that was a hallmark of journalism in an age past. Such reports had a huge impact on the perceptions of the American and overseas audiences regarding the state of the recovery and thus the capabilities of the government even though, in retrospect, many of these broadcasts were simply inaccurate, fueled by rumors of mythical proportions.<sup>9</sup> The “genie in a bottle” construct was in play and to this day many believe the initial inflated rumors of rape, murder and other violence.

Broadcast journalism in today’s information environment is more than ever before a business; typically a fairly effective self-policing business. But it is about advertising revenue driven by viewership and so “hard-hitting,” breaking news sells. The information environment fundamentally drives this journalistic bent. In the old system of journalism reporters provided value added by gathering information in the form of relevant stories and delivering it. Today, in this current

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8. Alvin Snyder, “Hurricane Katrina-Domestic and Foreign Newscasters View Things Differently,” University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy, September 18, 2005 [newswire service online]; available from [http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newsroom/worldcast\\_detail/050918\\_worldcasting/](http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newsroom/worldcast_detail/050918_worldcasting/); Internet; accessed November 28, 2006.
  9. Susannah Rosenblatt and James Rainey, “Katrina Rumors,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2005; available from <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-rumors27sep27,0,5492806,full.story?coll=la-home-headlines>; Internet; accessed December 1, 2007. This article discusses inaccurate reporting based on rumor and speculation and cites numerous cases from numerous media outlets, to include the Los Angeles Times...the newspaper where the article was posted.

environment, information is plentiful and journalists constantly look for ways to make their product more “sellable.” Philip Meyer, holder of the Knight Chair of Journalism at the University of Southern California notes: “Old media no longer have the luxury of producing good journalism out of family pride, civic duty or dedication to maintaining their institutional importance. They have to justify it to short term investors. They have to create a new culture for themselves and find new ways to add value to information.”<sup>10</sup> This is the reality of journalism today. It won’t change. The U.S. government must understand this in order to manage it, but the real issue is that they provided no effective counter to those stories. The good news stories weren’t being told.

Interestingly, reporting of September 11, 2001, events is the exception based on its focus on successes. Saving lives was a value added story.<sup>11</sup> But to be fair, 9/11, as tragic and devastating as it was, did not reflect the near total communication infrastructure breakdown caused by Katrina. And so not only was government’s job of providing public information greatly diminished, it’s ability to establish situational awareness in order to effectively respond was also limited.

Good news stories did eventually begin to flow particularly when General Honore and Admiral Thad Hall became visible, credible spokespersons. But the “gap” in time created an information vacuum that was filled by the broadcast media competing for the “value added” story.

### **Strategic Communication and Foreign Policy: The Broader Perspective**

*We must engage more aggressively, explaining and advocating our policies in ways that are fast, accurate and authoritative.*

—Karen Hughes

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10. Phillip Meyer, “The Proper Role of the Media in a Democratic Society,” in *Media, Profit and Politics*, ed. Joseph Harper and Thom Yantek (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2003), 12.

11. Frances Edwards-Winslow, “Telling It Like It Is: The Role of the Media in Terrorism Response and Recovery,” *Perspectives on Preparedness*, Harvard University, No. 9 (August 2002), 2.

The lack of strategic communication during the “gap” period had significant impact beyond our shores. While many parts of the world sympathized with our plight and offered significant assistance, emotive and inaccurate media reporting without effective and timely U.S. government response played havoc on the image of the U.S. overseas. South Africa’s “The Star” newspaper reported: “Who would have thought that over a million American citizens would become ‘refugees’ in their own country and flay their government for its failure to come to their aid” quickly enough “or that in the most advanced society in the world...the badly injured would be left for dead because of a lack of assistance?”<sup>12</sup> Qatar’s *Ash Sharq* newspaper on September 5th said the Bush administration’s handling of Hurricane Katrina “made parts of the U.S. appear like Mogadishu and the Congo.”<sup>13</sup> Similar writings could be read in the popular European press.

The initial overseas reaction of sympathy was quickly replaced by shock. Images and reports in the mainstream press reflected what many audiences saw as evidence of abject poverty and racism from a government that touted democracy and freedom as the ideals for the world writ large. The public diplomacy mechanisms could not react to the bow wave of criticism abroad. The U.S. could not communicate effectively domestically or overseas.<sup>14</sup> Karen Hughes officially took her job (as Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs) on September 9, 2005, a post chartered to tell the American story to foreign audiences. She noted: “We saw pictures on Thursday of people who were waiting to be rescued and didn’t feel that we had

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12. Todd Pittman, “Katrina Evokes Questions in Africa,” *Associated Press* (Dakar, Senegal), September 10, 2005; available from [http://eccentricstar.typepad.com/public\\_diplomacy\\_weblog\\_n/hurricane\\_katrina\\_and\\_us\\_image\\_overseas/index.html](http://eccentricstar.typepad.com/public_diplomacy_weblog_n/hurricane_katrina_and_us_image_overseas/index.html); Internet; accessed November 28, 2006.

13. “Review of Arab Editorials,” *The Middle East Times* (Cyprus), September 5, 2005; available from [http://eccentricstar.typepad.com/public\\_diplomacy\\_weblog\\_n/hurricane\\_katrina\\_and\\_us\\_image\\_overseas/index.html](http://eccentricstar.typepad.com/public_diplomacy_weblog_n/hurricane_katrina_and_us_image_overseas/index.html); Internet: accessed November 28, 2006.

14. Based on remarks at a meeting at the State Department by public diplomacy officials that the author attended in September 2006.

arrived quickly enough,” she said, adding that President Bush “has acknowledged that we have to do better and we want to do better.”<sup>15</sup>

But once again, the genie was out of the bottle... The damage was done.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CAUTIONS

*In the end, you make your reputation and you have your success based upon credibility and being able to provide people who are really hungry for information what they want.*

—Brit Hume

The information environment flattens and shrinks the world, empowering individuals. There is no going back. The asymptotic rise in the ability of the individual to strategically impact the geostrategic playing field through the use of information will continue unabated into the future. The reference to the United States as a “superpower” is a misnomer. It refers only to its prowess in wielding the military element of power. It is certainly not an information superpower. One could argue, in fact, that the government can’t dominate this environment except for short periods of time...and so it must be prepared to manage information to its ends as effectively and efficiently as possible. But even management of the information environment requires a new way of doing business.

Bureaucracies are, by design, cumbersome and slow. The U.S. government is the quintessential bureaucracy in that regard. That is not a bad thing for many aspects of running a nation. The messy business of collaboration and consensus building creates a necessary friction in a democracy. Strategic communication, however, requires a nimbleness that is the antithesis of bureaucratic plodding. Communicating messages that are both proactive and reactive must occur on the turn of a dime. Studies have shown that you have about 15 minutes in today’s information environment to respond to mis- and dis-information or it becomes the truth to the target audience. So, nimbleness must be built

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15. “Bush aide: U.S. image tarnished by looting after the hurricane,” *Cox News Service* (Gainesville, FL), September 9, 2005; available from <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/53.htm>; Internet; accessed November 30, 2006.

into processes, cultures and infrastructure. One must think about this from both a planning and execution perspective.

Centralized policy and contingency planning based on a national strategy is essential. Rapid, decentralized execution of those plans with the flexibility to react to unforeseen circumstances can allow the U.S. voice to be heard domestically and world-wide. If the mainstream media can be on the streets of New Orleans providing real time images and reports, then the government must develop and rapidly deploy communication infrastructure packages that allow its voice to be heard simultaneously. Current ongoing actions at the national level are cautiously encouraging.

Ambassador Hughes has taken positive steps in this regard in the year that she has been in her job. A National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication has been drafted and is being coordinated within the beltway for potential implementation. She has provided specific guidance to Public Affairs officers at embassies throughout the world that shortcuts (and eliminates in many cases) the requirement for bureaucratic clearances to speak to the international press. She has established a rapid response unit within the State Department to monitor and respond to world and domestic events. And she has established processes to disseminate coordinated U.S. themes and messages laterally and horizontally within the government.<sup>16</sup> The Defense Department recognizes the problem as well and is doing something about it.

The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) conducted a spin-off study on Strategic Communication that resulted in a roadmap addressing planning, resources and coordination. Perhaps the most important aspect of the roadmap is the stated objective of creating strategic communication plans in conjunction with policy development, thus fulfilling Edward R. Murrow's desire to be brought in on the takeoff, not the crash landing.<sup>17</sup> However, it is important to point out some cautions.

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16. Based on discussions with members of Ambassador Hughes' staff at various times in 2005 and 2006.

17. QDR Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication: 3.

First, there is a need for culture change within the U.S. government regarding wielding information as power. Senior government officials must seek out opportunities to engage the press. This must be a strategic imperative. To have a voice you must engage vigorously both the press who share your views and those who don't. The U.S. must embrace contrarians such as Al Jazeera, otherwise the Arab world will hear only one side of the story. This also requires that the government develop a culture of engagement with the press. This will mean that it may have to accept some incidents of information fratricide or information collateral damage...however, if it doesn't it will always be behind in today's information environment. Second, processes and organizations must be built that endure beyond this administration. Ambassador Hughes has the ear of the President and therefore may be able to achieve many of her goals even while serving only at the Undersecretary level. But when she departs in two years, it is unlikely that her replacement will maintain that level of trust or power. The short and frustrating tenures of her two predecessors serve as a testament to that reality.<sup>18</sup> Americans have a modern history of distrust of information used as power by the government that goes back to World War I and the Creel Commission, and that was solidified by the propaganda machine of the Germans in World War II. The demise (after four months) of the Office of Strategic Influence in the Pentagon is recent evidence.<sup>19</sup> The United States will never have a Department (or Secretary) of Information so the current positive policy actions must be codified to be enduring. Finally, the government must have both presence and communication infrastructure during crises, both domestic and abroad. Presence does not necessarily mean an American voice, but we must co-opt "key influencers" willing to speak on behalf of America to a target audience who see them as credible. Public affairs organizations must have a rapidly deployable capability, both in people and equipment, which puts them in the street with the mainstream media during disasters and catastrophes. The military has made strides in this regard; the policy level interagency has not.

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18. David E. Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars," U.S. News and World Report, April 25, 2005: 27-28.

19. *Ibid.*, 30.

Strategic Communication during disaster response directly supports the ability of the U.S. government to establish a safe and secure environment for its citizens. Accurate public information is critical. Managing expectations and positively influencing perceptions is equally important. Senior leaders must provide accurate messages in conjunction with actions and images that instill public confidence in an information environment that they can rarely dominate. In the end, Strategic Communication is leader's business and leaders must take steps to break bureaucratic paradigms so that they can compete and tell their story.