

Hurricane Stories, from Withinⁱ

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Before Hurricane Katrina, I remember saying it was the busiest semester of my life, that our video ethnography group was working at a ‘near death’ pace, and that my office looked like a ‘hurricane hit it’. Three months later, none of that was so important. And other metaphors are better for describing work and disorganization.

The hurricane itself was a mild affair for me, working on a computer in Lake Charles, four hours from New Orleans and two from my home in Baton Rouge. Often when you evacuate—and even when you don’t—the storm heads somewhere else and you have a holiday. ‘Hurricane parties’ are infrequently held during storms.

But when the images began to appear on television, life began to change. ‘From within’ the hurricane community the most information I ever had—constant, voluminous, multi-sourced, and imperfect—was in the first two days after Katrina, before I returned to Baton Rouge. From within, there is often less time to collect, sift, and absorb mediated information about events as they occur than from without. You turn on the television, or radio—but there is not time to sit and watch. Too much to do. You receive email messages from people in far flung places that know more about what’s happening than you do, or may know, or don’t know and think they do. I’m sorry for the emails I didn’t answer. And for my insensitive friends that forgot to send one—believe me, you’re off the hook.

‘What’s happening’ is the issue from within and there is a beautiful, collective effort to find out. The media are crucial—as WWL in New Orleans produced its live webcast, their disorganization was perfectly attuned to the state of the city. From without, it was possible to watch too much television and become depressed, but from

within, there is just too much to do—including finding out ‘what’s happening.’ Baton Rouge—the closest major city to New Orleans—began filling up with evacuees before the storm hit. Many of the faculty in New Orleans appeared in the halls of LSU. People opened their homes to the evacuees, the displaced. Interpersonal communication channels that were nonexistent or inactive are opened. Structural relationships are no longer good predictors of communication flow: complete strangers discuss important matters like lifelong friends. For almost everyone, time is divided between taking care of local and specific matters, and communicating information about these local and specific matters. In the early stages, the failures of FEMA are less relevant from within than from without. ‘What’s happening’ questions do not reflect any deep interest in causes or blame or explanation. These are discursive interests for the watchers, triggering responses by the hurricane community that are sporadic and haphazard.

What is conveyed by television is local and specific—in that sense it is perfectly valid as just and only that—local and specific slices of the world. During the storm, pre-positioned cameras show wind and rain. Few if any were lucky enough to film an ‘event.’ Just for comparison: we filmed several dozen continuous hours on Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras one year. Even there, it was often difficult to tape an event without a videographer directing the camera. Since hurricane images are momentary, and wind and rain are boring, they are not looped (repetitively provided for the television audience). Until the second hurricane, three weeks later, neither wind and rain, nor their media representations were of much concern to me.

It is a different matter with looped looting. We will need a committed investigator to examine, through the thousands of hours of media footage that were taken

in the week after Katrina, how many images of looters were captured on tape, how many were shown to the viewing audience, and how often. Such an effort will be welcome as a definitive analysis of news gathering and editorial choice, and many of us will anticipate a key hypothesis: when it comes to looting and criminal activity, a few shots will serve your news feed for quite some time.

Three days after the storm, these images of looting and lawlessness began to affect Baton Rouge. A senior municipal official, in his wisdom, stated that the ‘thugs from New Orleans’ would not take over our city. A senior university official, in his wisdom, decreed that ‘confirmed reports of civil unrest’ made it necessary to lock all the doors. When I went to my weekly tennis lesson, my coach noted that two carjackings had occurred at the intersection fifty yards away and that just down the road a gang of looters had run through the grocery store firing guns. (He was still teaching--thugs don’t do tennis.)

Shortly after these stories had spread through the city—and their dismissal as rumors by the Baton Rouge media—we first went to the field to film interviews. Louisiana State University had already turned into a storm center for news, analysis, and medical care for evacuees. Many of the faculty were housing displaced persons, and volunteering their services with the Red Cross. The desire to ‘do something’ was palpable throughout the city, as it doubled in size. A had been nagging at me—expertise, which we believe we have in STS, could actually be useful. A doctor volunteers as a doctor—not only to carry sandbags. Why weren’t we ‘out there’ doing what we do best—finding out what is happening in the world? Since late 2002, our

group at LSU had become interested in digital video as an ethnographic tool, shooting several hundred hours of footage in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In retrospect, the most important thing we did was not to think too much about this—get in the field as soon as possible. A hurricane is no time to review the literature and ponder the kind of argument that will fly at Social Studies of Science. Moreover, the faculty at LSU that did have an actual claim to hurricane expertise were absolutely overwhelmed with calls from reporters throughout the world, fielding so many calls that it was virtually impossible for them to work. Our advantage, if one could call it that, was simply that we had the equipment, the experience in video ethnography, and the time. We determined that our contribution would not be a sandbag, but an archive. We knew that the media would lose interest as the people were rescued off of houses and the shelters were emptied. We could guess based on decades of work in STS, that there would be controversies over the humanly constructed technologies designed to protect New Orleans from water, and the social practices that were expected to smooth rescue and recovery.

Many people want to tell their stories. During the first ten days, when there were 5000 individuals passing through the largest Baton Rouge shelter, 1000 members of the press came to interview and film. Those few individuals who happen to be in certain locations get far more than their 15 minutes of fame—they get media burnout. But the consequence is the media neglect of the other half million people who were dramatically affected by the storm, who also have their opinions, their own accounts of escape and loss. They are eager to talk—and they tell you when they do not want to talk, as it should be.

We designed some guiding questions for displaced persons and took several camera setups to a variety of locations during the next weeks. Usually we went with six to eight doctoral students and often one or two undergraduates. We could interview individuals in parking lots, as they shopped for provisions; we could work with the Red Cross to find individuals in the main shelters. Nearly everyone we interviewed was videotaped, but a few individuals preferred ‘audio only’ (leave the lens cap on), and a small number did not want to be recorded at all. The interviews occur in a social context that is partially captured, whether or not the videographer is thinking much about context. We went to the ninth ward on the first day citizens were allowed back, and conducted several interviews with those few people in the area—in the lower ninth, armed guards still blocked every entrance and there was no one to interview. What seemed critical was the visual record—we placed notes with my contact information on the houses and shot all the footage we could. Flexibility in equipment and its use are important--thinking on your feet with your gear. Video ethnography is important for the STS bag of tricks because the data that are collected in an audiovisual stream can also be the raw material for presentation. Much in the same way that the field notes of an ethnographer are excerpted for text-based arguments, audiovisual data are cut into a movie.

It was not long before we became part of the information flow—but we did not take calls from reporters. Several times we met after the day’s work, and tried to formulate a consensus summary of what we had learned, in the knowledge that we would experience different slices of the ground. Twice we broadcast these as emails to various colleagues, friends, listservs, and websites. We quickly learned that there was no easy answer to the looting and crime issue that was part of our initial motivation (had our

neighbors really become animals?). Yes, people did enter stores and exit with products they had not paid for—some of these were survival-related provisions and some were not. (In case of confusion, beer is considered a ‘provision’ in Louisiana.) Sometimes the police were involved in breaking into stores. Was police behavior or the crime rate worse than it had been before the hurricane? The vast majority of those people we interviewed were not much concerned with crime and had not seen any. The crucial contextual factors are that New Orleanians consider themselves sophisticated with respect to crime and risk and that New Orleans police were considered relatively harsh and corrupt (and effective at crowd control) before the hurricane. Often the accounts of rapes and murders that we heard were, on further probing, unwitnessed, second-hand stories. Insofar as the people we interviewed were representative of the New Orleans metropolitan area, there is simply no evidence that looting and crime were widespread during the immediately aftermath of the storm.ⁱⁱ

Three weeks after Katrina, Hurricane Rita arrived. Because Houston was evacuated, and the ninth ward flooded once again, the media coverage continued. The eye passed over southwestern Louisiana. The house where I had watched Katrina was now uninhabitable in Lake Charles. Many of the hurricane representations were blatantly wrong—in the straightforward sense that audio commentary and subtitles pertained to a location in Texas, while the video clip showed waves lapping at Lake Charles. Many of them were highly misleading, in the sense that audio commentary about flooding was paired with video of the lake itself. The impression was that the city might already be submerged, as New Orleans had been a short time ago—when few neighborhoods

experienced any flooding. Most video clips simply showed a lake with high water and wind.

It is tempting to say that experiencing the second hurricane gave new meaning to my study, or provided some nuanced understanding of loss and aftermath, or any of the other formulations that emphasize the element of participation over the element of observation. After three months I am convinced that it makes little difference. The diversity of experiences associated with the hurricane provide one's identity as a full member of the hurricane community, whether or not your house was damaged. You are part of the hurricane community if you are there for the aftermath—yes, FEMA is part of it, though the people may be from other places. If there is a single phrase that characterized our early interviews with displaced people it is this: “I’m one of the lucky ones,” followed by an account of their losses. There is commitment and sharing in stories of escape and support. There is an appreciation for the well being of others—in more social scientific terms, the question of relative welfare is weighted towards an appreciation for those at the bottom, rather than envy of those at the top.

In Lake Charles, going back to the affected areas was strictly forbidden, but you could easily get in—this was the biggest surprise of the entire experience for me. From the first day after Rita, radio and television broadcasts made it clear that barricades were up, Interstate exits were closed, and that anyone attempting to enter the city of Lake Charles would be turned back. Not only was this untrue, it was not even the case that only residents were admitted. Every day for the first week, we drove to Lake Charles in the morning and back to Baton Rouge at night. We were stopped, indeed, by guardsmen and police, but briefly—it did not seem to matter whether you were bringing supplies,

wanted to see your house, were checking on a cat, or any other thing. No one ever asked for identification, and sometimes simply driving up to the police was sufficient for them to wave you through. There are two possible reasons for this—governmental authorities actually had no knowledge about (or no influence on) ingress and egress. That seems unlikely, given that it was almost impossible to avoid the discovery of the critical fact that people could readily get in. I believe rather that the authorities wanted a small proportion of residents in the city to begin the cleanup and guard property—but not so many as to overwhelm the shattered infrastructure and limited facilities in operation. The solution appears to have been to rely on that small proportion of the population that disbelieves the authorities, doesn't listen to news, or distrusts and dismisses the government: in short, surveillance by the disaffiliated.

Word of our video ethnography began to circulate at LSU, and we were asked to join a group of engineers (“Team Louisiana”) investigating the New Orleans levee breaks that had been identified, after some resistance by the Corps of Engineers, as the proximate cause of the flooding. As in many technological controversies, multiple teams with different expertise and funding sources sought the causes of ‘failure’ in the historical, political, organizational, and engineering practices that constructed and maintained the extensive levee system in south Louisiana. The ostensible reason for our participation was to discover the times of electric clocks that had stopped near the five main breaks along the Industrial, London Avenue, and 17th street canals. However, to its credit, Team Louisiana was more interested in documenting ‘what happened’ to the people—a subject that has little direct bearing on the levee breaks but everything to do

with the social history of the city and the aftermath of what virtually all New Orleanians anticipated in advance and knew after the fact to be a humanly constructed disaster.ⁱⁱⁱ

The final lesson pertains to the traditional wisdom of social scientists about community solidarity in the wake of disaster. Rescue and recovery workers describe a sequence of phases in the public response, moving from appreciation to indifference to hostility. By December 2005, when residents finally returned to the lower ninth ward, security was increased due to a threat of violence. But at the interpersonal level, my own experience is that the aftermath during these past three months has been nothing short of amazing in terms of helpfulness, affability, and human companionship under conditions of duress. The reduced population of New Orleans has been generous and friendly. Lake Charles, while it now looks like the poor southern town it never was, is rich with love and hope. There is indeed a moment, after the storm, when social life works the way it is supposed to—it has nothing to do with whether FEMA helped you or not.

Please remember. These hurricanes on the Gulf Coast were not just a bad thing—they were a disaster. The force of that term has been exhausted through repetition and application to small events. Please remember. Take the time to enjoy your work—it is truly a blessing to have a place to do it. And your office—when papers and books are strewn about? A hurricane didn't hit it.

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ⁱⁱ My strong sense is that looting was much higher in the months after the storm than it was during the immediate aftermath. The absence of people in many areas of New Orleans, and the presence of valuable objects, particularly on the second stories of houses, made looting easy. Many report being looted multiple times.

ⁱⁱⁱ I would love to tell you more about this team, but I have never meet any of these colleagues, which gives some idea of scientific collaborations after Katrina. 'What's

happening' is giving way to 'what happened.' It will be a very long time before one can assess this in any full and systematic way.