

## FRAMING "KATRINA"

*The analysis of Katrina coverage by the American media is presented in the article. The questions of news framing process, predominant editorial criteria, challenges faced by the journalists, and the change in traditional US agenda setting theory are addressed. The main episodic and thematic framing elements of the coverage are identified in the context of increasing media influence on the public opinion and political agenda-setting process.*

This article examines the coverage of Katrina hurricane in American media through the analysis of framing process as a one of the core instruments of media and political communication. Katrina coverage in media, especially on TV, represents important momentum for re-evaluation of process of political communication within American political spectrum and rethinking of the role media play or are potentially able to play in the modern society. The main research questions were:

- how the media news framing process in covering Katrina was organized;
- what editorial criteria were predominant in the coverage
- what were the main challenges for both newsmakers and media organizations
- what have changed in traditional US political agenda-setting process.

Author looks at the process of changes within American media spectrum in Katrina coverage and attempts to determine main episodic and thematic framing elements in the context of increasing media influence on the public opinion and political agenda-setting process.

Media coverage of Katrina was one of the milestones in the history of American media due to unprecedented harm made by hurricane and due to unprecedented media attention to this disaster. One of the features of this coverage was the role media have played not only covering hurricane but converting it to unprecedented media and thus political event. Bush Administration which was very untimely and ineffective with evacuation and relief efforts became totally dependent on media in the process of formation of the national discourse on one of the most dramatic events in US history after September 11, 2001. It was media who should provide the final decision for the nation whether it was glorious victory or political, economic and social failure.

News framing by media organizations could either ruin political positions of Bush administration because of covering of its disastrous mismanage-

ment of hurricane aftermaths or could make political forces inside White House even stronger and looking like capable to unite nation around disaster and get more political and economic benefits. In this case framing process has certain important consequences for the future of political system. Iyengar (1991) demonstrated that the selection of an episodic or a thematic frame in the news influences how viewers attribute responsibility for policy problems and forms public opinion - either positive or negative. American framing of Katrina was very episodic. Very few American news outlets tried to find wide context of what happened. Most critical ideas came mainly from abroad. Even less US media outlets came to the conclusion quoted by the German environment minister, Juergen Tritten who wrote in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* that "by neglecting environmental protection, America's president shuts his eyes to the economic and human damage that natural catastrophes like Katrina inflict on his country and the world's economy".

Viewership for the cable news channels during active phase of Katrina has soared. Fox's prime-time audience climbed to 4.2 million on one given day, 112 percent above its ordinary average for this day of the week, according to *Nielsen Media Research*. CNN had 3.7 million viewers, an increase of 336 percent. MSNBC had 1.5 million viewers, 379 percent above its average. Audiences for the broadcast networks' regular evening newscasts were also up. NBC had 11.3 million viewers on up from 8 million the week before. ABC had 9.7 million viewers, up from 7.8 million. CBS had 8.1 million, up from 6.4 million.

As Robert Whitcomb wrote in editorial in *The Providence Journal* (Rhode Island, September 16, 2005), "Katrina has been *hyper-televized, re-dramatized, and re-melodramatized, sometimes to the point of excruciating redundancy*. Without the cameras, it's all too "boring."

From one point of view TV was doing much more than usually. From the other side it continued

framing news according to *previously existed* media patterns. Dave Lindorff compared New Orleans to Potemkin Village with President Bush addressing the nation, promising reconstruction and asking for help, "For those who missed it, Bush, dressed in a pressed, blue, open-collar dress shirt (not "badly tailored" this time), was backed by a beautifully blue-lit St. Louis Cathedral. The lighting was flown in by the White House advance team, along with generators (most of New Orleans is still without power). To spare the American public from seeing the darkened ghost town of the surrounding French Quarter, the Bush advance team also flew in military camouflage netting, which was strung up behind the president to block out all buildings but the cathedral." As some observers pointed out, the setting, on TV screens, resembled nothing so much as the Disney castle—an appropriate metaphor for the whole Bush presidency, with its focus on imagery, stagecraft, and hocus-pocus."

As some media critics pointed out, media-state mass propaganda and agenda-setting had its impact: public opinion polls indicated that more (70%) of the public were hostile of the President's petroleum policy and high gas prices than of the gross political neglect which have caused the death of thousands of their, mostly black, compatriots (66%). As Thomas Friedman have stated in *New York Times* after some post-Katrina initiatives of Bush, "Setting the goal of energy independence, along with a gasoline tax, could help to solve so many of our problems today — from the deficit to climate change and national security. And Americans would pay it if they thought the extra money was going to renew America, not Iran, and not just New Orleans." He explains to what point and to what extend the post-hurricane initiatives of US presidents can fit the American political system and at the same time give guideline how the public opinion should be affected.

The methodological key to understanding of the framing is *what* the audience should know, in *what* form and in *what* context news are created. As Gitlin (1980, p.7) defines frames are, "persistent patterns of *cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion* by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse." Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p. 47) emphasize the importance of *creation of context*. Gamson and Modigliani (1989, p. 3) understand framing as, "organizing idea, or frame, for *making sense of relevant events, suggesting what is the issue.*"

Graber (1988) identifies four steps in news frame-setting process:

- determine what information is noticed, processed and stored

- organize and evaluate new information to be fitted into established perceptions
- help to provide extra information to complete information
- provide information about scenarios and how to cope with them.

One of the specific moments in the process of news framing of Katrina was that very often the media were the *only* agenda-setters in the field of political communication while the traditional agenda-setting institutions were totally incommunicado in literally or metaphorical sense. It was only media and not the decision makers who provided information about scenarios and were interested in understanding how to cope with them. *The Providence Journal* (2005) wrote, "if the coverage of Katrina wasn't perfect, it did get two very big things right: 1) The TV cameras got to the scene, when disaster relief somehow couldn't, and brought us powerful, compelling images of the devastation caused by the storm, and the angry, desperate people who were left behind. In effect, the pictures became a cry for help that couldn't be ignored. These images contrasted sharply with the reassuring words coming out of bureaucrats in Washington. 2) With what certainly looked like honest emotion, even passion, reporters and commentators held those same bureaucrats' feet to the fire and refused to accept the usual political spin."

ABC's *Nightline* presenter Ted Koppel was astonished when Michael Brown, the head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency confessed that the federal government had just learned that there were people at the convention center in New Orleans after several days of relief efforts. Koppel's argument was, "Don't you watch television? Don't you listen to the radio?"

As Professor Paul Levinson, chairman of communication and media studies at Fordham University wrote in *Newsday* (2005), on the changing role of the media that can "alter the course of the history" for the better, "Brian Williams on NBC is especially worthy of mention. Not since Walter Cronkite's wonderfully furious outburst at the "thugs" on the floor of the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago - the security guards who were punching Dan Rather - have we seen such appropriate outrage from a network news anchor. His grilling of the government in its absence - "Where is the help? ... Are you watching?" - was almost enough to make you believe that the anchors on stodgy, traditional broadcast networks have a real future, after all."

From the other side media coverage was far from being perfect. As some critics mention, "by Day Four of the disaster, the critical impassioned voices

were replaced by measured voices of official compassion. Photo opportunities of Bush abounded; the National Guardsmen were arriving and the Government was responding. The "news" was about the heroic aid workers with photogenic white guards and nurses cradling black infants, bringing relief to the "refugees" and ending the growing lawlessness, violence and "looting" among the survivors. Interviews with top military officials focused on the threats to the soldiers from violent elements among the "refugees". Visual images of armored troop carriers, heavily armed Special Forces against a backdrop of angry desolate people, resonated with the war propaganda from Iraq. What was an exercise in humanitarian aid was converted into a counter-insurgency operation" (Petra, 2005).

The big TV networks were quite supportive of Bush's performance. MSNBC's Chris Matthews, for example, declared on August 31, "Tonight, under the direct command of President Bush, the full force of the federal government is mobilized. A superpower of resources, manpower and know-how heads on an historic rescue mission to the Gulf Coast." Matthews later adds that Bush, "seems very much like the old Harvard Business School kind of guy that he is, the president of the United States, today, because he delegated very clearly." So much it was the case with mainstream print media who also considered President's efforts sufficient. *The Washington Post* editorialized (01/09/05) that "the federal government's immediate response to the destruction of one of the nation's most historic cities does seem commensurate with the scale of the disaster. At an unprecedented news conference, many members of President Bush's Cabinet pledged to dedicate huge resources to the Gulf Coast."

As many observers pointed the media converted the destitute city into a war zone and by heavy using military vocabulary made the news from New Orleans *strategically framed news* (Capella and Jamieson, 1996). "This really does remind me of covering a war zone or a third world story," John Stack, the vice president of newsgathering for the Fox News Channel, have mentioned. "New Orleans became Fallujah. The media dredged up every rumor, hearsay, un-substantiated third hand report of child rape and murder to provide a "context" for the "new reality" the militarization of a devastated American city. The media are well prepared for that scenario: Embedded journalist featured soldiers handing out concentrated military field rations (totally useless for small children and dehydrated elderly) while the beating of blacks carrying groceries (blacks 'loot' food; whites 'find' food) was omitted" (Petra, 2005).

As McQuale (1994, p. 355) notes, "much news is presented within frameworks of meaning which derive from the way news is gathered and processed." So news values can become primary guidelines for the frame-building of coverage of the event. *Morning Call* (Allentown, Pennsylvania, September 4, 2005) wrote on black rapper's comments' on Bush, "George Bush doesn't care about black people," West said." The rap star also criticized coverage of the catastrophe, saying, "I hate the way they portray us in the media. If you see a black family, it says they're looting. See a white family, it says they're looking for food." But the West Coast viewers didn't, however, hear West's criticisms of the media and the slow pace of the relief. NBC's officials said the network made the decision to cut West's remark on Bush because of, "a desire not to politicize the concert and possibly dissuade viewers from donating money to the hurricane victims." So in this case the newsroom framing become one of the examples of how media perform *gatekeeping* function.

Iyengar evaluates the framing effects of television news on political issues and call it a 'context of no context.' "Television news is routinely reported in the form of specific events or particular cases - Iyengar calls this "episodic" news framing and "thematic" coverage which places political issues and events in some general context. "Episodic framing depicts concrete events that illustrate issues, while thematic framing presents collective or general evidence." Iyengar found that subjects shown episodic reports were less likely to consider society responsible for the event, and subjects shown thematic reports were less likely to consider individuals responsible.

*The New York Times* on September 19, 2005 wrote that "many of the urban legends that sprang up - the systematic rape of children, the slitting of a 7-year-old's throat - so far seem to be just that. The fact that some of these rumors were repeated by overwhelmed local officials does not completely get the news media off the hook. The Fox News anchor, John Gibson, helped set the scene: "All kinds of reports of looting, fires and violence. Thugs shooting at rescue crews. Thousands of police and National Guard troops are on the scene trying to get the situation under control. Thousands more on the way. So heads up, looters." A reporter, David Lee Miller, responded: "Hi, John. As you so rightly point out, there are so many murders taking place. There are rapes, other violent crimes taking place in New Orleans." After the interview, Mr. Gibson did acknowledge that "we have yet to confirm a lot of that."

As James Petras, a former Professor of Sociolo-

gy at Binghamton University, New York stated in his article "Mass Media and New Orleans: From Victims to Vandals", "the media repeatedly played on white paranoia: black rapists terrorizing neighborhoods, shelters, anywhere they could flag a rumor. It is surprising that 'cannibalism wasn't included in the media's list of Outrages' committed by the 'Africanized' destitute. Ninety-nine point percent of the poor blacks were destitute but the media focused on the 1% of criminals. "Zero tolerance" declared Governor Blanco of Louisiana to titillate the President and to prime the automatic rifles of the Special Forces" (*Counterpunch*).

At the same time one of the core moments in framing Katrina coverage was the attempt to transfer discourse from national to international level, explaining that Katrina as a phenomenon that is far beyond national borders of US, alien phenomenon of a sort, so US administration can do nothing about it and that's why must be beyond any critical evaluation. Very often it was compared with 9/11, war in Iraq, with unseen but powerful enemy. A lot of attention was paid to the article "The Terrorist Katrina Is One of the Soldiers of Allah" by Muhammad Yousef Al-Mlaifi, director of the research center at Kuwait's Ministry of Endowment. It helped some political forces in US to connect in some way Katrina with Al-Qaeda, and again - with events of 9/11.

The non-conformist reaction of some European media to US government response to Katrina also gave ground to those who wanted to see the external enemy in all situations with Katrina aftermath. Thus Bill O'Reilly from Fox News quotes some European media reaction like in The French publication *he Monde* ("At this moment, America discovers or re-

discovers that she shelters the Third World in herself.") or Philip Stephens, writing in *The Financial Times* ("[There is a] sadness at the loss of so many innocent lives, yet alongside this sits a nagging satisfaction that Mr. Bush's inert administration has been humbled."). After that anchor summarize: "Talking Points" (the program he presents) wants to be clear about this. Anyone, anyone, who feels joy when America suffers, is our enemy. Period. One of these days, we Americans are going to wise up and unite against terrorism and other atrocities. We're going to recognize our true enemies, both inside and outside the USA and deal with them in an appropriate way. One of these days. And when that day comes, our friends will be greatly rewarded. Our enemies will not be" (Fox News).

The framing of Katrina was very episodic, with a lot of microscopic details which distracted the audience's attention from seeing the more general, contextualized picture of events. There was very few analysis of background why the aftermaths were so destructive, help slow. There were almost no attempts to look at Katrina not as a set of many small dramas, but as a disaster in general, with administration inability to handle, system failure and most of all class-orientation of revealed problems.

That set of small and unproved episodes created very special framing of disaster inside US media and politicum. No class problems covered, no ecological context was added into discourse. No large issues at all! And now very rapidly Katrina disappears from American media discourse and all the attention is going back to nation's war on terrorism ~ the project with the vogue description of antagonist and extended timeframes.

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### **ВИСВІТЛЕННЯ ПОДІЙ ПІД ЧАС І ПІСЛЯ УРАГАНУ «КАТРІНА»**

*У статті аналізується висвітлення урагану «Катріна» американськими мас-медіа. Головними питаннями є структурування повинного процесу, домінантні критерії редагування новин та сюжетів, проблеми, з якими стикаються журналісти, та зміни, що сталися в традиційній американській теорії визначення порядку денного. Головні епізодичні та тематичні структурні елементи висвітлення подій ідентифікуються в контексті збільшення впливу мас-медіа на громадську думку та політичний процес визначення порядку денного.*