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Hurricane Katrina - Domestic and Foreign News Broadcasters View Things Differently

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There are at least two versions of what happened when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and other Gulf cities -- of the flooding, the death and breathtaking destruction, and of the governmental response. Sharply different stories are being told, one by domestic broadcasters, the view from their bubble; the other by foreign broadcasters, as seen from their bubble.

The best way to look inside the American bubble is to watch a video called "Reporters Gone Wild," on Salon.com, which delivers what the title advertises. Displayed in the raw are U.S. broadcast news reporters emerging from their traditional role as observers to become emotionally involved, to become hyper-advocates, to become themselves part of the story about Katrina, together with its victims.

One reporter gone wild was CNN's Anderson Cooper, seen interrupting Sen. 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."

We monitored other CNN reports, one of which noted that "corpses in New Orleans are disintegrating, threatening disease. Economic losses may be much greater than officially announced."

In the New Orleans Superdome and the Convention Center, where tens of thousands fled for safety and found themselves unsafe and locked in, Fox reporter Geraldo Rivera held up a black baby in his arms and tearfully exclaimed on camera, "Let them go, let them out of here."

Fox anchor Shepard Smith reported, "Things are not equal in this city. The government locked them in here. Let them out," he exclaimed. "When is help coming for these people? Is there going to be help? ... Officer?"

A Bubble Away

But far away, outside the American bubble but in another one, things were calm and business-like. The story played quite differently on TV and radio in Europe and the Middle East.

Worldcasting determined this by looking through hundreds of broadcast summaries from

those parts of the world. In an admittedly unscientific survey, we read broadcast texts from TV and radio newscasts of many countries, using the subscription BBC Monitoring Service database. We examined the period from Aug. 29, when Katrina came ashore on the Louisiana Gulf Coast, through Sept. 15, an 18-day period. Of course this was not an all-inclusive survey, but we did review enough broadcasts from abroad over this two-and-a-half week period to come away with a pretty good idea of how Katrina was reported to TV viewers and the radio audience there, as compared to the way the story was being told at home in the United States. It should be noted that the BBC Monitoring Service does not monitor United Kingdom press.

We found that the hurricane was handled in what might be called a routine manner abroad. It was another story competing for airspace with several stories which often took precedence over Katrina. The hurricane was often not the lead story, but instead placed well down in the body of a news broadcast, akin to the second section of a newspaper.

A regional or local tie-in was most often the news peg. Humanitarian aid seemed to be the strongest bond, reflecting the specific assistance conveyed to the United States from that nation.

On Belgian radio, Defense Minister Andre Flahaut was interviewed on the tarmac near a plane containing aid workers that would soon take off for New Orleans.

"It's just like when the tsunami appeal was made," said Flahaut. "Within a few hours we had 250 volunteers, on Friday afternoon. The first 10, men and women, are leaving from here and a reserve is still available, but this will depend on the requests made or the needs observed on the ground."

A Belgian soldier nearby added, "First, faced with a disaster such as we have seen in the United States, I am proud to represent Belgium. And then, I like to work to help people."

This humanitarian-help theme was echoed in countless other broadcast reports from Europe and the Middle East.

Next in prominence, Katrina was reported as a business or economic story, because of its broad impact on oil and gasoline prices.

Bosnian IRIB Radio reported that the "price of crude oil exceeds record \$70 per barrel due to possible consequences of Katrina."

Danish Radio said the country was providing oil to the market from reserves "to alleviate the shortage of oil caused by the devastation left by Hurricane Katrina...."

RTP International TV of Lisbon reported, "Alongside countries such as France, Spain, Germany and Italy, Lisbon has offered to send barrels of crude oil and gasoline from its emergency stockpiles in an effort to alleviate a gasoline supply crunch in the USA in the wake of Hurricane Katrina." Montenegrin TV News reported on the day the hurricane hit New Orleans, over video of the devastation, that oil prices would be going up.

Victims in New Orleans were not depicted as being black or white, rich or poor, young or old, as they were in U.S. media reports. They were local nationals from Croatia or Denmark or Saudi Arabia who were in harm's way in New Orleans, and the audience learned who they

were and how they were faring.

“No Danes are missing in the USA after the hurricanes,” reported Danish Radio on its web site Sept. 7. “The last Dane who was missing ... has now been found.”

And Slovak Radio reported well down into a newscast, “The Foreign Ministry has no information about any Slovak nationals being victims of Hurricane Katrina. In cooperation with the Slovene embassy in Washington, a Slovene woman was helped with returning home and they are organizing the return of a Slovene student who is currently with a group of students in the Louisiana State University facilities.”

Spanish Radio said a rescue mission was headed to New Orleans to help Spaniards affected by Katrina.

There were international stories that took precedence during this period over Hurricane Katrina, such as the many hundreds of pilgrims killed in the Baghdad bridge stampede, the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, the first democratic elections in Egypt, and the fourth anniversary of 9/11, each of which at one time or another took precedence over Katrina in news broadcasts abroad. In Syria, a local story about police academy graduates was the lead, while Katrina was relegated to the 17th spot in the news report.

A reason for Katrina being played as business-as-usual was that few stations had reporters of their own in New Orleans. Croatian TV did have a journalist on the scene, and placed his stories higher up in the news broadcast than other stations that relied on coverage of Katrina from other sources.

There was some reporting on the lack of preparedness by administration officials from Homeland Security and the Federal Emergency Preparedness Agency, but overall President Bush fared fairly well. Each of his three visits to New Orleans was duly noted, placing him at the scene of the disaster and thus portraying him as caring about it. His Saturday radio addresses were also reported. Washington politics and charges of racism connected with rescue operations did not surface to any great extent in our program review.

Looting was reported, but moderately; blacks involved were generally depicted as lawbreakers, not victims.

Slovene radio news reported that the “consequences of Karina Hurricane in the USA were catastrophic,” with criminal gangs taking over towns, no law enforcement, explosions, and more soldiers being sent to the affected areas.

Croatian TV noted that “lawlessness grips New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.” But this aspect of the story, which became a focus of reporting on U.S. television and radio outlets, was limited in coverage abroad that we reviewed.

Voice of America correspondents appeared on TV and radio news broadcasts in Europe and Middle East with factual reports from New Orleans.

Reporting about Al Manar Lebanese Hezbollah TV, the BBC Monitoring Service noted that “... preachers this week gave special attention to Hurricane Katrina. ...The preachers considered the hurricane a manifestation of the power of God, a lesson to people, and a warning to the

arrogant on Earth.”

But the infamous al-Jazeera Arabic channel displayed even-handed coverage of Katrina by noting that “President Bush pledges to investigate any negligence in rescue and relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.” And Syrian TV also noted that President Bush had pledged to investigate his administration’s handling of the Katrina disaster.

Al-Jazeera noted that, “The popularity of Bush is dropping,” and that “many Americans are asking the administration to turn the funds it is spending in Iraq to the disaster-stricken area.” Iranian TV on the anniversary of Sept. 11 had a long report which spoke of America’s “weakness in attending to the post-Katrina crisis.”

And now we return to the U.S. bubble, where reports abound that Katrina and the slow response to its victims by government, will further tarnish America’s image abroad.

The International Herald Tribune’s Roger Cohen writes from New York that, “All the ingredients were there in the days after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. ... The rich, mainly white folks, high-tailing it out of town; the poor, overwhelmingly black, abandoned and marooned; the streets given over to armed vigilantes; the government unresponsive and society unglued ... has ... hurt the international image of President George W. Bush’s administration....”

Worldcasting concludes that those abroad are more interested in themselves than in us. What may happen, as New Orleans rises from rubble to become a gleaming new city on the Gulf Coast, is that broadcast news stories abroad will likely dwell on the positive side of the city’s re-birth, and their own hand in it.
