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THE SHAKE FELT ROUND THE WORLD:
AN EXAMINATION OF FRAMING OF
SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN LOCAL MEDIA IN
THE WAKE OF THE EARTHQUAKE IN HAITI

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Abstract

This paper examines framing in two localized media sources in the wake of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti to observe any potential differences in the presentation of social inequality and poverty. Much of the previous literature on media framing and disasters has indicated that media plays an important role in public perception of events. This paper uses the method of content analysis to discover if the phenomenon of framing differed in local media sources serving the Haitian-American and English speaking Dominican Republic communities. This will make significant contributions to our understanding of the role of the media in reporting on disasters through an analysis of sources providing news to peripheral populations. Most media studies focus on media from wealthy core nations regardless of where the disaster occurred. Offering a localized perspective will allow for a greater understanding of media framing by those having a greater familiarity with the impacted community. This study finds that there are differences in how an event is framed based on what a news source's readership finds interesting.

Introduction

Media sources are often described by scholars as both friend and foe when it comes to disaster coverage (Scheufele, 1999). Media framing is an important concept to study because the way the public perceives an event is likely to be constructed from how that event is presented in news sources. This will in turn dictate the response of the public, as well as government to an event. As Scheufele (1999) states, audiences rely on the media to construct their view on a

situation, and for their greater perception of reality. The media can be a useful tool for disseminating information to the public, but emergency managers and scholars should be wary of depending on a private business to control the framing used since each news source has their own agenda and special interests (Fernando, 2010; Quarantelli, 1990).

On January 12, 2010 an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.0 shook Port-au-Prince and Southern Haiti. Official estimates from the U.S. Geological Survey website (http://earthquake.usgs.gov) put casualties from this earthquake at 222,570; along with 300,000 injured and 1.3 million displaced persons. This earthquake revealed the extreme stratification and inequality of Haitian society (World Report, 2010). The combination of absolute poverty and social inequality compounded the earthquake's effects on the Haitian community. This event offers the chance for scholars to examine the pervasive inequality and poverty in Haitian society; this paper will explore these phenomena in reference to their presentation by the media.

Theoretical Framework

This paper borrows from Erving Goffman's (1974) theoretical concept of framing to examine depictions of social inequality and poverty within media sources. Goffman describes framing as, the ability to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within an individual's world. Framing is the construction of an individual's reality which governs the subjective meaning assigned to events (Lemert & Branaman, 1997). Through assigning meaning to an event we can conceptualize this event according to our previous frameworks. We believe that everything can be categorized and thus, we need frames because they allow us to understand events occurring within our realities (Goffman, 1974). Frameworks can be divided broadly into two categories, natural and social. Natural frameworks are seen as events perceived as unguided doings, not subject to moral judgment. Social frames are guided doings which are subject to

social appraisals. For example, an earthquake is seen within a natural frame, but an interpersonal dispute is viewed through a social frame (Lemert & Branaman, 1997). Disasters therefore can demonstrate interesting intersections of natural and social frameworks, something not yet directly explored in the literature.

Goffman (1974) makes the argument that the public continues to support framing because the frames used are grounded in an everyday unstaged world which allows us to make sense of the frames by applying them to our own lives. For example, the framing of an activity as work is grounded in the payment received for the activity. Further, Goffman says that the anchoring of activities in the ongoing world allows the generation of a sense of reality, but this does not render the activity unframed. Activities and events are often collectively framed and the individual perspective is not accounted for. This is the case in a major disaster setting such as the 2009 earthquake in Haiti. Goffman's work comes out of the theory of multiple realities, though Goffman takes it a step further, insisting that there is no reality, only a construction of reality. Therefore, this framework will allow a study of the construction of the reality of life in post-earthquake Haiti according to localized media sources.

Literature Review

Media has an inextirpable link to disaster studies; however, as the field of Disaster Research has progressed so has the way scholars study media's role in disasters. Existing literature has predominately focused their examination on the study of disaster myths perpetuated by the media. Goltz (1984) found in his quantitative study that there was little reinforcement of disaster myths by the media. However, other researchers countered Goltz, stating that merely counting the frequency an article containing disaster myths occurred was not enough. Researchers such as Wenger (1985) and Wenger & Friedman (1986) stated that the placement of

the articles was important in reinforcing disaster myths. Other scholars have found that myths were widespread in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (Harris & Carbado, 2006; Masozera, Bailey, Kerchner, 2006; Dynes & Rodriguez, 2006). Still other scholars choose to focus on one specific myth; Tierney, Bevc & Kuligowski (2006) and Barsky (2006) elected to examine the media depictions of looting in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Additionally some scholars have focused their analysis on the framing of issues of inequality, and race by media sources more generally rather than examining a particular disaster and the subsequent media framing. Gandy, Kopp, Hands, Frazer, & Phillips (1997) looked at how the public understands who is to blame for the inequalities in our society. They concluded that the way media frames inequality in society is generally to place blame on those in disadvantaged socioeconomic states for their position in society. Iyengar (1990) examined specifically the issue of poverty and reached very similar conclusions to those of Gandy et al. (1997). Iyengar concluded that the media dictate how the public conceptualize responsibility for poverty, and thus most often disadvantaged citizens are blamed for their status. Tuchman (1978) supports this in her studies of media by purporting that in "Seeking to disseminate information that people want, need, and should know, news organizations both circulate and shaoe knowledge." Goshorn & Gandy (1995) find, not surprisingly so, that the way an issue is framed will determine the likelihood that people will elect to read an article. Also, not surprising is that the framing of an issue seems to change with the characteristics of the population most likely to consume a given news source. Gandy (1994) examines the unforeseen consequences of perpetrating racially based risk myths in the media. He discovers that not only do those unfamiliar with a population use the media to gain knowledge of populations, but that those depicted in the media come to see themselves through the media depictions. Gandy also

questions the existence of a "tipping point" at which coverage of minority issues stops for fear of a loss of white readership.

There has thus far been little research published reflecting the earthquake in Haiti given its recency, however there has been research on inequality present in Haiti long before January 12, 2010. The World Bank reported in their 2007 Country Study that there was widespread and highly concentrated inequality and poverty on the small island. Potter (2009) examined newspaper articles from 5 major U.S. news sources to study the frames used to present Haiti. What she discovered was that generally Haiti was framed as a failed state due to their utter economic disparity. Potter discovered these to be the key frames used when describing Haiti: violence and political unrest, poverty, economy, history, illicit drugs, landscape, and refugee. Potter makes the point that even when "positive" news coverage emerges out of one of these frames it is often presented in a condescending manner by U.S. media. Potter makes it clear from her analysis that long before the 2010 earthquake, the United States, at least according to media sources, thought of Haiti as a failed nation. Other scholars picking up where Potter left off discuss the United States involvement in Haiti post-impact, claiming that this played a role in the increased stratification of an already disadvantaged society (Dupuy, 2010; Fernando, 2010; Hallward, 2010; World Report, 2010).

After an investigation of the existing literature, I propose to contribute to the forthcoming investigations of the 2010 Haitian earthquake by examining the framing of social inequality and poverty within local media sources. This will enrich the existing literature by offering an examination of media sources from peripheral nations, rather than looking solely at the core nation media perspective generally studied. This study will add to framing research within the international media community.

Methodology

I examined articles from two localized media sources, the *Boston Haitian Reporter* and *Dominican Today*. The *Boston Haitian Reporter*, according to their homepage (www.bostonhaitian.com), is a monthly publication which serves the growing Haitian-American population along the east-coast. It is said to be available thru 300 distribution sites in and around Greater Boston, and electronically free of charge. This publication is primarily meant to document the experiences of Haitian-Americans, as well as report on news pertinent to the Haitian-American community (www.bostonhaitian.com). *Dominican Today* was established in 2005 and states its objective to be covering all news relevant to English readers within the Dominican Republic. According to their website (www.dominicantoday.com), is the first and only online English language publication coming out of the Dominican Republic providing daily local and international news to their readers (www.dominicantoday.com).

These news sources will provide distinctive perspectives at the conceptualization of a disaster riddled with inequality by a news source for Haitian-Americans and an English news source out of the Dominican Republic. I selected these sources for analysis because of their idiosyncratic perspectives within the existing media literature. Being as national westernized media sources are frequently used for framing studies, this examination will differ in that it chooses to look at localized sources in more developing communities in peripheral nations. I think that observing potential differences within these localized sources will offer very interesting insight into media framing in the aftermath of the 2010 Haitian earthquake.

This data will be selected from the E. L. Quarantelli Resource Collection at the Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware. They come more specifically from the Special Collection: Haiti Earthquake Media Coverage, 2010, consisting of 334 articles collected from 13

web-based news sources. These electronic sources were collected between the event date, January 12, 2010, and March 24, 2010. These media sources were randomly collected to obtain representative perspectives but not all perspectives of the event. Representative media sources were obtained through local and national media sources from the United States, the Dominican Republic, sources with links to Haitian communities and sources with connections to the University of Delaware. Article collection from each source ceased after three consecutive days with no reports on the earthquake. Therefore, this collection is not meant to be a comprehensive look at the media reporting on the Haitian earthquake, it is merely meant to offer a random sample of the media coverage. The articles were collected by the Resource Collection Coordinator and one undergraduate student researcher.

I seek to identify potential differences within these media sources by using the method of content analysis. Content analysis is a research technique which allows for objective and systematic discovery of patterns within a content source. Though content analysis has a subjective element, attempts have been made to alleviate this through the operationalization of inequality through the usage of well-defined codes. I coded the articles through Microsoft Word's comment feature using inductive reasoning analysis. Thus, using the theoretical construct of framing, I studied all articles present in the collection from the *Boston Haitian Reporter* (79) and *Dominican Today* (25) to observe potential themes of the portrayal of inequality in international local media.

Coding:

Three codes were used to identify themes of social inequality and poverty within these 104 articles.

Historical Inequality was defined as 'anything alluding to the presence of poverty and/or inequality in Haiti prior to the January 12, 2010 earthquake.' Examples of this historical inequality are:

> "An already weakened infrastructure basically collapsed" (Haiti's recovery must belong to Haitian people, *Boston Haitian Reporter*).

> "On January 11th, Haiti was already the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Even before the quake there were 380,000 orphans in Haiti. Most Haitians lived on less than a dollar a day; one in eight children died before their fifth birthday, and 40% were not enrolled in school; 120,000 Haitians were HIV-positive; and rural Haitians were plagued by malnutrition" (Haiti's recovery must belong to Haitian people, *Boston Haitian Reporter*).

Resilience & Rebuilding was defined as 'any mention of Haiti or Haitians as a strong, prideful people who will overcome the destruction left by the earthquake to rebuild their country and communities.' Examples coded as resilience & rebuilding are:

> "After 206 years of freedom, our faith is what has held us down through floods, heat waves, hurricanes, and now this destructive earthquake. We (in Boston and everywhere), your children will rebuild through blood, sweat, and tears you will be beautiful again. L' Union Fait La Force!" (Haiti, you'd be proud: Boston steps up, *Boston Haitian Reporter*).

> "Every able-bodied person in the neighborhood is doing their part. Without any discernable help from the outside world — there are no rescue teams, no soldiers, no heavy equipment in Delmas yet— Haitians are helping Haitians" (In Delmas-It's Haitians helping Haitians with no sign of outside help, *Boston Haitian Reporter*).

Lack of Resources was coded as 'any discussion of a deficiency of food, water, shelter, medical supplies, personnel (fire, medical, clean-up crews, etc.), knowledge and education, or any other necessary items for survival.' The following were coded as lack of resources:

> "While hundreds of bodies were stacked outside the city morgue and limbs of the dead protruded from the rubble of crushed schools and homes" (Desperation intensifies in Haiti as logistics slow aid distribution, *Dominican Today*).

"Today, the need for food, shelter, medical supplies and basic security is enormous, and the coming rainy season will pose new challenges. Infrastructure that was destroyed in minutes will take years to rebuild. Guided by the roadmap for cooperation and coordination developed by the government of Haiti, the United States will support our Haitian partners as they transition from emergency assistance to recovery and long-term reconstruction." (White House Statement: US continued to stand with Haiti, *Boston Haitian Reporter*).

Results and Conclusion

These codes were used to identify that 41 out of the 104 articles (28 *Boston Haitian Reporter* and 13 *Dominican Today*) present in the collection discussed social inequality and poverty. The other 63 articles were relevant to Haiti's earthquake, but did not discuss social inequality or poverty, nor did they fit within any of the established codes. These other 63 articles were thus not included in the final analysis. Themes these other articles did discuss were: descriptions of the earthquake by seismologists; human interest stories of individuals having survived the earthquake, or rescuing others during the earthquake; aid given by varying nations; the deaths and injuries of citizens from around the world in the earthquake; China and Taiwan's conflict over joint search & rescue teams; and Obama as a guest columnist for Newsweek, among other stories.

Examples of how social inequality and poverty were framed in each of the codes are as follows:

 Historical Inequality: "Haiti is a country where most already suffered most of their lives, due to economic exploitation, foreign intervention, and perhaps the worst, its' own government" (Praying for Haiti, *Boston Haitian Reporter*);

Resilience & Rebuilding: "The people of Haiti are not asking for "hand out", they are simply asking for "hands up." With that we can bring change and hope of a better future for all. The time has come to put an end to the suffering of our people" (Numb with pain but resolved that this will never happen again, *Boston Haitian Reporter*);

Lack of Resources: "Outside one aid coordination centre near the airport crowds gather every day in the hope of receiving sustenance yet still none has been provided. One man told me he had not eaten in three days. Painted on a wall opposite the heavily guarded gates of the compound is the simple message, "WE NEED HELP". Signs like this one have sprung up all across the city as its increasingly desperate inhabitants await assistance." (Tempers fray as aid fails to reach survivors, *Dominican Today*).

I coded for primary themes (see appendix Table 1) as the main idea conveyed in the article either through that idea being the most important theme or the theme which occurred the greatest number of times in the article. This is supported by Goffman's (1974) usage of primary frameworks, defined as the central elements of their culture. Secondary themes (see appendix Table 2), in my study, were mentions of other codes within the article, but when they were not as important as the primary theme. In the *Boston Haitian Reporter* there were 4 articles with primary themes of historical inequality, 4 articles with secondary themes of historical inequalities, 12 articles with primary themes of resilience & rebuilding, 6 with secondary themes of resilience & rebuilding, 13 with primary themes of lack of resources, and 5 with a secondary theme of lack of resources. In *Dominican Today* there were 2 articles with themes of historical inequality, 1 code of resilience & rebuilding, and 12 articles with lack of resources as a major theme.

The most common theme coded for was lack of resources in both *Dominican Today* and *Boston Haitian Reporter*. This phenomenon could be occurring because of the poverty in Haiti, thus there are few resources there and acknowledging this allows the rest of the world to be able to send the assistance which Haiti needs. I hypothesize *Dominican Today* doesn't cover the idea of resilience & rebuilding because they are not focused on the pride and strength of Haitians; rather they focus their articles on the lack of resources in Haiti, something they as a neighboring

nation giving aid have a stake in. The Dominican Republic was one of the first responders to the earthquake, and their resources have been widely received by Haitians, but more resources are needed. There were 2 codes for historical inequality for *Dominican Today* these spoke broadly about the notion of a long history of poverty and inequality in Haiti. One news story in *Dominican Today* described Haiti as "the poorest country in the western hemisphere" when speaking about their historical economic state.

The *Boston Haitian Reporter* focused their articles primarily on lack of resources and resilience & rebuilding. This is to be expected because the paper is produced by Haitian-Americans for the Haitian-American community. Therefore, one would expect they would be more likely to want to create a sense of community and strength through their articles, hence the high presence of resilience. They would also seek to draw attention to the plight of their family, friends, and fellow Haitians by highlighting the lack of resources. Historic inequality did occur within the articles, but it was almost always followed by a proclamation of how Haitians had overcome previous adversities.

> "Haiti is under siege. It is battered, bloodied and bent. It is not defeated. Haiti will survive because of people like Richardson. It will rise again because of the neighbors in Delmas and Petionville and Carrefour and Leogane and Jacmel who refuse to let their nation descend into the night. Not without a fight." (It's up to us, *Boston Haitian Reporter*).

This study found that there are differences in the way that localized media sources portray social inequality and poverty, and it would seem that these differences stem from the paper's connection to the event as well as how invested in the event the readers are. The *Boston Haitian Reporter* as a localized source providing news for the Haitian-American community in and around Boston focused their coverage of social inequality and poverty post-earthquake on the strength of the Haitian people and their ability to overcome adversity. There was also a good

deal of coverage on lack of resources in Haiti. In contrast, *Dominican Today* as a source of news online for the English speaking community focused their attention almost solely on lack of resources in Haiti.

This study has several limitations, one being that of the articles available for each news source, only 39% of the total articles (41/104) were included in this analysis due to the restrictions of the research question. Also, when selecting news sources there were few localized choices in the collection, thus these news sources were selected because of their localized nature, not because of their merit as a news source. Lastly, as with all content analyses, there is an element of subjectivity in the coding process which cannot be removed, even through operationalization of terms.

This paper makes significant contributions to the field because it not only offers a retrospective look at local mass media in the wake of the Earthquake in Haiti; it also contextualizes media framing within current society. The examination of framing within the mass media is essential to understanding modern conceptualizations of reality. If we do in fact participate in our reality in the way that we conceptualize it, and if the media is a source for that conceptualization, then studying the media is vital to understanding the societal operationalization of reality. This previous operationalization of reality through the media has focused primarily on core nations as is indicated by the literature review. However, this study attempts to discover if there are differences in local news source framing of social inequality and poverty post-earthquake in an already disadvantaged peripheral nation.

Future research should be directed toward more examinations of localized media sources after disasters in impoverished areas to see how framing of social inequality and poverty differ. It

would also be interesting to compare local media source framing with national media source framing of social inequality and poverty.

Appendix

Table 1

Primary Code	*Boston Haitian Reporter* # of articles	% of coded articles *BHR*	% total articles *BHR*	*Dominican Today* # of articles	% of coded articles *DT*	% total articles *DT*
Historical Inequality	4	14%	5%	2	15%	8%
Resilience & Rebuilding	12	43%	15%	1 code in 1 article	n/a	n/a
Lack of Resources	13	46%	16%	12	92%	48%

Table 2

Secondary Code	*Boston Haitian Reporter* #of articles	% of coded articles *BHR*	% total articles *BHR*	*Dominican Today* # of articles	% of coded articles *DT*	% total articles *DT*
Historical Inequality	4	14%	5%	n/a	n/a	n/a
Resilience & Rebuilding	6	21%	8%	n/a	n/a	n/a
Lack of Resources	5	18%	6%	n/a	n/a	n/a

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