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FRAMING VOLUNTEERISM IN A CONSENSUS  
CRISIS: MASS MEDIA COVERAGE OF  
VOLUNTEERS IN THE 9/11 RESPONSE

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**FRAMING VOLUNTEERISM IN A CONSENSUS CRISIS: MASS MEDIA  
COVERAGE OF VOLUNTEERS IN THE 9/11 RESPONSE**

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On September 11, 2001, the world witnessed one of the most hideous terrorist attacks ever perpetrated in American soil. Individuals from the Al Qaeda terrorist network intentionally flew commercial jetliners into the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, leaving the highest death toll (near three thousand people) ever registered for a single terrorist act. Beyond comparison in terms of its nature and magnitude, the tragedy generated both a vast disruption and the mobilization of many individuals, organizations, and resources.

This paper examines the mass media coverage of volunteerism in the context of the World Trade Center disaster. Using news accounts, this paper, firstly, explores the extent of convergence in Lower Manhattan immediately after the terrorist attacks and the types of activities in which volunteers engaged. Then, using notions of “frame analysis” advanced by social scientists such as Goffman (1974) and Gamson (1985), this paper seeks to identify how the media “framed” volunteerism in the context of 9/11. The mass media both empowers and limits understanding by providing an edited or fragmented version of reality. Thus, it is crucial to identify both what frames the media borrowed from broader cultural contexts and what frames the media made available to the public when reporting volunteerism in 9/11.

## **VOLUNTEERISM IN DISASTER SITUATIONS**

The development of a sociological dimension in disaster studies has greatly enriched the understanding of collective behavior and has challenged early assumptions that the coming together of individuals in collectivities is characterized by unruly, disruptive, irrational, or regressive behaviors. In fact, sociological research on disaster has found that although the convergence of individuals during disaster usually shows

emergent, unstructured, and even some non-traditional features, these behaviors are typically rational, goal-directed, and cooperative (Quarantelli 1960, Goltz et al. 1992).

In this regard, Dynes and Quarantelli (1971, 1976) have proposed to differentiate between what they have termed “consensus crises” and “dissensus crises.” Altruistic norms and behaviors typically spring from a consensus crisis (i.e. a natural disaster), whereas conflict and social fragmentation normally emerge from a dissensus crisis (i.e. a civil disturbance). Consensus crises are characterized by a general agreement of participants on the goals and objectives to be taken, and great efforts on the part of authorities and the impacted population take place to minimize social distinctions and promote a common orientation for action. On the other hand, dissensus crises are normally characterized by a fragmentation of norms and orientations, and particular interests usually prevail over a sense of community.

The convergence of volunteers during and immediately after disaster is frequently needed to support initial emergency response activities, yet at the same time, convergence is usually inevitable (Drabek 1986). Volunteers are primarily recruited from the impacted population (Le Chat 1976, Phillips 1984). Nevertheless, many people not directly affected by a disaster often become involved with disaster-related activities through volunteerism (EMA 1996). Economically speaking, volunteers are extremely important. Because disasters of great magnitude occur sporadically, it is financially unfeasible for communities to count on a large number of professional emergency workers at all times (EMA 1996). Therefore, the support of volunteers is particularly important during the initial emergency period when professional or specialized personnel need to focus on critical tasks.

People who converge onto a disaster site usually do so with different motivations (Fritz and Mathewson 1957) and normally represent a wide variety of social backgrounds (Weller and Thomas 1994). This type of description of convergence is at odds with early versions of convergence theory, particularly used to explain social protests (see Dollar et al. 1939, Meerlo 1950), which assumed that there was a lot of homogeneity among the constituents of collectivities. Along these lines, Fritz and Mathewson (1957) showed that heterogeneity, as opposed to homogeneity, characterized convergence during disaster. For instance, they identified five types of individuals who converge onto an impacted community based on their motivations. These types of individuals were residents returning to an evacuated area (returnees), relatives worried about relatives and friends (anxious), individuals seeking to provide assistance (helpers), individuals merely driven by curiosity (curious), and those seeking to exploit the disaster situation in some form (exploiters).

As noticed above, the initial response during the emergency period of disaster commonly involves the inevitable convergence of numerous individuals and organizations and of an enormous amount of donated resources, all of which enter the emergency social system with little or no coordination. This observation prompted Barton (1969) to denominate the phenomenon as a “mass assault,” and other studies have confirmed this pattern (see Drabek et al. 1981, Hull and Wenger 1992, Mileti and O’Brein 1991). The massive response of volunteers is normally confined to the emergency period of disaster, yet in some occasions it extends over post-impact and recovery periods (Zurcher 1968). When voluntarism does extend over post-impact and recovery stages, it tends to be in a more structured and organized form (Wolensky 1979).

Although volunteers often provide essential economic, social, and emotional supports that accelerate resilience in a community, the effectiveness of volunteerism depends highly upon how well volunteers and voluntary groups and organizations are coordinated. In this sense, having vast numbers of people and supplies frequently pose serious challenges for emergency management (Carter, 1979; Tierney, 1985). Officials lack the resources to manage massive amounts of volunteering response and donations, which in turn, may inhibit an effective response to assist disaster victims (Neal 1994).

### **MEDIA COVERAGE, FRAMES, AND DISASTER**

One major objective of this paper is to link “frame analysis” to how the mass media covered volunteerism in the context of the 9/11. Goffman (1974), remaining close to Gregory Bateson’s concept of “frame” in “A Theory of Play and Phantasy,” introduced the notion of “frames” to refer to “schemata of interpretation” that enable individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label” occurrences within their immediate experience as well as in the world at large. Expanding Goffman’s conceptualization of framing, Gamson and Modigliani (1987: 143) have analyzed “frames” not only as organizing and interpretative mechanisms but also as “central organizing ideas” that can steer an audience while providing meaning in a particular form. In other words, frames actively construct meaning in addition to merely organizing information.

In industrialized societies, mass media discourse is one of the most important cultural resources available to know about and understand issues (Gamson 1995). Similarly, disaster experience is greatly mediated through the media. That is, irrespective of personal elements, the media provides the basis for common understanding of a disaster and for further conversation. In the case of 9/11, for instance, it is possible to talk

about various issues on the basis of an assumed common understanding of the event. News frames, normally taken for granted, make the world look natural, as opposed to appearing to as social constructions. As Gamson (1985: 617) asserts, “news frames determine what is selected, what is excluded, what is emphasized, in short, news represents a packaged world.”

Previous disaster research has found that the way in which news stories are made and what and how pieces of information are selected and organized to produce stories tend to reinforce cultural myths of disaster, such as a stress on victim helplessness, panic flight, and antisocial behavior, despite there is no scientific evidence that those behaviors increase significantly during the emergency period (Quarantelli and Dynes 1972, Wenger et al. 1975). The media transmits a fragmented reality. It portrays some frames, which convey certain cultural messages, while it excludes others. This inclusion and exclusion process limits the amount of data the public has to make sense of an issue as well as the public’s understanding of that issue. In this sense, news reporting actively constructs and reconstructs an issue.

The use of frame analysis in this paper does not intend to provide “objective” or factual information about volunteers in 9/11. That would be not only naïve but also methodologically inappropriate. Identifying frames is not about identifying the media information per se, but instead how that information transmits and reinforces some cultural beliefs and values. For instance, media’s emphasis on illegal behaviors during disaster may actually not be about the incidence of crime during disaster but about a cultural message or a “moral tale” that reinforces cultural views that it is pathetic to

commit illegal acts against highly vulnerable individuals. In fact, news reporting of this sort may actually encourage altruistic behavior.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data used for this study consist of articles related to the World Trade Center disaster tragedy collected from online editions of major newspapers across the nation. News articles and images from these online sources were collected by staff from the Disaster Research Center (DRC) at the University of Delaware for three months following the tragedy. Appendix A contains a list of the newspaper sources monitored. Among those, there are the New York Times and Washington Post, sources upon which a major emphasis was placed during the data collection period. Also, the DRC staff monitored and collected data from other online sources such the Red Cross, FEMA, which provided situational or other reports in relation to the 9/11 disaster. I selected a total of seventy-nine articles for the initial analysis in this paper. Additionally, I conducted searches in *Google* to identify websites of voluntary organizations that emerged and continued to operate after 9/11.

Collecting articles from online editions of newspapers and other related sources provided the advantage that data were already in a digital format. This facilitated the use of computer software to conduct searches of articles covering volunteerism in the context of the World Trade Center disaster. Articles selected for the study were imported into *MAXqda*, a software program for the analysis of text-based qualitative data. A code system was developed to sort, compile, and organize data, and to provide the fundamental means for subsequent analysis. In the analysis process, the objective was to identify how newspaper articles approached the coverage of volunteerism in 9/11. What themes were



included or excluded in media discourse? How those themes relate a broader cultural and crisis frameworks?

### **VOLUNTEERISM IN 9/11**

World Trade Center tragedy included features not frequently seen in other disasters. Perhaps the most distinctive feature was that the tragedy resulted from a meticulously elaborated terrorist attack, which in legal terms, also represented a crime. In this sense, the term “Ground Zero” served to identify and refer to a disaster site as well as to a crime scene. A major implication of the disaster/crime duality was that the coordination of individuals, groups, and organizations that responded to the emergency necessitated a highly complex division of labor under two distinct approaches. While the management of activities associated with the terrorist acts fell under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Justice, activities normally related to disaster management, such as search and rescue of victims, were led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). The dual characteristic of the World Trade Center tragedy not only demanded a complex intra- and inter-organizational coordination but also largely determined the range of activities in which volunteers could engage and the type of news coverage they received.

Another important aspect that needs to be stressed is the enforcement of tight security measures within “Ground Zero” and its surrounding areas. With a few exceptions, only professional search and rescue teams and other pertinent personnel had access to the disaster site. This measure posed great restrictions on volunteers and their involvement in different disaster-related activities. For those individuals who were able to converge in Lower Manhattan, there were only very few, if any, direct search and rescue

roles to be performed. The disaster literature has documented that volunteers generally tend to perform non-emergency activities during disaster (O'Brein and Mileti 1993). However, this pattern appeared to be greatly intensified as the result of the intense security measures adopted in Lower Manhattan.

Newspaper articles served to identify several activities in which volunteers engaged. The activities were numerous, and it would take many pages just to list them. Volunteers gathered around respite facilities established close to Ground Zero. These respite facilities also housed a plentiful amount of donated supplies. A voluntary activity commonly covered in news accounts was preparing meals for rescue workers. The American Red Cross was a large source of volunteers, whose activities were extensively covered in news articles. For instance, the American Red Cross reported that, with the assistance of eight thousand volunteers, had served 100,000 meals a day and provided services such as first aid, counseling, message therapy, and chiropractic care. The serviced population was mainly search and rescue workers and victim's families. Some volunteers actively engaged in assisting victims' families with official procedures to claim aid or grants designated to those who had lost their loved ones in the terrorist attacks. Other volunteers handed out roses to individuals who were holding up signs of the missing or walked around offering assistance to residents nearby the devastated area. Generally, volunteers undertook a wide range of activities, yet based on newspaper and other official accounts, only a few of those activities required specialized individuals.

Another type of voluntary activity commonly covered in news articles was the donations of money and resources by many private enterprises. Again, just to list this kind of support would take several pages. Nonetheless, to have an idea, Nextel donated

thousands of radio-telephones. Marriot Financial Hotel and St. John's University offer donated the space where respite care facilities operated. Hewlett Packard and other manufacturers donated computer equipment and services. Contributing to this variety, UPS used some of its trucks to transport ice to preserve the deceased bodies. In sum, what is important about all these supplies and services donated by private organizations is that it shows that 9/11 tragedy was followed by a great deal of convergence, emergent roles, and improvisation. Similarly, it opens the question of how multi-organizational response networks developed and functioned in 9/11.

Media correspondents themselves did not have access to the highly secured areas, so what they could report about volunteers who engaged in direct search and rescue activities was limited. Nevertheless, based on a few reports, it can be observed that professional workers quickly displaced the small number of volunteers who managed themselves into search and rescue activities. As an iron worker who had the chance to volunteer for a few hours in debris clearance asserted, "the environment has shifted as most volunteers have been replaced by professionals." Professional response to the attacks was massive and unprecedented. More than two hundred Fire units, about one-half of all units in the city, and more than one hundred ambulances in the EMS system, or about one-third of the total available, responded to the disaster (McKinsey & Company 2002). Additionally, many professional search and rescue units came from outside New York City and some from out of the country.

### **TOO MANY AND TOO MUCH**

The 9/11 tragedy drew enormous support within the nation. Based on the consensus/dissensus distinction of crises formulated by Dynes and Quarantelli (see

above), it can be asserted that the World Trade Center tragedy was a consensus crisis, at least in the sense that it drew a lot of support among individuals and organizations within the United States. Although consensus may be positive for recovering from a disaster, a lesson learned from 9/11 is that extreme levels of consensus bring about extreme levels of convergence, which in turn, produce exceptional challenges efforts of cooperation and coordination among emergency management agencies. As implied in Barton's "mass assault" metaphor, many individuals and organizations entered the emergency social system immediately after the terrorist attacks. A survey conducted by *Wirthlin Worldwid*, found that 70 percent of Americans reported some form of charitable involvement in response to September 11. Cash donations began within a few hours, and so did the response of thousand of volunteers who formed several staging areas close to Ground Zero, the most notorious being at the Javits Center in Lower Manhattan.

Newspaper articles generated two major news themes in regard to the excessive amount of help and donations. The first theme covered some of the problems caused by the presence of too many individuals seeking some involvement with the recovery efforts, whereas the second major theme comprised problems the American Red Cross faced in regard to the management of vast monetary donations. Although the tragedy connected Americans in many ways, problems associated with an extreme outpouring of volunteers could not go unnoticed. Because of the magnitude of the 9/11 disaster, officially requesting volunteers through public announcement or similar means was unnecessary. On the contrary, by 9:57 p.m. on Tuesday September 11<sup>th</sup>, New York City Mayor Giuliani had made a public announcement that no more volunteers were needed,

“not even for the evening’s rescue effort.” It was the same day of the tragedy, and no more voluntary help was wanted. There were just too many volunteers!

Newspaper articles immediately following the attacks emphasize the altruistic side of volunteerism and express high regard for those willing to offer their unpaid services. Nonetheless, that enthusiasm was gradually fading away as the amount of unwanted help grew beyond control. By Saturday September 15th, for instance, a New York Times article reported that there were too many volunteers wandering around with nothing to do. The claim was that many volunteers were merely disguised disaster tourists. Many became a nuisance, as the following report describes:

The scene through the windshield Saturday was one of chaos. There were thousands of volunteers sitting around with nothing to do but eat donated cookies. There were the crash-site crazies who pose as marines and priests and firemen. There were reporters milling around disguised as construction workers. There were men drinking in bars that had their windows blown out. There were tens of thousands photos taken. Some people stood and smiled and posed. There was too much traffic for the trucks to move in and out effectively.

Except for sporadic labor shortages of professionally trained emergency personnel, most volunteers did not have the chance to engage in direct emergency activities. Volunteers’ hopes of providing any type of service increasingly faded as they realized the real task at Ground Zero was the recovery of body parts. This reality created a great frustration, especially in individuals who have had thought they could have used their specialized training to help victims of 9/11. However, demand for professionals, who are usually critical in disaster, was very limited. For instance, medical doctors who came to New York City to volunteer ended up mostly giving eye drops to firefighters and other rescue workers. Due to the extreme nature of the terrorist attack, rescue efforts had turned out into recovery, as this volunteer recalls,

Yeah. It was horrible. Except we didn't have any people dying or ailing. After two hours, the greatest difficulty was too many volunteers. People began endless discussions about where, exactly, to stack body boards. Meanwhile, more ambulances pulled up with roaring sirens; each time, nobody was in the back.

Willingness to help and generosity were getting in the way. On Sunday 16<sup>th</sup>, authorities had said "No More." Volunteers expressed great frustration with nothing to do, and authorities were weary of dealing with volunteers. As police commissioner asserted, "some pushy volunteers seemed more intent on satisfying their own needs than actually helping." This frustration prompted authorities and the media to ask volunteers to offer their services in their own communities. By the same token, tons of donated food and water, unused, got eventually distributed among the homeless system and hospitals of New York City.

Failing to recognize the uniqueness of the 9/11 disaster, the Red Cross used standard procedures to maximize blood and cash donations, yet it lacked a plan to deal with the distribution of funds and donations of such magnitude. By Wednesday September 12<sup>th</sup>, blood centers had been turning away donors, "handling them red tickets from rolls of 500 and telling them to come back the next day, and only if they had type-O blood." Monetary aid, traditionally preferred in disaster situations for the relief of victims, was also overwhelming. The allocation of collected donations did not start until approximately eight weeks after the disaster. It not only took a great administrative effort but also was surrounded by harsh criticisms.

Several organizations took advantage of the America Red Cross' inefficiency to deal with 9/11 donations and emerged to handle and coordinate relief efforts. Among some of the organizations that emerged were the September 11<sup>th</sup> Fund, the 9/11 United Services Group, Cross-Cultural Solutions, WTC Ground Zero Relief. Additionally, all

these non-profit organizations relied on volunteers to meet their new challenges. A lesson that can be drawn from this is that most emergent roles during disasters may be transitory, yet not necessarily inconsequential. Some of these emergent organizations have established themselves with long-term goals. For instance, their websites indicate long-term commitments to provide economic and emotional supports to disaster victims.

### **THE CONSENSUS FRAME**

News coverage stressing social solidarity, however, is not entirely misleading. The immediate aftermath of a disaster is usually characterized by a great deal of solidarity (Turner 1976). Avoiding conflict may serve important functional aspects such as developing emergency consensus, maintaining local solidarity, or strengthening community identity. As disaster impact fades over time, so does the evidence of “mechanical” solidarity (Turner 1976, Quarantelli).

Since Al Qaeda, and international insurgent organization, assumed responsibility for perpetrating the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, descriptions of the tragedy almost instantaneously embraced a tone of war and (international) conflict. Newspaper articles tend to reinforce images of consensus, and cultural images of America as a nation of “rights” and “freedom.” This kind of discourse dominates media coverage of 9/11 in general and of volunteers in specific despite that the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> have not significantly changed the stratification of the world. If something has changed is perhaps an increasing emphasis in maintaining the U.S. “influence” on the world order.

Government officials and the media rendered a limited view of the 9/11 episode. Despite that the “attack on America” on September 11, 2001 could have been framed in

many different ways, it was framed as to equate “America” with “freedom” and “democracy.” Thus, the terrorist attack represented a serious assault on values of freedom and democracy, which may be part of the values of most human beings, rather than, for example, an act of resistance to the imposition of capitalist and other Western values in the Middle East.

The portrayal of volunteers as symbols of patriotism is evident in news coverage of 9/11. The altruistic values of volunteers served to draw solidarity and consensus. Newspaper articles selectively present pictures and stories in which volunteers send messages of unity and belonging. These elements of unity and belonging are essential because support for war could be drawn upon them.

Volunteers are described with a tone of high regard, and several front-cover pictures show volunteers standing on long lines waiting for their turn to donate blood or other services. As a public official asserted, “public servants have traditionally been defined as government workers; I’ve always felt great pride in being a public servant. These last few days have expanded my definition of public servant as I’ve watched the outpouring of volunteers from every walk of life step forward and give their support, blood, and sweat.”

Disasters are perceived as dramatic events and thus reported as such. Newspaper articles constantly dramatize the role of volunteers by elevating them to symbolic positions. Dramatic stories, such as those of war between “good and evil,” need heroes. The passengers of flight 93, police officers, firefighters, Major Guliani, and even volunteers are all notable for being referred to as “heroes.” Furthermore, the assumption is that what motivates the actions of these “heroes” is patriotism or love for their nation.



Positive qualities are emphasized and often exaggerated, negative ones are usually left out.

In sum, newspaper coverage of volunteers tends to highlight their altruistic side over the problems they bring with their convergence. By providing frames in which conflict within the group of “insiders” is minimized and in which volunteers are romanticized for their heroic actions, the media seems to contribute to the drawing of boundaries that divide this nation with the most part of the world. Now we can think about bombing Afganistan or Iraq with little remorse. We may think that those people deserve it, and that casualties are just the part of any war. Yet what makes us think that our pain and sorrow for the victims of 9/11 is more valuable than the pain and sorrow the families of those casualties are going to suffer. Patriotism is a dangerous frame, but unfortunately is the one that sticks out from newspaper coverage of 9/11 volunteerism.

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