

**The “I” of the Storm:  
An Assessment of Celebrity and the Social Construction of Hurricane  
Katrina**

**by**

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## ABSTRACT

Recent theory on the role of celebrity in a contemporary context emphasizes the unique manner in which celebrity pervades public discourse. This thesis examines the interrelationship between celebrity and disaster theory in order to evaluate the extent to which celebrity had access to public and media discourse about Hurricane Katrina. Attention is also focused on the ways in which celebrity was manifested within this discourse. Social constructionism is employed here as the theoretical lens through which celebrity and disaster merge. With regard to methodology, qualitative elements of Altheide's (1987) ethnographic content analysis are used to decipher the claims made by and about celebrity within the Katrina news media narrative. In order to address questions of context, Fine's (1997) adaptation of Smelser's (1962) value-added model is used to identify some of the structural considerations from which these claims emerge.

From this examination, three substantive themes emerge: (1) Gabler's (1998) celebrity theory offers a suitable approach to the examination of the intersection between celebrity and Hurricane Katrina; (2) Due to the character of this assessment, constructionist applications which consider not only the role of claims-makers but the structural context of claims-making activities provide the most comprehensive framework; (3) The pervasiveness of celebrity in the contemporary context, combined with the dissensus surrounding the Katrina event, allowed celebrities to adopt unique roles within the Katrina narrative.

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# **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Discourse on popular culture is commonly celebrity discourse. The cultural fascination with celebrity has generated a body of scholarly literature on the subject. This literature emerged in the mid 1900's. More recently it has emphasized the affects of new media technologies and changes in the cultural climate. Celebrity theories are concerned with the manner in which celebrity interacts with other aspects of social life, including the entertainment industry, media, social institutions and audience interest. These theories are frequently premised on the notion that celebrity has pervaded a variety of social spheres and some suggest that celebrity or fame might be conceived as a broad social value (Gabler 1998). Celebrity theory is strongly linked to media theory since it is through mass media that celebrity reaches a broad audience. This thesis conducts a constructionist examination of this literature in order to determine the manner in which news stories or media events of various types become or include stories about celebrity. To this end, the tenets outlined in celebrity theory will be applied to a discussion of Hurricane Katrina.

## **HURRICANE KATRINA: TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION**

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf coast August 29<sup>th</sup> 2005, flooding areas of Louisiana and Mississippi, leaving tens of thousands of residents stranded on the streets, on their rooftops, or at the Louisiana Superdome convention centre. News broadcasters rushed to New Orleans; a city frequently celebrated in the media, in order to



cover the disaster<sup>1</sup>. The events emerging from what has been classified as the Katrina social disaster, lent themselves very easily to news stories about the Hurricane. The seeming social chaos, manifested in what appeared to be an increase in crime, death, and physical destruction, provided news makers with a range of stories to tell. The controversy surrounding what was criticized as slow government response raised a number of questions about government ineptitude and race relations in America.

The scholarly literature on Katrina addresses a number of these questions; it includes research findings and more informal accounts which attempt to explain the event. This literature frequently emphasizes media coverage of the Katrina event and the manner in which it told stories that were exaggerated, biased, uncritical or racist. While some of the literature examining coverage of the Hurricane addresses the role of particular celebrities involved, the link between celebrity and disaster remains unaddressed.

The case of Hurricane Katrina was selected for this research for three central reasons. The first is the extensive and available media coverage of the event, made possible by the prolonged character of the episode and the varied discourses within which discussions of the episode were organized. The second is that because the Hurricane was most readily framed as a natural disaster, it did not implicitly command celebrity involvement in the same manner other types of stories might. Finally, there were a few celebrity stories which emerged from the Katrina narrative in powerful ways, prompting further research into the perhaps less obvious stories told about celebrity within the Katrina context.

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<sup>1</sup> The term disaster, as any social category is a social construction. It is used here and throughout the thesis because it is used to classify Hurricane Katrina in public discourse.

## THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis employs social constructionism as a theoretical orientation. While the orientation applied follows more contextual approaches toward constructionist questions, insights derived from the work of strict constructionist writers are by no means ignored. This is made most evident by the use of the typology developed by Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) and described in Chapter Four. Constructionism offers a lens through which the discourses of celebrity and disaster might be merged.

It is useful to distinguish between the particular types of discourses which will be discussed throughout this thesis. Media discourse, defined by Sasson (1995) as “the spotlighted facts, public figures and catch-phrases” which are “[supplied] by the mass media” (151) informs this research by presenting a set of messages about Hurricane Katrina which are transmitted to a broad audience and thus influence public understandings of the event. While the media has a role in shaping public opinion, audiences have alternate tools available to inform their construction of an event. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) argue: “media discourse is part of the process by which individuals construct meaning, and public opinion is part of the process by which journalists and other cultural entrepreneurs develop and crystallize meaning in public discourse”(2). The process of constructing meaning is complex and requires such a distinction between media discourse, public opinion and public discourse. Media discourse frequently does not have the “cultural resonance” or public supporters to properly infiltrate public discourse (ibid). Further, public discourse is not limited to media discourse; it may consist of the claims made by political, cultural, religious, legal and scientific entrepreneurs. Having briefly distinguished between types of discourses, it

follows to return to the manner in which constructionism provides an appropriate framework from which to assess the interaction between them.

Constructionism lends itself particularly well to the study of celebrity. Celebrity as a social category is contested. There are various interests involved in constructing public figures as celebratory, and a set of meanings which can be attached to the manner in which they interact with other aspects of social life. Constructionism offers insight into the construction of these elusive figures, as well as a set of tools from which to decipher claims made both by and about them (Loseke 1993, Best 1995, Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003, Bolin and Stanford 1998, Stallings 1995).

With regard to the study of disaster, traditional sociology seeks to examine the social dimension of these episodes in which conventional life is disrupted and the perceived social order is at stake. A great deal of objectivist writing on the subject tends to reinforce popular definitions or understandings of disaster, working within those understandings to identify the social conditions which emerge from such disruptions (Klinenberg 2003). Constructionist perspectives favour discussions about the manner in which the term “disaster” is imposed on certain types of events over others. They also examine the roles of particular individuals or groups which receive increased attention during a disaster, while also considering the sometimes highly exaggerated claims which tend to arise from these events (Stallings 1995, Ogle et al. 2003, Bolin and Stanford 1998, Garner and Huff 1997).

Finally, constructionist theories offer an appropriate framework with which to examine media conventions. These theories emphasize the discursive or rhetorical practices engaged by media workers in order to structure claims (Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003,

Best 1999, Dobkin 1992, Jacobs 1996, Tuchman 1978). Further they examine the manner in which news sources present different types of stories, as well as the devices employed by news makers in order to construct a highly entertaining narrative. With regard to media constructions of disaster and celebrity, constructionism offers tools which foster an analytic understanding of the manner in which the spectacular narratives attached to celebrity and disaster intersect with the media conventions of entertainment.

The methodology employed within this research is ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1987). Ethnographic content analysis is favoured here because, unlike more quantitative content analyses, it involves a less rigid and more exploratory approach to data collection. This approach places a great deal of responsibility on the researcher, who must remain reflective in analyzing the data, however it also has the capacity to produce thorough and multi-dimensional results. Within the thesis, this methodology is used to analyze a series of newspaper articles, magazines, and websites which refer to the interaction between celebrity and Hurricane Katrina. Once the content is organized thematically a typology described by Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) is used to identify the rhetoric which packages claims made by the media with regard to celebrity, and also those made by celebrity with regard to Hurricane Katrina.

Engaging with the discourses of media, celebrity and disaster, and drawing from the available sociological research guides this analysis in distinct but related directions. The aim of this project is to consider both theoretically and empirically: 1) the manner in which media-defined disasters such as Hurricane Katrina are constructed; 2) the manner in which celebrity figures into the Katrina discussion; 3) employing a contextual constructionist lens, the structural context from which constructions of Katrina arise.

Chapter Two addresses the theory guiding this analysis, outlining the central tenets of constructionism, as well as the benefits and challenges of a strict or strong approach over a contextual or weak approach. The chapter goes on to discuss four central themes which emerge from celebrity theory. As the themes are presented and the theories are outlined, they are evaluated on the basis of their perceived ability to foster an understanding of the interaction between celebrity and Katrina.

The third chapter describes ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1987), and uses this methodology to investigate headlines relevant to Katrina coverage. A substantive overview of media discourse, as well as scholarly literature about media and disaster is conducted. These are used to develop a narrative understanding of Hurricane Katrina, as well as an overview of some of the claims made about the event outside of celebrity considerations. Constructionist theories lend a critical orientation to the media discourse presented.

Chapter Four describes the data collection process, which involves first a structured search of newspaper database *Factiva* using the search terms “Hurricane Katrina” and “Celebrity,” and second a more informal exploration of celebrity websites, magazine articles and other media or news related websites on the subject. Following this the findings of the thesis are presented using Ibarra and Kitsuse’s (2003) typology. Two rhetorical idioms and one counterrhetorical device are applied to an understanding of the manner in which news sources package claims about celebrity, and celebrities advance claims about Hurricane Katrina. Consideration is also given to claims-making styles, as well as motifs structuring parts of the content.

Chapter Five attempts to integrate the findings elaborated in the thesis in the first four chapters in order to discuss the contextual considerations which allowed Hurricane Katrina to become the particular type of event it became. To this end Fine's (1997) adaptation of Smelser's (1962) value-added model is employed and extended to an understanding of the manner in which the structural arrangements surrounding the event affected the manner in which celebrity interacted with it.

Finally, Chapter Six presents a summary of the arguments outlined throughout the thesis. Here, some limitations of the research are discussed along with some suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL ORIENTATION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter discusses the theoretical orientation guiding this research. To this end two distinct theoretical interests will be outlined. The first, social constructionism, provides a lens through which the discourses and findings related to celebrity and disaster are interpreted. The second deals more specifically with the manner in which celebrity engages with various social venues. In order to undertake a constructionist assessment of celebrity and the manner in which it interacts with Hurricane Katrina, it is first necessary to consider the manner in which it is situated in the theory. This chapter addresses the varying constructionist approaches which will be applied within this research and uses this constructionist framework to introduce the concept of celebrity, as well as the manner in which it has been theorized in academic literature.

### **CONSTRUCTIONISM: A BROAD OVERVIEW**

Social constructionism was arguably first framed as a paradigm by Berger and Luckmann (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality* although its roots lie in symbolic interactionism. The work described ways in which knowledge and reality are socially constructed, situating the role of social actors, social structures and social processes in formulating and negotiating “reality.” Berger and Luckmann suggest that meanings are “objectivated” (70), and “truth” or validity of knowledge is “taken for granted” (44), explaining that individuals do not critically reflect on the knowledge they receive, and instead have become accustomed to accepting and validating information presented by

social institutions. They posit that “reality is socially defined,” and that “definitions are always *embodied*, such that, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality” (116). The process of defining and maintaining reality is complex, and the individuals who are responsible for the task are referred to as claims-makers (Sacco and Kennedy 2002: 213, Best 1995, Loseke 2000).

### **THE STRICT AND CONTEXTUAL APPROACHES**

In the process of debating constructionist methodologies, theorists have generally aligned themselves with one of two approaches: “strict constructionism” and “contextual constructionism.” Strict constructionism seeks to examine “epistemological concerns” in the claims-making process; to consider the characteristics of, and people involved in social problems claims and to juxtapose them against other claims. In this vein, “analysts [are] urged to avoid any contamination by objectivism, to shun all assumptions about the empirical world (Holstein and Miller 1993: 135, Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003, Kitsuse and Spector 1975). Best (2003) refers to this approach as a “strong reading” and explains that it is “phenomenological; it calls into question all commonsensical assumptions about deviant labels, official statistics, social problems, and the like” (51, Kitsuse and Spector 1973).

Contextual approaches, referred to by Best as “weak readings”, “study claims-making within its context of culture and social structure” (Holstein and Miller 1993: 139). They may examine statistics or other “objective” materials, in order to evaluate the validity of a claim. They may also engage with analytical questions in order to decipher the potential motives of claimants (Kitsuse and Spector 1973: 415, Best 2003: 55). Weak interpretations tend to be more common in constructionist literature, however they are



also subject to the criticism of strict constructionists for lacking a sort of “analytical purity” (Best 2003). Further, weak readings tend to be more susceptible than strong ones to the criticism of Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) that: “constructionists inevitably adopt an epistemologically inconsistent position” (Best 2003: 56). Referring to this inconsistency as “ontological gerrymandering,” Woolgar and Pawluch suggest that the problem with constructionist assessments is that the researcher cannot set aside his or her own assumptions in order to examine the truth assumptions surrounding a social problem. While strict constructionists respond to this criticism by avoiding any objective measures, contextual constructionists argue that such measures, when critically examined, can help the researcher to assess the “relative merits” of claims (58).

Best encourages the consideration of objective materials which either support or refute claims. Arguing against approaches which devalue objective conclusions, he aims to "worry a little less about how [social scientists] know what [they] know, and worry a little more about what, if anything, [they] do know about the construction of social problems" (66). While objective materials, such as statistics are sometimes generated by skewed methodologies, it is possible to gauge their validity and to consider what categories they represent. Using the “satanic scare” of the 80’s as an example, he explains that contextual constructionism allows the theorist to ask such questions as:

“Is there a satanic conspiracy with a million - or perhaps only one hundred thousand or even ten thousand - members? Does the cult claim tens of thousands - or maybe just dozens - of victims each year? Further, one might wonder about the people issuing the warnings. Who are they, and what motives or interests lie behind their claims? And is the evidence they offer persuasive?” (Ibid 53).

By incorporating statistical information social scientists are able to assess whether the moral panic is founded.

In contrast, he argues, strict constructionism allows social scientists to consider two sets of claims - those that suggest that “satanists sacrifice sixty thousand victims per year” and those that oppose it, but “they must not let their analysis be affected by judgments that one set of claims presents a stronger case” (Ibid). In the absence of any “objective” referents it becomes difficult to methodologically examine the construction of social problems. Further Best argues that assessments such as that of Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003), which focus analytical attention on vernacular categories and the rhetorical and counterrhetorical strategies used to structure claims, are an “illusion because language never leaves society” (63). According to Best “an analyst who ignores the social embeddedness of claims-makers’ rhetoric takes that embeddedness for granted; this is another form of ontological gerrymandering” (Ibid). He concludes that strong readings are limited both in their ability to thoroughly decipher the character of social problems, and in their susceptibility to the same sorts of criticisms which they claim to have resolved.

Following Best’s arguments, this thesis is guided by the tenets of contextual constructionism. It seeks to examine the rhetorical categories which structure claims as well as the structural arrangements from which those claims emerge. To this end, a typology advanced by Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) is employed to organize the rhetorical and counterrhetorical themes and devices which describe the interaction between celebrity and the media discourse about Katrina. Following this, Fine’s (1997) constructionist adaptation of Smelser’s (1962) value-added model is incorporated. This

model is borrowed from the collective behavior field and used to situate rhetorical and counterrhetorical categories in their structural context.

## **CONSTRUCTIONISM AND CELEBRITY**

Loseke (2003) describes that claims made about the nature of reality can be verbal, visual or behavioural (26) and that in order to be effective and broadly accepted they must be made by credible individuals or members of reputable institutions (Loseke 2003, Berger and Luckmann 1966, Sacco and Kennedy 2002, Best 1990). Related to this, she suggests that constructionism is concerned with how we understand the world as well as with how “we categorize the people in our world” (14-15). Within this context a range of questions about celebrities, such as where they stand on the “hierarchy of credibility” and how they go about making claims, become intrinsic to the interrogation of celebrity theory. Further constructionist questions, with regard to celebrity might include: How is celebrity constructed? Are different types or categories of celebrity constructed in different ways? What is the role of celebrity in constructing or maintaining reality? Which institutions might be in charge of constructing celebrity? What are the uses of celebrity for institutions such as the media, the government and the capitalist district? How does the audience respond to celebrity constructions? Are celebrity constructions fairly consistent or frequently shifting? Many of these questions are contested in the literature, but they provide an effective framework for thinking about how celebrity interacts with the social world as well as with structures such as media.

## **CELEBRITY THEORY**

Celebrity can be defined according to a variety of uses and functions. It merges individuals from diverse backgrounds together into common interest forums such as internet fan-sites. It is frequently accompanied by a simple yet extravagant narrative, which is highly entertaining, and can also be broadly applied to a number of interests and circumstances. It offers a site for contesting political and social meanings, and it provides a physical embodiment for certain widely held cultural goals, such as fame, wealth, and attractiveness. Celebrity is manifested in a variety of ways: as human, animal, monument or place, constructed in a variety of ways: as heroic, deviant, political or puppet-like, and finally theorized in a variety of ways.

Accordingly, this endeavour seeks to examine how sociological literature identifies the interaction between celebrity and the social world. To this end, four themes or defining characteristics of celebrity are drawn from the relevant literature: 1. Celebrity has pervaded a variety of social spheres, drawing and holding the attention of a broad audience. 2. Celebrity represents itself through conventions of entertainment. 3. Celebrity can be characterized by its uses as a commodity and its role within a capitalist agenda. 4. Celebrity lends itself to public life such that it arouses feelings of intimacy within audience members.

### **THEME 1: “THE CELEBRITY IS THE MESSAGE”**

Perhaps the most defining or significant characteristic of celebrity, in so far as it is a common starting point for most celebrity theories, involves the ways in which celebrity has pervaded the North American social infrastructure. Celebrity is not limited to the spaces created by the fame and entertainment industry, but is intertwined with political

and capitalist structures as well as with social causes. Celebrities, used here to refer to the human representation of the concept, have broad accessibility; they may gain popularity within local or national contexts and they are arguably an unlimited resource. The theories discussed in this section speak to the manner in which celebrities gain access to audiences through their prevalence, through the conventions of new media and technology, and through the broad ideal of entertainment within which they are the sort of spokespeople.

### ***Ownership and the Making of Celebrity***

According to Neal Gabler (1998), author of *Life: The Movie*, the pervasiveness of celebrity across a variety of social spheres can be at least partially explained by the vast number of people who can be, and have been classified as such. This practice of constructing many celebrities, Gabler posits, can be seen as an issue of supply and demand. He argues that: “as the demand for celebrities [keeps] growing beyond the capacity of the finite number of movie stars, singers, athletes, and other conventional entertainers to satisfy it, the media [have] to find or create new figures” (156). He goes on to explain that in order to create new celebrity categories, media simply needs to “widen the beam of their spotlight;” (Ibid) to transform that particular executive, chef, fashion designer or housewife into a person of interest by lending them access to fame for as long as their audience will allow it. With the onset of reality television, and the variety of mechanisms through which an individual can “celebritize” him - or herself, there has been an acceleration in the emergence of celebrities or pseudo celebrities; since there is a noteworthy distinction between “those who [command] the media spotlight and those

who [have] only been grazed by it” (160). The wide demand is now met by an even wider supply.

In a similar vein, Leo Braudy (1986) argues that “societies always generate a number of people willing and eager to live at least part of their lives in the public eye” (5). While Braudy factors in audience aspirations as a crucial element of celebrity construction, he does not view the vast supply of celebrities as the direct fulfilment of a public desire. Instead he takes into consideration the other side of the fame transaction. That is, he credits the individuals, who are socialized to value individuality, recognition and achievement, as the reason for the supply, arguing that: “in a society committed to progress , the seeking of fame, the climbing of the ladder of renown, expresses something essential in that society’s nature” (Ibid). Further, he explains that the people who make up this surplus are not simply instruments of the American value system, they are not just “people who are well known for their well knowness” as Boorstin (1962) defines them, rather they also play a part in shaping these values, in ensuring that the demand for a number of celebrities remains high.

### *Crediting the Industry*

Other perspectives deemphasize the role of the celebrity in self construction, claiming that the pervasiveness of celebrity can be attributed to the ways in which technological advances and new media conventions have imposed celebrity on a broad audience. Daniel Boorstin (1962) attributes the fabrication of well knowness (47) to what he refers to as the “Graphic revolution”: the “ability to make, preserve, transmit, and disseminate precise images” to accompany a variety of news or human interest stories (13). He suggests that the shift from “folk” to “mass,” from self-expression to

replication or representation, changed the contemporary meaning of heroism. This new meaning emerged as a result of the public's need for greatness, their demand for a new "mould" in which "marketable human models – modern 'heroes' - could be mass produced, to satisfy the market" (49). Boorstin attributes some of this mass production to the celebrities themselves, but only within the conventions of the "Graphic Revolution", and thus only as a means of marketing their image. Celebrities will "breed more celebrities" but only because they "intensify their celebrity images simply by having relations amongst themselves" (65). In a sense, Boorstin blames the press agents, and publicists for constructing celebrity as a bricolage of widely held social values, fads and fascinations, in such a manner that they have become generalizable across the social scope.

Boorstin's appeal to the role of images as the creators of celebrity is shared by other celebrity theorists. Joshua Gamson (1994) traces celebrity throughout various phases and media developments within the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He highlights three themes with regard to these advancements. The first is that the development of public relations meant "that the task of garnering and shaping attention had become progressively more 'scientific'" (42). The second suggests that the popularity of these public relations firms, alongside the media venues which showcased their successes, caused the conventions of entertainment to be applied across a variety of sectors. Within this context he notes that politicians and public figures began to hire publicists in order to help them build certain celebrity qualities and traits. The third examines the role of television and the internet in making celebrity images more accessible, transforming the practice of engaging with

celebrity into a sort of lifestyle (43). Sociologist Orrin Klapp (1962) advances a similar argument:

“There is widespread and continuing preoccupation with the bodies, personalities, and private affairs of celebrities as is shown by gossip columns, "human interest" news, fan magazines, and the like. The real purpose of such information is seen in fan magazines, which are plainly for pin-up and scrapbook purposes...to supply images which people can incorporate into their own lives” (143).

Both Gamson and Klapp interpret media forms and conventions, alongside the public relations industry, as the sites through which the meaning of celebrity was transformed and generalized. Gabler (1998) does not refute this view, comparing it to Marshall McLuhan’s theory that “any technology gradually creates a totally new human environment;” (55) however he does suggest that it may be highlighting the wrong issue. He posits that the reverse may actually be true, that “new human environments create new technologies” or put differently, that it was “a change in the American consciousness that had triggered the Graphic Revolution” (56). Gabler (1998) suspects that this change can be attributed to the prevalence of entertainment, a theory which will be discussed below. This shift in thinking is addressed here because it raises new questions about the broad applicability of celebrity as a concept. If celebrity, in so far as it embodies the value of entertainment, can be held accountable for the shift in American consciousness, then perhaps it is not the “medium which is the message,” as McLuhan theorized, perhaps it is the celebrity who is the message.

### *The Value of Entertainment*

Gabler’s theory, which may be applied to an understanding of how celebrity came to pervade the social world, merits further discussion here. Gabler advances the fairly



controversial idea that: "It is not any ism but entertainment that is arguably the most pervasive, powerful, and ineluctable force of our time - a force so overwhelming that it has finally metastasized into life" (9). According to Gabler, entertainment, within the contemporary western environment, has trumped traditional or modernist sources of control, going beyond the media to pervade a variety of social spheres, finding the ability to draw and hold the attention of the masses. This theory raises interesting questions in terms of the role of celebrities within the "republic of entertainment." A significant part of Gabler's analysis of celebrity relates to how they comply with the conventions of entertainment and melodrama both within their work and outside of it. This identification will be discussed further below, but the purpose of applying Gabler's theory here is to discuss whether, or in which ways the pervasiveness of celebrity can be attributed to the dominance of entertainment in the contemporary social world.

Gabler argues that entertainment as a dominant social value has led people to conduct even the most monotonous tasks of their everyday lives as though they were in a movie. For Gabler the role of celebrities in this is simple: "Audiences need some point of identification if the show is really to engross them. For the movies the solution was stars. For the life movie - it is celebrity" (7). The relationship between the audience and its new religion, entertainment, is fostered by and embodied within celebrity. Celebrity in this context, is valorized by figures such as "lifestyle adviser Martha Stewart - who are essentially drama coaches in the life movie, instructing [the public] how to make [their] own lives more closely approximate the movie" (8). But celebrities are not the only individuals interested in perpetuating entertainment as a value; the value is reflected by figures outside of the entertainment industry as well. Gabler describes the ways in which

politics and entertainment are intertwined in much the same way Gamson (1994) does. He suggests that the value of entertainment can be easily ascertained from electoral campaigns in which “candidates [are] the putative stars, the primaries open casting calls, the campaign [is] an audition and the election itself the selection of the lead, while the handlers [serve] as drama coaches, scriptwriters and directors” (100). Gabler posits that the value is also expressed in news forums, citing Barbara Walters, who “made her reputation less as a news anchor than as a celebrity interviewer”(152) as an example of one of the ways in which stories about politics, social problems and other national affairs are gradually being overpowered by stories about celebrity. Gabler makes a convincing argument which draws out the role of entertainment in various social sectors. His arguments contribute to the theory that celebrity has pervaded the social world, treating celebrity as the embodiment or representation of the value of entertainment.

While there seems to be a consensus among celebrity theorists as to the pervasiveness of celebrity in contemporary society, there appears to be a lack of agreement over who or what can be held accountable for this phenomenon. At this point it becomes clear that celebrities, dominant institutions such as media and politics, as well as the public in general each play some part in elevating celebrity on the social and perhaps even the value hierarchy; however, theorists arguing the prevalence or strength of one over the others all make convincing arguments. Expanding this discussion within the defining characteristic of celebrity may lead to some resolution in terms of how they function together, or at the very least, in terms of how to apply these contrasting theories in a study of celebrity.

## **THEME 2: STAGING “REAL” LIFE**

Gabler’s notion that celebrity serves as the physical and conceptual embodiment of entertainment can be divided into two central arguments. The first, discussed above, is that celebrity functions to broaden the value of entertainment. The second suggests that celebrity represents itself through the conventions of melodrama, or, put in another way, that celebrity is the site for entertaining narratives. Gabler’s theory will be applied here in order to lend structure to this discussion; however, other theorists, namely Boorstin (1962) and Klapp (1962) will also be addressed.

### ***Avoiding Abstraction***

Gabler examines the ways in which celebrities represent themselves through the conventions of melodrama and spectacle, discussing celebrity narratives, the plight of putative celebrities and the relationship between criminality and celebrity. Gabler revised his definition of celebrity after he wrote *Life: The Movie*, classifying it as “an art form wrought in the medium of life” (Lear Center 3). He also identified a distinctive and common feature of celebrities - that they “[live] out narratives that capture [public] interest and the interest of the media — narratives that have entertainment value” (Ibid 5). Oftentimes these entertaining narratives are created by the audience members, who transfer the narratives of the sitcom or movie character onto the celebrity in their “real life” (7). In general though celebrities fulfill the “functions of conventional entertainment” (2000: 168) in a variety of ways: they offer distraction and escape, a sense of community which is “forged from the shared symbols of popular culture,” they create a context for “gossip and trivia” (Ibid), they engage with “high culture” and finally they offer a set of myths which “begin to resolve themselves into a single fundamental or

set of themes about American life” (169). According to Gabler, celebrities offer “self-contained entertainment, a form of entertainment that [is] rapidly exceeding film and television in popularity” (146). If celebrity is to embody entertainment both on and off the set, it must contrive and uphold a dramatic plot which can dominate both dimensions.

Celebrity theorists Daniel Boorstin (1962) and Orinn Klapp (1962) present similar arguments regarding the ways in which celebrities uphold dramatic narratives; offering particular reasons as to why celebrities might chose to characterize themselves by the conventions of entertainment. Boorstin (1962) argues that in the search for well knownness and labels of heroism, celebrities must appeal to entertaining narratives in order to differentiate themselves from each other. He posits that “entertainers...are best qualified to become celebrities because they are skilled in the marginal differentiation of their personalities...they do this by minutiae of grimace, gesture, language, and voice” (65). Boorstin bases his discussion on the notion that celebrities do not have any ability or natural tendency toward greatness. In order to achieve celebrity status then, Boorstin writes, they must offer a performance which will attract the attention of the audience, and through this, allow them to derive fame or well knownness. Boorstin argues that this practice is largely a response to the demands of the audience, explaining that when audiences “talk or read or write about celebrities, [their] emphasis on...[celebrity] marital relations and sexual habits, on...tastes in smoking drinking, dress, sports cars, and interior decoration is [their] desperate effort to distinguish among the indistinguishable” (65). Celebrity, in this context, offers a dramatic narrative in order to fulfil the needs of the audience, whose increased demand for various models of greatness has, in a cyclical manner, caused them to create so many imitation heroes for themselves.

Although Gabler (1998) offers a different perspective, he makes a similar argument regarding dramatic narratives and differentiation. Gabler's theory, which applies primarily to putative celebrities, is based on the notion that the creation of new categories of celebrity has led to the emergence of celebrity in large numbers, creating competition among those celebrities who rely on an enticing narrative to perpetuate or even stimulate their fame (160). In developing this argument, he cites film director Mike Nichols, who inquired:

“Where is there a hero who can fall from greater heights than Michael Jackson? Where is there a more naked rivalry than between Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan? What couple can you write about that is a stronger metaphor about relations between sexes than the Bobbitts?” (161).

According to Gabler, the broad practice of “self-celebritization,” or the tendency for regular individuals to fuse melodrama and entertainment into their lives, forced celebrities to fabricate fantastic narratives so that they might attempt to separate themselves from the vast landscape of recognizable figures surrounding them.

In a similar vein, Klapp (1962) stipulates that celebrities must represent themselves theatrically in order to transform themselves into “socially comprehensible image[s]:” (12) so as to gain wide cultural access to the public. According to Klapp, in order for individuals to achieve fame, they “must have superior ability to stamp themselves upon the minds of others by personal "color" or drama of roles” citing “Will Rogers, Tallulah Bankhead, Huey Long, Babe Ruth” (12-13) as examples. In order to avoid abstraction, celebrities must construct “personalities,” which can be easily categorized into the “types” or narratives to which the audience has become accustomed (Ibid). The celebrity aims to construct him - or herself as part of a “type” because “the

mass symbol is a vehicle for the imaginings of thousands” (14). Since fame is represented as a central aim, and a familiar narrative as the vehicle to achieving it, “[the celebrity] is likely to have perfected dramatic form as hero, villain, or fool” (Ibid). Klapp’s theory might function as an explanation for the “deviant” and “strange” behaviours which tend to adorn celebrity narratives. Within the context of entertainment, some celebrities seem to abide by the principle that “there is no such thing as bad publicity.” By this logic, to be recognized as a villain is better than not being recognized at all.

### *Celebrating the Infamous*

Gabler extends Klapp’s axiom, which conveys that even villainous behaviour is celebrated if it complies with certain melodramatic standards, describing how criminal offenders regularly achieve celebrity status. Traditionally, criminal offenders have been scorned as unwelcome threats to the social order, but “judged by the values of entertainment...the perpetrator of a major, or even a minor but dramatic, crime, [is] as much a celebrity as any other human entertainer (2000: 181). Gabler recites the “stories” behind terrorists such as Timothy McVeigh, and assassins such as Lee Harvey Oswald as examples. Intrinsic to these stories are the ways in which the offenders have been glorified by the media sources which use the “language of celebrity” to describe them, the lawyers who emphasize the person behind the crime, and the offenders themselves who tend to dramatize their oddities and appear to thrive in their deviance (182-4). Narratives of violence, entertaining crime, and deviant personalities have become part of the narrative of entertainment, leading a variety of celebrities to gain recognition through deviance, and members of the audience to gain celebrity status through crime.

Literature which theorizes the ways in which celebrity manifests itself dramatically makes a strong case for the role of the celebrity, the media and the audience in constructing the celebrity. Revisiting the conflict over which of these players, if any, has the most influence, it is useful to note within the context of this theme that Gabler finds resolution through his theory that: “One needs a performer. One needs a personal real-life, or purportedly real-life, narrative, even if it is only the foundation narrative. One needs publicity for that narrative. And last, but by no means least, one needs fans” (10). While Gabler attributes responsibility to all of the players he argues that the most defining characteristic of celebrities, the feature which determines their fame, is their ability to provide an appealing narrative.

### **THEME 3: THE PRICE OF FAME**

Shifting the emphasis from the theories that position celebrity within the broad cultural value of entertainment, a third defining characteristic of celebrity, which builds on the notion of celebrity pervasiveness, holds that celebrities have uses in a broad capitalist agenda. The arguments summarized above addressed, to some extent, how the broad set of cultural goals which celebrities embody might be used toward capitalist ends. The aim in exploring this theme will be to move away from the conceptual or ideological meaning of celebrity and toward a discussion of how celebrities themselves have become commodities. These theories seek to identify the ways in which capitalism, rather than entertainment, is the central pervasive force through which celebrity might be defined.

#### ***Celebrity Commodification***

Theories which seek to argue that celebrity has uses within a capitalist agenda tend to develop their arguments from a similar starting point as most others - that is, they

begin their assessment by describing how the power or pervasiveness of celebrity attributes to their objectification. Marshall (1997) posits that “celebrity describes a type of value that can be articulated through an individual and celebrated publicly as important and significant. The term is linked to past power structures (i.e., the church) and...modern power structures (i.e. capitalism)” (7). Marshall’s definition of celebrity recognizes the role of the celebrity as a public figure holding influence over the masses, yet it also goes a step further to acknowledge the influence of capitalist interests in constructing the celebrity. In this view, the celebrity “is the product of dominant interests that reproduce themselves in consumer goods and cultural forms” (Newbury 2000: 279). The exchange of the celebrity product, then, is between the institutional powers which develop it, and the public which consumes it. In a setting where "everyone is involved in either producing or consuming celebrities” (Andrews and Jackson 2001: 4) interesting questions emerge with regard to the role of the celebrity who, as the representative of wide public interests and thus the centre of power, seems to be passive in this transaction. Within this vein, it is useful to unravel both how the celebrity might be seen as a commodity, and how the celebrity is used within a capitalist agenda.

Theories which seek to explain the relationship between celebrity and capitalism frequently argue that celebrities have become the commodities - the products which are carefully fabricated by commercial interests for the purposes of profit. In *Claims to Fame* Joshua Gamson (1994) describes how the 1950’s marked a shift in celebrity dialogue, explaining that “terms began to change: the celebrity was becoming “merchandise,” “inventory,” “property,” a “product”, a “commodity” (45). The process of building celebrities became just as marketable as the celebrity him – or herself, and a



variety of journalists and publicists began to describe the process in public venues. As evidence, Gamson cites an article published in *TV Guide* in 1967 entitled “How to Manufacture a Celebrity,” which uses “the case of Barbara Walters” to “[demonstrate] how the mechanical assembly line created celebrities from raw human material” (45). In this vein “notoriety becomes a type of capital,” (62) and the people who hold it a marketable product.

Andrews and Jackson (2001) centre their discussion on the ways in which sports celebrities are commodified, appealing to Marshall’s theory in framing their analysis. In defining celebrity they identify a new category beyond the hero and the star which they deem the “quasar.” According to Andrews and Jackson “quasars” are “people unwillingly sucked into...the vortex of promotion” (2). Their identification here refers in part to the industry of celebrity endorsements, but also to the practice of individual celebrities being transformed into commodities. Using Michael Jordan as an example, they describe the ways in which he “has become a brand unto himself, serving as a significant example of America's transnational commodity culture” (20). The “just do it” logo has been woven into Jordan’s persona. He is not simply a spokesperson for Nike but the embodiment of the “just do it” logo and an almost irremovable part of the Nike product (20-24).

In attempting to explain the uses of celebrity in these ways, theorists posit that celebrity is the “arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises and where it is secured” (Marshall 1997: 45). These theories tend to emphasize that the audience is not passive in the consumptive process since they “do not blindly accept the substitution of unreality or dominant realities presented to them but instead use

commercially mediated images to reflect upon and argue for their own ideological predispositions and interests” (Ibid). The question which emerges then revolves around whether celebrities have agency, or whether they are the passive beings in the transaction, molded by the demands of the audience and the interests of the commercial industries.

Another avenue of thought within the theory of celebrity and consumption emphasizes the role of celebrities as the non-autonomous representatives for commercial interests. Andrews and Jackson (2001) highlight the broad applicability of celebrities in a variety of product endorsements and social causes, arguing that “diverse arenas such as politics, religion, commerce, the judiciary, sport, and virtually all other forms of entertainment, have cultivated their own celebrity economies (4). Again, the representational power held by celebrities is offered as a primary reason why celebrities function as spokespersons; however there is another equally plausible reason, elaborated by Gabler (1998). Gabler argues that the primary use of celebrity in the endorsement of commercial products can be understood by the way in which they transfer themselves onto the products. In this context, he argues that these endorsements do not only function to communicate that consumption will allow the consumer to imitate the celebrity, but they also “[suggest] that the celebrity’s aura [has] rubbed off on the product...placing the consumer at the other side of the glass” (201). The notion that these products hold a sort of “celebrity residue” is consistent with the arguments which view the celebrity as the commodity; there is something appealing about what the celebrity embodies and consumption of certain products may allow the consumer to access it.

### *Celebrity Exchange*

Having focused primarily on the material commodities endorsed by celebrities, the discussion turns to two other capitalist venues in which the celebrity is used. The first of these venues is charitable causes. The business of charity may appear to have non-capitalist aims; however, the fame and charity industries have converged in some sectors, allowing for the exchange of celebrity endorsement for capital. These organizations have viable motivation to seek out celebrities since what they “bring to the table is something that the cause is not going to get any other way” (Marketplace 2002: 1). For instance, it might be argued that fund-raising efforts for Muscular Dystrophy would not have been so successful were it not for the meaning ascribed to them by the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon, which “for two generations of Americans” has become celebritized by its use of a recognizable public figure (Ibid 2). For this reason, charities tend to hire celebrities, financing their limousines and extravagant hotel rooms in order to emphasize their celebrity value and, in return, to use that value to raise funds (Ibid). The business of celebrity charity endorsements has also created a market for organizations which purport to facilitate the process. Companies such as “Celebrity Connection” operate as a “for profit matchmaker” between celebrities and social causes (Ibid 1), demonstrating that even the practice of fundraising holds commercial interests in celebrity construction.

Another capitalist venue which seeks to benefit from celebrity endorsements is the fame industry or more particularly, the “becoming famous” industry. Celebrities are constantly used as spokespeople for the “becoming famous” industry - which appeals to their success stories as a sort of credo for their capitalist cause. Jake Halpern (2007) showcases the facets of this industry in *Fame Junkies*, writing about the fame seekers

who spend thousands of dollars consuming the training of talent agencies, attending the conventions where they might be “discovered” and moving to Hollywood with expectations of achieving celebrity status. Halpern attributes the popularity of fame seeking to “the increase in celebrity vacancies, combined with the abundance of celebrity-centric programming” (XXI). He argues that television programs such as *American Idol* demonstrate to their audience that fame is achievable. In this context, celebrities such as Paula Abdul are used to promote both the glamour of and the plausibility of becoming famous (XXI –XXVI). The business of fame is an elaborate production, and what celebrities offer within the business is a personal validation that fame is a worthwhile investment.

Theories which seek to frame celebrity in terms of its capitalist constructions stipulate that dominant institutions can be held accountable for the pervasiveness as well as the influence of celebrity. Presenting capitalist structures according to their deeply contrived agendas, many of these arguments do not create space for celebrity agency or the potential for a self-created melodramatic narrative. These theories provide a relatively simple and recognizable model from which to go about studying celebrity which must be accounted for in discussions of celebrity; both because they advance an effective argument and because they provide a viable contrast to theories which frame entertainment as the dominant cultural force.

#### **THEME 4: UNREQUITED LOVE**

A final theme which emerges from the constructionist literature on celebrity, concerns the ways in which audience members respond to celebrity representations. The arguments presented in this context suggest that audience members adopt a variety of

emotional responses to both the people and places which have been celebritized, addressing them as though they were intimate friends and using them as sites to negotiate personal struggles. In order to engage in a discussion of these theories, the central argument of Richard Schickel's (1985) *Intimate Strangers*, will be applied in an understanding of the ways in which audience feelings of intimacy are created, how they are manifested, and finally how they relate to celebritized monuments or places.

### *Creating the Illusion of Intimacy*

Schickel advances an argument which holds media representations of celebrity responsible for the emotional responses which they rouse in public audiences. In developing the position that the "relationship between the famous and the unfamous is based on an illusion of intimacy, which is, in turn, the creation of the ever tightening, ever more finely spun media mesh," (4) he holds television responsible for creating this intimate sphere. Schickel contrasts old venues of entertainment, namely the theatre, where physical distance prevented the audience from accessing the expressions of the actors, with the readily available intimate "close-ups" which television offers. The effect of this particular convention of television is that it "not merely encourages a sense of intimacy, but...invites [the audience] to read character into the face, to formulate, from the lines and wrinkles therein, an impression easily mistaken for a detailed knowledgeable portrait of a star" (10). From this, the audience begins to chart an emotional understanding of the celebrity, recognizing subtle nuances and facial characteristics as telling of underlying "secret thoughts or emotions" (12). Schickel wrote an afterword to his work in 2000, noting that television remains primarily responsible for creating intimate relationships with celebrities, but that the detailed

celebrity accounts presented on internet web pages introduce a new venue for the creation of intimacy. In this context, the audience's emotional investment in celebrity becomes an issue of access.

### *Mourning Strangers*

Having identified the media venues responsible for evoking emotional responses from the audience, Schickel describes a number of ways in which these intimate feelings are manifested. Perhaps the most curious manifestation, and the one which will be unravelled here, relates to the ways in which audience members respond to celebrity death. Schickel emphasizes his bewilderment on this issue, exposing the audience's collective grief practices over the death of a person they did not "really" know, as a side effect of intimate celebrity representations. He highlights the recognition that: "whatever...viewers have experienced it is not grief. Grief is the tax [individuals] pay on [their] attachments, not on [their] interests and diversions or [their] entertainment" (302). Schickel explains that the audience's response in these cases is unparallel to the nature of their relationship with these figures. The need for "closure" in these circumstances, Schickel argues, relates more to "psychological correctness" than an actual feeling; the emotions expressed in these contexts "are false and voyeuristic," perpetuated by media coverage which is limited in terms of scope of information yet continuous in terms of the amount of time devoted to it (302). In this context, the amount of grief over a celebrity death relates more directly to the "tragic" or "entertaining" story surrounding the cause of death, than a longstanding respect or actual relationship with them – an observation which has useful applications to Gabler's theory.

### *Famous Places*

Schickel's (1985) theory provides a useful framework from which to examine physical or geographical representations of celebrity. Throughout most of this discussion celebrity has been described by either its human or its conceptual representation; however, consideration must also be given to theories which suggest that certain objects or places can be "celebritized." Extending Schickel's framework, many of these theories emphasize the intimate or nostalgic meaning contained in certain monuments or cities, elevating them to celebrity status. In his work *Shadowed Ground*, Foote (2003) conducts an assessment of monuments erected to commemorate influential people or to provide accounts of historical occurrences. Foote argues that the "very durability of the landscape" and the monument adorning it, allows it to "[symbolize] and [sustain] collective values over long periods of time" (33). Just as celebrities offer a site of shared values, these monuments serve to reinforce broad social meanings. In a similar vein, Jones and Jensen (2005) articulate an account of "posthumous fame" in which they examine how certain monuments, places, or even internet "webshrines" become "celebritized." These sites allow devoted fans to negotiate the meaning held by the celebrity, to immortalize the celebrity through durable structure, and to continue to devote time and attention to the celebrity in its new form (Jones and Jensen 2005). In this context, the intimate relationship formed with celebrity in its human form is extended to its structural form, and in some cases a similar amount of time, money, and careful construction is allotted to the maintenance of this relationship.

As Schickel describes, diverse interests are involved in constructing the "illusion of intimacy" which binds audience members to famous people. While his theory

emphasizes the role of television, it also addresses the role played by celebrities who offer their personal stories to public audiences, to the media and capitalist venues which ensure that famous people are celebrated and endorsed in a variety of social spheres, and to the audiences which seek out admirable and entertaining individuals. It would seem then that the theory outlined in this theme, much like the theory outlined in the preceding themes, identifies a variety of interests involved in celebrity construction; however, when applying Schickel's arguments to physical or geographical manifestations of celebrity, the role of the celebrity is almost rendered obsolete. When an object or place becomes "celebritized," unless the object represents the narrative created by a celebrity, the transaction occurs entirely between the people who construct the celebrity and the people who consume it. Contrasting these celebrity manifestations with human celebrities, in terms of the expansiveness of their audience and their ability to be sustained and celebrated might provide some interesting conclusions in terms of the role celebrities play in perpetuating their own fame.

## **CONCLUSION**

In some ways the wide range of celebrity theories overcomplicate the concept of celebrity, and in others they merely scratch the surface of this immense and highly ambiguous phenomenon. Celebrity theories emerge from a number of different traditions and frameworks yet present a relatively cohesive understanding of the ways in which celebrities operate in social spheres.

While these arguments seem to stray from each other, what they offer is an apt representation of the variety of questions, tensions, and contexts wrapped up in the topic



of celebrity. Despite the seeming contradictions between these explanations, they tend to overlap in the literature; celebrity is not a straightforward topic and without a narrowed frame of analysis it becomes difficult to favour one characteristic or explanation over another. In consideration of the frame of analysis presented in this thesis, this discussion proposes that Gabler's theory offers the best vantage point from which to approach the intersection of celebrity and Hurricane Katrina discourses. Gabler presents a rather thorough explanation which, to some extent addresses each of the four themes derived from celebrity theories in general. Further, his description of the interrelationship between the value of entertainment and the melodramatic narratives presented by celebrities in "real" life has interesting applications with regard to the interrelationships between the media conventions of entertainment and the narratives presented by celebrities in the Katrina context. Having examined the theoretical orientation guiding this analysis, the following chapter will discuss the Hurricane Katrina news story.

# **CHAPTER THREE: THE MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF HURRICANE KATRINA**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Media representations of Katrina constructed the Hurricane much like they would any other disaster, employing dramatic language, sensationalized images and “horrific” tales of destruction, crime and death. While print, broadcast and Internet media apply unique devices in the construction of disasters, news media in general are arguably the most powerful and pervasive force in the meaning-making process. Disaster news provides audiences with early and frequently reinforcing definitions of the event, identifying the key players and central claims involved. In telling the Katrina story, news reports framed the event as a disaster even before the Hurricane reached the Gulf coast. By situating the event in a familiar narrative, the news media, in a sense allowed the traditional conventions of disaster reporting to tell the Katrina story.

However, sociological literature on Katrina challenges widely held definitions of Katrina as a natural disaster; reframing it instead as a social event. Within this literature, social events can be broadly conceptualized in two ways. According to one perspective, they are “objective phenomena;” events or conditions which are “naturally” perceived to be problematic and which may be taken as accurate representations of the social world (Best 1994: 8). Within disaster literature these perspectives assume that disasters are “marked ‘by an excessiveness’” (Klinenberg 2003: 23) which causes otherwise obscure social categories to reveal themselves in very obvious ways, and which allows social scientists to engage in a thorough dissection of various social institutions (Klinenberg

2003, Ploughman 1997, Stallings 1995). This literature presents interesting arguments with regard to Hurricane Katrina. However, as these arguments do not comply with the theoretical or empirical interests of this chapter, they will be discussed alongside the discussion of structural conditions emphasized in Chapter Five.

This chapter concerns itself with constructionist perspectives. As discussed in the previous chapter, constructionist perspectives define social problems outside of objective conditions, describing them as “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (Spector and Kitsuse 1977: 75-6). Constructionists concern themselves with the process by which certain events become classified as social problems, and seek to identify the individuals, structures and interests which motivate these definitions. Within disaster theory, constructionists “contend that the risks posed by various social or environmental conditions are socially produced and discursively constituted” (Bolin and Stanford 1998: 35). Constructionist research seeks to uncover the ways in which claims-makers have constructed the threat of disaster, examining the claims-makers themselves as well as the arenas through which claims are advanced (Bolin and Stanford 1998, Stallings 1995).

This chapter aims to incorporate constructionist definitions of social problems by outlining some of the ways in which Hurricane Katrina has been framed. It seeks to undertake a constructionist assessment of the Katrina news story, examining claims made about the Hurricane from the days before its onset, to the weeks after it made landfall. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which media conventions structure these claims. Further, a series of images and headlines, collected by ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1987), will be used to support or further qualify the arguments made

with regard to Katrina coverage. These headlines and images were collected informally, using search terms and temporal guidelines which complied with the scholarly literature presented; they are not intended as the findings for this research but rather as examples of the types of news frames and devices used to construct the Katrina news story. In short, this chapter seeks to engage in a substantive overview of the media discourse, as well as the scholarly literature which addresses constructions of Hurricane Katrina.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology applied in this analysis can be generally described as qualitative content analysis. More particularly, it is guided by the principles of what Altheide (1987) terms “ethnographic content analysis.” Unlike more quantitative content analyses, which Altheide argues “[originate] in positivistic assumptions about objectivity,” (66) ethnographic content analysis “is used to document and understand the communication of meaning, as well as to verify theoretical relationships” (68). This genre of content analysis is less concerned with calculating the frequency of certain key words or messages; it focuses on “[drawing on] and [collecting] numerical and narrative data, rather than forcing the latter into predefined categories” (Ibid). Ethnographic content analysis involves a great deal of reflexivity on the part of the “investigator” (Ibid). The character of the process is exploratory; it enables the researcher, who might begin the analysis having some theoretical model in mind, to depart from rigid categories, and organize data according to the frames or themes which become apparent.

This methodology is valuable to social constructionist research as it seeks to explore the vernacular, thematic or narrative categories contained within the data. In a

sense it allows the researcher to uncover the nuances of the claims-making process, a task which may not be conducted as thoroughly when abiding by the formalities of a pre-imposed structure. Seeking to depart from the confines of a numerical analysis, this project models itself on other constructionist ethnographies (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985, John M. Johnson 1989) by narrowing the analysis to an investigation of narrative or qualitative data. The exploratory character of the methodology is particularly meaningful in guiding the process of data collection.

### **SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEDIA AND DISASTER**

In order to recount the Katrina news story from a constructionist perspective, it is useful to consider how the framework situates this media form in the process of knowledge construction. Constructionist assessments suggest that news functions in both primary and secondary claims-making. Best (1995) argues that in some circumstances the press “make the initial claims” or repeat claims made by other journalists, while in others they report claims made by experts and non experts (34-35). Even as secondary claims-makers, news reports play a significant role in knowledge construction. Since “media content is rhetoric in that its form and content necessarily reflect a certain set of motives and values” (Ogle et al. 2003: 3) claims are not simply “transferred” but are “transformed” (Stallings 1995, Tuchman 1978). In other words, claims are subject to media interpretation before they are presented to the audience, and it is by this process that the audience’s perception of reality is shaped.

Given the level of agency afforded to the news in making and presenting claims, as well as the wide accessibility of the medium to the public, researchers and audiences

alike frequently rely on news sources in order to gauge the importance of a social issue. The practice of telling the audience “what to think about” has been termed the “agenda setting function” of the news (McCombs and Shaw 1972: 176-187). It stipulates that “the coverage of disasters by the press and the media is so selective and arbitrary that, in an important sense, they ‘create’ a disaster when they decide to recognize it” (Ibid, Bolin and Stanford 1998, Garner and Huff 1997). Here, the “objective” conditions of an environmental or technological catastrophe are inconsequential; whether such events are defined as disasters depends on the extent to which they meet the criteria for an entertaining and thus “sellable” news story.

### **CONSTRUCTING EXTREME MEDIA EVENTS**

Much of the scholarly literature on disaster news suggests that news makers classify an event as “extreme” in order to bypass normative structures and engage in unique reporting styles. Such “extreme” events or disasters, as they are labeled “disrupt the routines through which journalists and the key sources on whom they habitually rely construct the news” (Klinenberg 2003: 189) allowing journalists to abandon their usual practices and temporarily adopt a new role. In such circumstances, news reporters encounter pressure to offer “answers...resolutions or solutions” (Ogle et al. 2003: 3) while, at the same time wanting to capture the “uncoordinated, mutually contradictory accounts” which frequently accompany such “extreme” events (Molotch and Lester 1974: 109). Some theorists argue that the practices engaged in by news media during these events result in the perpetuation of disaster myths (Garner and Huff 1997: 6, Koch 1990). Disaster myths generally refer to those claims about the behaviours or statements made by either social organizations, or disaster victims which, further investigations suggest,

are grossly exaggerated or fabricated accounts of the situation. Disaster myths might also be constructed through the conventions of news reporting, which tend to emphasize the highly entertaining “impact” phase of an event while offering little coverage of the policy making or “risk mitigation” phase (Garner and Huff 1997: 6). Disaster news is organized in a particular way such that its presentation or reporting style differs from that which is classified as everyday “routine” news; however the narrative structure of news content tends to remain similar regardless of the manner in which news makers classify the event.

### **NARRATIVITY: STRUCTURING CATASTROPHE THROUGH CONVENTION**

There are news conventions which are employed across various types of news stories. Such conventions allow news makers to organize information and construct knowledge in a particular way. In catastrophic situations, journalists do not improvise ways to present the news but rather follow a fairly predictable format. Identifying and explaining these conventions serves to highlight the ways in which news subjectively structures information, which will offer some research tools for the subsequent examination of disaster construction.

Perhaps the most significant device organizing news constructions, narrative structure is employed by news makers in order to add a sort of ritualistic dimension to the presentation of knowledge. Narrativity offers audiences a familiar context from which to receive information. Narrativity may function to elevate a relatively mundane news story to one of significance, or it may impose a recognizable structure on unconventional or unfamiliar subject matter. In either case “definitions and labels reach publics through the narratives in which they are located” (Dobkin 1992: 30), making them an intrinsic aspect in the construction of news events.

### *Contextualizing the Narrative*

Narrativity structures news stories in a variety of ways. When constructing a news story, news makers must first ensure that the narrative employed to recount a particular event is consistent with “dominant ideology” (Dobkin 1992: 30). By situating a story within a recognizable “theme” journalists are able “to present a specific event or series of events as an example of some broader concept” (Ibid). Journalists employing this technique often cite previous news stories in their reports, constructing the new event by using the system of meanings attached to an old one (Dobkin 1992, Jacobs 1996, Zelizer 1993). Journalists involved in disaster construction refer to similar stories when they are not able to rely on conventional sources or routine scripts. Borrowing from the grand narratives which have been used in a variety of disaster stories, journalists are able to create both a format for the story and a meaning for the event.

Beyond referencing past events, journalists appeal to familiar narratives for guidelines on how to present information. Just as news makers structure reports such that they are consistent with the conventions of entertainment, they perform such reports in a manner which is consistent with the meaning assigned to the event. Jacobs (1996) argues that news makers apply “narrative archetypes” – comedy, romance, tragedy and irony, in order to “structure the relationship between the protagonist and the audience” and to help determine “how [an event] will be dramatized and what its relationship will be to the other stories in the news broadcast” (383). Such archetypes may be perceived as metanarratives, in that they are broad themes which can be found in a variety of social arenas and which are used to structure knowledge. Particular archetypes manifest themselves in journalistic practices: news stories about tragic events tend to be conveyed



in a more serious tone, while stories about a local charity car wash may be recounted more jovially. Audiences come to expect cues from the reporters, and as a result, journalists present their television news broadcasts in such a manner that their “facial expressions and voice inflections” inform the audience of the “kind of story that is about to come (Ibid). These practices ensure that the organizing concept of the event, which is consistent with both the aims of the news network as well as the interests of the audience, are upheld throughout the telling of the story. The use of these particular conventions will be discussed later in the chapter, with regard to the telling of the Katrina news story.

### ***Broadcast Storytelling***

Narrativity is most evidently employed by journalists in the recounting of events. The use of grand narratives might capture the audience’s attention, but it is the unfolding story which maintains it. In this manner news stories are “bound by the narrative structure that contains [them];” they “are meaningful...because of the degree to which audiences identify with them” (Dobkin 1992: 31). Audiences and journalists alike benefit from narrative structure. Jacobs (1996) explains that journalists “narrativize” events in each phase of “news production.” In doing this they offer a spatial and temporal context from which to recount the event, rendering it more meaningful and recognizable to the audience. Only when events can be “recognized as plot elements in a story” do they become “newsworthy” (384). According to Jacobs narrativity also functions alongside journalistic conventions because it “allows news workers to do much of the work of producing the news in the very act of discovering it” (381-2). He summarizes that “social actors understand events by placing them into stories, composed of actors and ‘messages,’ and having a beginning, middle and end” (381). In order to

satisfy these requirements, news makers attempt to situate the event as a type of story from the outset, identifying key players and central claims. As elaborated later, news makers continue to unravel the story in this manner until it is appropriate by news standards to provide closure.

### *News Frames and Textual Narrativity*

In order to elaborate on a final method by which narrativity lends structure to the news story, it is useful to introduce the concept of framing. Media frames refer to those “unspoken and unacknowledged” patterns of presentation and interpretation that ‘organize the world both for journalists who report it and, in some important degree, for [those] who rely on their reports’” (Dobkin 1992: 27). Much like grand narratives, frames offer journalists a format for reporting during “unexpected events” (Ibid). Unlike grand narratives, framing shapes news stories in very particular ways which “encourage those perceiving and thinking about events to develop particular understandings of them” (Entman 1991: 7). Researchers identify frames because they hint at the meaning which has been imposed on the text by news makers. Entman (1993) describes framing as the process of “[selecting] some aspects of a perceived reality and [making] them more salient in a communicating text” (53) in order to “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (52). Further, unlike grand narratives, frames are not the central organizing concepts which exist outside of the confines of the story, rather they “reside in the specific properties of the news narrative itself” (Entman 1991: 7); stated differently, they are “the pattern of words that create the copy that becomes the news” (Dobkin 1992:30, Koch 1990). Frames can be identified in the rhetorical devices used to convey a

news story; they “are constructed from and embodied in the keywords, metaphors, concepts, symbols, and visual images emphasized in a news narrative” (Entman 1991: 7). Frames might be derived from the manner in which rhetoric is packaged. In the subsequent recounting of the Katrina news story, particular attention will be paid to the headlines and images which are used to frame the story.

### **THE KATRINA NEWS STORY**

Retelling the Katrina news story highlights one of the many ways of looking at the event; however, as previously discussed, the influence of the news media elevates this particular viewpoint to one of cultural significance and as such merits some consideration. This assessment is not concerned with addressing any “actual” or empirically observed conditions of the Hurricane. Rather, this section seeks to provide a critical examination of how disaster news employs particular conventions to construct a story, as well as an identification of the key players and claims advanced throughout the mediated event. Structuring the news story in terms of the meanings constructed at each narrative stage of the event, this assessment will present an overview of the literature on coverage of the Katrina event.

#### **BEFORE THE DELUGE**

Katrina was first introduced as a news story approximately one day before it made landfall in southern Florida and five days before it reached the Gulf coast. Early reports described Katrina as a slow moving tropical storm, emphasizing its potential to become a “Category 1 Hurricane.” As the storm gained strength, the Katrina news story became an elaborate spectacle, evolving from a fairly routine weather story to a sensationalized tale

of destructive winds, extreme rainfall and emergency evacuation. For the purposes of this discussion, the period “before” the storm refers to the days leading up to August 29<sup>th</sup>, the day Hurricane Katrina reached the Gulf coast. Katrina’s landfall in Florida is situated here as an event occurring “before” the storm, because of the role this event played as part of a series of escalating events which contributed to the making of the central disaster story. Thus, due to its relatively non catastrophic impact, Katrina’s landfall in Florida is treated as part of the set of meanings which introduce the Katrina narrative, thereby functioning as a sort of precursor to the main event. In the phases before Katrina reached the Gulf coast, news stories organized the event appealing to two standard disaster frames: Katrina as a weather media event and Katrina as a story about New Orleans.

### ***Katrina: The “Weather Media Event”***

The central frame used to construct the Katrina news story, according to Fleetwood (2006), represented the storm as a “weather media event.” A weather media event is defined here as “a convergence of news and meteorology, and as a national crisis” (768, Sturken 2005). Studies which examine weather media events frequently emphasize the dramatic conventions which transform weather news into televised spectacles. Fleetwood argues that in some ways Katrina was framed as a weather media event before it was forecast because of the context within which it emerged, explaining that: “due to a record number of hurricanes” in “the late summer of 2005, disaster reportage dominated much of television news” (770). The news conventions which accompany “hurricane season” were already in place, giving the Katrina story a familiar and entertaining narrative from which to unfold. According to Klinenberg (2003), this

practice is common in disaster news: “reporters and editors refer to other media accounts” in order to “[place] themselves in a closed network of credible information in which the relations among different media and media organizations shape the kind of stories that various news teams [produce]”( 192). With regard to the Katrina story, news reports appealed to this convention by reminding their audience of other spectacular media events, such as Hurricane Ivan, which had caused some New Orleans residents to evacuate the year before, and Hurricane Denis which had threatened the Florida panhandle one month before. Further, in order to hint at the potential severity of Katrina, news reports referred to Category 5 Hurricanes Andrew and Camille as well as to the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935 (“Coast Guard Auxiliary” 2005, Copeland 2005, Treaster 2005). The news narratives which accompanied these Hurricanes set a dramatic tone for the Katrina story early on. News reports also provided more extensive coverage of Katrina’s landfall in Southern Florida in order to illustrate the developing storm as a serious threat. Referring to the “deadly landfall,” made by the “stealth Hurricane,” (Copeland 2005, Ball 2005) they used dramatic language, and victims’ stories, in order to represent Katrina as the villain, to emphasize its status as a killer, and to transform the unravelling Katrina story into a thriller.

According to Fleetwood, meteorologists and news anchors advance the most influential claims in disaster construction. In order to advance such powerful claims, they invoke what Katherine Fry (2003) refers to as “CNN Syndrome,” which “uses both technological instruments (weather maps, Doppler radar, interactive diagrams) and narrative strategies (anticipation, climax, denouement) to make weather must-see...news” (Fleetwood 2006: 771). Mark Svenvold (2005) terms the transformation of a natural

disaster into a commodity “catastrophilia.” He suggests that disaster programming has emerged as a “subgenre” of reality television; (96) allowing weather news to provide “a semipermeable barrier that creates the illusion of involvement yet provides the safety of distance” (99). Viewers are able to access the details and visual representations of the disaster as it unfolds from the safety of their own living room.

The construction of the Katrina news story as a weather media event is evident in many of the reports leading up to the Hurricane. Headlines from many “reputable” news sources, including *CNN*, *The New York Times*, and *MSNBC* as well as from New Orleans newspaper *The Times-Picayune*, constructed the storm according to the spectacular conventions of a weather media event. According to Klinenberg (2003) headlines “are important because they both organize the substance of news publications in ways that allow for selective reading and because they suggest which events and issues matter most” (213). In other words, as previously outlined, headlines often function to frame a story. Applying this logic to the Katrina news story, such weather related headlines from the *Times-Picayune* as “Hurricane Center director warns New Orleans: This is really scary;” “Storm surge map projects Katrina's flood path;” “NWS outlines grim forecast of devastation expected across area;” and “Washing Away: The worst-case scenarios” can be interpreted as attempts to personify weather conditions, emphasizing the impact of wind and water over the related social issues of government preparedness and widespread poverty (2005). Similarly *CNN* headline “New Orleans braces for monster hurricane” (2005) as well as *CTV* report “Hurricane Katrina is the biggest storm on earth” (2005) evoke catastrophic conceptions of the storm, reinforcing its status as a natural disaster. Amidst the dramatic headlines, satellite images of the Hurricane along with visual

representations of its projected path also support the classification of Katrina as a weather event.

Framing Katrina as a weather media event allowed news makers to rely on meteorological technologies to structure the story. On August 29<sup>th</sup>, meteorologists claimed that the storm had gained strength, manifesting itself as a Category 5 Hurricane. News headlines shifted their emphasis to reflect this development, providing what Svenvold describes as “a dramatic escalation in the first act of an immense and movable opera” (50). From its onset as a potential tropical storm in the weather section of newspapers, to the moment it emerged on the front pages as a Category 5 Hurricane, Katrina was depicted by a series of stories about the spectacular impact of the weather. Within this frame, news makers and meteorologists served as the primary claims-makers, relying on technological credibility, and traditional news conventions in order to construct the potential storm as a natural disaster.

### ***The “Big one” Threatens to hit the “Big Easy”***

A second frame which structured the Katrina story before the storm reached the coast emphasized the distinct cultural character of New Orleans, telling a story about place rather than weather. Framed in this way, the Katrina news event was introduced by the series of documentaries, news reports and simulations which showcased the probability of a large scale hurricane destroying the city. Fry (2006) suggests that disaster stories often emphasize the setting in which the event is taking place, positing that “natural disasters are instances when TV news tells a story about the nature of a place and in doing so both recreates and reinforces the meaning of that place” (83; 2006). Fry (2006) dismisses the Katrina narrative as a story about the weather, suggesting that

claims made about Katrina relate to the set of meanings popularly attributed to New Orleans.

Constructing the storm as a threat to New Orleans, news stories excluded a number of surrounding cities from the Katrina narrative. In reports before the storm “Katrina was nearly synonymous with New Orleans, known by many as the Big Easy, a place of corruption and debauchery” (Fry 2003: 84). Added to the cultural uniqueness of the city, the geographical and historical narrative of a place “situated...on the Gulf of Mexico, below sea level” (Ibid) was easily packaged as a newsworthy story, particularly since it was part of a greater narrative of stories which had centred on the city in the past. New Orleans had an extensive lore surrounding it. Aside from having a questionable levee system, it had been constructed as a spectacular site; its character had come to be synonymous with Mardi Gras, jazz music, and Creole food. When “disaster” threatened to hit the city “there were copious media speculations that [it] could be “the big one” prophesized for years and documented in government and media reports” (Kellner 2007:222). In the media imagination, the big one was finally threatening to hit the Big Easy, and it just might be the blockbuster of the year.

Amidst New Orleans-centered headlines, such as *CNN* headline “New Orleans braces for 'the big one', and “New Orleans empties out amid fear, prayers” from *The Houston Chronicle*, a less evident manner in which Katrina news stories emphasized New Orleans over other areas was through the coverage of mayor Ray Nagin. Early news reports seemed to emphasize the claims advanced by Ray Nagin in a forceful manner through quotes, pictures and headlines. Nagin became a central player in the Katrina news story perhaps because, as an African-American politician who lived in the



city, he represented the interests and the character of the place which news sources had emphasized over time. Another reason why Nagin's claims may have gained media attention may be that they were consistent with the narrative which news stations were aiming to construct for the event. For instance, Nagin ordered the mandatory evacuation of New Orleans, an action which reinforced media speculations that "the big one" was imminent and increased the dramatic value of the news story in its early phases.

As officials spoke of the increasing likelihood that a severe hurricane would reach New Orleans, news makers moved from being primary claims-makers - speculating about the "what ifs" of such a scenario, and became secondary claims-makers - citing the perspectives of various "experts" and representing them in a very serious manner. The Katrina news story was framed before the storm both as a story about weather and a story about place. These frames were central to the event because they followed a familiar and newsworthy narrative and because they offered a structure within which serious claims could be advanced.

#### **DURING: THE KATRINA MEDIA STORM**

From the time Katrina made landfall in Louisiana and Mississippi on August 29<sup>th</sup>, until the remaining residents were evacuated on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, the news media abandoned conventional news practices in the telling of the Katrina story. In this phase, the master frame of the Katrina news story, which had constructed the storm as a natural disaster, briefly shifted. Political controversies, accusations of systematic racism, and images of death and destruction began to dominate news reports, causing the previously succinct Katrina narrative to break down into various types of stories. While to a certain extent the Katrina news story remained a story about the weather and its impact on New

Orleans, a range of competing frames emerged, deemphasizing the significance of the claims raised before the storm. Due to the highly dramatic and unstructured style of disaster reporting, many of the claims advanced during the storm were structured by the conventions of disaster reporting. Stories about victims, officials, policies and social conditions were recounted in a manner consistent with the “emergency phase” of disaster reporting. This phase of the Katrina news story can be characterized by its use of live broadcasts, sensational visuals and emotional reporting.

*“This Just in:” News makers’ on the Spot Construction of the Katrina story*

One particular journalistic practice, a common convention in the construction and communication of disaster news, is the tendency to offer the audience a live narration of events as they unfold. This convention affords journalists and news makers a great deal of agency in assigning meaning to the events witnessed and described. Jacobs (1996) refers to this practice as the “this just in” dimension of disaster reporting and explains that “during media events there is a ritualized sense of heightened involvement with the story, which itself tends to increase commitment to the story’s production at the same time that it decreases reflexivity” (391). News makers in this phase are generally concerned with satisfying the audience’s interest in extensive coverage but are not always as concerned with providing accurate or well researched explanations. Senvold (2005) describes disaster reporting as “free public entertainment, a low tech reality show” (50) largely because of the manner in which reporters physically position themselves in the midst of disaster conditions, and perform the news in a dramatic manner.

The “this just in dimension” generally applies to those media, such as Internet, radio and television, which have constant access to the public; however the practices

employed in this phase are also transferable to print media. Newspaper journalists are also under strict deadlines and are subject to pressure to define an event with little reflection. Klinenberg (2003) explains that “if reporters revert to conventional frames and story ideas when they write articles or submit their notes to lead writers it is in part because the system of daily news production constrains their capacity to make sense of the conditions they see” (210). Some of the conventions of disaster reporting structure the news such that journalists become the claims-makers. Without the required time and resources to research those claims, they often invoke “official rhetoric and preconstructed folk wisdom...to account for an event” (211). As a result, despite being packaged as a more reliable or unbiased source, newspaper articles can be affected by the same practices and limitations as live news.

Live reporting practices may be used to understand many of the meanings attributed to Hurricane Katrina. During the Katrina event, instances of live reporting were easily recognizable. News personalities such as CNN’s Anderson Cooper “reported almost continuously from New Orleans as the levees broke free on Lake Pontchartrain, flooding the city beyond capacity” (Fry 2006: 84). Similarly NBC anchor Brian Williams “reported from the overcrowded convention centre, demonstrating for viewers his bravery and his insistence that the story be told” (Ibid). In these circumstances, the anchors’ proximity to the storm allowed them to take on “expert” status. They had a great deal of power over the claims advanced because their presence in the midst of the event gave them the authority to construct the set of meanings surrounding it. Few other people had the knowledge or the public access to question those meanings. As a result of “on the spot” reporting “within days of the hurricane grim, rumour-based stories began to

dominate news coverage. Lootings became the headline news” (Finnegan 2006: 149). Media emphasis on looting became apparent as early as August 31<sup>st</sup> through headlines on the subject; such as *MSNBC*’s “Looters take advantage of New Orleans mess” (2005) and *Times-Picayune*’s “Looters leave nothing behind in storm's wake” (2005). These stories connected the already entertaining aspects of the disaster story with an equally spectacular narrative of crime, allowing journalists to add new dimensions to the Katrina news story.

Eventually, claims about looting led to claims about more serious crime, and the emphasis shifted to the “violent crime wave” within the city of New Orleans, particularly among evacuees at the Superdome and Convention Center” (Sommers et al. 2006:44). Headlines began to refer to “anarchy” “lawlessness” and “chaos.” In this phase “reports described sniper fire aimed at rescuers, rampant homicide, and roving gangs of youths committing rapes against teenage victims and even babies” (Rosenblatt and Rainey, 2005 cited in Sommers et al. 2006:44). Stories about crime moved through the Katrina narrative rapidly; they evolved and took on very serious meanings but were just as quickly dismantled within days after the storm. The Katrina crime story followed a narrative common to live reporting practices. Though claims about crime were powerful and pervasive they were reported among a variety of other equally strong claims, which were structured by different conventions. Some of these competing claims will be explored in the next section.

### ***Visual Event***

Perhaps more powerful than textual claims, visual claims engage audience members on a more intimate level, allowing them to visually conceive of the event which

news makers are seeking to construct. Images tend to highlight the impact of an event, particularly since news makers tend to display images which depict sensational occurrences rather than those which may offer a more representative account of the story. Visual representations are especially significant in the construction of a disaster story, because disasters “offer news organizations so many possibilities for spectacular image making,” and because images serve as “evidence” reinforcing journalists’ claims that a catastrophe is taking place (Klinenberg 2003: 214). For instance, with regard to Katrina, claims about looting were accompanied by a collection of images which showcased empty stores and residents carrying items such as televisions and food through the flooded streets. The combination of headline and image suggested to the audience that the looting was widespread, and that it was a grave enough issue to gain wide media coverage over a series of other newsworthy events taking place at the same time. Disaster theorists argue that news reports tend to “transform crises into visual spectacles” (Ibid) in their most intense phase “if images of helpless victims are available” (Smith 2004: 19). Because the “emergency phase” of the Katrina story occurred over a series of days, images of victims were easy to acquire, and it was not long before the Katrina news story was transformed into a “mediated visual narrative” (Faux and Kim 2006:55, Fry 2006, Kellner 2007).

In the “emergency phase” of the disaster, news stories continued in some ways to frame Katrina as a “mediated weather event.” Unlike the weather story constructed before the Hurricane, the graphic weather narratives displayed during the storm were interwoven with narratives about people attempting to survive amidst the elements. Overwhelmingly, images depicted flooding, representing the destruction caused by

“natural” conditions. Television news in particular “[showed] the hurricane and flooding “live” as often as possible...to offer the most recent dramatic visuals possible, including pictures of those who didn’t live through the storm” (Fry 2006: 84). Durham (2006) describes that “almost immediately, *The Times-Picayune* became a Web-based bulletin board for survivors. Along with *The New York Times*, *The Picayune* published spectacular photos of the flood’s destruction” (81). Aside from displaying houses, streets and cars in ruin, the Katrina news story focused on “stranded individuals” who “turned refrigerators and blow-up mattresses into flotation devices,” or who climbed to their rooftops hoping to be saved (Fleetwood 2006:24). While the textual or broadcasted narrative behind the images made mention of technological failure, the images suggested that the true villain was the weather. In this phase of the disaster, as news makers scrambled to make sense of the storm and to represent it in a dramatic manner, Katrina was continually being redefined. After the first day of visual coverage the claims behind the images shifted slightly, no longer telling a simple story about natural disaster. Reporters suggested that the photographs began to “reveal” something about the social conditions of New Orleans.

Whether news makers sought to pose critical questions or simply sell a dramatic news story, the Katrina visual narrative depicted an overwhelming number of African American residents as they were affected by the storm. The impact of photos which showcased “the spectacle of the poor, sick, and largely Black population left behind” (Kellner 2007:224) seemingly shocked a number of journalists who were not accustomed to seeing “images of unbelievable suffering and destruction, depicting thousands of people without food and water” within their own country (Ibid). What the photographs

made salient was a condition of American society which, according to (Fry 2006) had not been unknown to the general public. However, in this circumstance, where the media had already depicted an extensive visual narrative framing New Orleans residents as victims, the plight of poor African Americans was looked upon as a terrible tragedy. Suddenly journalists who may have avoided issues of race and class prior to Katrina began to incorporate this discourse into their reports. Notably, CNN's Wolf Blitzer (2005) commented on a series of photographs three days after the Hurricane made landfall: "You simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals...many of these people, almost all of them that we see are so poor and they are so black, and this is going to raise lots of questions for people who are watching this story unfold" (Sept 1<sup>st</sup> cited in Finnegan 2006: 149). Reports about the number of African American victims emerged alongside serious questions about the lack of emergency response resources being sent to rescue these victims. Some "politically conservative" news stations responded to the perhaps unintentionally advanced visual claims with counter claims, emphasizing images of African Americans looting. Others, especially those outside of the United States questioned whether these images revealed something about systemic racism in America. In either case, the "morbidity and expendability [of these citizens] circulated through the ultra-flexible portable imaging and informational technologies available to media outlets (Fleetwood 2006:781). Whether they sparked tough political questions or simply a movie-like disaster story, images of dead bodies and extreme destruction were available to the media, who, in many ways exploited the harsh conditions in order to entertain their audiences.

### *Emotions in the News Room*

A third characteristic of disaster reporting, which assists news makers in the claims-making process, refers to the emotional manner in which journalists tend to broadcast reports. Broadcasts during a media-defined catastrophic event require an elaborate performance, organized such that claims made are advanced in a genuine and powerful manner. Journalists who appeal to emotion in order to provide a spectacle and advance claims tend to be reputable; they have generally demonstrated to an audience that they are serious news reporters. When they abandon their serious style to make dramatic, emotional pleas, they communicate to the audience that the event is especially catastrophic, which reinforces their reputations as caring and trustworthy sources. The Katrina news story featured a variety of reputable reporters, using live reporting devices and visual images in order to support their emotional broadcasts. The combination of “the storm’s cinematic destruction of a major metropolitan area, the unfettered images of human suffering, the emotional outburst of media personalities and celebrities, and the portrayal of governmental ineptitude fixated viewers across the country on their television screens” (Fleetwood 2006:773). News stations, which often seek to reinforce dominant ideology and avoid contesting the dominant societal powers, scripted such emotional reactions because “simple drama requires a clear-cut distinction between good and evil...the powers that be were the bad guys, news reporters the good guys” (Fry 2006: 84). In order to take on the heroic role, news coverage appealed to emotional devices in the telling of blame stories, presenting claims which sought to villainize government institutions for their performance throughout the event.



In the early phases of the event, journalists followed fairly conventional routines, reporting about the disaster as a natural event and representing the plight and suffering of New Orleans residents who remained in the city when the Hurricane made landfall. As days passed, and some began to ask questions about the delayed rescue efforts, news reporters reacted to this sentiment, transforming questions into claims about government ineptitude and deliberate neglect. Though many reporters, including “CNN reporter Anderson Cooper, NBC anchor Brian Williams, and Nightline’s Ted Koppel...visually and verbally showed their anger” Fry (2006) argues that “because of Koppel’s stature as a television news figure...his interview with...[The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)] head Michael Brown became the defining moment of heroic TV journalism,” setting a precedent for similar encounters to take place (84-85). Koppel vigorously questioned and criticized Brown’s inactivity hours after he had been praised by President Bush in a press release. When Brown claimed that he was not aware of how many people were at the convention centre, Koppel retorted angrily “don’t you guys watch television?” (cited in Finnegan 2006:146) As the interview went on Koppel performed a highly charged monologue attacking Brown:

“Mr. Brown, some of these people are dead. They're beyond your help. Some of these people have died because they needed insulin and they couldn't get it. Some of these people died because they were in hospitals and they couldn't get the assistance that they needed. You say you were surprised by the fact that so many people didn't make it out. It's no surprise to anyone that you had at least 100,000 people in the city of New Orleans who are dirt poor; who don't have cars, who don't have access to public transportation, who don't have any way of getting out of the city simply because somebody says, "You know, there's a force five storm coming, you ought to get out." If you didn't have buses there to get them out, why should it be a surprise to you that they stayed?” (cited in Finnegan 2006:147).

Before Koppel's interview, journalists addressed the slow response to the Hurricane in a more subtle manner, reporting claims made by others such as New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, that the people in the convention centre did not have enough supplies, and that the most serious impact of the disaster occurred after the storm. For example, when President Bush stated in an interview with Diane Sawyer that: "no one could have anticipated the breach of the levies," she did not confront the President with the series of media reports, and "expert" opinions which suggested otherwise (Finnegan 2006).

According to Finnegan, the first instance in which news reporters shifted from secondary claims-makers to primary claims-makers on the issue of race occurred during an interview with "Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff" when "NPR's Robert Siegel repeatedly asked why no food and water was being delivered to the Hurricane victims and insisted that Chertoff provide a date when help would arrive" (Ibid). Following reports by Koppel and Siegel, Anderson Cooper included himself in the blame narrative, suggesting that the plight of New Orleans residents was a small priority to members of the government:

"What is the federal government doing? Should more have been done early? I mean we knew this storm was coming. If we knew an attack on the south of the United States was coming, you would think some military forces, National Guard forces would be mobilized in a high degree. Was that done?...Does the federal government bear responsibility for what is happening now?" (cited in Finnegan 2006: 146).

According to scholarly literature on the subject the reasons why journalists took on such controversial subject matter and revealed their emotions to the public are twofold. First, as was previously introduced, events which have been framed as disasters offer opportunities for journalists to perform, and for a dramatic narrative to unfold. For

journalists reporting live, “the aesthetic that informs those who describe the scene is of necessity linked to the mood and environment of Katrina’s victims, survivors, and audiences” (Dawkins 2006: 12). This is offered as an explanation of the physical demonstration of frustration, which included yelling and crying, engaged by television journalists. Second, various images and “facts” were available to justify the journalists’ emotional responses, making it less risky to criticize the government than to ignore what those images were representing. For instance “news footage showed...images of parking lots filled with flooded buses, potentially available to evacuate many before the storm had arrived” (Fleetwood 2006:775). Footage also showed images of “Bush on vacation playing guitar with a country singer shortly after the levies broke and pictures of Condoleezza Rice shopping at an expensive Manhattan boutique” (Finnegan 2006: 146). Images of Rice were particularly relevant within this media discourse as they showcased the irony of an African American politician seemingly having a passive response to the conditions in New Orleans. These images, combined with stories in which “firefighters told reporters they were being forced to take classes on sexual harassment before being allowed to rescue victims” (Ibid 147) set a very emotional tone with which news makers were compelled to comply. Reporters had ample material to support claims about government ineptitude and deliberate neglect, giving them a free pass to play out the Katrina news story using melodramatic conventions (Fry 2006).

In this phase, the Katrina news story became a narrative about blame, structured by a reporting style which allowed journalists to present claims in a highly dramatic manner. While such intense criticism of the federal government was not consistent with a routine news story, it unfolded as a reflection of the heightened mood created by the

disaster. After the buses arrived to evacuate the remaining residents, the style of reporting as well as the types of stories shifted, reflecting the final stages of the Katrina narrative.

#### **AFTER: MAINTAINING NARRATIVES AND MAKING AMENDS**

Following the narrative structure of news making, the Katrina story in its final phases focused on the restoration of order and calm; in a sense an attempt was made to repair the emotional claims made throughout the “emergency phase” of the disaster.

While the meanings of the Katrina event were continually contested by news makers after the remaining residents were evacuated, most debates shifted to address less controversial details. News makers in this stage sought to create a balance between maintaining the highly spectacular narrative which had been unfolding, and providing closure to the story before the audience lost interest. This section seeks to examine the manner in which the Katrina story was framed in the weeks following the evacuation, though some general observations about Katrina coverage in the months following its occurrence will also be addressed. Since the claims advanced after the storm tended to be structured by more routine news conventions, journalistic devices will not be the emphasis of this section as they were during the event.

#### ***Holding on to the Entertainment: The Ongoing Battle between “Right” and “Left”***

Having set up and reinforced particular frames before and throughout the storm, news makers were able to sustain the Katrina news story by continuing to operate within those frames. The types of stories told about Katrina, and the manner in which they were told allowed the event to be constructed as a melodrama (Best 1999, Jacobs 1996,

Fleetwood 2006, Fry 2006). Even in the absence of spectacular live material, those stories kept unravelling because they had been situated in an entertaining narrative and could thus hold audience attention. According to media discourse on Katrina, news media went about this in two diverging ways; either upholding the practice of highlighting government failure and assigning blame - as well as redemption, or diverting from political stories to recount stories about victims.

Since many news stories about Katrina had been framed as political stories, news narratives after the storm tended to unfold according to the familiar dichotomy of “politically conservative” and “politically liberal.” On more “conservative” planes, news stories emphasised the irresponsibility of the residents who failed to evacuate. The website “Media Matters for America” reported Bill O’Reilly’s claim that “‘many of the poor in New Orleans’ did not evacuate the city before Hurricane Katrina because ‘[t]hey were drug-addicted’ and ‘weren’t going to get turned off from their source’”(“O’ Reilly: ‘Many Many Many’” 2005). However, when “reputable” sources countered these claims, suggesting “that there were tens of thousands who were so poor they had no transportation... and many had to care for sick and infirm friends, relatives” and that “the poor were abandoned for days without any food, water, or public assistance” (Kellner 2007: 225) they began to shift blame elsewhere. In a second attempt to divert blame from republican officials “the rightwing attack machine targeted local officials for the crisis” (225). “Media Matters for America” recounts that Newsweek “suggested Blanco was slow in declaring [a] state of emergency;” O’Reilly “accused [the] La. governor of not requesting more National Guard troops” and Limbaugh “claimed that New Orleans mayor “has moved to Texas” (2005). News stories which sought to blame the slow

response on local or democratic officials ran alongside stories which claimed that blaming President Bush for the incident was unjust or even uncivilized. Many journalists empathized with Bush's position, and suggested that his alleged lack of awareness that the levies could break was genuine. The passion with which journalists spoke about these issues as well as the ongoing opposition from the "liberals" allowed the Katrina media spectacle to continue.

On more "liberal" planes, journalists advanced claims about the ineptitude of the president and his appointees, presenting their claims in an equally passionate manner. A video of Bush being warned about the possibility of the levies breaking became a focal point of this criticism since it contradicted pleas made by "conservative" reporters and suggested that Bush's previous statements had been false. At the same time, "Internet sources and *Time* magazine revealed that Brown had fudged his vita, claiming in testimony to Congress that he had been a manager of local emergency services when he had only had a low-level position" (Kellner 2007: 223). The media drew links between Brown and the President, suggesting that he had been hired for his social connections rather than his qualifications. News makers appealed to similar devices as their more "conservative" counterparts in pleading their cases. Instead of arguing that blaming the president was an unjust practice they suggested that "any American with even a tiny amount of conscience who watched those images from New Orleans shook their heads with disbelief and shame that something like this should happen...in these modern times" (David Jenkins 2005 cited in Kellner 2007: 223). News stories followed the actions of republican officials, reporting every "mishap" along the way to an audience which craved the controversy. When President Bush visited New Orleans, residents' claims that the

power had been turned on in the city for the distinct purpose of his press appearance became a significant news story. New York Times journalist Maureen Dowd (2005) reported that:

“In a ruined city — still largely without power, stinking with piles of garbage and still 40 percent submerged; where people are foraging in the miasma and muck for food, corpses and the sentimental detritus of their lives; and where unbearably sad stories continue to spill out about hordes of evacuees who lost their homes and patients who died in hospitals without either electricity or rescuers—isn’t it rather tasteless, not to mention a waste of energy, to haul in White House generators just to give the president a burnished skin tone and a prettified background? (p. A17 as cited in Kellner 2007: 229).

The ongoing argument between both sides, made possible by the extension of certain entertaining news stories, created a sort of media circus. Because news makers introduced a political dichotomy, audience members were encouraged to align themselves with a position and fight vehemently for “their side.” This allowed the Katrina news story to be maintained in the months after the storm had occurred. Many news stories avoided political questions altogether, focusing instead on stories about the victims and survivors of the catastrophic event.

News stories also extended coverage of Katrina for weeks after the event through the use of individual survivor and victim stories. Personal stories provided firsthand dramatic accounts of the narrative which had held the attention of the public for days, and the number of such stories made them widely accessible to the media. Victim and survivor stories were frequently told through the use of images: “after days of nonstop coverage of flooded New Orleans, television news organizations turned to recycling several familiar images of black suffering and survival” (Fleetwood 2006: 775). A few

images in particular became emblematic of the Katrina event, such as “the repeated image of a dead elderly woman at the convention center, left in a wheelchair, covered by a plaid blanket” and the image of the “young woman who held two listless babies” (Ibid). Fleetwood (2006) describes that “out of these images emerged stories of individualized hardship and struggle” (Ibid). One particular story which Fleetwood uses as an example is that of “Hardy Jackson of Biloxi, Mississippi” who “confused, disheveled, and tearful after narrowly escaping drowning, [described] [to a reporter] having to let go of his wife’s hand as she [was] swept away by the waters” (Ibid). Fleetwood demonstrates how this story was adopted by various news stations which “produced several follow-up stories on Jackson’s plight,” depicting his emotional state and framing the story “in moral terms” (776). Similar stories emerged in the weeks after the storm, allowing the audience to develop intimate understandings of the individuals whose homes they had watched being destroyed by the flood. In a sense, recounting survivor stories gave audience members an opportunity to know the actors of the melodrama they had watched unfold. Audience interest in these stories encouraged news makers to continue providing them. Stories about politics and victims or survivors were prevalent in the immediate weeks after the storm but gradually garnered less coverage. After some time, the audience as well as the news stations were ready to move on, to present the final act of the narrative and provide the audience with closure.

### *Calming the Media Storm*

Despite the highly charged political criticisms which had been aired by powerful claims-makers during the Katrina event, news makers after the event gradually returned to “routine” news reporting styles. Eventually they stopped asking critical questions or



framing the Bush administration in unfavourable terms. At the same time, media critics listed grievances against coverage of the event, offering reputable news stations the opportunity to make amends. News makers in the final phase of Katrina coverage sought to return to “business as usual,” to allow their hasty meaning-making and “biased coverage” to be critiqued, and to provide closure for the benefit of their relationship with the audience, and the government.

In order to communicate with the audience that the intensity of the disaster phase had passed, news makers shifted away from emotional reporting and republican criticism, instead reframing the disaster in other terms. Since news has an “agenda setting function,” “traditional newsgathering practices result in hazard coverage which is event-centered, thus avoiding long-range questions of planning and resource allocation (Wilkins 1987: xii). In telling the audience “what to think about” news makers generally emphasize the “emergency phase” of the disaster, downplaying the aftermath and thus affording government officials the agency to act or avoid acting without the influence of any collective critical gaze. With regard to Katrina, Fry (2006) argues that despite “visualizing the economic and social inequalities that exist in New Orleans...the true measure of heroism comes in following up on these socioeconomic issues after crisis has abated” (84). Kellner (2007) argues that such heroism was not displayed by news workers, suggesting that “the U.S. corporate media returned to their conservative agenda some weeks into the tragedy” (227) citing media critic Nikki Finke (2005) to support his claims:

“Once the crisis point had passed, most TV journalists went back to business-as-usual, their choke chains yanked by no-longer-inattentive parent company bosses who, fearful of fallout from fingering Dubya for the FEMA fuckups, decided yet again to

sacrifice community need for corporate greed. Too quickly, Katrina's wake was spun into a web of deceit by the Bush administration, then disseminated by the Big Media boys' club...Karl Rove was reportedly put in charge of both the White House PR effort and reconstruction efforts, and suddenly, Bush was sent down to the disaster area every few days to make an appearance, hugging Black people and showing that he cared and was in charge. Of course, these media visits were pseudo-events constructed to make Bush look presidential (cited in Kellner 2007: 228).

The media, in cooperation with the president were able to restore calm; to ensure the audience that they had mended their relationship and that the disaster was in the process of being repaired. Perhaps in lieu of the renewed partnership, media critics presented a series of claims which sought to debunk news coverage of the Katrina event.

### *Debunking the "Myths"*

Critics of the Katrina news story suggested that the media had exaggerated or even fabricated certain details of the story. Here, journalists returned to being the secondary claims-makers, reporting the statements of "government workers" and "National Guard officials," that "other" news stations had seriously overemphasized the number of criminal occurrences in the "emergency phase" of the event. Official reports described that only four bodies had been found in the aftermath of the Katrina event, debunking claims made by the New Orleans newspaper that "40 murder victims had been found in a freezer at the Convention Center" (Sommers et al. 2006: 44-45). Furthermore, "although sexual assaults often go underreported even under normal circumstances, only one such assault (with an adult, not child victim) [was] confirmed at the Convention Center...hardly supporting allegations of a sexual assault wave" ("Auditing the early," 2005 cited in Sommers et al. 2006: 45). The media responded to these accusations in two ways. Some passed the blame along, suggesting they had received false information

from the New Orleans police chief or other sources. News makers using this strategy occasionally admitted some responsibility for not seeking more evidence or checking the credibility of sources. Others pleaded that the media was simply the next victim of an ongoing blame game and that people should be pleased that the disaster did not result in as many casualties as expected. Such statements were likely able to weaken claims about media discrepancies, framing the story as a narrative about government officials blaming the media in order to distract audiences from questions of media credibility.

Other criticisms of the Katrina news story claimed that the media had been racist in framing the disaster narrative. These claims predominately organized themselves around one particular news story, in which “an AP picture of a black man wading in the flooded city was compared to an AFP caption of a white couple wading through the same waters” (Finnegan 2006: 149). Though their activities might have been interpreted in the same manner, the headlines framing the story described different scenarios. The caption which described the image of the black man referred to "a young man [wading] in chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans," while the caption framing the story of the couple described: "two residents [wading] through chest deep water after finding bread and water from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina" (Finnegan 2006: 149, Kellner 2007: 226). These diverging frames were compared in a variety of news stories, and used as “evidence” that Katrina reporting had been racist. Overall, news makers did not concentrate a great deal of attention on this phase since the live phase of the disaster was more likely to imprint the collective memory; a few allegations of media bias after the main event could not compete with the series of emotional, image supported broadcasts which occurred during the storm.

## CONCLUSION

Constructionist literature on Katrina coverage used a range of frames created to construct the story as well as a set of interpretations from which to understand those frames. Two observations emerging from this literature are particularly relevant to this discussion and warrant further mention. The first is the emphasis on entertainment as the primary interest of news makers. This interest in entertaining the audience over attempting to provide the most accurate account of events caused news makers to tell a certain type of story about the Hurricane, largely transforming Katrina itself into a sort of celebrity storm (Fleetwood 2006, Kellner 2007, Finnegan 2006, Senvold 2005). The second is that the “emergency phase” of the storm was marked by a variety of unique or more controversial reporting styles, in which certain news “personalities” were able to advance highly influential claims.

Throughout this chapter, the attempt has been to outline some of the ways in which sociological literature, as well as media discourse interpreted Hurricane Katrina. From both accounts, the conception seems to be that the Katrina event was far more than a “natural disaster.” Although these approaches to Katrina are both fascinating and relevant to the study of contemporary sociology they are not the analytical focus of this project. This research is interested in the manner in which celebrity interacted with Hurricane Katrina and the media discourse surrounding it. Celebrity takes on a variety of meanings within the Katrina context, some of which will be unraveled in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the intersecting media constructions of celebrity and Hurricane Katrina, in order to elaborate claims about public figures within the disaster news narrative and also those made by celebrities about the structural or social characteristics of the Hurricane. In order to assess the manner in which celebrity dominated media discourse surrounding the event, a qualitative content analysis of news sources was conducted. This included the examination of text and image, as well as hard news and soft news sources. The data informing this analysis were gathered from internet databases, using the search terms “Hurricane Katrina” and “celebrity;” though some information was also gathered using more informal means.

With regard to claims made about celebrity, the manner in which celebrity is constructed, as well as the “types” of celebrities discussed, varied somewhat depending on the sentiments toward the Katrina media event (as it is characterized by unique narrative stages), as well as on the news source.<sup>2</sup> This variance produced different kinds of claims and claims-making styles, but remained within the rhetorical rubric identified within constructionist literature. Overwhelmingly, news sources constructed celebrity involvement in the event favourably, using celebrities to advance claims about the event, while also using the event to advance claims about celebrity.

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<sup>2</sup> As discussed in Chapter Three news conventions are influenced by a number of variables, such as the character of the news station, newspaper, journalist or anchor, the reporting style and/or format, the tendency to present entertaining and controversial stories as well as the type of story.

With regard to the role of celebrities as claims-makers, the relatively influential status of celebrity in contemporary culture, as well as the interdependent relationship between celebrity and the media, allowed them to take on the role of primary claims-maker at different phases of the event. In other words celebrities likely informed news stories, using the media to advance claims about the event and their contribution to it. Since celebrity claims are packaged and presented by media sources, a process which is highly structured, and also since the relationship between the two interests is mutually reinforcing (that is, the media can not be excluded from the primary claims-making role), the present analysis emphasizes media constructions rather than other sites in which celebrities may have advanced claims about Katrina.

Although this project does not employ a strict or strong (Best 2003) social constructionist paradigm, a typology advanced by advocates of this perspective, Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003), is used to lend structure to the assessment. According to Ibarra and Kitsuse's model, *rhetorical idioms, counterrhetorics, motifs and claims-making styles* are "overlapping but analytically distinct rhetorical dimensions" which "provide a framework for discerning patterns in phenomena that appear from the outside to be incoherent and in a constant state of flux" (2003: 25). This typology is favoured because it provides an effective model from which to identify patterns or categories within the articles, transcripts or images, and also because it lends meaning to a discussion of the structured character of media constructions. Despite the use of a typology which stems from strict constructionism, this discussion employs the allowances of a weak reading. This entails a consideration of celebrity or Katrina discourse in order to make inferences about the motives of claims-makers.

This chapter will proceed by first discussing the manner in which the methodology - ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1987) - informed the data collection process. Following this the rhetorical idioms and dimensions outlined by Ibarra and Kitsuse will be described. Finally, these idioms and dimensions will be used to structure the data thematically, and they will be applied in an understanding of the celebrity Katrina event.

### **DATA COLLECTION**

As discussed in previous chapters, media sources play a central role in constructing the meanings and symbols which pervade social spheres. Since media sources tend to construct and transmit celebrity messages within public discourse, and news sources tend to construct and transmit stories about disaster, news media sources were selected to inform this analysis about the interaction between them. The data sample for this analysis was collected in two stages. In the first stage, data were collected from the Internet database *Factiva*, using the search terms “Hurricane Katrina” and “celebrity.” While including “celebrity” in the search terms may have narrowed the data sample, potentially excluding articles that made reference to certain “known” celebrities simply by name rather than status, its inclusion as a search term also ensured that the highly ambiguous task of defining celebrity was undertaken by the news source rather than the researcher.

Following an ethnography, the second stage of data collection yielded results from less structured internet news sources, such as Oprah Winfrey’s website, critical media and magazine websites. These data were collected more informally; they were

included in the analysis because they contributed opinionated journalistic accounts as well as a variety of images which complied with the search terms and introduced new layers of rhetoric to the data set.

As discussed in Chapter Three, images play a central role in the claims-making process. This analysis departs from the logic of Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) who suggest that images play a role in “[altering] a claim,” instead following Loseke’s (1993) postulation that “images might be the claim” (127). Here images supplied the data with rhetorical nuances which served to reinforce certain textual themes. Further, the inclusion of opinionated journalistic accounts or soft news showcased alternative methods of packaging claims. Soft news, which “may be defined as coverage which focuses on individuals, personalities and feature content” (Spragens 1995: 13) can be distinguished from hard news “which is straight reporting of events” (Ibid). In this analysis soft news produced a rich textual narrative which recounted its own unique story or which reified the existing rhetorical categories constructed by hard news accounts.

## **RHETORICALLY SPEAKING: FRAMING THE CELEBRITY KATRINA EVENT**

This section seeks to describe the four rhetorical dimensions: *rhetorical idioms*, *counterrhetorics*, *motifs* and *claims-making styles*, and the manner in which they inform a constructionist overview of the celebrity Katrina event. Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) define rhetorical idioms as “definitional complexes, utilizing language that situates condition-categories in moral universes” (26). Condition-categories, they explain, refer to “terms used by claimants to identify the subject of a social problem claim” (22). In the context



of this analysis, a broad condition-category may be identified as “celebrity involvement in Hurricane Katrina” but condition-categories can also manifest themselves more particularly and discursively in phrases such as: “heroic celebrity involvement amidst disastrous Katrina conditions,” or “celebrities’ campaign for racial equality in lieu of slow Katrina response.”

Rhetorical idioms contain a set of symbols and vernacular categories, also referred to as “moral vocabularies” (27) which introduce a sort of symbolic significance to the condition-category and thus increase the strength of the claim. Ibarra and Kitsuse elaborate five recurring rhetorical idioms which may be identified in media constructions: *The Rhetoric of Calamity*, *The Rhetoric of Endangerment*, *The Rhetoric of Entitlement*, *The Rhetoric of Loss*, and *The Rhetoric of Unreason*. They also describe the symbols and terms which allow “these moral vocabularies” to become apparent to the researcher. In the context of this analysis, the news materials appealed to two distinct idioms, *The Rhetoric of Loss* and *The Rhetoric of Entitlement*. While these idioms highlighted different aspects of the condition-category, they did not provide contradictory accounts or constructions of the event. As Ibarra and Kitsuse qualify “rhetorical idioms cut across ideological divisions;” (28) they offer different contexts within, or manners of, advancing similar claims. The characterizations of these rhetorical idioms, along with their corresponding motifs, and claims-making styles will be further described in the subsequent section.

Before expanding on the uses of motifs and claims-making styles, it is useful to discuss the role of counterrhetorical strategies as they interact with the analysis of claims-making activities. Counterrhetorical strategies refer to alternative constructions which

seek to dismantle the set of meanings surrounding a claim, or which critically question the relevance of the claim itself. They are “discursive strategies for countering characterizations made by claimants,” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003: 26) and they tend to be “less synoptic and thematic” than rhetorical idioms (Ibid). According to Ibarra and Kitsuse, counterrhetorical strategies may approach a condition-category sympathetically or unsympathetically, depending on whether they seek to challenge some aspect of the construction, or whether they question the condition-category itself. In the context of this research, news sources which appealed to counterrhetorical strategies used them to question the motivating interests of celebrities. This reportage chided journalistic accounts for framing celebrities as the heroes of the event, and criticized celebrities themselves for seeking to undermine the efforts of the federal government.

In order to describe the manner in which particular rhetorical idioms and counterrhetorics organized coverage of the celebrity Katrina event, and to clarify how they became apparent in the research, it is necessary to discuss two rhetorical dimensions; motifs and claims-making styles. These dimensions frame the condition-category and thus the rhetorical idiom; they emphasize particular aspects of the idiom which helps to pronounce claims, and they offer different perspectives or frames of analysis for interpreting claims.

Motifs hint at the overarching themes guiding the construction, yet they tend to be expressed more subtly in textual or visual references. Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) identify motifs as “the recurrently thematic elements and figures of speech that pithily encapsulate or highlight a central dimension or dynamic of a social problem” (38). Further they qualify that “they are a kind of generic, cross-idiom vocabulary used by claimants”

(Ibid). In describing news constructions of the celebrity Katrina event, motifs frequently refer to categories of people or “types” of celebrities; here motifs are expressed in classifications such as “victim” or “hero.”

The final rhetorical dimension informing this analysis refers to the style in which the news is packaged and conveyed. Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) define claims-making styles as the manner in which “various groupings of the claimant’s bearing, tone, sensibility, and membership category can inform both a claim’s general appearance and specific content as well as instruct auditors on how the claims should be interpreted” (40). They outline five claims-making styles: the *comic style*, the *theatrical style*, the *civic style*, the *legalistic style* and the *subcultural style*, elaborating the particular traits or manners in which they are manifested. While most of these styles were identified within the data, with the exception of the *subcultural style*, some of them did not conform to the rigid precepts outlined by Ibarra and Kitsuse, and have been slightly adjusted to describe the findings. In addition, another claims-making style, which arose within the data but had not been defined in constructionist literature, has been created. This style is termed “attributional style” and refers to those instances within the discourse where claimants or counterclaimants draw a conceptual border around their own “camp,” and use the divide to lay blame on outside parties, structures or interests. Claims-making styles provide an effective scheme from which to interpret the manner in which claims are conveyed; they will be discussed here in relation to particular rhetorical idioms and counter-rhetorics.

### ***RHETORIC OF LOSS***

Dominating news coverage of celebrity and Hurricane Katrina, *The Rhetoric of Loss* is adopted by claims-makers in order to construct celebrity as the hero of the Katrina

event. Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) explain that a “central image” of this idiom “is that of humans as custodians or guardians of some unique and sacred thing or quality” (28). With regard to Katrina the data suggests that three distinct objects were elevated to a symbolic level: the city of New Orleans, the “victims” of Katrina, and local “celebrities.” This discussion seeks to assess the manner in which these objects were constructed as sacred items. Following this, the manner in which celebrities were constructed as the guardians of these sacred things, through representations of their humility or accounts of their personal approach will be explored.

Within this idiom, news sources and celebrities shared the claims-making role; however news media tended to dominate primary claims-making activities, advancing claims about the role of celebrities in the event while using their activities and statements to support these claims.

### *Sacred Things*

The symbolic significance of New Orleans is reinforced through a set of celebrity accounts which contribute to the romantic lore of the city. Here the notion of celebrity residue discussed in Chapter Two can be used to foster an understanding of the manner in which a celebrity’s “aura” is seen to “rub off” on a particular product (Gabler 1998: 201) or in this case a city. An article from the *Times Union* expresses: “the suffering of New Orleans, a culturally rich city, is...felt across the entertainment world” (Coyle 2005A). The article constructs the city as a sacred object by recounting the statements of those famous people who are “native” to the Louisiana and Mississippi area, including Master P., B.B. King, Harry Connick Jr., Patricia Clarkson, Rapper Juvenile, Dave Pirner (Soul Asylum), Ellen DeGeneres, Britney Spears and Morgan Freeman. The article also

discusses the impact of the Hurricane on these public figures, frequently using a rhetoric which emphasizes the connection between the “celebrity” and the “city.” New Orleans is personified, romanticized and constructed as an object of great significance; Harry Connick jr. is quoted saying: “New Orleans is my essence, my soul, my muse, and I can only dream that one day she will recapture her glory” (Ibid). Here, the narrative which accompanies the celebrity contributes to the narrative of the city. This article, entitled “Celebrity makes no difference to Katrina” also appeals to local celebrities as sacred objects; this category will be elaborated below.

In a similar article, printed by the *PR Newswire*, the significance of New Orleans is constructed and supported by the celebrity status of those who had links to it. Ellen DeGeneres is quoted in this account, stating: "New Orleans holds a special place in my heart, because it is where I grew up" (“National Celebrities” 2005). The discourse maintains an emphasis on place, broadening the scope to include the State of Louisiana. The quote from DeGeneres is offered as a sample of a series of Celebrity Public Service Announcements recorded for the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation. According to the article, the foundation encouraged celebrities to “tell their personal story of living, working and playing in a state that needs their help so desperately...” (Ibid). Such ties between the celebrity and the place allow New Orleans to take on meaning as a significant object, introducing it as an item in need of protection.

Discourse which emerges from *The Rhetoric of Loss* also tends to emphasize the “victims” of the storm in order to frame the residents of New Orleans as a sacred group. Here the “victim” motif is used almost solely to describe both those people who evacuated New Orleans and those who were stranded in their homes or at the convention

centre. Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) suggest that “connotations of the victim motif vary when positioned amid diverse kinds of claims” (39). This motif took on a variety of context-specific meanings within the Katrina narrative. As discussed in Chapter Three, competing interests during the event sought to make sympathetic appeals on behalf of those residents who experienced losses, or to chide them for staying in New Orleans and engaging in “deviant” activities. Within this rhetoric, the residents of New Orleans occupy the victim category, which emphasizes their symbolic meaning as a sacred group, and reinforces the “membership category” of hero and victim.

News sources most evidently characterize the residents of New Orleans as victims through frequent and repetitive uses of the term. Articles which emphasize the ties between celebrity and Katrina within this rhetoric avoid framing New Orleans residents adversely. Here, victim characterizations are often packaged within narratives which have been culturally defined as sacred. For instance, narratives about “victims” are often mentioned alongside those about children. Drawing a meaningful link between the victim narrative and one which connotes innocence and helplessness allows New Orleans residents to be transported further from the negative connotations constructed by competing interests. In one example of this, a *Third sector* article entitled “Focus: Fundraising – Celebrity Watch” describes: “Katie Melua has sung on a special recording of Eric Clapton's *Tears in Heaven* to raise money for Save the Children and victims of Hurricane Katrina” (2005). In another, celebrities’ “Reese Witherspoon, Jennifer Garner and Cicely Tyson” are said to have “joined a group of women brought here by the Children's Defense Fund to bring attention to the needs of storm victims, particularly traumatized children” (“Aide Suing” 2006: B05). By situating the residents of New

Orleans within victim categories, and reifying this status through a series of discursive links to a symbolic narrative, the “people” of New Orleans are framed as a sacred group.

In some articles, constructing a relationship between celebrity and the Katrina event involved invoking a sense of communal suffering and thus communal understanding. Emphasizing the link between celebrities - often beloved social figures, and “victimization” created another category of “unique and sacred things” in need of protection. Discourse on local “celebrities” told stories which drew on victim narratives and on narratives about New Orleans.

Written much like any other story about New Orleans residents and Katrina, an article printed in *Hobart Mercury* describes the plight of “Rhythm and Blues legend” Fats Domino. The article did not include any references to the artist’s work, emphasizing the more urgent and arguably entertaining narrative of the Katrina event. Describing the flood waters which surrounded the “legend’s” apartment, and the manner in which he and his family were rescued, the article follows the conventions of a hard news report, until the last line where a quote from Domino “we’ve lost everything” (“Now Fats” 2005) expresses a more emotional account of the celebrity and the storm. The account communicates that both the “legends” and the residents were subject to the destruction of the Hurricane, thus raising everyone in the category to a level of significance.

The links between “local,” “celebrity” and “victim” also express themselves using conventions which highlight the communal character of the Katrina event. Much like the discourse which links celebrity to place, these accounts describe those celebrities whose family and friends were affected by the storm. News stories which link celebrities to victims generally offered lists which sought to inform the reader of another manner in

which celebrity could be contextualized within the event. Some of these articles however went on to describe the efforts of “stars” alongside the “suffering” of their friends and family members. In an article entitled “Manning brothers team up for Katrina relief,” author Marsha Walton (2005) labels the brothers as “legendary,” “football greats” and “hometown heroes” in order to tell a story about some of the “victims” of the storm. Here, stories about “victims” as well as local charity organizations are packaged between quotes from Peyton Manning which describe his ties to the New Orleans community. Through such quotes as: “The whole town is like family, so it's very much a personal issue;” and “We know these people; these people know us... We have a connection to these people;” (Walton 2005) the “victims” are framed in a familiar context, gaining significance through an appeal to familiarity. At this point, it follows to note that the relationship between the “victims” and the “celebrities” is mutually reinforcing within the discourse. Just as celebrity accounts elevate the status of the “victims” to a symbolic level, in other contexts victim stories are used to elevate the celebrity to “heroic” levels.

### *Storm Troopers*

Having discussed the manner in which the discourse identifies sacred objects in need of protection, the emphasis shifts to the role of those deemed the “protectors.” Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) elaborate on this “concept of protection” explaining that it “suggests a defensive posture that is heroic rather than merely ‘reactionary’” (29). Within the discourse on celebrity and Katrina, this defensive posture showcased itself through a series of celebrity appeals to the public and exaggeratedly sincere commitments to the cause. Ibarra and Kitsuse outline that: “such an impression is assisted by the premise that the sacred objects or beings cannot save or help themselves and... must have



the claimants acting on their behalf to protect their elevated symbolic positions and interests” (29). Discourse which appeals to this rhetoric packages celebrities as sincere and dedicated to the protection of these sacred objects in two distinct manners; by either emphasizing their humility or identifying the personal and unique manner in which they contribute to the Katrina event.

A great deal of the discourse situated within *The Rhetoric of Loss* emphasizes the heroic status of the celebrities involved, showcasing quotations which contextualize their “humble” efforts to contribute to a monumental cause. In these cases, celebrities attempt to distance themselves from their “star” status.” Instead they appeal to idealized constructs, citing humanity as the common thread linking them to the Hurricane survivors. While the quotations attempt to illustrate the human dimension of the “stars,” the rhetoric surrounding these quotations reinforces both their “star” status as well as the extent of their charity. This construction allows them to take on a newly celebrated status as the humble practitioners of a worthy effort.

Hard and soft news discourse expresses itself according to a recognizable format: linking the celebrity to the source of their fame; referring to their actions in assisting with the Katrina effort; extending celebrity appeals for help to a broad national audience; and citing an inspirational quote in which the celebrity empathizes with those impacted by the Hurricane. The most straightforward example of this pattern occurs in a hard news article entitled “Clooney Donates To Katrina Relief Efforts” (2005). The article’s opening sentence combines a reference to the actors’ fame along with his appeal to a national audience: “OCEAN’S ELEVEN star GEORGE CLOONEY has become the latest celebrity to open up his wallet to help victims of Hurricane Katrina and is urging

others to do the same” (Ibid). The article goes on to specify Clooney’s donation of one million dollars to the United Way, concluding two sentences later with his draw to humanity: “we’re all in this together” (“Clooney donates” 2005). While Clooney’s humility is emphasized, the article has little to say about Katrina survivors, victims or evacuees; it is most evidently a story about celebrity heroism.

In another article, packaged as a daily celebrity news update, a similar format is applied, but the “hero” in focus is Jamie Foxx. In this article, just as in the previous one, the narrative is organized around Foxx’s quote: “The reason you have to do this is you have to let them know that you're real” (“The daily dish” 2005). However, in this case a quote from a “victim” is used to reinforce the actor’s celebrity status:

“‘He was so fine. I was just wishing he could have took me home with him,’ said Venus Junius, who was forced from her New Orleans home and spent three days on top of a bridge until a bus brought her to Houston. ‘When I saw him I just ran to where he was at,’ she said” (Ibid).

The story highlights the celebrity’s seeming attempts to shift the attention away from himself and onto the people of New Orleans; however the humility displayed in this action results in the elevation of his own heroic status.

Soft news sources adopt a similar format but extend their coverage, adding rhetorical dimensions to reinforce celebrity humility. A central example emerges within data collected from Oprah Winfrey’s website ([www.oprah.com](http://www.oprah.com)). Oprah’s website is particularly informative because it offers a myriad of visual and textual references from a handful of Katrina-relevant celebrities. This website, along with others suggests that Oprah had rallied celebrities to the cause. While the website showcases diverse instances of celebrity humility: featuring for instance a diary from Mathew McConaughey which

he signed “just keep livin,” and images of people such as Chris Rock, Lisa Marie-Presley and Gayle King, the website is primarily organized around Oprah’s humanitarian efforts. Through a narrative of images, Oprah is shown crying and praying with the “victims.” Tagged below these images are quotes from the “star” in which she attempts to provide a voice for the people: “I feel deeply that we owe it to every single family who has suffered to not forget and to not let them stand alone” (“Oprah reports”). Not unlike the hard news sources described above, the narratives conveyed on this website, while decorated with “victim stories” are again, primarily stories about celebrity heroism, and celebrity humility. While the theme of celebrity humility develops most poignantly within *The Rhetoric of Loss*, it also emerges as a theme or motif within the discourse in general and can be identified in a variety of contexts within the research.

A second way in which “celebrity heroism” is discussed within the discourse occurs through stories about the unique and personal approaches which celebrities contribute to the Katrina effort. Whether they applied a “hands on” approach, donated money, or started a new charity on behalf of the cause, the discourse frames their efforts as particularly meaningful. The soft news offers lists of celebrities’ “personal touch” to Katrina philanthropy, referring to the names of the charitable organizations they had started, or the particular manner – song, speech, telethon, clothing auction or donation, in which they became involved. These lists are typically framed by statements such as: “members of the Hollywood community...are trying to put their unique stamp on relief efforts” (Thomas 2005). They are also generally accompanied by images of celebrities “in action”, as well as excerpts where the “heroes” qualify the manner in which their philanthropic activities represent their personal sentiments.

Within this discourse, a range of stories are told. There are stories about new celebrities such as chef “John Besh,” who gained his celebrity status after he “fed New Orleans until it could feed itself” (Severson 2007). There are also stories about well known “stars” who had the added task of integrating their existing celebrity narrative with one which would reflect their sentiments about the cause. Mathew McConaughey, for instance qualifies his own particular brand of philanthropy by explaining how his actions best serve the “needs” of the sacred group:

“The best use of my time was going to be in an arena that served others while using my strengths as well...Me and the *Oprah* team were going to Waveland to find stories...to report the "news" of what was happening, to the places, and to the people...to show people the reality, so they might better understand it, to help bring attention through individuals, which will hopefully compel others to serve these people in need, through giving their time, donations and prayers....” (“Mathew McCaunaghey’s Journal”).

Finally, there are stories communicated through visual narratives. Overwhelmingly these images represent the celebrities “in action,” often incorporating aspects of sacred objects which they were “heroically” trying to protect. Among others, there are images of John Besh sitting on a pile of bricks in New Orleans holding a plate (Severson 2007); images of Oprah comforting a young woman in distress (Media Awareness Network), images of Sean Penn in a rescue boat (Thomas 2005) and images of John Travolta and Kelly Preston loading a plane full of supplies (“The Angel Network Team”). The stories told through the images allow the celebrities to “star” in a heroic narrative about their “real” lives. The personal and unique approaches represented within them allow celebrities to be distinguished from one another; to emphasize their individuality within the celebrity Katrina event.

### ***The Business of Performing Heroism***

The claims advanced within *The Rhetoric of Loss* are generally transmitted using a more subtle form of what Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) term the *theatrical style*.

According to the theorists, this style “encompasses those instances of claims-making that make a point of illustrating a group’s moral critique in the very way in which the claim is represented” (43). While discourse within this rhetoric did not stage theatrical productions to advance claims, the terms used to frame the celebrities such as “legendary”, and the quotes used to represent them are often quite dramatic. Further, the images of celebrities crying, hugging victims, or praying, incorporates theatrical elements into the transmission of claims. Perhaps because the claims surround a series of actors, media personalities and other public figures accompanied by dramatic narratives, the claims-makers did not need to go to drastic lengths in order to convey a story using the *theatrical style*.

### **RHETORIC OF ENTITLEMENT**

Discourse which appeals to *The Rhetoric of Entitlement* continues to construct celebrities as the heroic figures of the Katrina event. Within this rhetoric, many of the themes related to the hero classification are revisited, and similar claims-making styles are adopted in the transmission of claims. Discourse within this rhetoric is less plentiful, and tends to be dominated by soft news accounts. This may be due to the controversial character of the rhetoric – which involves critiquing social structures and interests. Here celebrities are overwhelmingly the primary claims-makers, advancing claims about aspects of the disaster, or more subtly about their role within it. These claims are

supported by news sources which tend to package these claims about celebrity involvement favourably.

According to Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) *The Rhetoric of Entitlement* “emphasizes the virtue of securing for all persons...equal institutional access as well as the unhampered freedom to exercise choice of self expression” (29). The idiom is “egalitarian in its aversion to forms of discrimination against categories of persons” (Ibid). In the context of this analysis thus far, the discourse has generally emphasized the protection of the “victim.” Within this rhetoric, the socio-political dimensions of the victim category are brought to the surface and used to advance claims about race relations and class relations in America.

As outlined in Chapter Three, discussions of institutionalized racism were prevalent within sociological literature on Katrina. Here, the discourse is less structured, displaying a series of interacting influences and diverse approaches to this sensitive topic. This section does not intend to draw empirical observations regarding the interaction between race, class and Katrina, but rather to address the manner in which the data within this rhetoric characterizes celebrity campaigns for racial equality. Here, two distinct narratives of resistance will be discussed. For the purposes of this discussion, they will be identified as the *Kanye narrative* and the *Oprah narrative*.

### ***The Kanye Narrative***

The Kanye narrative emerges in the discourse very early and begins to wane just as quickly. The short duration of the campaign may be due to the defensive or reactive style of its ambassador, or to the controversial character of the claims made. This narrative transmits messages through an “off the cuff” reporting style, characteristic of

the *civic style* of claims-making. According to Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003), the style “entails making claims that have what we might call ‘the look of being unpolished.’ The style’s distinctive element is dramaturgical... [it involves the] projection of an ‘honest,’ ‘sincere,’ ‘upright,’ ‘unstylized,’ demeanor” (43-44). The claims-makers in this narrative present emotional appeals within a discourse which frames them as brave and caring activists, seeking equal rights for marginalized groups.

The Kanye narrative is introduced the night of an NBC “Concert for Katrina relief” when, as one article describes “West began a rant by 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’” (Moore 2005). The “rant” escalated quickly and West advances a couple of strong claims, suggesting “they” have “given them permission to go down and shoot us” and delivering the infamous quote: “George Bush doesn't care about black people” (Ibid). Immediately after Kanye’s appeal, discourse begins to distance itself from his claims, linking the incident to other “emotional outbursts” he had displayed in the past, and printing NBC’s apologies. Within a few days of the event however, other celebrities begin to support Kanye’s campaign as well as his freedom of expression. They suggest that the federal government should be held responsible for the delayed response to Katrina, arguing that tough questions about race relations can not be factored out of the equation.

Within this rhetorical idiom, celebrity claims transmitted using the *civic style* are linked to the Kanye event, helping to construct a narrative surrounding his campaign. One article entitled “Dion upset over hurricane response” relays Kanye’s story in order to frame Celine Dion’s critique of “officials for arresting looters,” and her suggestion that

resources were being withheld from New Orleans since “it [was] so easy to send planes in another country to kill everyone in a second, to destroy lives” (“Dion upset” 2005). Beyond the seemingly unscripted and emotional manner in which she delivers them, Celine’s tearful and angry appeals are likely situated in the Kanye narrative because they advance similarly strong claims about deliberately slow government response. Other articles which refer to the Kanye narrative apply rhetorical devices in order to frame controversial celebrity campaigns in positive terms. Here, celebrity claims about government ineptitude are packaged between stories about celebrity philanthropy. For instance, an *Associated Press* article provides a list of celebrity “relief efforts” before including a quote from Matt Damon in which he declares his support for Kanye’s words: “I’m not a fan of (President Bush), so I let out a big cheer (over West’s comments)” (Coyle 2005B). The article also appeals to the symbolic status of local celebrities to reinforce these claims, citing Dr. John’s quote: “It makes me think of what my friend Rev. Goat just told me... “New Orleans didn't die of natural causes, she was murdered”” (Ibid).

While the Kanye narrative is constructed within *The Rhetoric of Entitlement*, news sources cautiously avoid any overwhelming support for his campaign. The manner in which he presents his claims, combined with his limited celebrity status, does not afford him the reputability to maintain a strong campaign. Despite the brevity of the Kanye narrative, particular artifacts which emerge within it, such as “off the cuff” claims-making, are successfully applied in other campaigns. Within this rhetoric, Kanye is undoubtedly praised for his efforts, but the largely exaggerated and unsubstantiated



claims that he and others within the narrative advance can not compete with the symbolic status of a charitable “icon.”

### *The Oprah Narrative*

The rash and reactive claims which characterize the Kanye narrative are dominated by discourse on and by the social activist who has gained symbolic status for her sincerity and her charitability. Whereas celebrities seemingly adopt the Kanye narrative to support the rapper’s freedom of expression and to lend reputability to his claims, those who participate in Oprah’s narrative (as discussed in the previous rhetoric) serve to reinforce or even share in her reputability. A variety of factors have contributed to the symbolic status of this “icon.” Academic literature on the subject has coined the term “Oprahization” in order to describe her influence on contemporary culture.

Paul Thaler (1997) writes that the Oprahization “phenomenon” is “characterized by ordinary people going on TV talk shows to discuss every imaginable, and unimaginable, sexual, psychological, physiological, and emotional aspect of their lives” (201). In this context Oprah is constructed as the medium through which peoples’ personal lives enter into public domains; a process which, he argues, has altered the manner in which media sources present and construct social problems. John R. Hill, and Dolf Zillmann (1999), use the phenomenon to discuss the “growing sensitivity of jurors” in violent offending cases, advancing the argument that “Oprah Winfrey is frequently credited with extraordinary empathic skills in extracting self-disclosures and gut-wrenching confessions from her guests” (67, Abelman 1998, Abt and Mustazza 1997, Priest 1995). The impression which emerges from the discourse and informs this analysis, is that of an individual celebrity holding a level of cultural relevance which is

based on her ability to draw out the “true essence” of an individual or social dynamic. Within this rhetoric Oprah advances campaigns for the rights of New Orleans residents in a manner which is more subtle than Kanye and his fellow campaigners yet carries more influence.

The heroic status of Oprah within the Katrina event has been addressed, to a certain extent in the previous section. Within this rhetoric, the manner in which this celebrity advances claims about the treatment of Katrina victims will be elaborated. *The New York Times* article entitled “In Hurricane’s Aftermath, Winfrey Calls for an Apology” addresses some of the emotions expressed by the celebrity with regard to the interaction between race and the delayed Katrina response. Here, Oprah’s role as one of the central heroes of the event is used to lend strength to her claims. The article begins by describing some of the statements Oprah made during the television shows which she “devoted to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina” (Wyatt 2005). In one show, the article reports, she states that “the nation owed an apology to the people who died in the streets of New Orleans and elsewhere, and to the survivors whose misery was compounded by a relief effort whose inadequacy ‘makes me so mad’” (Ibid). Oprah’s subtle yet discernable criticisms of the effort are followed by a discussion of the celebrity’s charitable actions.

“unlike the politicians, musicians and movie stars who toured relief facilities and the news networks whose reporters were bound to let officials defend their relief efforts, Ms. Winfrey was able to turn her own cameras on the suffering, to have a celebrity physician tour medical facilities and diagnose injuries, to orchestrate family reunions and to feature aid efforts headed by celebrities like Jamie Foxx and Faith Hill” (Ibid).

The suggestion that Oprah is able to “do more” for the Katrina effort than other public figures reinforces the symbolic status of the already powerful figure. While Oprah’s

accounts may be characterized by the *civic style* of claims-making, discourse about Oprah is expressed using a somewhat dramaturgical version of *the legalistic style*. *The legalistic style* “is premised on the notion that the claimant is in fact speaking on behalf of another party, a defendant or plaintiff, and that the merits of that party’s case are consistent with rights and protections embodied in the law” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003: 44). In this case the “party” is the victim, and the claimant is framed as a credible representative for the cause.

In order to increase the strength of Oprah’s claims, the article also appeals to the emotionality which, academic literature suggests, is instrumental to the celebrity’s influence. Here, the journalist describes: “she also took her characteristic optimism to survivors, vowing that ‘I’ll get the country to pray’ for them and telling one mother of seven, ‘I believe you can come up out of that storm and you can have a better life’” (Ibid). The dramaturgical effects used to decorate her stories and video clips about the suffering of New Orleans residents and the inadequacy of the government response are part of a narrative which began before the Katrina event. While Oprah invited a number of other celebrities to join her campaign, few of them advance claims about the role of the government. Perhaps their avoidance of the issue is symptomatic of their involvement in a narrative organized by a powerful campaign leader. These celebrities likely contribute to Oprah’s symbolic stock, but her role as a sincere and tasteful advocate for the rights of the victims directs the discourse to emphasize her claims.

## **COUNTERRHETORIC**

Alongside the discourse which seeks to frame celebrities as “hurricane heroes,” a separate discourse emerges which seeks to dismantle claims advanced by and about

celebrities during the Katrina event. Here news personalities, journalists or audience members adopt the primary claims-making role, excluding celebrity voice from their accounts. To this end “*the counterrhetoric of insincerity*” is employed through sources such as editorials, satirical pieces, and audience letters. Soft news sources offer claimants the journalistic freedom required to examine events retrospectively as well as the conventions to recount human interest stories. Overwhelmingly, these accounts avoid referring to the people of New Orleans or the damage to the city, directing their unsympathetic retorts towards celebrity constructions and claims.

### ***Charging Insincerity***

Discourse within this counterrhetoric responds to many of the claims advanced by *The Rhetoric of Loss*. This discourse categorizes celebrities as attention seekers, aiming to dismantle media emphasis on the celebrity Katrina event and to critically question the agendas motivating celebrity efforts. The *counterrhetoric of insincerity*, postulate Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003), occurs when “the counterclaimant suggests or declares that the claimant’s characterization is suspect because of a ‘hidden agenda’ on his part” (37). The validity of the claim is suspect because the claimant is accused of presenting it as a “means of advancing or guaranteeing his career or as a means of securing or gaining power, status or wealth” (Ibid). Perhaps because of the tendency to narrate hyperbolized accounts within this counterrhetoric, the claims-making styles used to dismantle claims are particularly salient, and will be used to organize the data.

Discourse which employs the *comic style* is particularly prevalent in this counterrhetorical category. This may be because the exaggerated tendencies of the style allow claimants to scrutinize celebrities without addressing more sensitive and serious

topics surrounding the event. According to Ibarra and Kitsuse (2003) this style “encompasses those practices by which participants foreground absurdities in certain positions or highlight the hypocrisies of claimants or counterclaimants, typically by using a measure of irony or sarcasm to undermine or bolster a particular moral” (42). News sources which employ this claims-making style target those celebrities who are either “poster people” for the Katrina cause or who, in various types of news stories tend to be the objects of scrutiny. The sources avoid discussing those celebrities who have family ties to New Orleans, likely in an attempt to avoid trivializing those who fittingly belonged in the victim category.

One article which employs this style, printed in *The St Petersburg Times*, broaches the subject of Katrina only briefly in the context of a “celebrity gossip” account. The article begins with a powerful statement: “Looking for a cast-off snake? Britney Spears is having an online garage sale to raise money for Hurricane Katrina victims on eBay” (“this just in” 2005). The claimant appeals to common-sense types of arguments in order to highlight the ridiculousness of the celebrity’s efforts. In another ironic suggestion, the article adds: “if you want a nasty piece of America's favorite white trash, bid on one of three pairs of rubber flip flops. Hurry up, they are closing in on the \$200 mark” (Ibid). Here the claimant shifts his or her criticism to the public, ridiculing their interest in celebrity residue and questioning their willingness to pay for such a mundane object.

In a slightly more detailed account, entitled “Stars rush in after tipping off the media,” *Daily Telegraph* writer Luke Mcilveen targets those celebrities who were particularly vocal in the Katrina event. The article, which was appropriately framed by

its headline and first sentence: “behind every human disaster is a celebrity looking for a front page” (2005) begins with a sarcastic quip about Sean Penn – who was the subject of a great deal of criticism after images of him using a plastic cup to bail water from a rescue boat surfaced in media discourse (Media Awareness Network). Mcilveen suggests that there were “two problems” with Penn’s efforts: “first, he forgot to put the plug in. Second, the damn boat was so full of admirers he could not fit any survivors in, even if the boat had not begun to sink” (Ibid). He proceeds to make light of Celine Dion’s dramatic appeal, and to sarcastically praise celebrities for “throwing” money into the relief fund. The article seeks to demonstrate how easily celebrity efforts can be framed unfavourably, and, thus how unreasonable it is to present celebrity stories within the Katrina event. Despite Mcilveen’s trivial reporting style, he advances some fairly strong claims about celebrity insincerity and the state of “America’s priorities in this unfathomable disaster” (Ibid).

In a similar article, entitled “CELEBRITY NOISE; Victims know it's the thought that counts, right?” Mary-Liz Shaw incorporates the *comic style* in order to counter claims about the “heroic” efforts of celebrities during the Katrina event. Appealing to a familiar narrative, the article begins with sarcastic stories about Britney Spears and Sean Penn. Shaw then extends her critique to Kanye West, framing his fickle campaign under a trivial subheading: “Kanye or can’t he” (2005). Here she recounts statements from the celebrity in which he promises to follow the script at an NFL kick-off concert, and cites the need for entertainment as the cause which merited his censorship. While again this article does not employ a “serious” claims-making style, the emphasis on Kanye’s

inconsistencies raises some fairly powerful questions with regard to the sincerity of the celebrity's campaign.

Discourse which employs the "attributional style" of claims-making tends to blame celebrities for luring media attention away from the Hurricane and toward their own causes. This style is less prevalent in the discourse, perhaps because there is a tendency to avoid constructing celebrities as relevant figures by responding to them in a serious manner. Adopting a serious tone is useful within these articles however, because they emphasize the severity of the "disaster" in order to construct the attention-seeking efforts of the celebrities as particularly repugnant.

One example of a news source which employs the "attributional style" in order to dismantle celebrity sincerity is an audience letter. In the letter, M. Scahill from Dublin disagrees with a previously printed letter which had praised celebrity efforts, retorting: "If I had just survived a natural disaster the last thing I would want to see would be Oprah's face - along with a couple of stylists and a camera man" ("Your Voice" 2005). She goes on to suggest: "If they want to help they should hand over some cash anonymously. These attention-mad celebrities are using a natural disaster as a photo opportunity" (Ibid). Here, M. Scahill appeals to the severity of the situation, advancing claims about the "sacred things" which were compromised by the "disaster" in order to detract from claims about celebrity heroism.

Using a similar approach, an article entitled "Hollywood Crowds into New Orleans" by James Hirszen, suggests that celebrities were involved in the Katrina catastrophe primarily because they were seeking "photo-ops." Hirszen adds a unique dimension to the existing counterrhetoric, suggesting that the celebrities also "used" the

Hurricane to advance claims about the government: “Hollywood's elite didn't miss a beat in using Hurricane Katrina to launch a political attack on the Bush administration – or to seek publicity for themselves” (2005). Here, the author appears sympathetic to the people affected by the Hurricane, however; the emphasis of the article was not on New Orleans residents. Instead, the author supplies a list of celebrities who argued or even hinted that the governmental response was delayed, and subsequently appeals to the growing Katrina discourse which blames, or “bashes” celebrities in order to dismantle claims made against the government. Following the list of celebrities who he identifies as criticizing the government, Hirszen produces a series of “facts” in which he displays “evidence” of President Bush’s proactivity. Hirszen’s counterclaims are constructed in a manner which makes his own agenda apparent. Within the article he promotes his newly published book in which he argues that “Hollywood elites are increasingly blurring the lines between entertainment and news to force their views on the rest of the country” (Ibid). While his own agenda may be apparent, his article represents a growing discourse which seeks to dismantle the influence of celebrity claims. Within the media discourse on celebrity and Katrina, articles written from both of the styles were relatively common. This suggests that the dominant construction of celebrity as the “hero” of the Katrina event faced notable opposition from counterclaimants.

## **CONCLUSION**

When organized thematically the data supported the hypothesis that celebrity had a role in various discourses about Katrina. The emergence of the celebrity Katrina event, as an event which is distinct from others within the Katrina narrative, frequently referred



to celebrity involvement favourably. These constructions of celebrity likely dominated media discourse because primary claims-making was closely shared between news-maker and celebrity, and also because opening a space for such an extensive celebrity narrative allowed news personalities to enter into this narrative and build their own celebrity status. With regard to claims made by celebrities about the political dimensions of Katrina, it would seem that much like the Katrina news narrative celebrities responded to the live or “emergency phase” of the disaster in order to advance strong claims in an emotional manner. Those celebrities just as quickly removed themselves from the narrative shortly after this phase, and no longer seemed to associate themselves with the issues they had been passionate about days before. There were also celebrities like Oprah, who adopted Katrina and their efforts toward it as part of their own narrative. These celebrities became intertwined with the Katrina narrative in a manner which made conversations about one conducive to conversation about the other. While there was also a counterrhetoric within media discourse, this category was not prevalent and seemed to often be linked to other motivations. In the following chapter the discussion shifts away from the rhetorical categories and devices used to advance claims, considering instead the structural arrangements from which these claims emerged.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an integrated assessment of the discourse, arguments and findings outlined in the thesis thus far. In an effort to contextualize the rhetoric surrounding the celebrity Katrina event, the body of research and theories described in earlier chapters will be revisited and used to situate the discussion of the influence of structural arrangements on the meaning-making process. An examination of these arrangements, while considering the findings presented in Chapter Four, highlights how the unique characteristics of the Katrina narrative affected celebrity interaction with the event.

Given the contextual constructionist lens employed in this study, it is useful to consider not only the claims-making activities but the structural conditions from which the Katrina narrative emerged. To this end, Fine's (1997) social constructionist adaptation of Smelser's (1962) value-added model will be used to guide the discussion. Smelser's model, which emerges in his *Theory of Collective Behaviour* outlines six conditions which must be in place in order for a movement to become value-oriented. These include structural conduciveness, structural strain, generalized belief, precipitating events, mobilization, and social control. The "determinants" of collective behaviour, as Fine describes them, occur in the temporal sequence presented above and necessitate particular patterns of development within them as well as consistency between them (Smelser 1962, Fine 1997). While Smelser's model was regarded as an appropriate analytical tool with which to understand instances of collective behaviour, the

functionalist or objective rigidities of the model as well as its lack of strong empirical support prevented it from gaining widespread applicability in the field of collective behaviour (Fine 1997: 298).

In order to explain the manner in which these determinants function together it is useful to provide, as an example, a brief overview of Lewis's (1972) application of Smelser's value-added model in his assessment of what he describes as the Kent State riot. The Kent State University riot occurred in 1970 in response to President's Nixon's actions in sending troops to Cambodia. This expansion of the Vietnam War frustrated a group of students who protested by going into the city of Kent and breaking the windows of downtown businesses. The public reaction to the "riotous" protests of the students eventually escalated into an incident where the National Guard fatally wounded 4 students (Rudwick and Meier 1972, Lewis 1972). In seeking to explain the event, Lewis tests the applicability of Smelser's determinants of collective behaviour.

With regard to structural conduciveness, he suggests that "the conditions that were generated by the social structure...were permissive for the hostile outburst" (90). He identifies three conditions of conduciveness. The first is termed "the structure of responsibility" and refers to the blame placed on the Guard because of a general anti-war sentiment and also because of the escalating conflict between the students and the Guard occurring in the days before the riot. The second refers to the actions of the Guard in shutting down student access to communication, and the third to the ability of the "aggrieved" group to gather and protest due to a general understanding about the most effective meeting place for campus protest, known as "the Commons" (90-91). Lewis goes on to link these conditions to a condition of strain – which he identifies as a strain in

norms and values. He suggests that a two sided strain was caused by threats to normative structure, created by the presence of the Guard on student territory, as well as threats to value structures, created by the Guard's demand that students disperse and sacrifice their "right to assembly," and by the students actions in challenging authority by engaging in illegal protest (91-92). Stemming from this, Lewis identifies the "growth and spread of generalized hostile beliefs" among the students including: ambiguity over whether the rally was prohibited, the anxiety created by the Guard's presence, the assigning of responsibility to the Guard for these sentiments, the "strong desire to punish the Guard" and the "exaggerated feeling of omnipotence...in terms of their power to drive the Guard from the Commons" (92). These three determinants then became compounded by precipitating factors which "make specific the hostile belief" (Smelser 1962, Lewis 1972). In Lewis' study the precipitating factors are described as the announcement calling for a Monday rally at the Commons (Monday being the day of the shootings), and the actions of the Guard which involved "making a stand" at the Monday rally (93).

Following these events, Lewis describes the manner in which student populations were mobilized through "the chanting of the active core," which served as a sort of leadership as well as through the "organization of the hostile outburst" created by pre-existing crowd structures and ecological factors - such as a general knowledge of the Commons as a gathering area and the presence of students protesting on campus rather than attending classes. Finally Lewis suggests that the Guard did not effectively engage in methods of social control such as "preventing interaction between leaders and followers" and "never bluffing force" (94). The lack of social control in this instance is linked to an escalation, rather than a control of hostility. Lewis' study offers a

functionalist approach of Smelser's model, demonstrating the links between the determinants of a hostile outburst. The discussion will now shift to a more constructionist application of Smelser's model.

### **FINE'S ADAPTATION: AN OVERVIEW**

Fine's (1997) adaptation is favoured for this discussion because it departs from the rigidities of Parsonian analysis and utilizes a constructionist interpretation of the determinants. Fine uses the model to examine the 1921 scandal surrounding the notorious murder case of Paramount film star "Fatty" Arbuckle. Arbuckle allegedly jumped on actress Virginia Rappe during a party at a San Francisco hotel, causing her bladder to rupture 4 days later (300). According to Fine a number of contextual considerations, such as the consumption of alcohol during prohibition, the suspicion of sexual assault, the controversy surrounding a group of women and men partying together in a hotel room, and the increasingly strained relationship between the public and Hollywood contributed to the moral dimension of the scandal. Unlike previous applications of Smelser's model, the Arbuckle scandal did not involve a riot or crowd in the traditional or literal sense, however Fine (1997) interpreted it as an episode of collective behaviour because it emphasized "the power of scandal to focus public attention by questioning institutional legitimacy" (298). For this reason, Fine chose to incorporate Smelser's model into his constructionist assessment of the scandal. In this way, he was able to integrate a discussion of the manner in which audiences manage scandal with a consideration of the moral dimension of structural arrangements.

Fine (1997) argues that a thorough constructionist assessment requires that the researcher look beyond the role of claims-makers and the “dynamics of claims” to the “existence of problematic conditions” (297). He rejects a strict constructionist perspective and seeks to incorporate agency as well as structure into his model; a feat which he argues Smelser’s perspective accomplishes. Fine considers both cultural and institutional structures as sites where “interaction and discourse occur” (298). Beyond the emphasis on structure and agency Fine considers Smelser’s model to be effective because its “temporal sequence recognizes that the establishment of collective action is necessarily processual” (Ibid). This view is consistent with Jacobs’ (1996) argument presented in Chapter Three, which suggests that news stories require a compelling narrative, including a beginning, middle, and end in order to maintain the interest of the audience. Fine attempts to integrate structure and agency as well as objective and subjective, by “[confronting] the legitimacy of consensually recognized (“objective”) social conditions, while claiming that these conditions gain power through collective interpretations” (Ibid). The aim here is to extend Fine’s contextual constructionist adaptation of Smelser’s model to a discussion of the celebrity Katrina event. Although each of the six determinants to be described throughout the chapter are essential to an understanding of the event, this endeavour seeks to argue that a central strain - the lack of a strong definition of the event - contributed to the uniqueness of the Katrina narrative and celebrity involvement within it.

## STRUCTURAL CONDUCTIVENESS

With regard to structural conduciveness Smelser's (1962) model is concerned with identifying the conditions from which a value-oriented movement might emerge. He suggests that the particular issue in question must have some broad moral resonance in order to result in this type of movement, explaining that for example: "when the world-view is religious, then, protests against the world invariably become defined in religious terms" (321). After a broad social value has been challenged, the questions which both Smelser and Fine emphasize centre on the issue of communicating this potential movement to a broad collective audience, particularly: "What are the available means for expressing grievances? Among the several possible kinds of value-oriented responses, does a given social structure favour one of more kinds?" (1962: 320). Structural or institutional arrangements are linked to each other through a set of shared values; the aim in this section is to identify which arrangements were linked to each other and through which value.

Following these criteria, along with Fine's emphasis on media as central disseminators of knowledge, it is possible to identify three conditions which allowed for the emergence of the celebrity Katrina event as a value-oriented movement: (1) The prevalence of media in claims-making activities; (2) The cultural fixation with celebrity; and (3) The perception of New Orleans as a spectacular city. The first condition refers to a structural arrangement whereas the latter two, while having some structural elements, are primarily value-based. In order to avoid a lengthy summary of previous chapters, the present discussion briefly revisits some of the conditions in place before the storm in

order to illustrate the link between the values and structures mentioned above and to provide a context for the beginning of the movement.

Before this assessment occurs, some consideration should be given to Fine's (1997) observation that "the choices of which social conditions to include, and how to define them, is itself a matter of construction" (301). The information and classifications presented within each of the determinants can be fairly fluid; there may be overlap between categories and each of the conditions discussed is shaped by the interests of the particular research as well as the particular researcher. For instance, if the value-oriented movement in this case were to involve suspicions of structural racism with regard to the Hurricane Katrina response, the conditions included may revolve around any number of events. They may emphasize the local artists who have expressed this sentiment in their music, or the 2004 FEMA simulation which demonstrated that the levees would have great difficulty surviving a Category 3 Hurricane (Brinkley 2006: 18). Further they may refer to the events surrounding the 1927 Great Mississippi flood, where "civic leaders...detonated thirty tons of dynamite on the Caernarvon Levee, just fifteen miles downriver from the French Quarter, breaching the levee in poor black neighborhoods, in the interest of protecting the rest of the city"(Ibid 8). However, because the precipitating event emphasized here relates to celebrity, the emphasis centres on the set of values and conditions which imbue celebrity involvement in the Katrina narrative with a level of meaning.

### **MEDIA AS "MORAL GATEKEEPERS"**

Turning to the role of media, various social and communications theorists have suggested that they function as the structure through which value-oriented information is



disseminated to a broad audience. Fine (1997) outlines this perspective in his assessment of the Fatty Arbuckle case; illustrating the manner in which by 1920 media had become a vehicle for presenting information to a broad audience (as opposed to an exclusive audience of elites), and speaking to the role of media as the “moral gatekeepers”(301-302). This perspective is also supported by the discourse presented in Chapter Three. For example, Best’s (1995) notion of primary and secondary claims-making stipulates that in order for a social problem to be successfully constructed, there must be moral entrepreneurs to advance the claim, as well as interests to transmit the claim to a broad audience - a task in which media sources are overwhelmingly involved. Further examples include, the concept of the “agenda setting function” of the news which encourages the audience to fixate on particular social problems (McCombs and Shaw 1972); Ogle et al.’s (2003) argument that all media information may be conceived of as rhetoric because it presents particular interests and values; and the growing literature on disaster news which suggests that news sources classify an event as a disaster by using a set of rhetorical devices to define them as such (Ibid, Stallings 1995). Applying these arguments to the “before” phases of the celebrity Katrina event invites two observations: the first is that media, as a structural arrangement are overwhelmingly involved in framing as well as transmitting information to the public, and the second is that media structures were firmly in place, such that they had established narratives from which to discuss Katrina, before the storm occurred.

### **LINKING STRUCTURE WITH CELEBRITY**

Having considered the structural aspects informing this section, it is useful to link structure with value in order to demonstrate the context from which the celebrity Katrina

event emerged as a value-oriented movement. Much of the theory presented in Chapter Two emphasized the cultural relevance of celebrities, and the manner in which broad audiences remain fixated on the concept of fame as well as celebrity. Celebrity theorists posit a number of explanations as to the pervasiveness of celebrity across a number of arrangements; including the highly melodramatic narratives they tend to perform both on and off the screen (Gabler 1998, Klapp 62); the manner in which advancements in media technologies have given audiences access to intimate and frequent details about celebrated individuals (Schickel 1985); and the acceleration of entertainment as a broad social value in which celebrities are the sort of spokespeople (Gabler 1998). While the explanations are varied, the consensus among these theorists is that celebrity is socially valued and has a role in a variety of social arrangements. Since media sources play a role in constructing celebrity as a pervasive social value, the two conditions often function together, and this arrangement or partnership is conducive to a value-oriented movement.

### **THE VALUE OF NEW ORLEANS**

Stemming from the theory on celebrity as a broad cultural value is the notion that geographic landmarks may also be celebritized. Theory on the celebration of a place emphasizes the symbolic value attributed to a monument or city (Foote 2003). This theory, combined with the lore attributed to the city of New Orleans before the event occurred, suggests that the city itself held a particular moral dimension. In the days before the Hurricane, news reports constructed the city according to its celebrated elements, reinforcing the symbolic value of the city by emphasizing the romance of jazz music, Creole food, and Mardi Gras (Fry 2003;2006). With these two values in place, and strongly linked to the structure which is largely in charge of constructing and

disseminating moral messages, the potential for a celebrity Katrina event was firmly entrenched.

### **STRUCTURAL STRAIN**

With regard to strain, Smelser (1962) finds that “inadequacy of knowledge or techniques to grapple with new situations sets the stage for value-oriented movements” (338). He suggests that conflict among “components of action” (47) is a key source of strain, but emphasizes that sources of strain are varied and many types can “find their way into the same general movement” just as “the same strains may result in different movements” (344). Fine (1997) contributes more subjective understandings of strain into his model, arguing that: “ultimately strain is experienced by the individual, situated within a community of meaning (Smelser 1962: 51). Significant strains are widely recognized, particularly where interpretive entrepreneurs (such as the media or the clergy) have legitimate roles” (302). Fine emphasizes the importance of situating strain in a context, and linking it to generalized belief as well as collective action (Ibid). Here, consideration will be given to both Smelser and Fine’s models in order to decipher the manner in which interpretive packages, in this case media, construct or present a structural conflict. More specifically, this section argues that within the Katrina media narrative the central source of strain was the lack of consensus among claims-makers, and that this dissensus allowed celebrities to insert themselves into the narrative in forceful ways. Accordingly, the following discussion uses Best’s typology of social problems construction to compare the events surrounding 9/11 to those surrounding Katrina; not as events which are intrinsically or objectively similar, but as two 21<sup>st</sup> century American

media crisis events which are attributed to the same sort of non-conventional news reporting. These events were also frequently linked together in both political and media discourse, meaning that when politicians or journalists spoke about one event they often tended to reference the other.

## **SOCIAL PROBLEMS CONSTRUCTION**

In *Random Violence: How We Talk About New Crimes and New Victims* Best (1999) suggests that the function of news reports in social problems construction is to “describe the nature of the problem, explain its causes, and interpret its meaning” (38). He expands on these criteria, suggesting that news makers often use typifying examples in order to describe the problem; that is they identify a particular troublesome incident and generalize it to an understanding of the scope and severity of the problem. Having achieved some definition of the problem through a set of melodramatic labels and exaggerated tales, news makers commission experts to present authoritative discourse on the subject; this serves to problematize it further. Finally, an “interpretive package” or frame is imposed to add a moral dimension to the problem. News makers often achieve this by situating the problem within other troublesome narratives, such as drugs, sex or violence (37-45).

Best argues that successful claims-making requires news makers to define the problem and situate it in a moral universe. Further, he draws on the work of Stallings (1990) to emphasize the importance of developing the problem within a simple or straightforward narrative using a single “interpretive scheme.” Stallings suggests that even “opposing accounts will likely contain monocausal rather than multivariate explanations...because they suit the needs of contributors to media discourse (90).” He

specifies that “focusing on a single cause concentrates responsibility, thus simplifying the process of disownership (Ibid).” While Best and Stallings suggest that multiple causes or interpretive schemes result in short term success for a social problem, this research argues that much as random violence “challenges our most basic assumptions about social order (Best 22)” the ambiguities and dissensus surrounding definitions of Katrina confused a broad audience of people searching for answers, and threatened certain generalized beliefs about American leadership. These beliefs will be further expanded in the following section; however this point warrants mention here as it will be used to identify the unique way in which celebrities had access to the Katrina narrative, and were able to advance a varied set of claims to interpret the event.

### **BUILDING CONSENSUS AROUND TERRORISM**

In order to demonstrate the effects of dissensus or ambiguity as a structural strain, it is useful to examine the relative consensus which emerged from the 9/11 media narrative. In *War of Words* Silberstein (2002) explores the media and political rhetoric which emerged after two jets flew into The World Trade Centre and another flew into the Pentagon. Silberstein emphasizes how quickly claims-makers advanced a definition of the situation, expressing that the very day of the incident “CNN announced the ‘Attack on America.’ But the ‘attack’ quickly became an act of war, this generation's ‘Pearl Harbor’” (1). In response to this “act of war”, America declared a “war on terrorism.” It is perhaps worth noting that the Hollywood feature film Pearl Harbour had been released a few months before the attack, providing a well-suited melodramatic typification which may have fostered definitions of 9/11 as a terrorist attack.

Best (1999) speaks to the advantages of “declaring war on social problems” explaining that the “metaphor defines the social problem...as an enemy to be fought” (145). Further, since “fighting the enemy is a common cause of the entire society” there is a notion that “individuals should set aside their doubts and reservations and join in the larger struggle” (147). Here, the immediate and strong definition of the event offered by various media sources and politicians, and derived from the metanarratives of melodrama created consensus with regard to 9/11. The collective understanding of the event as a terrorist attack was accompanied by melodramatic classifications: “good” versus “evil” and “us” versus “them.” The definition of the event did meet with some resistance from those who interpreted the event as retaliatory, but overwhelmingly the fear evoked from the seemingly random attack allowed this definition to prevail. As a result of this relatively strong consensus around the straightforward narrative, celebrities seemed to take on a more passive or nominal role in the 9/11 media event; “[stitching] together concerts and other events to raise money but more to provide an outlet for grief and condolence” (Zelizer and Allan 2003). Aside from a few isolated exceptions, celebrities fulfilled a softer role, they did not ask tough questions or challenge the government; instead they provided symbolic efforts towards the emotional healing of the country.

### **STRUGGLING TO DEFINE THE KATRINA EVENT**

In contrast, the Katrina media event did not garner such consensus; no individual or group claimed immediate ownership of its construction as anything other than a natural disaster, there were no movies or American instances which could serve as a typifying example, and no clearly defined social problem to declare war against. Instead, days passed and people remained stranded on the roofs of their houses or at the convention

centre without the aid they needed, causing the collective audience to begin questioning whether this was indeed a natural disaster, and also whether the delay in response, occurring in a country as wealthy as America, could be attributed to structural racism (Fleetwood 2006). This sentiment was reflected in scholarly literature. Marable (April 2006) addresses what he argues is the systemic racism underlining the Katrina crisis: “what made the New Orleans tragedy an “unnatural disaster” was the Federal government’s gross incompetence and indifference in preparing the necessary measures to preserve the lives and property of hundreds of thousands of its citizens” (2). Marable first critiques FEMA, offering a list of the organization’s responses to the Hurricane in order to provide evidence of this incompetence. He juxtaposes statements released by FEMA which suggested that members of this agency were unable to reach victims with supplies and lacked access to emergency vehicles, with instances of reporters and “entertainers” reaching victims, as well as offers from the Florida government and surrounding fire departments to send emergency vehicles. Marable then advances a second argument in which he suggests that “the terrible destruction of thousands of homes and businesses, and relocation of over one million New Orleans and Gulf area residents, was perceived as a golden opportunity by corporate and conservative political elites who had long desired to “remake” the historic city”(3). He mentions President Bush’s involvement in this task, describing that he contracted large corporations, as opposed to local companies, to rebuild the city. Marable uses the Katrina event in order to ask a broader social question about the “public spectacle of Black suffering and anguish” and whether it has “evolved into what might be defined as a ‘civic ritual,’ reconfirming the racial hierarchy with blackness permanently relegated to a subordinate

status” (5). Marable’s research seeks to uncover something tangible about race relations in order to offer an explanation of the Katrina event.

The strain between the claims-makers (the media, the politicians) and the collective audience created large discrepancies in the Katrina narrative, which seem to have created a space for celebrity claims-making to occur at a level which had not been possible in other media crises such as 9/11. In subsequent sections, this discussion seeks to demonstrate that this strain can be meaningfully linked to the precipitating event as well as the collective action.

### **GENERALIZED BELIEF**

Value oriented beliefs begin to “crystallize” “under the conditions” outlined in the previous sections (Smelser 1962: 348). Fine (1997: 305) contends that “a generalized belief identifies the source and characteristics of the strain.” Because a great deal of consideration has been given to strain, as well as the generalized beliefs which motivate this value-oriented movement, this section seeks to conduct a summary of these beliefs alongside a theoretical explanation of how they impact the movement. To this end, the two generalized beliefs to be discussed are: (1) The belief that members of State agencies should initiate action in response to a local disaster; or engage in the rhetoric of problem ownership in order to maintain a sense of social order; (2) the belief that celebrities are desirable authorities in news media events because they tend to be involved in social causes and because they have media presence. Fine (1997) suggests that “beliefs...are inevitably grounded on values, norms, and emotions: in short what people believe should be happening” (305). Since the scope of this research has not extended to an objective



assessment of audience perspectives, this section follows other research on the subject in presenting a speculative account of audience expectations.

## **THE USES OF GOVERNMENTAL RHETORIC**

The belief that State agencies should mobilize resources to protect American citizens likely stems from a variety of sources, ideologies and narratives. Silberstein (2002) demonstrates the process by which governments make powerful claims about unity and collective identity in order to imbue the audience with a sense of protection and calm. The expectation of leadership which was, as Silberstein suggests, fulfilled (even if only symbolically) during 9/11 did not quite resonate in the same manner throughout the Katrina narrative. Within the scope of this research, it is difficult to speak to whether audiences actually expected money and resources to be sent to Katrina victims. The arguments presented on strain however suggest that collective audiences expected State agencies to create a sense of security by offering strong definitions of the event and answers or solutions to support those definitions. If Katrina had been easily framed by claims-makers and communicated to the audience through typifying examples and straightforward narratives, members of State agencies might have simply reified those definitions. The absence of a definition likely encouraged audiences to expect strong leadership capable of restoring a sense of social order.

Revisiting Best's (1999) assertion that if violence is random then "all individuals run equal risks of victimization" (8) it is useful to question whether the events surrounding Katrina, which became increasingly severe, were collectively conceived of as random; in which case collective audiences may have developed fear of their own victimization. Perhaps the belief that America had the resources and the willingness to

protect Americans was challenged when the government did not seemingly make any assertive attempts to do so. As a result, perhaps the phase directly after the Hurricane hit, in which members of State agencies attempted to assign responsibility to external forces rather than providing definitions and solutions, collapsed expectations that a strong governmental rhetoric would restore a sense of social order.

### **CELEBRITY LEADERSHIP**

In contrast, Smelser (1962) offers a rather functionalist explanation. He suggests that in addition to the belief that the social order is being threatened “a positive set of values is put forth. A new social order is envisioned; institutional chaos will give way to harmony and stability; the evil will be eradicated, and human happiness will result” (348). While Smelser’s portrayal is slightly melodramatic, his suggestion that positive forces can overtake the sense of social upheaval has relevance in terms of this discussion. Having already outlined the structural conditions which situate celebrities as claims-makers, this section speculates whether celebrities compensated for the compromised role of the government. In consideration of the theory which suggests celebrities are conceived of as “intimately” tied to the social and even personal interests of audience members (Schickel 1985), alongside the tendency of celebrities to involve themselves in a number of different social venues which often have little to do with their public personas, it would seem as though the belief that celebrities can be suitable authorities may have allowed them to claim ownership of the Katrina narrative in a way which State agencies could not. This belief and the manner in which it manifested itself will be further explored in subsequent paragraphs.

## **PRECIPITATING FACTORS**

Smelser (1962) describes a precipitating factor as “an event that creates, sharpens, or exaggerates a condition of strain or conduciveness. It provides adherents of a belief with more evidence of the workings of evil forces, or greater promise of success” (352). A precipitating event provides a tangible manifestation of a generalized belief, which forges the value movement ahead in a more extreme or spirited manner. Smelser offers political failure and economic deprivation as examples of such factors. Following Smelser’s definition, Fine (1997) argues that “for public attention to emerge, a major event, e.g., a scandal, is necessary to focus debate” (307). With regard to his case study he claims that “generalized beliefs have effects, but it was the arrest and trial of Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle that galvanized public attention” (Ibid). Here, the occurrence of a controversial and media worthy event sharpened public sentiments about the moral laxity of Arbuckle in particular and Hollywood in general.

## **HURRICANE KANYE**

Considering the celebrity Katrina event, the key precipitating factor can be generally conceptualized as the immediate involvement of a number of celebrities in the Katrina media narrative; however, as the findings suggest, this involvement was limited at first to the standard charitable response expected of celebrities during a crisis. For the purposes of this analysis then, the “scandal” which served to “galvanize public attention” and “crystallize general belief” is identified as the Kanye West speech in which he proclaimed “George Bush doesn’t care about black people.” Kanye’s speech represented a shift in the celebrity Katrina event; his hostile and controversial questioning of the

government characterized a number of subsequent celebrity interactions with the Katrina narrative. Kanye's speech emphasized the belief in celebrity as a central claims-maker or authority, as he provided the audience with a rigid definition of the situation which was consistent with the increasing anxiety surrounding questions about who was to blame for the catastrophe. From his remarks a number of celebrities began to advance stronger claims or incorporate their own narratives in a more forceful manner. Further, media sources concentrated stories on celebrity perspectives, creating an opening in the Katrina narrative for a celebrity event.

### **MOBILIZATION FOR ACTION**

After a precipitating event has taken place the success of a value-added movement depends on its ability to mobilize some portion of the population. Attempts at mobilization often employ a set of rhetorical devices to garner the support of a particular group. Smelser (1962) identifies particular determinants for mobilization, explaining that at the beginning or informal stage of the movement strong and charismatic leadership is required to help a group envision a new social order (355). Eventually, the successful movement "inherits an organizational structure;" (356) various tactics are put into place through a process of trial and error, and practices, procedures and roles are formalized (355-361). Fine (1997) examines how public discourse surrounding the Arbuckle case was structured, and identifies four distinct audiences mobilized through media tactics (309). Having identified the rhetorical devices and media conventions used to frame the celebrity Katrina event, this discussion attempts to draw further observations with regard to which groups were mobilized and which tactics were employed. To this end,

consideration will be given to Best's (1995) distinction between primary and secondary claims-making in terms of celebrity claims and media tactics.

With regard to the role of media in claims-making activity, the findings presented in the previous chapter suggest that media engaged in both primary and secondary claims-making. That is, in certain occasions it appeared as though media sources were acting as the primary moral entrepreneurs, advancing claims about the celebrity Katrina event either directly, through editorial style news reporting or using a set of rhetorical devices. In other cases, media sources appeared to be acting as secondary claims-makers, advancing celebrity claims about Hurricane Katrina, and often packaging them in a rhetoric which supported these claims. In both cases, media played a central role in constructing and disseminating the set of meanings attached to the celebrity Katrina event.

### **THE STARS OF THE LIFE MOVIE**

With regard to mobilization then, the relationship between media and celebrity was mutually reinforcing; media narratives included and to some extent relied upon celebrity claims in order to create what Gabler (1998) refers to as the "life movie" (7). In the "life movie," celebrities are the "lifies," the "point of identification" which keeps audiences members "engrossed in the show" (Ibid). Here, celebrities were mobilized to incorporate the very melodramatic narratives they represent in their "work" to the narrative of this disaster news event. In this sense celebrities may be seen as what Best (1999) terms "cultural resources." Best likens cultural resources to idioms, motifs or frames but generally suggests that they are "existing...ideas and images" (86) used to "endow claims with significance" (87, Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993: 35-6). The narratives

occupying most celebrities involve the “deep mythic themes or broad cultural perspectives” (Ibid, Hilgartner and Bosk 1988: 71) which are characteristic of cultural resources. Thus, incorporating celebrity narratives into a disaster media event serves to familiarize the story by situating it in a melodramatic context. As explored in the findings, celebrities are in a sense typecast with narratives; for instance Oprah incorporated her on-television narrative as the philanthropic and sympathetic character into the Katrina event just as Sean Penn’s actions in rescuing people in a motor boat were consistent with his narrative as the heroic and spontaneous movie star. These narratives are instrumental in the meaning-making, as well as the news-making process and can be used to understand the advantage of mobilizing celebrities to engage with the Katrina event.

## **HURRICANE POLITICS**

Similarly, celebrity involvement in the Katrina narrative mobilized news sources, by creating a discourse about political shortcomings. The findings suggest that, as a result of the spirited accusations made by celebrities such as Kanye West, news personalities began to engage in equally spirited debates about politics. Discussions about celebrities making outrageous claims, passing blame, and seemingly avoiding politics to advance their own image as philanthropists opened up a dialogue for those news makers who rely on such stories to fulfill audience interest. As media personalities from the politically conservative camps prepared to debate those from more liberal positions, various celebrities identified their political paradigm and fuelled the interest of news makers to keep doing the same. Political debates and personalities were a firmly established dimension of the news before Katrina; however the number of celebrities who

politicized the event offered news makers celebrated spokespeople to add to their spectacle in new ways; often providing news makers with certain “authorities” to be able to advance political claims safely and convincingly.

### **SOCIAL CONTROL**

In the final phase of the value-oriented movement various circumstances converge which allow the movement to depart from the controversial, hostile or spirited manner in which it has proceeded. Rudwick and Meier (1972) characterize this phase, stating that it “provides for ‘ruling out uninstitutionalized expression of hostility . . .[and] direct challenges to legitimacy,’ on the one hand, and for ‘opening channels for peaceful agitation for normative change’ and ‘attempting to reduce the sources of strain’ on the other”(81). Fine (1997) emphasizes the manner in which Hollywood institutions distanced themselves from Arbuckle in order to disseminate claims that the structure as a whole supported “moral laxity.” With regard to the celebrity Katrina event, mechanisms of social control were largely employed by the authors of the outburst. While the government engaged in various tactics to calm hostile criticism, it was overwhelmingly the actions of the celebrities and news makers which restored a sense of social order to a collective audience. As suggested by the findings, this was achieved in part by the shift in general demeanor, style of reporting, and tone towards the government presented by news makers. As important as it was to question the legitimacy of the government when the audience felt as though their generalized beliefs were compromised and a threat to social order had taken place, it was equally important to restore routine news narratives before audiences lost interest in the story. By restoring a more civic style of reporting, and making amends with fellow claims-makers, the audience did not have to question the

legitimacy of news makers, who, had they continued to question the government in an emotional and hostile manner, may have been seen as an equal threat to social order.

### **INSTITUTIONALIZING CELEBRITY PHILANTHROPY**

Celebrities also contributed to this phase by reemphasizing their role as philanthropists rather than activists. This was largely achieved through the institutionalization of charitable efforts. Celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and Ellen DeGeneres imposed an organizational structure on their efforts, identifying the particular needs of the place and people they choose to address, giving their project a name, and setting goals. The institutionalization of this celebrity work shifts the emphasis away from the Katrina celebrity narrative as one which was highly controversial and critical to one which was more neutral and desirable. Further, because news stories continued to emphasize these forms of celebrity work, and likely had a role in fostering their organizational structure, the definition of the celebrity Katrina event moved away from stories about challenges between claims-makers. It is likely that both celebrities and news makers began to engage in these control mechanisms shortly after the residents had been evacuated. The central strain, which had involved dissensus over a definition of the event, seemed to be of primary importance in the midst of severe and urgent conditions. After the evacuation occurred, a great deal of strain was relieved and it was in the interest of celebrity and news maker alike to begin restoring a collective sense of social order.

### **CONCLUSION**

The discussion conducted throughout this chapter has attempted to examine the manner in which structure shapes the interaction between celebrity and media. A set of



observations have been made here with the aim of supporting the notion that Katrina offered media a new context to continue their strange but mutually reinforcing relationship with celebrity; relying on them for purposes of distraction, melodrama, and claims-making.

Within the Katrina context celebrities were able to merge into the narrative, instigating discourse and advancing claims in a manner which is not typical in disaster news stories. Reintroducing structure into a discussion of celebrity and media claims-making reveals interesting dynamics with regard to collective expectations of authorities and the functions of dissensus among claims-makers. With regard to Katrina the inclusion of structural arrangements in the analysis allowed for an increased understanding of the celebrity Katrina event, leading to the observation that it was not only celebrity pervasiveness, but dissensus within the Katrina event which allowed celebrities to enter the Katrina narrative in such a forceful manner. Merging Fine's adaptation of Smelser's value-added model with theory about celebrity has unraveled new dimensions in terms of the celebrity Katrina event, and may be an effective framework for further discussions about the role of celebrity in disaster media events.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

### INTRODUCTION

The aim throughout this thesis has been to explore the interaction between celebrity and media constructions of Hurricane Katrina. Scholarly literature on these subjects informed this assessment on the manner in which diverse social categories command distinct interpretative packages just as claims-makers attach unique meanings to various events. Media discourse provided the textual and visual data informing the findings. Throughout this qualitative examination of media, celebrity, and disaster, three observations or arguments emerged.

The first observation, proposed toward the end of Chapter Two, suggested that Gabler's (1998) celebrity theory offers the most appropriate tool with which to assess the intersection between celebrity and Hurricane Katrina. This argument was derived in part because of the broad applicability of Gabler's theory to the themes discussed in celebrity literature. More particularly, the applicability of Gabler's argument to this discussion became apparent as links between his explanations and those used to understand disaster coverage were noted. For instance, Gabler's emphasis on entertainment as a broad social value parallels arguments that highlight the uses of media-defined disasters in building a highly entertaining news story (Fleetwood 2006, Kellner 2007, Finnegan 2006, Senvold 2005). Further, his arguments with regard to celebrity narratives - in terms of the manner in which they develop and maintain entertaining narratives which they uphold outside of their work, has meaningful links to media theories which emphasize the importance of narrativity in any news story (Dobkin 1992, Jacobs 1996, Zelizer 1993). Finally his

notion of “celebrity residue” has interesting implications with regard to celebrity involvement or the uses of celebrity within the Katrina context. Gabler’s theory bridges the concept of celebrity as “self contained entertainment” (1998: 146) with the entertaining aspects of disaster stories and provides a useful framework for examining the intersection between the two.

A second observation, which emerged in consideration of Best’s (2003) arguments supporting a weak reading of social problems, is that Fine’s (1997) adaptation of Smelser’s (1962) value-added model offers an appropriate framework from which to examine the structural character of claims-making. Contextual constructionism is favoured for this assessment because it allows for the inclusion of various “objective” referents to support or refute the validity of claims. In the absence of a particular framework from which to consider context, this analysis borrowed from collective behaviour literature in order to examine how structural arrangements affected the media construction of the celebrity Katrina event. The aim throughout this assessment has been to examine the claims made about celebrity within the context of Hurricane Katrina; this required a framework which would allow for a discussion of this context and the manner in which its relation to other structures affected the way in which it was interpreted. Incorporating Fine’s adaptation of Smelser’s model allowed this research to develop a distinct manner of understanding celebrity involvement within the Katrina narrative, which led this assessment to a third and final argument.

The third observation is that the pervasiveness of celebrity in a contemporary context (which is derived from the theory) alongside the dissensus regarding a definition of the Katrina event (which is derived from the structural considerations explored in

Chapter Five) allowed celebrities to adopt unique roles within the Katrina narrative. Although this research does not conduct the formal cross comparison required to assess whether celebrity infiltrated the Hurricane Katrina news narrative more aggressively than other disaster stories, the availability of news stories on the subject allows for some speculation on this point. Further, what can be understood from the findings is that the uniqueness of the celebrity role within the Katrina narrative is due to the extent in which they adopted roles as claims-makers. Within this role, celebrities fulfilled a number of purposes, advancing claims which provided audiences with a definition of the event, making fairly controversial statements which criticized the Bush administration, and lending their own entertaining and familiar narratives to an extreme and unfamiliar event. Having reviewed the central arguments presented throughout this research it follows to discuss some of the limitations of the research, as well as some suggestions for future research.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

The limitations of this research relate partly to the breadth of the topic, and partly to a lack of available information. For the purposes of this discussion, three limitations have been identified. The first limitation relates to the distinct character of the Katrina event. Due to the unique set of circumstances which arose from Hurricane Katrina, and allowed celebrities to be involved in the manner that they were, there was limited previous literature available to inform this assessment. Further, no known research addressed the interaction between celebrity and disaster directly. The literature used to

gain an understanding of this interaction was gathered from separate fields and the process of integrating it resulted in fairly broad understandings of the topic.

Related to this, a second limitation pertains to the use of celebrity theories which have not been operationalized. The range of celebrity theory is relatively limited, which placed some constraints on this research. The process of selecting the most appropriate celebrity theory from which to conduct this assessment was informal, and in the absence of empirical research on the subject it is difficult to know whether any of the celebrity theories presented can be used to accurately describe the interactions between celebrity and other aspects of social life. It may have been beneficial to direct some of the empirical focus in this research toward understanding which theories have stronger merits with regard to this discussion. This might have been accomplished by including a quantitative content analysis with search terms related to the uses of celebrity as commodities, or entertainers. It may further have been accomplished by conducting a survey pertaining to audience impressions of celebrity, and the extent to which they intimately identify with them.

A third limitation is that many aspects raised within celebrity theory remained unelaborated. Theories on celebrity present a number of different ways of approaching the subject and a number of ways in which celebrity as a concept manifests itself. Based on this, many subjects may have been the sole focus of this project. For instance, there was some extent to which the entertainment derived from the storm itself transferred onto the victims of the storm, making them the stars of the Katrina movie. Conducting a study which examined the celebritization of victims may have provided more specific results. This might have been accomplished by engaging in a more extensive qualitative content

analysis, perhaps using a sample of articles related more generally to Hurricane coverage rather than to celebrity-hurricane coverage. These results may have also helped to empirically address the theories which claim that celebrity, as a concept has infiltrated various types of events and stories. Stories about victims being celebritized were fairly rare in the sample, perhaps because the search term “celebrity” is generally used in news stories to classify people who have derived fame through more conventional venues.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The limitations of this research suggest that there are various aspects of the intersection between celebrity and disaster to be explored. The findings also support this notion as they portray the uniqueness of the Katrina event, in terms of the celebrity involvement within it. Literature which addresses the role of celebrity has produced a great deal of theory which could be meaningfully, if cautiously, applied to a number of extreme events. As described in the literature, extreme events are accompanied by allowances which are not typical in everyday reporting (Klinenberg 2003, Ogle et al. 2003, Molotch and Lester 1974, Garner and Huff 1997, Koch 1990). These events produce more controversial or dramatic claims-making styles, and often involve different claims-makers. Based on this, a few suggestions for future research will be discussed.

The first suggestion is that celebrity involvement be examined across a range of disasters. Literature on the social construction of disaster frequently examines news makers or journalists, but rarely emphasizes the role of celebrity (Best 1995, Ogle et al. 2003, Stallings 1995, Bolin and Stanford 1998, Garner and Huff 1997). This may be due to a perceived lack of celebrity involvement in other disasters, or it may be due to the

limited application of celebrity theory in empirical studies. The implications of celebrity involvement within Hurricane Katrina could be more thoroughly assessed through a comparison to other disasters or extreme events.

A further suggestion entails elaborating those celebrity theories which emphasize commodification, rather than entertainment, as the force driving celebrity involvement (Marshall 1997, Newbury 2000, Gamson 1994, Andrews and Jackson 2001, Halpbern 2007). These theories have interesting implications with regard to Katrina and may showcase a different dimension of celebrity involvement. Research using these theories may seek to gather information regarding whether publicists encourage celebrities to be involved in events such as Katrina, or whether the entertainment value of celebrity might be used to distract audiences during a media crisis event.

A final suggestion relates to Fine's (1997) adaptation of Smelser's (1962) value-added model. As discussed in Chapter Five, Fine's adaptation offers an apt framework from which to examine the social construction of disaster, moral panic or scandal. This model allows for a typology from which to engage in a contextual constructionist analysis. Considering context in this research led to a unique understanding of the interaction between celebrity and Hurricane Katrina in terms of the manner in which claims were anchored in larger structural arrangements. Further research which applies Fine's adaptation, particularly when considering the claims which arise from events, would likely enrich contextual constructionist understandings of social problems.

This research has attempted to examine the intersection between celebrity and the social construction of Hurricane Katrina. Consideration for diverse discourses as well as an integration of media, disaster and celebrity theory was involved. While various

questions and observations arose from this assessment, the central conclusion was that Hurricane Katrina produced unique roles for celebrity; in part because of the social prevalence of celebrity, and in part because of a dissensus among other claims-makers with regard to a definition of the Katrina event. Further research on this intersection, using different events, or favouring different aspects of celebrity theory may add a more thorough understanding of the topics explored within this project.



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