Constructing Catastrophe: Public Rhetoric in Response to the Katrina Disaster via Letters to the Editor Published in New Orleans Local Newspaper, The Times-Picayune

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This thesis titled

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by

HOLLY J. WILSON

has been approved for

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and the Scripps College of Communication by

________________________________________

Bill Reader

Associate Professor of Journalism

________________________________________

Scott Titsworth

Interim Dean, Scripps College of Communication
ABSTRACT

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Constructing Catastrophe: Public Rhetoric in Response to the Katrina Disaster via Letters to the Editor Published in New Orleans Local Newspaper, The Times-Picayune

Director of Thesis: Bill Reader

Hurricane Katrina was deemed to be one of the worst disasters in American history. The purpose of this study was to analyze the cathartic role of letters to the editor (hereafter, “LTEs”) in local newspapers, specifically in a community directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina and the levee failures. Letters were selected from New Orleans’ major daily newspaper, The Times-Picayune. Textual analysis was used to analyze 198 LTEs published from Sept. 21, 2005, through Oct. 31, 2005.

Previous LTE research about catharsis and writing was used to guide the theoretical framework of this study. Emotion-fueled LTEs in this case study provided evidence of catharsis. LTEs packed with rich content, highlighting diverse topics, concerns and issues, were considered as evidence of more than mere venting. The study suggests that taking into account catharsis and writing in terms of psychological research, and clearly understanding the limitations that emerge from gate-keeping functions and editorial tactics, may help future researchers better understand how public forums can facilitate catharsis for individuals and communities after catastrophe.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Bill Reader

Associate Professor of Journalism

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Unforeseen natural and man-made catastrophes are inevitable. Hurricanes, flooding, tornadoes, earthquakes, wild fires, bridge collapses, and similar disasters can add to everyday struggles for individuals and communities. When a community experiences an unexpected event, and when lives are turned upside down and stability is lost, people need a place to convene and communicate during that time of distress.

Public forums, such as letters to the editor (hereafter, “LTE”) sections in local newspapers, are important because they can provide a platform where individuals can connect (Hynds, 1991) and reconnect with others. Such forums can also provide a place to facilitate community recovery efforts and afford users with a much-needed cathartic outlet when dealing with the aftermath of a disaster. Pennebaker and Harber (1993) wrote:

(W)hen individuals face an emotional upheaval, they naturally talk and think about it. If they are unable to talk with others but continue to think about the event, they are at greater risk for a variety of psychological and health problems. (p. 125)

Killing more than 1,300 people and displacing hundreds of others, Hurricane Katrina and the related flooding has been deemed the worst natural disaster in the history of America (United States, 2006). The perceived lack of government response on all levels -- for instance, government failure to maintain the levee system, to coordinate evacuation, to sustain order, and to care for refugees -- further contributed to a need for catharsis in communities in and surrounding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. This thesis analyzed LTE sections in a community directly affected by levy failures after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The literature suggests that using a culturally grounded, cultural-studies approach to analyzing and interpreting LTEs in local newspapers is an
appropriate method for researching the cultural roles of such public forums. This study operated under the theoretical framework that LTE forums can provide an essential cathartic role for individuals, as they deal with the aftermath of a community catastrophe.

Background

This case study focuses on the role of an LTE forum published in one printed newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*, after a high-profile local catastrophe, the levee breeches in New Orleans, Louisiana, after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. Hurricane Katrina and related flooding impacted New Orleans and surrounding areas. The Lower Ninth Ward was presumed to be one of the areas hardest hit by the storm, affecting a segment of the population which was primarily African American. According to Landphair (2007), “By 2000, approximately 90 percent of the Lower Ninth Ward was African American, and 33 percent lived in poverty” (p. 842). Following the event, 80 percent of New Orleans was inundated; some areas 15-20 feet under water (United States, 2005, p. 10). More than 700,000 people were displaced (p. 8). More than four months after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf region, “85 percent of public schools in Orleans parish had still not reopened” (p. 17).

Textual analysis of LTEs can contribute to previous LTE research that has explored how letter columns serve the public (Vacin, 1965; Lander, 1972; Hynds, 1991; Hynds, 1994; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001), in what ways letter writers contribute to the ideal of the "public sphere" (Habermas, 1991, p. 2), and people’s motivations to write and submit letters to the editor (Forsythe, 1950; Davis & Rarick, 1964; Lander, 1972; Reader, Stempel & Daniel, 2004; Tarrant, 1957; Vacin, 1965). The underlying objective of this
study builds in particular upon previous LTE research that has suggested that letter forums can have a cathartic value by affording the public an opportunity to publicly “vent” or “blow off steam” (Tarrant, 1957, p. 502; Lander, 1972, p. 142).

Rationale

The idea that LTE forums can have cathartic value for users also could be extended to online discussion forums, the common features news media provide below articles published on websites. However, those online forums are generally unfocused and unregulated, as opposed to LTE forums which involve editor selection of submissions to publish. Selected submissions are then edited for length, style, and other attributes. The analysis of printed LTEs remains important because “newspapers have historically served as the main, perhaps the only, broadly democratic and broadly representative source of information in our democratic society” (Cranberg, Bezanson, & Soloski, 2001, p. 141). Recognizing the importance of LTE sections in print, Wahl-Jorgensen (2001) wrote:

(T)he letters to the editor section of the newspapers is one of a few such sites to have survived throughout a large period of the history of American mainstream mass media. The section has historically been seen as ‘among the few outlets available to the public for voicing opinion,’ ‘a debating society that never adjourns’ ... and public forum ‘essential to the effective operation of the democratic system’. .... (p. 303)

The focus only on printed letters is required for this case study because in 2005, when Hurricane Katrina struck the coastal regions of Louisiana and Mississippi, The Times-Picayune's website did not publish LTEs online and thus did not have online comment features for those forums. It is the goal of this study to enhance understanding about the
role of LTEs when the printed page served as the established, broad public forum available to New Orleans at that time.

Significance

Supposed failures of the government in the Katrina situation may have increased challenges and stress for individuals coping with the event; that in turn, further ignited a need for catharsis after Katrina and related flooding. Although catharsis has been discussed in previous LTE research (Davis & Rarick, 1964; Forsythe, 1950; Hynds; 1994; Lander, 1972; Pasternack, 1979; Tarrant, 1957), there appears to be no LTE research that fully explicates the concept or makes it the focus of the research. The study of catharsis is more prevalent in psychology and clinical research than in the journalism and mass communication disciplines. Understanding catharsis in broader terms may help us recognize how its function can relate to LTEs and other mass-media opinion forums, specifically when communities cope with catastrophe.

Pennebaker and Harber examined community coping in a study on the Loma Prieta Earthquake — a devastating earthquake that struck the San Francisco Bay area in 1989 — and the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991 (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993). The researchers found that directly after an “emotional upheaval,” there is a two-week period when individuals “openly” discuss and contemplate the event (p.125). From there, individuals move into an inhibition stage during which the event is thought about for six weeks, but no longer talked about. The researchers discovered that “certain indicators of distress, such as hostility and dreaming, peak during the inhibition phase” (p. 125). Following the inhibition phase is an adaptation phase, in which individuals no longer talk
or think about the event. This case study suggests that writing an LTE can afford writers a cathartic release during the emergency stage and the inhibition stage of coping, when individuals supposedly think about an emotional upheaval, but no longer talk about it.

In *The Social Dynamic of a Cultural Upheaval: Social Interactions Surrounding September 11, 2001*, Pennebaker and Mehl (2003) acknowledged the significance of studying communities coping with disaster. Specifically, exploring how people “naturally” react and adjust socially after a disaster is necessary because it can help researchers understand how humans respond to stress; moreover, a better understanding of social disaster findings can offer insight for health professionals and other experts about what are thought to be “normal and healthy psychological reactions to emergencies” (p. 579). Recognizing and understanding how communities cope with disasters will help researchers, journalists, and media professionals identify ways local news media can help facilitate community recovery efforts during and after a disaster. Understanding in what ways the public utilizes media outlets and in what ways media outlets can serve the public during and after a community disaster will help journalists to better serve as an agent of recovery and reconciliation.

It is important to note that LTE sections do not necessarily provide the natural setting described above, due to editorial tactics and gate-keeping functions. However, analysis of print LTEs in this case study remains significant, because the local newspaper did not have online features for LTEs in 2005; thus, the print LTE forum truly was one of the only, if not *the only*, public forum provided by the city’s only daily newspaper. Along those same lines, even if online comments had been more widely used at that time, users
likely would not have had regular access to sites and online networks directly after Katrina. This case study provides additional evidence that LTEs, as an established and broad-reaching public forum, afford the public an opportunity to both voice opinions and to have those opinions made part of the historical record.

This thesis begins with a brief review of the literature about letters to the editor and a brief discussion of the theoretical considerations of catharsis. It then synthesizes those two literatures into a cohesive framework to guide the analysis. Next, it includes a justification and explanation of the method. The results section includes analysis, discussion, and a summary of how the findings relate to the theoretical framework. Finally, it concludes with a summary of the contributions this study makes to the literature and a discussion of the study’s contributions and limitations, as well as suggestions for future study along these lines.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Letters to the Editor

For more than 60 years, researchers have studied various aspects of LTEs and similar modes of mediated public discourse (Andrews, 1968; Davis & Rarick, 1964; Forsythe, 1950; Foster & Friedrich, 1937; Grey, D. & Brown, T., 1970; Hynds, 1991; Hynds, 1994; Kapoor & Botan, 1992; Kapoor, 1995; Lander, 1972; Pasternack, 1979; Reader, 2002; Reader, Stempel & Daniel, 2004; Reader, 2005a; Reader, 2005b; Reader, 2005c; Reader, 2006; Reader & Moist, 2008; Rosenthal, 1969; Singeltary, 1976; Tarrant, 1957; Vacin, 1965; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001). That collection of studies and professional essays, published over many decades, gives today's contemporary scholars a substantial foundation for conducting additional research into the social roles of LTE forums.

Foster’s and Friedrich’s (1950) early attempts to grasp a solid understanding of LTE columns and the role they may or may not play in society set the foundation for several research projects, particularly a series of studies investigating the demographics of successful LTE writers and what motivated them to write (Forsythe, 1950; Tarrant, 1957; Vacin, 1965). Tarrant (1957) explored letters to the editor published in the "Mail Bag" forum of the Eugene (Oregon) Register Guard. In that study, Tarrant attempted to determine the following: “letter writers’ census type data, motivations determining letter-writing behavior, letter-writers’ habits and attitudes, and letter-writers’ own analyses of the purpose of letter sections in newspapers” (p. 501). Tarrant found that letter writers were apt to write letters to vent, or to “get something off my chest” about topics “in which they were greatly interested, or those which dealt with events which they had
experienced first-hand” (p. 502). Letter writers “felt their letters ‘helped’ the newspaper’s readership and they emphasized that the ‘Mail Bag’ was a democratic institution because it permitted freedom of expression.” Tarrant concluded that the “Mail Bag” served as a “public forum where the mentally acute and socially active citizens of the community aired their views in the interests of their fellow man” (p. 502).

Contrary to some assumptions at the time, Vacin (1965) found that letter writers “were not ‘cranks’ or ‘crackpots’…Their motivation for writing, although ego-centered in many instances, was found to be logical and sensible” (p. 510). Vacin’s findings suggested that LTEs afforded writers more than an opportunity to vent or blow off steam. According to Rosenthal (1969), “letter writing has obviously always provided a lot of people with all kinds of satisfaction, be it from an opportunity to engage in a form of individual public service, to enlarge one’s ego — or simply to get something off one’s chest” (p. 116). Another researcher, Pasternack (1979), explored possible motivations for writing; one common reason was to respond to news stories, editorials, or previously published LTEs. In that same study, the researcher concluded that other motivations for writing LTEs included “writer’s expertise (28 percent and much more common among the published subgroup); fulfillment obligation (29 percent) and catharsis (22 percent)” (p. 25). Letter writers tended “to be against something” rather than “in favor or for something” (p. 25), further supporting the idea that LTE writing can provide a way for citizens to vent (that is, to experience catharsis).

Later research suggested that LTE columns have played a vital role in society as a purportedly "open" community forum that can help bring a community's issues and
concerns into public light (Hynds, 1991, p. 124). The space newspapers designate for public debate and discussion can “foster an exchange of ideas and information concerning action or inaction by government and others” (p. 124). Hynds suggested that LTEs play a significant role in the community and an even larger role in democratic society, writing that LTE forums have a great capacity to “perform an increasingly important role in newspapers’ efforts to provide the public forums that are essential to the effective operations of the democratic system” (p. 124).

Much of Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2001) study focused on “whether a public forum such as the letters-to-the-editor section has an important role to play in our practice of democracy, and, if so, whether it plays that role well” (p. 304). In a study of newspapers in the San Francisco Bay area, Wahl-Jorgensen found that editors tend to view letter columns as a place for individual expression rather than a place for activists to converse and spread political interests: “To them [the surveyed editors], the letters section belongs to ‘the people,’ and this elusive entity consists of private individuals, the ‘average Joe,’ rather than the well-organized activist group” (p. 311).

According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2001), “journalism scholars, journalists, and editors alike, view the letters section as an essential public forum because it facilitates public discussion. This, in turn, assumes that public discussion lies at the center of democracy” (p. 305). Wahl-Jorgensen suggested:

(W)e can bring to light the peculiarities of a public forum that proclaims itself to be open and free-for-all, much like the ideal of deliberative democracy, but nevertheless privileges certain forms of expression that run counter to priorities of deliberation, impartiality, and rational-critical debate. (p. 309)
Catharsis

One aspect of LTE forums in a democracy is catharsis. Letter writers’ motivations to write LTEs vary. This study suggests that the nature and magnitude of Hurricane Katrina likely stimulated the need for catharsis, resulting in highly emotion-fueled LTEs during its aftermath.

Freud (1895) suggested that catharsis, the release of emotional energy, could help patients feel better. The idea is that if emotion due to some conflict is not released, it will create stress and havoc for a person internally; however, if emotions are expressed and let go, internal pressure will be alleviated for the individual, and thus other problems (possibly health-related) will be dispelled.

In terms of LTEs and catharsis, previous LTE research suggested that LTEs afforded letter writers the opportunity to “vent” or “blow off steam” (Tarrant, 1957, p. 502; Lander, 1972, p. 142). The cathartic value of writing and sharing that writing is well established in the psychology literature. Several studies have linked writing about trauma to positive results and benefits (Littrell, 2009). Littrell wrote, “In addition to exhibiting better functioning on health outcome measures, after writing about trauma, there is improvement in social and occupational domains” (p. 302). Littrell also discussed how perhaps Freud’s (1895) initial take on catharsis is not as widely accepted as it once was:

(W)riting about trauma produces positive effects on health, but no one knows why. The initial Freudian rationale for why the procedure is beneficial, that is, that persons writing about trauma benefit because they are no longer inhibiting, has been ruled out…The many variations on the Pennebaker procedure find that health benefits accrue from writing even when the beneficial effects cannot be explained by the release of suppressed thought and bottled emotional energy. (p. 303)
With that in mind, just as it has been suggested that writing and language usage can provide health and healing benefits (Pennebaker, 1997a; Pennebaker, 1997b; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, J., & Glaser, R., 1988; Pennebaker & Lay, 2002; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Petrie, Booth, & Pennebaker, 1998), assist with building stronger relationships (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994), and aid in coping with traumatic events and job losses (Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006), this study suggests that LTE writing and sharing that writing via a public forum can be beneficial in terms of coping with catastrophe.

Catharsis and LTEs

Some of the earliest known LTE research, conducted by Foster and Friedrich (1937), began to explore the cathartic role of LTEs. Those scholars noted that:

(LET)etters to the editor, when taken together, provide us with such a thermometer, indicating the amount of “heat” (to stay in our simile) which a certain issue is generating. A cross-section of a fair number of newspapers will, through their letters-to-the editor columns, indicate the extent to which interest is being aroused. (p. 72)

An interesting point Foster and Friedrich raise is the following: “So well known is the tendency of letters to the editor to be protests that in some newspapers the so-called ‘Vox-Populi’ column is known as the ‘Safety Valve’” (p. 74). The idea that LTEs served a social safety valve function was supported in another study by Forsythe (1950), who wrote:

(T)he statements of the letter writers…describe themselves as crusaders for this or that special cause, some stating that letter writing is a means for “blowing off steam”; the “against” pattern evidenced by the positions taken by the writers in their published letters; the fact that writers frequently associate disliked movements and trends with “bad men”…who serve as “hate symbols” and who also serve as the special objects of the writers’ aggressions; the hotly contentious nature of the letters, which usually do not represent reasoned, logical approaches to problems, but highly emotional reactions to policies and practices which often
do not seem to be clearly understood by the writers. The principle issue is almost always moral “rightness.” Judgments are made in dramatic blacks and whites. The factual materials occasionally submitted seem to be mere window dressing and seldom have much to do with the point of the argument. (p. 144)

Forsythe’s findings support the idea that catharsis is not about the content of the LTE itself, but it lies more in the action of the writer venting. According to Forsythe, “highly emotional reactions” and quick judgments made with little evidence indicated catharsis. After a community disaster public forums, such as LTE sections printed in the local newspaper, could display similar evidence of catharsis.

In another study, Davis and Rarick (1964) found that about two out of every three letters analyzed “were ‘anti’ in nature.” The researchers concluded that one of the functions of letters to the editor in a democratic society is catharsis. “The letter column gives the irate, the antagonist, the displeased, a chance to speak out and be heard” (p. 109). They further argued that “the predominance of ‘opposition’ letters was a general phenomenon” (p. 109). Based on Davis’ and Rarick’s view, anti- in nature content suggests evidence of catharsis and a link to the “irate, the antagonist, the displeased” individual. The notion of LTEs fulfilling a safety valve role in society surfaced again in later research when Kapoor and Botan (1992) suggested “letters provided a safety valve for people who are frustrated with society and enable the public to serve as a watchdog over a newspaper’s presentation and point of view” (p. 5).

Catharsis for Who: A Limited Demographic

The egalitarian nature of LTE forums is often heralded by professionals and disputed by scholars. It is important to bear in mind that although LTE columns are supposedly open to all for conversation, questions of accessibility raise concerns for
whether LTE forums actually provide an unrestricted arena for a variety of public
opinions and ideas. One scholar several decades ago suggested LTEs in local newspapers
differ from those in high-profile national newspapers. “Nonprestige newspaper letters are
generally characterized as serving a ‘social safety valve’ function. The middle aged and
middle class conservative white Americans are provided a catharsis to blow off steam in
an unreasoned and emotional way” (Lander, 1972, 142). Lander suggested only a limited
demographic was afforded the opportunity to vent and blow off steam, because LTEs
served only a segment of the population.

Earlier studies that examined LTE writers’ characteristics concluded that letter
writers in the mid-twentieth century were typically, in comparison to the rest of the
population, above average in age, income, and education (Forsythe, 1950; Tarrant; 1957).
Those findings were supported by a more recent study that explored the demographics of
letters writers, a survey of 1,017 U.S. adults (Reader, Stempel, & Daniel, 2004) regarding
both their letter writing activity and their success in having letters published (not all LTEs
submitted to newspapers are published). The authors concluded that typical letter writers
“tend to be older, wealthier, and better educated than average” (p. 55). People over the
age of 45 were more likely to have submitted letters and were more likely to have had
their letters published. Reader, Stempel, and Daniel (2004) also found that people with
higher incomes, as well as those with higher education, were more likely to have written
letters and seen them published. The authors concluded that “the number of letters
published from given groups of people is clearly a function of the number of letters
submitted by those groups, rather than any predisposition on the part of editors who
select the letters” (p. 63). With that said, there is only a segment of the population represented in LTE sections at any given time, and the supposedly “public” forum is not always necessarily a culmination of diverse viewpoints and ideas.

Editorial processes, such as must-sign policies, may deter some from writing LTEs, but some groups are simply more motivated to write LTEs than others. Issue-oriented groups are motivated to write LTEs on specific topics. Reader (2005) discussed a peculiar practice of organized letter-writing called “astroturf,” in which well-funded special-interest groups provide “ready-made letters to the editor for supporters to submit as genuine ‘grass-roots’ support” (Reader, 2005c, p. 43). The implication for LTE forums when journalists and special-interest groups do not recognize or share each other’s “ethical norms and professional goals” is they become a “turf to be defended or conquered” rather than “public squares for wide-open discourse” (Reader, 2008, p. 607).

If LTE sections do not represent a multitude of viewpoints, it is uncertain whether LTE forums are performing (or can achieve) the role of being exemplifiers of democratic society. That has important implications for democracy, because then only a portion of the population is represented when it comes to LTE sections. LTE forums provide a stage for participants to voice an opinion different than the majority if they take the initiative (and in turn, if the editor chooses to publish their work). Without a place for people to join together and share ideas and opinions, review processes and systems that are in place, and question the intent of organizations and leaders, society would not have a choice of what goes on and would no longer be a society built on democracy. As one scholar argues, “Free expression, as an American ideology and an institution, cemented
in legal interpretations of the First Amendment, privileges individual expression” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 313).

Catharsis and Writing

Catharsis is necessary for individuals in a community after a natural disaster or catastrophe, because depending on the type of disaster that ensues, people may be forced to deal with the deaths of loved ones, injuries, property damage and loss of assets, displacement and relocation, unemployment, homelessness, environmental destruction, and overall disruption of normal activity in the community and surrounding areas. The rationale behind this case study is that individuals can and do utilize public forums to connect with others during the aftermath of a disaster. More specifically, however, the focus of this study is to gain understanding about how a segment of the community utilizes the supposedly open and public space of LTE sections in print after a catastrophe.

The dynamic setting in most psychology and clinical research studies on writing and therapeutic benefits appears to be quite different from the individual letter-writing experience. When one writes and submits a letter to the editor, however, there are possible correlations to those clinical situations. For example, consider psychological or clinical research and writing studies in which there is emphasis on the individual expressing his/her thoughts, and in some cases, connecting with others. Similarly, the individual letter-writing process involves an LTE writer contributing his/her voice, opinion, or rant to take part in a larger public conversation.

A group-writing study that paired college students with low-income youths over a period of 10 weeks “revealed the development of protective processes of self-esteem,
In the study of college students and low-income youth, Chandler (2002) argued that:

self-efficacy, coping strategies, social support, and cultural connections” (Chandler, 2002, p. 255). The group element — “being in a group, writing with others, and hearing other’s stories” — was an “essential part of the process” (p. 265). Chandler wrote:

(A)n analysis of interviews revealed two themes that emerged from the experience of writing together: connection to self through feelings, reflection, and behaviors; and connection to others through learning and empathy. The results suggest that writing in a group using a specific approach facilitated emotional catharsis, increased self knowledge, coping strategies, and understanding and appreciating of others (p. 255).

The degree of connecting with others varies in a group-writing setting and an individual-writing experience in which one writes a letter to the editor, but at the core of each situation there is an element of the individual opening up and connecting with others, to voice an opinion that is distributed to the broader community and to the public at large. Chandler (2002) concluded that reading, listening, and providing feedback allowed participants to perceive things differently, and for each to understand his or her specific situation from another point of view. Some of the participants gained new coping strategies from their newly gained understanding: “Connecting to others by learning about different lives and empathizing with experience of their situation occurred through reading, listening, and providing feedback” (p. 265). It seems that after a community disaster it would be especially vital to recovery efforts for citizens to connect, communicate, and possibly build understanding of what happened and how to move forward.
Writing, reading aloud, and listening thus allow individuals to share, expand, and reflect on each other’s experience. Such interchanges theoretically lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of “community.” The researchers concluded that without these interchanges, individuals remain isolated from others, and, even more important, without tools for symbolizing, representing, and sharing their experiences, individuals remain isolated from themselves. (p. 258)

Applied to LTE forums, writers can read other published letters and in effect “listen” to the ideas and opinions of others. Participants also can provide feedback by submitting their own responses to published LTEs. Chandler’s viewpoint about sharing, expanding, and reflecting on each other’s experience is that it can ultimately bring individuals closer together and build a sense of community. A similar view can be taken when considering the individual LTE writer contributing his/her opinions to the community; in fact, it is quite possible that he/she would feel more engaged in the community after writing an LTE. Now consider the importance of writing, sharing, expanding, reflecting and building a sense of community, when the community is disrupted after something of Hurricane Katrina’s magnitude.

In a different study that reinforces the significance of analyzing public forums, researchers analyzed online conversations about the 1997 death of Princess Diana to gain better understanding about stages of coping and how individuals naturally “talk” about events as a coping strategy to deal with traumatic losses. Individuals normally talk with one another about a “collective traumatic event” when it is a shared experience, an event that the parties experience together (Stone & Pennebaker, 2002, p. 173).

Another group of researchers explored participants’ views of emotional disclosure, “the process of writing or talking about personally stressful or traumatic
events” which “has been associated with improvements in mood and immune parameters in clinical and non-clinical groups” (L.M.T., Byrne-Davis, Wetherell, Dieppe, Weinman, Byron, Donovan, Horne, Brookes, & Vedhara. 2006, p. 667). Conversely, reserving or “holding in” emotion has been connected “with poorer physical health ... and poorer immune function” (L.M.T., Byrne-Davis et al. 2006, p. 668). In reference to experiencing traumatic events and dealing with traumatic memories, it has been suggested that “expressing trauma through writing facilitates the processing of sensory-affective memories into an organized, linguistic format” (L.M.T., Byrne-Davis et al. 2006, p. 669-670). Such “disclosure results in a release of inhibition of the traumatic events through a form of catharsis” (L.M.T., Byrne-Davis et al. 2006, p. 669).

Another area of research that supports the idea that LTE writing could be cathartic focuses on the positive effects of therapeutic letter writing. One study considered how writing might assist counselors in their “efforts to promote and maintain positive change in students” (Oliver, Nelson, Cade, & Cueva. 2011, p. 6). The authors discussed specific guidelines and recommendations for counselors to follow when using letters as a means to help students realize they can make positive changes. “The intent of a therapeutic letter is to be helpful to the recipient in healing or making changes. Like social letters, therapeutic letters also are designed to maintain connection…” (p. 3). The authors note that therapeutic letters may be useful for school counselors “to enhance progress, solidify positive change, provide emotional support, and support competencies” (p. 3). The scenario of an individual writing an LTE is certainly different from a school counselor
writing a letter with intentions to affect a student’s life, but underlying both scenarios is the fundamental idea of writing, communicating, and connecting with others.

LTEs, Editorial Practices, and Gate-Keeping

It is important to recognize the filter through which LTEs are passed before they are published. When analyzing LTEs, one must take into account that editorial practices and gate-keeping functions play a role in the content that is presented in print. The supposed “public forum” is only as “open” as its gate-keepers will allow, and those gatekeepers may be inclined to reject letters that appear to be cathartic rants. However, data from Hynds’ (1991) study of newspaper editors provides some evidence that editors recognize cathartic letters. In his survey of newspaper editors, Hynds found that about three-fourths of the surveyed editors agreed that letter writers typically write against something rather than for something. Hynds’ literature review demonstrated that research conducted over several decades suggested that for many LTE writers, a key reason for letter-writing (and for many editors, letter-publishing) is to facilitate catharsis. Whereas earlier research by Singletary (1976) lacked sufficient evidence to claim that letters-to-the-editor sections served communities as social safety valves, Hynds’ study (1991) found that 50 percent of the surveyed editors “said they believe” letters to the editor can serve as a safety valve, providing people “who are unhappy with some aspect of community life” with an outlet to release their emotions (p. 135).

There are, however, editorial processes that may exclude a segment of writers due to the automatic rejection of anonymous or “name-withheld” LTEs (that is, either LTEs that are submitted without signatures or signed LTEs accompanied by requests to
A curious development in the 1980s and 1990s was the development of call-in opinion lines (Aucoin, 1997). The call-in forums, sometimes referred to as “Sound off columns,” were touted as an easier, less time-consuming way for people to participate in and expand public discussion. Although writers of traditional LTEs typically have had to sign their letters and have their names published, those who used the call-in forum could simply pick up the phone and “leave a message on a recorder and see their pithy, usually anonymous observations in print the next day” (p. 122). As Aucoin suggested, the call-in lines widened “public” conversation, but the researcher found that the “contents [of the call-in column] were more likely to be primarily opinion with relatively few facts” (p. 122). Similar to Forsythe’s (1950) viewpoint, a major criticism of call-in lines was a concern for the quality of the opinions exchanged, which could potentially resemble nothing more than “spitballs of emotion, fired without the validating force of evidence” (p. 135). Aucoin suggested that perhaps more well-reasoned arguments should be encouraged “to provide a workable, public outlet for anyone who has something to contribute to public dialogue” (p. 135).

A late-1990s study about the automatic rejection of anonymous submissions to LTE forums (Reader, 2005a, p. 62), found that among 16 editors of U.S. newspapers, six published separate forums designated for anonymous opinions submitted via telephone (p. 68). The editors who published anonymous opinions indicated that anonymous forums afford people who may not normally write and submit a letter to an editor with other outlets, such as phone, mail, or e-mail, to submit anonymous opinions (p. 68). One interviewed editor from that study commented that anonymous forums provide letter
writers, and also those who would not typically write, with “‘a chance to put in their two cents … People who call are not the kind who would write letters ….’ Another said: ‘It gives readers who feel disenfranchised from society a chance to sound off”’ (p. 68).

Anonymous columns, such as call-in columns, may contain more evidence of catharsis than a typical letter column, because participants are not required to attach their names to their submissions. It does not appear as though *The Times-Picayune* permitted anonymous LTEs to be published, as all LTEs included in analysis were signed.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing from the body of research on LTEs and the cathartic value of writing, this study will employ a theoretical framework of “cathartic expression” to analyze the messages in published LTEs. The analysis will focus on both explicit and implicit rhetoric that can be interpreted as cathartic expressions, from overt statements such as “I am furious ...” or “The situation is heartbreaking ...” to more nuanced or less direct rhetoric that suggests the writer’s emotional state. Segal, Tucker, and Coolidge (2009) found that in a comparison study of positive versus negative written expression among distressed students “the written expression of positive emotions is at least as therapeutic as the written expression of negative feelings” (p. 10). This analysis will broadly consider the prevalence, or lack thereof, of individual LTEs that contain cathartic expressions, and then focus more intently upon the letters that contain such rhetoric. That framework is not concerned with frequencies of incidents, but rather with the overall narrative from the constructed LTE forums as a whole.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

This thesis uses a culturally grounded approach to critical textual analysis. This study will examine LTEs published in *The Times-Picayune* newspaper after the 2005 flooding of New Orleans. The flooding was initiated by Hurricane Katrina, which caused numerous levees to fail, causing much of the city of New Orleans to flood and resulting in an extraordinary number of deaths and injuries, as well as in widespread destruction. The flooding after the Katrina disaster has been linked to structural failures in the levees, which presumably developed because of lack of attention and funding from government agencies; as such, the catastrophe was not just a natural disaster but also in many ways a man-made one. Although Hurricane Katrina caused widespread destruction throughout the region (coastal Mississippi also suffered extensive damage from the storm), New Orleans was particularly hard hit because of its dense population and the failures of government agencies to respond appropriately (Marek, 2006).

Qualitative Textual Analysis

The method used for this thesis is qualitative textual analysis, which is a common approach for research in the critical-cultural paradigm. McKee (2003) explained that “textual analysis is a methodology for gathering information about sense-making practices, that is, how members of various cultures interpret the world around them” (p. 63). In his guide to textual analysis, McKee wrote:

(S)ense-making isn’t an abstract part of our lives, and it isn’t a luxury afforded only to a few. It’s part of existing as a human being. How we make sense of our own lives, and of other people’s, has vital implications for our well-being and for how we treat others. At its most extreme, we can see the importance of the construction of communities of ‘we’ and ‘they’ when a sense-making practice sets up a binary between ‘we’ as human beings and ‘they’ as non-human. (p. 44)
People all over the globe have different ways of making sense of the world that surrounds them. Because of cultural and personal differences, “there’s no single correct representation of any part of the world and, in the same way, there’s no single correct interpretation of any text” (p. 63). Textual analysis therefore “is about making educated guesses” (p. 27). For this study, a careful reading and re-reading of LTEs about the New Orleans catastrophe, therefore, suggested both obvious and “deeper” meanings from the analyzed texts. The analysis was most concerned with rhetoric that may fall in line with the “catharsis” functions of LTEs in a democratic “free speech” society, taking as a given that LTE writers are free of government censorship and not faced with significant cultural barriers to expressing strong opinions; however, this study also will look for other dominant themes that emerge from the texts. The goal of this method is to “unpack” the text in order to reveal common threads and any “chain of meanings released” by the text (Parameswaran, 2002 p. 292). McKee addressed the significance of analyzing and uncovering deeper meaning:

(D)ifferent texts can present the same event in different ways, and all of them can be as truthful and accurate as each other. If all we say of them is “accurate” and “inaccurate,” then we never get to the interesting part of the analysis — how these texts tell their stories, how they represent the world, and how they make sense of it. (p. 17)

The primary benefit of textual analysis over other methods is that it is not necessarily meant to determine which interpretation is “the most correct one,” but rather to uncover “likely interpretations” (p. 63). Textual analysis is open to a variety of interpretations, but they must be reasonable interpretations; as McKee noted, “there isn’t an infinite number of reasonable interpretations of any given text at a given time in a given place”
Thus, the analysis must consider the texts' intended audiences. In this study, that would be those who are most likely to read the newspaper being studied: the residents of the greater New Orleans region.

Design of Study

This thesis is concerned with the interpretation of texts, not statistics. The specific texts for this study were LTEs published in New Orleans' major daily newspaper, *The Times-Picayune*. At the onset of this study, a time frame of eight weeks was chosen to consider changes in issues and emotions as the city moved from immediate reaction to recovery. The eight-week time frame was suggested by the findings of Pennebaker and Harber (1993) who researched different phases of coping (emergency, inhibition, and adaptation) after the Loma-Prieta earthquake and the Persian Gulf War. However, LTEs published in the local newspaper Aug. 29, 2005, were unrelated to Hurricane Katrina, and the paper did not publish any LTEs again until Sept. 21, 2005; limiting this analysis to five weeks, rather than eight. In all, 241 letters were retrieved and reviewed; after disqualifying staff-written items and six LTEs that were submitted before the disaster, 198 letters in total were analyzed. All letters, either indirectly or directly, referenced Hurricane Katrina and the related flooding. If a letter discussed an event, decision, or issue that was a result of the Hurricane or flooding, it was considered to be about the disaster; for instance, any letter that discussed the reopening of schools was included in the analysis, as schools were closed due to the impact of Katrina. Those letters became the corpus of texts analyzed for this study.
Data Collection Process

During the analysis, the researcher looked not just for individual cathartic expressions, but also for broader themes represented by patterns of regularly noted phrases, concepts, and tones within the texts. The first step was to grasp a solid understanding of the nature of the text of each letter, in order to fully understand the view of the person who wrote it. The next step was to understand the letter writer’s opinions in relation to the expressions of other LTEs. The final step was to view all of the letters together as a single narrative and look for overall themes that emerged. Thus, the process of analysis was to read the texts several times and first interpret the text individually and then again as a whole. In doing so, the researcher took into account previous LTE research which considered catharsis to be evidenced in LTEs that were off-the-cuff and hurried, sometimes made with little evidence or logic (Forsythe, 1950; Tarrant, 1957; Lander, 1972). While emotional expressions signifying catharsis were often negative, such as hostility and hopelessness, they were not always so. Emotional expressions that denoted gratitude, support, and hope were also thought to offer LTE writers some catharsis. That was determined based on the idea that catharsis is found in emotional release (Freud, 1895); it is not assigned any specific emotion. Therefore, a letter that contained expressions of emotion including, but not limited to, anger, frustration, blame, sadness, gratitude, support, humor, and a desire to escape, was considered evidence of catharsis.

In textual analysis, frequencies may be provided to better explain the corpus, but they are not intended for statistical purposes or generalizations of any sort (McKee,
2003). Therefore, the frequency of LTEs was tabulated only to provide an overall
description of the texts; beyond that, no other quantitative data was collected. Based on
previous LTE research (Davis & Rarick, 1964; Pasternack, 1979) that considered “anti”
letters an indicator of catharsis, the initial analysis also determined the number of “anti”
letters, or letters that contained and directed expressions of disagreement or criticism
toward media; lawless citizens; law enforcement; or government policies, agencies, and
leaders who seemingly failed New Orleans and surrounding areas.

Research Questions

Although textual analysis is by its nature exploratory, it also should be guided by
some preliminary questions to ensure the analysis remains within the preliminary
theoretical frameworks. The research-guiding questions for this thesis are, broadly, the
following:

RQ1: To what extent and in what ways did The Times-Picayune construct a
narrative of catharsis in published LTEs related to Hurricane Katrina and its
aftermath?

RQ2: What dominant themes related to cathartic expressions can be found in that
newspaper’s LTE forums?

Drawing on previous LTE research (Forsythe, 1950) that connected letter writing
and catharsis, irrational, unsound arguments that provided little evidence or factual
information, were indicators of catharsis in this analysis. Statements that openly
expressed emotion were considered to indicate catharsis based on the idea that the LTE
writer was voicing an opinion, communicating, and opening up to some degree. An LTE
that openly expressed anger, hostility, support, gratitude, or frustration against someone or something was interpreted as emotional release — that is, catharsis.

Examples of such statements include “I’m outraged,” “I am tired of this,” “Thank you for your efforts,” “I am fortunate,” “How could this happen,” “What a letdown,” “This has got to change,” “It kills me,” and “Ready to return home.” Words such as “saddened,” “disappointed,” “thankful,” “hurt,” “angry,” “frustrated,” and “let down” also signified emotional expression. Letters that made accusatory comments, such as “This happened because of you” and “You were the cause of this,” also denoted catharsis. Other indicators of catharsis were noted in LTEs that presented one side of a story and directed a lot of anger and frustration toward specific leaders or organizations, showing little understanding for the other side’s circumstances. LTEs that contained rhetoric of conflict and complained about a lack of accountability also were categorized as cathartic. LTEs were considered hurried, and thus cathartic, when they conveyed hasty accusations and “spouting off” without balancing statements (that is, without acknowledging or respecting other possible points of view).
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Narrative of Catharsis after Katrina

Due to the nature of the circumstances surrounding New Orleans at the time of this case study, LTEs contained much more than everyday complaints. New Orleans and surrounding cities were greatly affected by Katrina and the failures of the levee system. The damage and destruction caused by Katrina and the failed levee system tore apart communities. In response, two-thirds (132) of all 198 letters analyzed in this study featured expressions of either anger, frustration, or both, which were found to be the most dominant expressions of emotion evidenced in this analysis. More than half (111) of all LTEs analyzed were directed against someone, such as fellow citizens, government officials, law enforcement, local and national organizations, and other institutions. Other LTEs provided evidence of support, gratitude, humor, loss of hope, and grief.

In response to RQ1 (To what extent and in what ways did The Times-Picayune construct a narrative of catharsis in published LTEs related to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath?): LTEs did in fact support the idea that the local newspaper provided an outlet for some individuals to let off steam and vent; that is, to experience catharsis (Davis & Rarick, 1964; Forsythe, 1950; Hynds; 1994; Lander, 1972; Pasternack, 1979; Rosenthal, 1969; Tarrant, 1957). The breadth and depth of emotion evidenced in public conversations published in The Times-Picayune's LTE columns, highlighted more than everyday gripes were addressed, but, major concerns and public issues.

The Times-Picayune served as a public space that satisfied the catharsis role of LTE forums; moreover, the space, which served as perhaps the sole public forum
available at that time, presented a multi-faceted conversation that brought to light deep-rooted problems that persisted before Katrina. This case study attached strong emotional expressions of anger, frustration, disapproval, disappointment, worry, blame, support, gratitude, and humor to the notion of cathartic release.

**Criticism and Praise of the Times: A Balanced Narrative**

Importantly, published LTEs were for and against state, local and federal governments; prominent institutions; and local and national organizations. In doing so, a seemingly balanced narrative of catharsis was constructed in the newspaper. A critical LTE was often, but not always, followed-up with a supportive LTE, or vice versa. There appeared to be fewer supportive LTEs for federal government, law enforcement, and the New Orleans Parish School System, and those LTEs were, in some cases, submitted by a person directly affiliated with that organization.

In an example of the balance present in the local newspaper’s LTE section, one LTE expressed frustration toward the SPCA, because the writer could not locate her pets after Katrina hit. An LTE published later in the week thanked volunteers around the country for rescuing animals and encouraged people to plan ahead to save pets (Nassar, 2005, p. B10). Another LTE pointed out that the SPCA experienced severe devastation, much like the rest of the community and surrounding areas:

(T)he Louisiana SPCA lost its shelter on Japonica Street during the flood that devastated the lower 9th Ward community of New Orleans. In the following days and weeks, our lives were also touched dramatically by another wave: a wave of love and support. (Maloney, 2005, p. B6)

In response to negative LTEs written about schools, *The Times-Picayune* published a couple of LTEs that showed support for the school system. One such LTE submitted by
the superintendent and school officials outlined a series of steps the New Orleans Public Schools planned to take which would guarantee “the system will be stronger and the future for their children of this community will be brighter than ever before” (Watson, 2005, p. B10). That particular LTE expressed a vested interest in the students and their well-being and success. The local newspaper editors not only published LTEs that were for and against leaders, organizations, and government, but also included LTEs that were for and against their own actions; again, further supporting the notion that the newspaper employed editorial tactics to serve as an open platform and provide a fair and balanced narrative in its LTE sections after the disaster. A few examples of criticism toward the newspaper were noted in LTEs that accused the newspaper for compounding issues by publishing or not publishing particular stories; in one, an LTE blamed The Times-Picayune for people breaking the law and entering the city when it was not permitted. “By printing such stories, you are encouraging others to attempt to re-enter the city before it has been deemed safe to do so” (Wegener, 2005, p. B8). Another LTE that expressed frustration toward the newspaper stated:

(A)lthough The Times-Picayune has questioned LSU Health Sciences Center’s commitment to New Orleans, the fact of the matter is, we never left. … It was no small accomplishment to reorganize our schools with faculty, staff, and students scattered across the country, compromised communications, no classroom or clinical space, no housing and to resume classes in four weeks. To our knowledge, this has never been done before. …We are in the process of assessing and repairing the buildings on our campus, all of which suffered water or wind damage, or both, in anticipation of being fully back home as soon as possible. (Rock, 2005, p. 4)

These critical LTEs illustrate that while the public experienced growing frustration over lost pets, lack of information, a need for medicine and other necessities, some individuals
failed to show any sympathy for “the other.” Catharsis was noted in LTEs that communicated frustrations with current circumstances and often overlooked “the other” side of the story. In most cases, LTEs presented only one side of an argument, but the local newspaper provided the bigger picture by presenting a well-balanced forum.

Other LTEs criticized lack of media coverage: “I’m profoundly frustrated at the lack of any kind of historical perspective in the media coverage of this storm” (Youngman, 2005, p. B8). Others condemned the newspaper for criticizing Emeril Lagasse, a celebrity chef with roots and restaurants in New Orleans. One writer referred to this criticism as “whiny” and “unmerited” (Loubiere, 2005, p. 6) stating, “Emeril is investing lots of energy in fund-raising for the city and plans to reopen his restaurants. Don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”

Alternatively, some LTEs expressed gratitude and appreciation for the newspaper’s stories and updates during the time of chaos that followed Hurricane Katrina. That narrative suggested that citizens relied on The Times-Picayune for information, even though they may have had access to information from other news sources. One writer praised, “Let me applaud the heroic efforts of The Times-Picayune during this disaster. An unfortunate circumstance has shown the world The Times-Picayune’s commitment to journalism” (Casemore, 2005, p. B8). Another LTE gave thanks to the paper for “shedding light” on a specific topic (Giudice, 2005, p. 4). Those telling statements speak volumes for the newspaper and the role it fulfilled during the aftermath of Katrina, as The Times-Picayune was back to publishing after a brief three-week hiatus.
In summary, catharsis was evident in *The Times-Picayune’s* LTE sections after Katrina, and in a balanced way. Although there were a great number of complaints, the local newspaper also published praise and provided, in most cases, both sides to a featured issue. Evidence of one-sided arguments with little reasoning, sometimes considered emotional outbursts, supports the notion of catharsis in LTEs. Additionally, the balanced narrative indicates an editorial decision to afford the public with cathartic release.

**Dominant Themes Related to Cathartic Expressions**

Beyond looking for evidence of catharsis in LTEs, this study also asked, “What dominant themes related to cathartic expressions can be found in that newspaper’s LTE forums?” Three major categories and cathartic expressions emerged from the 198 LTEs: expressions of disorientation from the initial impact of Hurricane Katrina; expressions of anger/compassion through the articulation of fault, blame, and support; and expressions of acceptance through discussion of recovery efforts.

*Theme 1: Initial Impact*

The magnitude of Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing failure of the levees seriously impinged on everyday life for the Lower Ninth Ward and surrounding areas. Those neighborhoods faced terrible conditions, such as catastrophic damage to homes, buildings, roads, and workplaces, as well as loss of power, telecommunications, water/sewage systems, and other basic services. Schools and hospitals were closed, as were most other public buildings. Specifically, the impact of the storm, forcing thousands of citizens to relocate, resulted in many people waiting and wanting
information about when they could return to their homes and when their kids could return to school. Displacement and relocation also led to a higher need for financial assistance that some could not get.

Many LTEs addressed the impact the storm had on various communities. Overall, the “impact” LTEs constructed a sense of abandonment, a lack of government assistance, and the potential to lose businesses and support at a time when New Orleans’ economy was beginning to thrive.

The “impact” LTEs often addressed that displacement and relocation. Thousands of people were displaced by the Katrina disaster, and a lack of preparedness on all parts worsened an already chaotic situation. LTEs in the newspaper typically include a writer’s name and place of residence, but after Katrina many LTEs also mentioned where the writer had gone after the storm, such as “Gretna, Now in central Mississippi.” Those displaced writers expressed grief, anger, and frustration over the loss of love ones, friends and neighbors, pets, homes, and jobs. One LTE expressed that the writer was “outraged” and “frantically searching” for her pets. In respect to finding her pets, the letter said, “But the SPCA’s own system has made it impossible” (Cooke, 2005, p. B8). The LTE expressed no consideration for the establishment’s own circumstances (such as whether the SPCA building had power, whether the workers had been dislocated by the flooding, etc.), nor does the LTE express any accountability for her own missing pets (did she have a rescue plan in place pre-Katrina?). The letter has trappings of “catharsis” as it seems to be more an outpouring of raw emotion than a carefully considered opinion -- it seeks to
blame the said establishment for the writer’s frustration, but shows very little
acknowledgement for the “other’s” situation.

After evacuation many people wanted to know when they would be permitted to
return to their homes and communities. Those LTEs expressed a sense of anguish and
strong desire from writers who wanted to go home. LTEs like those conveyed tired,
emotional pleas, such as this one:

(I)m sorry there was a fire in the French Quarter when the power was restored this
weekend, but I ask you: If we flip the switch today or a month from now, what
will be any different? We have to try to go home.

I don’t want anyone’s property to burn. But we have to start trying to get
home or people will establish themselves elsewhere. I have to work and I need to
live in my home, since I have to pay for it anyway.

Please, let us go home. We’ve imposed on our friends and family long
enough. Let’s give it a try. (Sloss, 2005, p. 6)

After a period of waiting, it seems that many writers were in search of peace of
mind. An LTE stated, “We have yet to be informed of when we can see our homes and
possibly salvage what little may remain” (Duplessis, 2005, p. B10). Another LTE wrote:

(B)efore Hurricane Katrina, I resided on Spain Street in New Orleans. Currently I
am living in Houston. On Sunday, I visited my old home in order to salvage
anything that could be saved. When I pulled into my driveway, I saw my home
had been gutted. Oct. 5 was the first day people had been allowed to go back in
the area. How is it legal for the landlord to throw all my possessions away
without my approval?

I spoke to him before going back to New Orleans. On Sept. 30, he assured
me that he would give me enough time to go there and get my things.

I was under the impression that he would call to make sure I had actually
gotten my things before he gutted it. He didn’t call me before destroying my
property. He had the place gutted Oct. 11.

What am I supposed to do about being evicted even though I wasn’t
evicted? (Falasha, 2005, p. 4)
Other evacuees returned home in need of services and assistance; for example, one LTE highlighted that when patients returned home for hospital treatment, they were not made aware ahead of time that the service needed was unavailable. The LTE stated:

(T)hese patients were not prepared for the lack of services available within the city. … I hope *The Times-Picayune* will assist the health community in better informing persons with serious, chronic or life-threatening illnesses to contact their local health care providers prior to returning to the city and to have a viable plan for transportation and obtaining medication. (Townsend, 2005, p. 10)

In addition to evacuating and leaving behind personal assets and property, as well as important paperwork and documents such as birth certificates and insurance information, there were no guarantees that anything, including homes, would be there upon return. Another reason many letter writers cited was the need for their children to go back to school.

A lot of frustration was expressed in the LTEs about the delay in reopening schools. One LTE stated, “...if neighborhood schools are missing, it leaves our infrastructure in peril” (Jordan, 2005, p. 10). Another LTE stated:

(A)t a time of the most catastrophic natural disaster in our country’s history, members of the of Orleans Parish School Board cannot find a way to put aside their egos and personal needs in order to put New Orleans’ children’s needs first. … Either consult and work with state and national authorities who can lead New Orleans schools forward, or step aside and allow those who are interested and will to do so. (Kahoe, Durante, Becnel, & Shockey, 2005, p. B10)

Discussions of schools reopening stimulated conversation about restructuring schools and making them better than before.

Another LTE expressed frustration about schools reopening with different teachers. That LTE expressed a loss because “good” teachers were taken away from the schools where her children regularly attended and now United Teachers of New Orleans,
a teachers union, would “staff the schools as they see fit” (Tierney, 2005, p. 10). That LTE communicated frustration and upset over the union’s choices to relocate teachers, but the LTE did not at any point show any understanding or sympathy for any challenges the union may have encountered while planning to reopen and restaff schools. Another frustrated letter stated, “Let’s make them charter schools and get our kids learning again, before those of us who are here regret coming back and move away for good” (Allen, 2005, p.6). LTEs like that expressed threats to leave and never come back if the school system did not get back on track fast. Getting kids back in school was a major concern for parents. Again, another example of a threatening LTE: “If this school is not reopened, we will not return to New Orleans, and neither will many more professional families” (Buntin, 2005, p. 6). LTEs that did not address the effects of the disaster on the school system that prevented reopening and restaffing of school buildings, but outright criticized the system and lack of preparedness, were interpreted as cathartic.

Some LTEs questioned the delay in reopening; one LTE wrote, “I wonder if this is being done to save money or to keep the poor from returning to New Orleans – or is it just plain incompetence?” (Lawrence, 2005, p. B10).

LTEs were not published from only parents of children, but some were also submitted by teachers, one of whom wrote, “To rebuild a city you must have schools. The faculty and staff in my school are ready and anxious to resume teaching. The children are ready, too. It is time to rebuild the city, beginning with the schools in Algiers” (Richards, 2005, p.4).
The delay in reopening schools was just another regular aspect of life that was dramatically disrupted by the storm. Emotional pleas to reopen schools right away illustrated another focus of emotional responses to the aftermath of Katrina. Rhetoric that was angry and expressed a need for schools, but did not necessarily acknowledge an understanding of why schools may need more time before reopening further suggests that the post-disaster letters provided catharsis.

Hurricane Katrina and the destruction it brought created additional financial burdens for many people. FEMA, a national organization that many accused of not doing its job, received a lot of attention during the aftermath of Katrina. One LTE wrote,

FEMA has not helped all those who evacuated and applied for assistance. We and many others we have talked to evacuated for 10 days or more, to return to homes with damage, refrigerators with rotten food and no air conditioning, water or phone services, but were denied the initial $2,000.

Others we talked to received the $2,000, plus a $2,300 payment for rentals.

Why the difference? They are apartment renters; we are homeowners who have large payments for mortgages, insurance property taxes and upkeep but received no help for that.

In fact, many were apparently denied because they have homeowners insurance. Does this make sense? FEMA, are you listening? (Gaines, 2005, p. 6)

Another LTE expressed frustration toward FEMA and lack of assistance:

(I)f there has even been a dysfunctional organization, it is FEMA. It cannot be disputed that the money is being distributed in an unfair and inconsistent manner. … I’m not comparing my losses to those who lost their homes or loved ones. But I, like many others who chose to stay home, could’ve used some emergency funds.

I guess next time, I’ll have to evacuate too, and then maybe I won’t feel so stressed over finances. (Thompson, 2205, p. 6)

This next LTE is an example of one of many challenges citizens faced when dealing with insurance companies after the storm:
Our story is no different from thousands of others, and because we didn’t suffer flooding and we have a roof over our heads, we are much better off than thousands more, and we are very thankful. Nonetheless, we have to deal with damage caused by the storm, and find that our insurance company does not cover removal of downed trees “not on buildings” or repair of fences “not attached to the house.”

Insurance companies gamble when they write a policy. Just like casinos, they manipulate the odds in their favor. Sometimes they have to pay off, but they rely on the majority of other policyholders to keep paying and paying to cover their losses.

We would have been better off to have put the money spent on insurance premiums over the last 30 years into a savings account so that we could now have cash available to pay for the removal of trees (assuming we are able to find somebody to do the work). In the future, we’ll insure ourselves – the only people upon whom we can depend. (McCammon, 2005, p. 10)

Just as LTEs expressed a sense of having been ignored when it came to government assistance, insurance reimbursement, and FEMA, other LTEs expressed opinions that major institutions had abandoned New Orleans when they chose to relocate to other cities in midst of recovery mode.

When Ruth’s Chris Steakhouse made the decision to relocate its headquarters to Florida after Hurricane Katrina, citizens were let down because they were in dire need of support, stability, jobs, and a solid economy. That letdown was expressed in one such LTE, which stated:

(I) am terribly angry about the decision that Ruth’s Chris Corp. has made to move its headquarters to Florida ... I sincerely hope that other companies will realize that New Orleans needs their help and support at this time and that we, as New Orleanians, will support them in turn. (Watermeier, 2005, p. B6)

The company’s choice to leave at a time when leaders and government on all levels seemed to fail New Orleans was just another blow to the people, according to many LTEs. However, those LTEs did not recognize that the decision to relocate may have been the best decision for the company and its recovery efforts at that time.
A handful of LTEs expressed fury in even the hint of discussion about the New Orleans Saints, a professional football based in New Orleans, relocating after Katrina. Many of those LTEs directed anger at Tom Benson, the owner of the football team. One such LTE stated:

(G)o, Saints. Just go. Get outta here.
  The Saints should go immediately announce their intention to move to San Antonio and spare us all waiting.
  A new New Orleans does not need an organization whose history can be summed up in these three words: embarrassing to underachieving.
  The NFL rightfully loves New Orleans. Like Indianapolis and Cleveland, we will get a team again. We will see Super Bowls in New Orleans. Our city leaders have proven they know how to attract a sports team.
  To our friends in San Antonio: Tom Benson is coming. You have been warned. (Andre, 2005, p. 6)

Another example of language that displayed anger directed toward Tom Benson:

(I)s Tom Benson proud of himself today? Does he not have any shed of human decency?
  After all the money that the fans and the state have given him, how can he take away our team at this time?
  As for Mayor Phil Hardberger and the city of Looterville (formerly San Antonio), what a classy bunch they are. I wish I could say what they are, but this is a family paper.
  Finally, God bless fired Saints lawyer Arnold Fielkow. I would like to thank him for standing up for our region.
  I hope Mr. Fielkow can win a lawsuit against the Saints. I know this does not make what happened any easier, but he will be better off in the long run. A man of his character shouldn’t be in the company of a ruthless, uncaring, mean and greedy man like Tom Benson. (Burns, 2005, p. 6)

There was not only a sense of disappointment that surrounded the possibility of The Saints relocating to another city, but LTEs also expressed utter disappointment over the football team’s losing streak. That further supported earlier assumptions about catharsis and writing being evident in LTEs that were “against” something or someone, rather than just being critical.
There is another aspect of emotional release in such LTEs: a desire to escape the hard work and desperation of disaster-recovery by watching NFL football, only to be let down yet again in the form of home-team loss. One LTE stated, “I was hoping the Saints would keep their promise to bring ‘intensity and emotion’ to the game and prove to be an inspirational force for a battered Louisiana” (McCue, 2005, p. B8). That LTE finished with “At a time when everything around most Louisianians has changed, the Saints have remained a bastion of consistency: a very poor and uninspired football team.” In spite of everything that happened during and after Katrina, some people still had energy to be concerned with and complain about New Orleans’ football team’s losses. It is likely the team-owner’s disloyalty toward the city was not the issue and neither was the football team’s losing streak, but for some it was a topic through which to direct generalized anger during a tragic time; for others, it served as something to believe in.

Overall, the theme of LTEs focused on the initial impact of the disaster seem to have set the stage for the general tenor of the forum. As the narrative expanded, the overall tone of the LTEs remained decidedly angry and hostile, particularly LTEs that tried to assign blame for the human failures that exacerbated the disaster.

**Theme 2: Fault, Blame, and Support**

_The Times-Picayune’s_ LTE columns contained strong, emotional expressions that highlighted what were thought to be wrongdoings of leaders and organizations on all levels — local, state and national. Thus, as predicted perhaps by Hynds (1991), the local newspaper successfully fulfilled one of its responsibilities to serve a watchdog function in a democratic society. Letters that contained a sense of disappointment in leadership
following Hurricane Katrina frequently directed blame toward local and state officials for not protecting or helping the citizens of New Orleans. As Katrina and related events unfolded, LTEs blamed law enforcement for not stepping up. Letters that were supportive toward someone or something often expressed gratitude and thanked the mayor, governor, police force, or whomever; similarly, some letters also were written to reprimand citizens who faulted local police officers and government for their actions. It is important to note that not all of the LTEs were submitted by locals; for instance, strong stances were taken against citizens and leaders of New Orleans, sometimes written by people who could be considered “outsiders” who were not personally affected by the disaster in and around New Orleans.

A handful of LTEs expressed anger toward the Army Corps of Engineers, which was accused of implementing a poor structural design and inadequate maintenance that ultimately resulted in the levee failures. The devastation of New Orleans and the Lower Ninth Ward had others asking if they had a reason to worry. For example:

(T)he same floodwalls that failed at the 17th Street Canal and other areas of New Orleans are being built right here in West Jefferson, along the Harvey Canal. This design is now proven to be a failure. Who builds a wall that cannot withstand the water level to its full height? A floodwall does not know the difference between a Category 3 or 4 storm. It only knows water pressure, based on the height of water. Do we want the same false sense of protection in our back yard?

We must demand that a thorough investigation is conducted to determine the failure of these walls. All new construction must be stopped and the floodwall design must be corrected before West Jefferson suffers the same fate that New Orleans did. It appears the Army Corps of Engineers is not qualified to handle floodwall design and construction. Would you hire a company with such a poor record? (Folse, 2005, p. B8)

Although many blamed the Army Corps of Engineers for the flooding, others blame the federal government generally for not funding improvement projects that would
have supposedly lessened the level of devastation from Katrina. More so, local
government and federal government took heat for not responding in a timely manner to
rescue and serve disaster victims. One example of rhetoric that illustrates just how
unhappy some citizens were with local government after Katrina is the following:

(A)nnoyed at the excuses from the public official whom we entrusted with our
well-being…it is now clear who was intended to be placed in the body bags that
we heard so much about. ‘Katrina’ comes from the Greek word for cleansing. The
question is now or the next election. Either way, credibility is lost. (Moustoukas,
2005, p. 6)

Some LTE writers also were highly critical of New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, claiming
he did not handle the event with poise and that the mayor was not truthful when
discussing the conditions in two major evacuation centers, the Superdome athletic arena
and the city’s convention center. One LTE stated,

(O)ne has to wonder what the residents of the city of New Orleans must think of
Mayor Ray Nagin and Police Chief Eddie Compass, after it was revealed that the
two of them were among the most vocal spreaders of false information about the
conditions at the Superdome and the Convention Center.

The mayor demonstrated hysteria (“10,000 dead!”) not befitting to a
leader who should have been helping people stay calm and offering hope. Then
there are the multitude of media who spread the rumors of mayhem, rape, murder
and general pillage while not once offering, that I saw, an interview with anyone
who actually saw these scenes.

When there were camera shots of the crowds at the Dome, I’d see people
standing about looking bored, hot and miserable, but not out of control, even as
the report might be mentioning atrocities that were supposedly going on inside.

One poor elderly lady dead in a wheelchair became “the bodies in
wheelchairs.” The fact that the media showed the same body over and over
indicated there was a scarcity of bodies to be found lying around to stumble over
in the streets.

The mayor has done a sorry job, and I hope his career in politics is over
soon. The man has done more harm than anyone to the image of New Orleans.
(Murray, 2005, B10)
In respect to the flooding of Jefferson Parish in Louisiana, one LTE wrote, “I hope the parish president and the mayor are proud of themselves” (Inman, 2005, p. B6). Also in response to the flooding of Jefferson Parish, another LTE said, “Mr. Broussard’s plan is responsible for the majority of this parish’s devastation. … If it is our parish leaders’ job to protect the property and lives of its parishioners, Mr. Broussard and Mr. Maestri have let us down” (Villanueva, 2005, p. B6). Another LTE said, “I will vote for any opponent who runs against him [Broussard]” (Smith, 2005, p. 4). Another LTE wrote, “Broussard has repeated that he would take the same lame actions if another storm threatens. He fails to realize that no matter how many times you repeat a fairy tale it never becomes fact” (Inman, 2005, p. 6).

Some writers emphasized that responsibility for lost lives fell on the shoulders of local and federal government, such as this example:

(1)n simplest terms, the fault of many of the deaths that occurred in New Orleans, Jefferson, St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes lies with the state and federal governments, which failed to provide funding to properly build and maintain the levee system.

No life, no matter how small and insignificant it may seem to the powers that be, is less valuable than money we print or foreign aid we give to other countries that have no appreciation for it… I am fortunate. I moved from New Orleans years ago… (Lehn, 2005, p. B8)

LTEs, such as the one above, suggested that state and federal governments were more focused on giving away money and aiding other countries than funding and maintaining infrastructure in the United States. Another example of rhetoric that focused on the United States spending more money overseas than domestically was this: “We are now in need, and those who have profited from commerce with this country should be
ready to provide assistance” (Hero, 2005, p. 10). Another LTE writer stated, “Now is the
time to insist on levees in Louisiana before bombs in Baghdad” (Hopkins, 2005, p. 39).

The rhetoric about government officials in post-Katrina letters was not all
negative. Some LTEs conveyed a sense of sympathy and understanding for the officials,
rhetoric that was absent in the more negative LTEs. One such supportive LTE stated:

(A)s a New Orleans native, it kills me to hear others bashing the city ... it’s easy
for some people to talk: those who haven’t been through a devastating situation,
or those who have been in and out of the city, against orders ... I hope the mayor
keeps up the good work and continues keeping the citizens of New Orleans and
their best interest at heart. (Fox, 2005, p.B8)

In reply to a negative LTE about the Kenner mayor’s response to storm challenges, the
newspaper published an LTE from the mayor of the New Orleans suburb where the
region’s major airport is located. The mayor wrote:

(T)he suggestion that I would cause harm to Kenner for the sake of one federal
dollar is utter nonsense and an insult. ... The city will lose a great deal of its cash
reserves in this disaster. ... I am very proud. I am proud of my staff, which pulled
together in the worst possible conditions and worked around the clock for four
weeks to get Kenner moving again. I am proud of Kenner firefighters, police
officers and city workers who helped keep homes as safe as possible. (Capitano,
2005, p. B10)

LTEs that communicated support and gratitude for local government and law
enforcement served as reminders that anger-fueled LTEs may provide seemingly rational
points, but also often are one-sided examples of “venting” that do not articulate (or
consider) all angles of a topic.

With much attention on Katrina and the unexpectedness of events thereafter,
everyday activities and responsibilities shifted. Groups such as law enforcement were
expected to continue to function and do their jobs to protect citizens and enforce laws.
However, many of those police officers also had to cope with the same challenges as other residents of the city (funerals for family members killed in the flooding, damaged homes, forced relocation of families, financial losses, and more). LTEs criticized and supported local law enforcement. For example, in response to the closure of public roads, preventing displaced citizens from surrounding areas to enter the relatively safe city of Gretna, an LTE stated:

(W)hen will Arthur Lawson, chief of the Gretna Police Department, be arrested along with the others who assisted him in trapping New Orleans residents trying to evacuate the city by foot – the only means they had – during a living hell that was not their making. Why has no one called for the arrest of these heartless people? … These people have blood on their hands, and I hope it haunts them for the rest of their lives. (Preau, 2005, p. B6)

Published that same day was a different LTE that conveyed sheer disappointment and frustration toward people who criticized police officers and their actions. That writer gave thanks to the officers in response to their decision not to allow outsiders to enter the city during the time of chaos after Katrina. That LTE stated:

(I) am completely disheartened at the criticism of the actions of the Gretna and Westwego police chiefs. ...What mattered was the lack of supplies or ability to care for thousands of people who would have had nowhere to go even upon entering Jefferson parish. (Smith, 2005, p. B6)

LTEs that were supportive in nature were submitted by the general public and in other instances by individuals affiliated with a group or organization, which was at the time, on the receiving end of negative attention. An example of that can be seen from this LTE submitted by a police sergeant:

(W)e do not ask any thanks, but we should not be criticized by our own. Of all the hundreds of people we rescued and the thousands we helped direct out of the path of Katrina and back home again, we received three complaints. All were
LTEs like the example above illustrate that even administrators and law enforcement officers criticized each other during the time of distress. One would expect city officials to take the lead in efforts to unite and work together at such a time; these examples suggest that there was infighting instead. The LTEs also provide further evidence of catharsis as LTEs directed anger toward law enforcement and vice versa. LTEs that disparaged law enforcement did not acknowledge that police officers were affected by the disaster as well.

During the aftermath of Katrina people had different ideas about who to blame, and at times, outsiders criticized city residents for not doing more to help themselves. Often in response to such LTEs, emotional appeals and a desire to be understood surfaced; those LTEs expressed disappointment in outsiders who criticized New Orleans citizens for not evacuating prior to Katrina and for waiting to be saved. Below is an LTE that communicated harsh and forthright criticisms of leaders who were accused of allowing problems of poverty to persist and citizens who were perceived to be waiting for someone to save them:

(I)f Hurricane Katrina didn’t prove the ineptitude of government in general and our governor and the New Orleans mayor in particular, nothing ever will.

Our brilliant governor blamed President Bush and told everyone to pray. Mayor Ray Nagin blamed Bush and went on television and cursed and of course talked about the “calvary” not showing up … He is the one who let many thousands of people fend for themselves during the evacuation. Many had depended on the government their whole lives for everything, and they just stayed and waited for the government to solve their problems one more time.

Of course Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton had to show up and spew their vile racial comments. I don’t remember them or the NAACP sending one boat for rescue or one ounce of food for the stranded folks in New Orleans. Anyone with
half a brain knows the problem is poverty, not race. Maybe Jackson and Sharpton should have been in New Orleans for the past 40 years, asking the poor why they don’t finish high school or have babies out of wedlock. The Advocate in Baton Rouge had a picture of one evacuee who had no money or place to go but had a 7-month old baby and was five months pregnant! Could this be part of the poverty problem?

The feds couldn’t find $17 billion to prevent the devastation in New Orleans but are quick to spend $200 billion to rebuild the city. Very typical.

For all the folks who have spent their lives waiting for the “calvary” to solve their problems, I am here to tell you that John Wayne is dead. Get off your butt, get an education, get a job, don’t have children you expect others to support, stay off drugs. And you can buy your own horses. (Wilkinson, 2005, P. B8)

Such criticisms of course attracted equally strong rebuttals. Here is one example:

(I) would like to suggest using the approaching Hurricane Rita to educate the rest of America about what would need to occur to completely evacuate New Orleans, in real time, in the face on an impending hurricane disaster. As so much criticism has been placed on our leaders since Hurricane Katrina, a real-time exercise showing the necessary time line would demonstrate to America that we are not slow Southern morons who don’t know when to come in out of the rain. (Casemore, 2005, p. B8)

In particular, the word choice of “we are not slow Southern morons” suggests that the LTE writer was highly agitated and annoyed with the lack of understanding others had shown. Another LTE provided further evidence of that frustration: “Let’s face it: Hindsight is a wonderful thing. It is really easy to sit back and say ‘shoulda, woulda, coulda.’ I am sure that for the next hurricane, we’ll pack about the same, but more people will leave” (Smith, 2005 p. 4).

Other LTEs blamed the city’s mayor, the news media, and local and state government for further contributing to a bad image of New Orleans. One angry businessperson wrote that at first, suppliers for that business offered a lot of assistance, but:
…after many weeks of watching national media coverage of the childishness and pettiness of our leaders, the lack of a plan to deal with disaster that had been predicted forever and the abhorrent behavior of some of our citizenry (and most of our politicians), many of those suppliers are balking.

One manager told me point blank that he had all of the faith in the world in my efforts but felt that the entire area would go bankrupt due to the inability of our leaders.

This sentiment was mirrored by many others.

We have all heard that the feds are reluctant to dispense financial assistance here because of the perceived irresponsibility of our leaders. It is both shocking and disgusting to see that significant citizens of the rest of the country consider us not only inept to rebuild but perhaps deserving of our situation!

This is a direct result of the political pettiness and short-sightedness that has been so amusing to all of us for so long. Well, it’s not so funny anymore, as people have died and spirits have been crushed.

We can no longer tolerate the shell game that passes for leadership in this area. I would implore everyone to be very vocal by letter or phone to call every time one of our officials makes a public display of idiocy of childishness. We can’t take any more negative publicity. While we’re all busy trying to rebuild our lives, many of our leaders are cutting off life lines. (Fransen, 2005, p. 6)

The negative image of the region also was published in the LTE column. For example, one person wrote, “I will do everything in my power to avoid Louisiana and New Orleans taking advantage of me by playing on my emotions. Listen up leaders of New Orleans and Louisiana: Do not steal my money” (Jones, 2005, p. B8). That LTE also stated, “The people of New Orleans knew for years that a flood risk existed, and they refused to fund adequate flood protection” (Jones, 2005, p. B8). Other expressions of frustration and anger were displayed when that LTE stated, “New Orleans and Louisiana have for years been notorious for corruption … New Orleanians need to do something for themselves. U.S. taxpayers will be there for assistance, but do not take advantage of us. You are on a world stage now. Do not blow it” (Jones, 2005, p. B8). Such letters seemed to play off of, and in turn exacerbate the high-emotion rhetoric in the LTE forums.
A handful of LTEs highlighted that not just New Orleans, but surrounding suburbs and nearby cities, were living the post-Katrina nightmare. Those cities did not receive as much media attention as the culturally rich tourist destination of New Orleans. Such LTEs addressed a major issue that thousands of people from other places on the Gulf Coast were forced to cope with disruption, displacement, and relocation. One LTE stated:

(W)here is the coverage of the devastation rendered to the less-affluent neighborhoods of Slidell? Take a drive out Short Cut and view Tammany Mobile Home Park, Northshore Mobile Home Park and Avery Estates. Apple Pie Ridge is gone too. These homes were tossed about like an angry toddler throws his toys. Hundreds of families were displaced. These folks have nothing to come back to…But all we see is New Orleans, New Orleans, New Orleans. There is life (or lack of it, now) somewhere besides New Orleans. It would be nice for the rest of the world to see and help these folks too. They are the backbone of the work force, and commerce will suffer for the lack of housing and assistance available for them. (Hartsell, 2005, p.6)

Another example of an emotional plea for others to consider that New Orleans was not the only city affected by the storm: “Please help Slidell. We are the forgotten city” (Gray, 2005, p. B6). Many LTEs that expressed a want and need for help and attention blamed the media for lack of coverage of other affected regions, such as inland towns that also were harmed by the hurricane:

(M)y husband and I live a few miles north of Picayune, Mississippi, about 45 miles from the coast. If I were depending only on the media for information about the storm, I’d conclude that Katrina stopped dead after passing Biloxi, Gulfport, New Orleans and Slidell. (McCammon, 2005, p. 10)

LTEs that expressed frustrations like above conveyed pleas for help, sympathy, and understanding. The language used displays profuse frustration toward the bulk of attention being focused on New Orleans and its neighborhoods.
The LTEs analyzed for this thesis were filled with the rhetoric of blame and imbalanced accusation. The targets of the blame were not just government agencies and officials, but also business owners, nonprofit organizations, even the disaster victims themselves. Those LTEs became less common in *The Times-Picayune* as more LTEs were published expressing acceptance of the situation and desires to move forward with recovery. Even so, later LTEs were not any less emotional or angry than printed LTEs published in the immediate wake of Katrina. It appears as though LTEs published later refocused energy and shifted attention toward recovery efforts after the initial impact of the event.

*Theme 3: Recovery Efforts*

Whether LTEs were directed toward local officials, national organizations, or failed processes, many highlighted a need to do more than simply rebuild the city. Some LTEs presented even lackluster initiatives as well-meaning attempts to rally fellow citizens of New Orleans to pick up the pieces and move forward. Strong, sometimes radicalized demands for change evidenced in LTEs expressed a desire among many New Orleanians to make sweeping improvements across the board.

The post-Katrina LTEs helped to frame many of the broader social problems that New Orleans and neighboring cities were plagued with before the storm hit. The high number of low-paying tourism-related jobs was a common topic, which one LTE writer indicated while also broaching the topic of racial inequality. “While the population of New Orleans is majority African-American, the reason for these citizens’ poverty is not the color of their skin but the below-average wages that many businesses pay them”
Some LTE writers suggested that an increase in good-paying jobs would help alleviate the poverty that plagued much of New Orleans. Other LTEs formed an argument that more investment in schools would be a wise long-term investment in the city’s economic future. One wrote,

(N)o education leads to no job, which leads to poverty and no car, which leads to – you guessed it – you ain’t getting out … the continued reliance on Saints, Mardi Gras, tourism and low-income, dead-end jobs is short-sighted and produces a very unstable tax base. (McCann, 2005, p. B8)

LTEs published after Katrina highlighted problems such as poverty, failing public schools, and accusations of corruption and shenanigans in local and regional government. Such dialogue challenged the broader view in society that aligned New Orleans with Mardi Gras and “The Big Easy,” and focused national and international attention less on the city’s reputation as a center for tourism and adult-focused entertainment and more on the city’s prolonged problems with poverty and crime. Many LTEs encompassed a “make it bigger, better and stronger” sort of attitude — a sense that the disaster created an opportunity to address the pre-Katrina problems of the region.

In response to Governor Kathleen Blanco’s actions after Katrina, there were a handful of highly emotional and angry LTEs that accused the governor of contributing to the “old” problems of New Orleans. One such letter-writer decried, “Shame on Gov. Blanco! She had the opportunity to show the country that Louisiana had changed. Instead, she confirmed that Louisiana is still run by the good ol’ boys. The only difference is that our governor is a good ol’ girl” (Voigt, 2005, p. 4). Another wrote:

(A)t the very time our congressional delegation is trying to convince other legislators that we can be trusted to spend federal dollars wisely, Gov. Blanco and her cronies blatantly belly up to the tough and pig out as usual.
There is no longer any doubt that Blanco lacks intelligence, judgment or even shame.
The best thing she can do for her state is to resign. (Aucoin, 2005, p. 4)

LTEs like that showed just how discontent citizens were with leaders. Other writers expressed their frustrations using humor, like this one: “I was thrilled to hear that Kathleen Blanco appointed former Sen. John Breaux. Then disappointment struck when I found out that Blanco didn’t appoint him governor. It seemed like a good idea, since we desperately need one” (Breun, 2005, p. 6).

Concerns about governmental corruption and police brutality also were discussed in the forums. LTEs that highlighted such concerns further supported the notion that many people in New Orleans were tired of loose policies and corruption. Quite a few of LTEs were focused on the beating of a 64-year-old African American male by police.

One LTE stated:

(1)n pre-Katrina days, innocent African-Americans were beaten by officers of the New Orleans Police Department [NOPD]; post-Katrina days apparently entail the same ... anyone who has lived in New Orleans for any length of time knows the NOPD’s history of abuse and corruption (Simeon, 2005, p. 6).

Other rhetoric that showed disapproval for supposed corrupt cops:

(I)t’s the crooked cops that scare me most. They scared me before Katrina, and they have me very scared after Katrina. Supposedly, Katrina cleaned out the thugs, but the crooked cops remain. … Just the same old BS. … And here is the thing, I am a Caucasian, with a job in an office and a home in the suburbs, but still the crooked cops scare me the most. (Boyd, 2005, p. 6)

Other LTEs referred to cops as “bullies in blue” (Wehner, 2005, p. 6); and, one wrote, “Anyone who has lived in New Orleans for any length of time knows the NOPD’s history of abuse and corruption” (Simeon, 2005, p. 6).

In an effort to defend law enforcement, a retired police sergeant wrote:
The fraternal Order of Police will not attempt to justify the behavior of the three officers. We will, however, insist that the officers receive proper legal representation and are afforded the due process that is their right.

Let us, as police officers, understand that the citizens we serve also suffered.

Let us, as civilians, realize that lawful police orders must be obeyed immediately.

Let us agree that wrongdoing by police officers or civilians will not be tolerated.

Let’s all of us work together to rebuild our great city. (Gallagher, 2005, p. 10)

LTEs also directed blame and fault toward the top executives of local municipalities, particularly Jefferson Parish President Aaron Broussard and his decision to evacuate the pumping stations in that county, which some believe increased flooding and ultimately worsened the situation for surrounding areas. Again, LTEs like that highlighted frustrations with current leadership and expressed a strong desire for change. Some of those LTEs revealed underlying opinions about Broussard and other such local leaders, which was exemplified in rhetoric such as this:

(J)efferson Parish continues to be run by a bunch of cronies, who are afraid to question the political bosses for fear that they won’t get their turn to move up in the hierarchy of cronies. Because as you move up in the hierarchy of cronies, you reap more benefits afforded only to politicians in this corrupt parish. (Brechtel, 2005, p. 6)

A variety of viewpoints were expressed in the LTEs when it came to priorities and how to move forward and rebuild the city. Rhetoric that accused the city of New Orleans government of corruption and sticking to “old” ways of managing New Orleans often expressed a need for New Orleans to clean up in more ways than one; first, to clean up and rebuild the city, and second, to clean up house, and be rid of any “old” ways of
handling matters. For some, that meant shifting interests to meet the common citizen’s needs.

After the initial impact of Katrina, some LTEs expressed a sense of defeat and abandonment. As the weeks moved on, *The Times-Picayune* published LTEs that expressed concerns about the loss of jobs and the overall decline of the economy from outside businesses and temporary workers moving in to profit from the rebuilding effort. Others expressed gratitude for the assistance New Orleans received from neighboring states and out-of-state workers. For example, one LTE expressed support for such workers, and wrote, “Thank God someone is coming to help in our time of need. Stopping 100 people from building while we wait for ‘Gulf residents’ is ridiculous” (Giudice, 2005, p. 4). In contrast, other LTEs expressed frustrations and concerns for “losing” New Orleans to big businesses and out-of-state workers. One person wrote, “Houston is luring our displaced workers with job fairs and a truly organized employment recruitment effort … What is being done to organize and counter Houston’s effort? Where is economic leadership? Probably waiting for the next Mardi Gras parade” (Sherman, 2005, p. B10). Another LTE praised immigrant workers for assisting with rebuild efforts in New Orleans; that LTE stated, “It was reassuring to see the teams of people working to clear the rubble and do all kinds of jobs to get our city back on its feet. … There is more than enough work for everyone for a long time” (Choi, 2005, p. 4).

In response to an editorial that criticized large companies, the vice president and regional manager of cable provider Cox Communications wrote:

(I)nstead of criticizing companies like Cox Communications and BellSouth, which are spending millions of dollars each week since Hurricane Katrina to
restore services, *The Times-Picayune* should be celebrating the example both are setting to quickly rebuild our metro area. It is exactly this kind of confidence and investment that will brighten New Orleans’ future, accelerate employment and help rebuild our local economy.” (Bicket, 2005, p. B6)

A few LTEs placed emphasis on buying only from locally owned companies and refusing out-of-state big business during recovery efforts. For example, one LTE stated, “I have pledged to do business only with local merchants — at least until our community is economically healthy” (Lachin, 2005, p. 6).

With such concern that large national corporations and out-of-state workers might swoop in to steal work and overtake New Orleans’ economy, some LTEs emphasized importance of the “average Joe’s” voice being heard. Such LTEs suggested that the average citizen needs to be heard and have an active role in recovery and rebuild efforts. A few LTEs stated they did not want lawyers or business-owners to dominate committees having to do with reconstructing New Orleans. One letter writer stated, “Ask the real people of the city to join that blue-ribbon committee … We need people who want to see a different New Orleans rise from the floodwaters” (Joubert, 2005, p. B10). Another letter writer stated,

(T)he mayor’s commission of 17 to rebuild New Orleans is supposed to represent the city’s diversity? I didn’t know that New Orleans was overwhelmingly male and that big businessmen made up more than half the population. I didn’t know that New Orleans had zero small-business owners and virtually no nonprofit organizations. I didn’t know that it had no religious leaders from the Jewish community.

No matter that there will be 200 committee members serving with this commission. Mayor Ray Nagin has clearly sent the message that he has no regard for the many voices of those who are the heart and soul of the city. (Cole, 2005, p. B6)
LTEs similar to the previous one are significant, because they express concern and fear for big businesses taking over; additionally, that fear is attached also to the government by pointing out that the mayor has created a commission that is not representative of the “real” population of New Orleans. It is telling that some LTE writers stated that they felt let down by their government, then expressed a strong desire for the city to move in a different direction only to see recovery efforts dominated by the same leaders and the same mentality that dominated New Orleans before the storm. In many instances, The Times-Picayune forum provided some of the public with a place to express concerns, frustrations, and hopes for New Orleans to move forward in a different way than before. The forum also highlighted deep-seated issues and obstacles that the city must overcome in order to rise above as a new New Orleans. It is clear that issues of education, poverty, and corruption are not easily overcome, but it is also evident, according to some LTEs, that unless courses of action are altered, the same vicious cycles will continue. There was evidence of venting in the local newspaper’s forum after Katrina. It is possible that some LTEs were written not only to vent, but also to influence policy changes, especially considering the large number of remarks directed toward leaders and their actions and inactions.

Of particular note is the recurring topic of New Orleans’ “Mardi Gras mentality” – that is, the emphasis on the city’s reputation as a party town. A handful of letters that focused on rebuilding efforts featured the “quick fixes” such as rebuilding casinos and bringing in tourism to ensure the success of the city’s most popular annual event, the mid-winter Mardi Gras celebration. For example, an LTE discussed how casinos could
help quickly revive New Orleans’ economy: “I completely disagree with The Times-
Picayune’s assessment of Mayor Nagin’s casino plan. The plan is excellent” (Spoo, 2005, p. 6). Another example of an LTE that took a strong stance against the newspaper’s editorial position to oppose expanded gaming in the city posed that, with the loss of jobs and homes, gaming would be a great way to rebuild and promote economic growth and enhance the local tax base (Halpern, 2005, p. 4). That LTE writer asked, “Where does the rebuilding money come from? I can assure you, not from FEMA or other governmental agencies. … I hope The Times-Picayune will open the forum and allow citizens to see the positive side of gaming” (p. 4).

Another LTE suggested that New Orleans needs to quickly get back to promoting its nightlife and its tradition of jazz music. Specifically, that LTE expressed disapproval for a councilwoman who opposed plans to reopen a particular jazz club in New Orleans. That LTE said, “Now more than ever, the value of local culture needs to be recognized and celebrated in New Orleans, not consigned to margins by backward-facing eccentrics like Councilwoman Clarkson” (Hahn, 2005, p. 7). The topic of Mardi Gras excited many LTE writers, as it brought in tourism and money, but others expressed a desire for priorities to shift from that party mentality, mainly associated with debauchery and relying on tourism for the region’s economy, to an interest in the long-term well-being of citizens.

One LTE suggested that citizens of New Orleans have always been “second-class citizens when compared to tourists” (Anderson, 2005, p. 4). That writer continued:

(T)he French Quarter is not the city of New Orleans, and the major part of this city is destroyed. Certain citizens who received little or no damage to their
belongings can continue to celebrate because their small, myopic world has been
restored, and they are again comfortable. The powers that be can once again
focus on how to cater to the tourists, while the citizens’ lives fall into further
disarray.

Unless we are treating our residents as the city’s most important
commodity, New Orleans will fail. (p. 4)

Another example of anti-gambling remarks in an LTE are:

(W)hy pursue a vision of neon, desert-bound Las Vegas with casinos on Canal
Street? Do we want the other things Vegas has to offer, prostitution, destroyed
dreams and the unending pursuit of the quick buck?

There are no cities in the world like New Orleans. We have a heritage as a
great port, a center for offshore oil and gas development, a banking and
transportation hub and a medical mecca, a university city and the birthplace of
jazz.

This is an economy of substance, not quick bucks.

What is the payoff for the Vegas solution? Casinos that rob citizens and
cheat the city and state of promised but unpaid tax revenues. And the shabby
reputation of another Atlantic City along with some more dead-end service jobs.
(Salzar, 2005, p. 6)

Letters that opposed expanding gambling in the city tended to also mention New Orleans’
“corrupt” ways. Those letters argued instead for building a “new” New Orleans, again,
 focusing on the idea of breaking free from past dilemmas such as widespread corruption
and entrenched leaders. As mentioned before, a number of LTEs emphasized the need to
invest in public education more than other sectors, and some suggested to invest in that
rather than the Mardi Gras tradition that underpins the city’s tourism industry. One such
letter writer argued:

(W)e need a new beginning in New Orleans, one that does not depend on tourism
and sports. We need to focus on education and business.

We need to step out of our teen years, and into adulthood as a city. Just as
an adult can put away his partying and sports, and go out and earn a living to
support his family, so must our city. ...

Grow up, New Orleans. Stop playing and protect your people. Once we
get the levees repaired once we get viable businesses up and running, once our
children are in schools that are safe, clean and staffed with qualified teachers, then we can talk about bringing sports teams back.

For now, we must do the mundane, the un-fun. We don’t need to listen to jazz yet, either, as the mayor suggested. The sounds of running water, air conditioners, traffic and phones ringing is music enough to most of our hurting ears. (MacArthur, 2005, p. 6)

Although some LTEs were focused on bringing in or keeping out gambling and gaming, other LTEs just wanted to see some kind of long-range, comprehensive plan for the future. One LTE said that because of too many varied interests and lack of teamwork from regional, state, and federal leaders, New Orleans would suffer without such a plan (Bijou, 2005, p. 4). Another LTE questioned whether the mayor had a long-range plan and wrote, “Does he have one or does he just pull ideas out of a hat? Does he think things through? … Now is the time to make New Orleans great. Please don’t let us down, again.” (Goliwas, 2005, p. 4).

Some LTEs in the “recovery” theme also challenged the citizenry to do more than complain about civic and economic leaders. One letter-writer suggested that “…it is our fault, the citizens of New Orleans, that it fell from grace. It wasn’t those self-serving politicians’ fault” (Epstein, 2005, p. 4).

As more of the LTEs published in The Times-Picayune exhibited fewer emotionally charged rants and seemingly more reasonable discussion of long-term strategy, the narrative in the LTE forums seemed to suggest this: Now that the citizenry has vented its anger and frustrations, and now that the allegations of who to blame have been made, it is time to move forward. Thus, it seems as if The Times-Picayune’s LTEs did, in fact, provide a venue for cathartic writing, albeit in a limited manner.
Summary of Findings Related to Catharsis and Theoretical Frameworks

It is apparent from the overall analysis that patterns of cathartic expression were evident in *The Times Picayune* in the months after Hurricane Katrina. These findings support unexamined claims made in earlier studies that LTEs may, in part, fulfill a societal role that such forums provide the “irate, the antagonist, the displeased” a place to vent (Davis & Rarick, 1964, p. 109). Even more, that evidence of catharsis coupled with rational arguments that warranted attention, suggests that *The Times-Picayune’s* public forum provided a space for more than mere venting and blowing off steam, further supporting Vacin’s (1965) untested suggestion that many LTEs are “logical” and “sensible” (p. 510). LTEs that presented one-sided arguments, with little consideration for the other side’s circumstances, suggested those writers were more interested in getting their emotions off their chests — that is, in achieving catharsis — than in engaging in discourse and debate or even simply offering contrary arguments to the actions of public figures and institutions (Freud, 1895; Davis & Rarick, 1964; Pasternack, 1979). That is, the LTEs studied here were not just “negative,” but many seemed emotionally charged almost to the point of being irrational. They were clearly emotive.

Because of space limitations and editorial practices, it is important to once again reinforce that this is an analysis of the narrative constructed by *The Times-Picayune* via its LTE-selection process. The question of what was expressed in unpublished submissions remains. The evidence of the forum being a constructed narrative is fairly clear: LTEs were often published and grouped together based on balance (one “for” and one “against” a particular topic), by the editors of the newspaper. Without access to the
LTEs that were not printed, it is impossible to tell whether the editors’ selection was representative of the whole of submissions. In regard to catharsis, there is the question of whether editors even considered publishing the more extreme emotion-charged tirades that they most likely received. Past studies have established that many editors privilege well-written letters expressing “logical” arguments; such preferences would likely lead to selection practices that are highly prejudiced against purely cathartic letters. Even while the public may have experienced increased, built-up emotion after Katrina, and there may have been a desire to vent those frustrations via the LTE forum of The Times-Picayune, the newspaper’s balanced-and-measured approach to selection may have ensured that the overall conversation did not become a public platform dominated by writers essentially “yelling” back and forth. Thus, one possible motivation for editors to weed out such LTEs is to preserve a quality and well-balanced conversation in which major issues and concerns are emphasized and discussed in-depth, while still publishing the occasional “catharsis letter” to ensure the narrative also provides some evidence of the extreme emotions of people facing such disaster.

Whether it’s writing an LTE in an moment of strong emotion, or writing for a set amount of time for a set number of days as a structured form of therapy, individuals in both settings are required to take some degree of initiative to communicate — to express an opinion, idea or belief, or expand on a traumatic upheaval. Both settings require a blending of thoughtful expression and emotional tension from the writer, building to the cathartic release when the letter is submitted, and (in the case of published letters) the affirmation of seeing those expressions in print.
An example of previous psychological research that could help indirectly explain the cathartic potential of LTE forums was a study of online conversations about the death of Princess Diana. In that study, Stone and Pennebaker (2002) considered the idea of a “collective traumatic event.” One of the purposes for that study was to “map” naturally occurring conversations as a shared traumatic event unfolds (p. 173). Although print public forums are not ideal for studying naturally occurring conversations (due to the constraints already mentioned), cathartic emotional expressions combined with revealing texts found in this analysis further supported the notion that citizens of greater New Orleans experienced a shared trauma; thus, the major daily newspaper’s LTE columns served as a platform for some of those residents to connect and communicate with the broader community as the waters receded and the recovery began. Just as Stone and Pennebaker found that the focus of online conversation about Princess Diana’s death “mirrored” the developing events (p. 179), similarly, textual analysis of LTEs published in The Times-Picayune’s letter pages revealed a reflection of events that unfolded in and around New Orleans after Katrina. For example, a couple of weeks after the event, LTEs contained language that expressed initial shock, disappointment, and blame. As the weeks moved on, the LTE sections contained fewer of those letters, and more LTEs containing suggestions for how to rebuild New Orleans, which “mirrored” the events that were actually taking place. As committees were established for rebuilding and recovery efforts, LTEs more or less “stabilized” to be dominated by comments on the workings of government and other influential organizations.
Similar to the idea of collective coping discussed by Pennebaker and Harber (1993), who found evidence that the 1989 Loma-Prieta earthquake in the San Francisco Bay area “brought the city together” (p. 132), Stone and Pennebaker (2002) later found that “the death of Princess Diana seemed to bring a global community together” (p. 180). That concept of “collective coping” (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993; Stone & Pennebaker, 2002) also was found in this analysis, as the tragedy of Katrina brought a community together, via its major daily newspaper’s opinion page, to discuss major concerns and issues.

This analysis suggests that local newspapers have a great capacity to serve the needs of the public after such an event, especially when communications are lost or access is limited, and information is needed. Furthermore, even though newspaper forums provide editor-managed conversations, they also perhaps relate more telling and informative conversations than free-for-all online forums. Many LTEs analyzed for this study contained rhetoric that addressed future needs and indicated strong initiatives and plans to move forward. Many LTEs were even submitted by letter writers who relocated and were no longer living in New Orleans but who still had connections to the city — that is, members of the post-Katrina diaspora. That suggests that displaced individuals still felt the need to engage their former communities by writing to their “local” newspaper, possibly to make sense of shared traumatic event (and, in turn, editors made decisions to print such letters); that is also consistent with past research that found people need to share, expand and reflect upon their experiences after a traumatic event.
(Chandler, 2002). With that in mind, *The Times-Picayune* editors seem to have constructed just such a narrative in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After a catastrophe in a community, public forums, such as LTE sections, have an opportunity to disseminate much needed information. Public spaces for communication have the capacity to perform several roles in democracy, especially in times of disaster. Newspaper LTE sections can provide an outlet for catharsis, in addition to providing forums in which citizens can express opinions and concerns, debate important issues, and promote community recovery efforts after a community disaster.

As stated earlier, this analysis was limited by the fact that *The Times-Picayune* did not publish for three weeks after the storm, yet certainly the newspaper received LTEs about the disaster during that time. Because Pennebaker and Harber (1993) defined the post-catastrophe period as spanning eight weeks, this study had to consider that cathartic letter-writing began immediately after the catastrophe struck, not when the newspaper that would print those letters resumed publication. There was no indication that the newspaper had either rejected LTEs submitted during those three weeks, nor that it adapted its editing strategies to accommodate any backlog. The LTEs were marked only by the dates of publication, not the dates they were submitted. That presented an obvious limitation to the study, but one that was unavoidable.

As a case study of published LTEs, this thesis also is limited in the same way as previous studies of published LTEs. When analyzing LTEs, it is important to consider the filter by which submitted letters are selected. Not all of the letters that were submitted to the newspaper after Katrina were published, as is common for larger newspapers. LTEs that were published may have been heavily edited as well, particularly for length — also
a common practice at larger newspapers. There are other routines aligned with LTE selection and publication that make the published forums products of the editorial process rather than reflective of broader public opinion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001).

Also, the researcher did not conduct interviews with LTE writers or editors and, therefore, cannot assume letter writers’ motivations for writing nor editors’ criteria for selecting or rejecting letters. Although such interviews would have added a useful dimension to the present study, the many elapsed years would have made it difficult, if not impossible, to locate and interview LTE writers, nor to expect writers or editors to recall their motives or feelings at the time.

Printed LTE forums also may not provide the best setting to study catharsis and writing, because of the limitations discussed above. Internet opinion forums may reveal a very different narrative of catharsis after a catastrophe. The Internet provides the public with endless opportunities to voice opinions, to share ideas, or to make noise and move on, as it is a growing hot spot for communication and host to thousands of ongoing conversations each day (Foust, 2005, p. 1). The Internet, a seemingly less restricted space for conversation than newspapers, coupled with online forums’ attractive qualities of convenience and accessibility, offers the public a much more “open” space in which people can take part in public dialogue, which has been an unrealized ideal of LTE forums (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 309).

This study considers whether the cathartic function of LTEs is much more significant than many journalists and scholars presently realize. Do LTE columns provide more than a place for the irate to vent, especially after a catastrophe? Do LTEs provide a
way for individuals and community to cope after catastrophe, because they afford the public with a place to join in public conversation, perhaps when there are no other available outlets? Those are among some of the questions that future studies could explore.

Clearly, one avenue for future study would be to figure out who writes letters that get published after a catastrophe, and why they write. Some of the letter writers who contributed to the LTE column studied here were influential leaders of New Orleans, such as senators, the governor, police officers, etc. There is something to be said for the letter writer who participates in the letter writing process, while a slew of messages and off-the-cuff comments can cover an online message board at any given time.
REFERENCES


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