

I'M NOT BUYING IT: A RHETORICAL STUDY OF MEDIATION DURING  
HURRICANE KATRINA

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## ABSTRACT

At 6:10 AM on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005, with sustained winds reaching 145 miles per hour, Hurricane Katrina made landfall near Buras, Louisiana. Thousands of people were left with no access to food, or water, or shelter. The affected area was in need of immediate assistance. They needed action. Their local government, their federal government, and we as fellow citizens, as fellow human beings, watched the victims of this horrible tragedy through some form of mass media as they were forced to wait for food, water, and shelter and little was done to help them. Inherent in our national failure was a lack of understanding as to how our information was delivered to us and how it both shaped and manipulated our understanding of Hurricane Katrina. Our national mediation through mass media was neither examined nor thoroughly understood.

I examine the mediation of Hurricane Katrina through the mass media sources of television news, including both broadcast news and cable news, as well as through the Internet phenomenon of blogging. Many factors motivate our mediation within these mass media sources, including our own capitalism, our immersion in literacy and progression away from oral culture, and a continual push towards individuality and self-awareness. The purpose of this thesis then, is to examine the mediation present in Hurricane Katrina coverage in order to better understand the overarching vehicles of mediation present in the presentation of our world. Understanding where our information comes from allows us to become more active participants in the formation of our world and the ideas that govern it so that our individuality and our literacy are allowed to become compliments to our social obligations as citizens of America and our newly globalized world rather than vehicles of isolation and suffering.

# I'M NOT BUYING IT: A RHETORICAL STUDY OF MEDIATION DURING HURRICANE KATRINA

## INTRODUCTION

At 6:10 AM on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005, with sustained winds reaching 145 miles per hour, Hurricane Katrina made landfall near Buras, Louisiana. Thousands of people were left with no access to food, or water, or shelter. The affected area was in need of immediate assistance. They needed action. Our federal government failed them as the suffering people of the Gulf were forced to wait. The largest evacuation shelter in New Orleans filled to capacity and beyond as the survivors of Katrina poured into the Superdome. Local government officials failed them as the people of the Gulf Coast were forced to wait. The levees were breached and the bowl that is New Orleans began filling, covering much of the city in several feet of water. For several more days, most Americans watched the victims of this horrible tragedy on television as they were forced, still, to wait. The recovery effort, the effort to reclaim the Gulf Coast from Katrina, took time, too much time for many as aid did not appear for nearly a week after the storm made landfall. Families were trapped on rooftops, bodies were left to float through the streets, and people began to sicken and die.

Unfortunately, this sort of response seems to have become a common occurrence in our newly globalized world. In fact, many of the same complaints lodged against our government and our country for inadequate responses to the needs of its people have similarly been voiced in Kashmir for the response to the massive earthquake in October of 2005 and in Indonesia for the response to the tsunami in December of 2004. Many complaints involve problems relating to logistical coordination or adequate personnel.

Often response teams are overwhelmed by phone calls and are swamped by the sheer numbers of people who need help or supplies. More often, however, there is a distance between the governing forces that run these countries and the people who they govern, including our own, so that the people needing help, needing food, water, and shelter must wait and must suffer. Aaron Broussard of Jefferson Parrish, Louisiana, after telling a story of how a friend's mother begged officials for rescue daily for four days until she finally drowned, commented that all the help that was sent was press conferences. "I'm sick of press conferences. For God's sake, shut up and send us somebody" (Broussard). In Kashmir, thousands of miles away, one resident afflicted by the devastation of the earthquake commented that, "The only aid we have seen is on television" (Bangash).

Ironically, just as Hurricane Katrina made landfall, devastating the Gulf Coast and leaving many in need of help, I found myself in a similar situation in which I, too, relied on the kindness of others. It was on a much smaller scale, of course. I bought a new home and only days after moving in, my water pump went out. Having never seen what a water pump looks like and having never needed to know anything about the water pumping process, I simply stood in my backyard staring at the vast array of pipes, valves, and fittings. Strangely enough, without a word, my neighbor, whom I had never spoken to, simply jumped the fence and hooked my water system up to his own, connecting our houses with a simple garden hose. His act of kindness says a great deal for our neighbor. It was a generous act. But was it extraordinary? So many more people were, and still are, suffering along the Gulf Coast and are in need of assistance much more than I am. Why, as people lay starving, sickening, and dying was the response to Katrina so late and ill equipped, while the mere hint of a lack of water sent my neighbor scaling over our

fence? What caused people from the president down to everyday citizens to remain practically sedentary for days before they were roused to action? The reaction of my neighbor seemed so automatic, and without hesitation, almost intrinsic, but our collective reaction to Katrina was anything but automatic.

The most glaring answer seems to revolve around our collective mediation that stems from our reliance, as a globalized culture, on technology such as television and the Internet, for our understanding of global events such as Hurricane Katrina. My neighbor's understanding of my water problem came from first-hand observations and from face-to-face communication, interactions that can help in illuminating the avenues of mediation that often confound the very connections between people that are needed in order to curb the effects of disasters like Katrina. My neighbor was able to evaluate the situation and determine that I needed help. For Katrina victims the "help," in the guise of fellow Americans, the FEMA director, even the President of the United States, is so vastly removed from them. Most, including President Bush, experienced the horrible destruction through television or the Internet and as such the reactions to the mediated images of destruction that we all received were mediated as well. Layers upon layers of mediation are involved in our understanding of these national stories, these global stories, that are part of our worldview and part of our cultural framework and very often our mediation is overlooked or ignored. Our mediation, however, is intrinsic in our cultural failure, our civic failure, to our fellow Americans after Hurricane Katrina.

In fact, it is our very dependence on mediated avenues of understanding and mediated forms of reality that allow tragedies as those seen in our own Gulf Coast region to remain unchecked for so long. Mediation, through television, through radio, through

the Internet, creates distance, which itself breeds inaction, ineptitude, injustice, corruption, and mismanagement. Our world is a pandemic of injustice and suffering that is only exacerbated by distance and by the relativism that accompanies our newly settled global village. It is no surprise, then, that the man from Kashmir, suffering and in need of aid and surrounded by others who need the same, feels the need to watch television as a way of understanding the situation around him. In America, as well, Aaron Broussard feels the need to watch the press conferences that, in his view, are complicating rescue efforts. Of course a reliance on television, on media in general, is not specific to those afflicted by disaster but happens every day as we watch the news or read the paper, log on, in order to understand what is happening to us. It has become a deeply imbedded part of our global social structure. As I will show, our reliance on technology, while it serves to inform us of our world and our place within it, also isolates us, transforms us into receivers, and, most unfortunately of all, it simply entertains us, allowing distance and inaction.

If we are to truly understand our civic failure towards our fellow Americans in their time of need, then we must analyze our technology. We must analyze our systems of information dispersal in order to understand the mediation and manipulation that is part of these systems. Somewhat like the ocean waters that engulfed Biloxi and New Orleans, exposing deeply ingrained racism and classism, so too has the media torrent washed over us, the American public, and exposed some of our deeply rooted beliefs about ourselves and our relationships with our communities. By examining the torrent, we can move closer to an understanding of the motives of our media and of ourselves as a community as well. We can understand what it was, exactly, that we were watching as

the coverage of Katrina came streaming into our homes. We can understand how the real life hurricane was contorted, created, and manipulated by our media, and more broadly, we can examine how the construction of our world through media affects our perceptions of it, and hence, our perceptions of our communities and ourselves as well. If we can discover how mediation works, then maybe we can begin to understand our own complicity in this mediation. Maybe we can begin moving towards becoming active participants in the experience of our mediated world and attempt to strike some sort of balance between the manipulations of our individuated consumer identities and our more broad civic and social identities as Americans and as human beings.

My study of the mediation that surrounds Hurricane Katrina will be centered on media broadcasts delivered via the television and the Internet. My exploration of television news coverage will include a discussion on the network evening news, as well as on 24-hour cable news broadcasts, while my examination of Internet coverage will include personal blogs concerning the Hurricane. These three media outlets are by no means the only sources of information on Hurricane Katrina, but they exemplify many of the ways in which our information is controlled and distorted. In addition, looking at each of these media forms in turn will allow us to glimpse the progression of our cultural attitudes and tastes towards the forms our media takes. There has been some research done on cultural mediation that has greatly informed my examination of Hurricane Katrina, including the work of Paolo Carpianno, Walter Ong, and Thomas De Zengotita to name a few. De Zengotita's work describes our existence as Americans as a mediated one that, being inundated with images, offers us an unlimited number of options or choices on everything ranging from sneakers to political beliefs. These options create the

illusion of control, through our supposed ability to “choose,” over otherwise uncontrollable situations (128). He further suggests that the individual is offered a great amount of power in exercising this ability to choose. Carpignano offers a glimpse of how this power is controlled through a culture of consumerism that commodifies the images that are offered to us in order to influence the “choices” that we make as consumers. Realities, then, such as Hurricane Katrina, are allowed to become media events, complete with commodified images that offer us a mediated “spectacle” of experience that “takes place outside of us, lives an autonomous life” and consequently, loses its relevance to our everyday experience (97). Ong sees the “spectacle” of modern media as a “second orality” that is highly stylized and self-conscious in nature, one that creates a communal sensibility but only in the present moment (134). He suggests that our communal sense is a “feeling” of obligation rooted in our ability to reflect upon ourselves and not any intrinsic need or tie to our larger world (134). When combined, these critics offer a view of our larger national community as a fragmentation of individuals whose identities are co-opted, created and contorted through mediated images of spectacle and “self-regarding self-representation,” mediated images that become a “tranquilizing substitute for action” (Carpignano 99).

My theoretical framework, consisting of these critics’ insights into mediation, is the foundation upon which I will discuss the language of the newscasts, beginning with a rhetorical analysis of evening news broadcasts from the three major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) both during and after the landfall of Hurricane Katrina. The analysis will identify, within the broadcasts, some of Ong’s “formulas” that may serve as mnemonic aids for us, the image-barraged viewer, but also tend to blur facts and simplify

discussions so that our personal beliefs become amalgams of these simplified and formulaic representations. Further, my analysis will identify techniques used by the media to commodify and spectacularize the news in order to reshape it as a product that we can consume. One example, though there are others, includes the use of the tension-building device of personification in describing Hurricane Katrina, which makes the storm seem as though it has a mind of its own. The result is a “spectacle,” a merging of news and entertainment that is audience driven and is designed to be watched.

The move towards an entertaining, audience-driven news format is exemplified by the phenomenon of the 24-hour news channel. My discussions of cable news venues will concentrate on the Hurricane Katrina coverage of two leaders in cable news, Fox News and CNN. I will examine the heavy reliance on live streaming that allows viewers to “really be there.” As Nick Couldry points out, the phenomenon of liveness centers not on the “factuality of what is transmitted, but the fact of live transmission itself” (355). Live television allows us to restructure our world in order to place ourselves within it and lose ourselves within the moment. In such a context, liveness becomes a corporate structure, a spectacle, geared towards engaging an audience and keeping them in the moment, an experience that gives the illusion of belonging to a larger community while satiating the desire to act within this community through the action of watching it live.

Moving from a more centralized or corporate media technology to a seemingly more independent and varied form of information distribution, I will concentrate the final portions of this thesis on Weblogs, or “blogs,” using Barbara Warnick’s study of the Internet in her work, Critical Literacy in a Digital Era, as a theoretical guide. One of the claims of the blogging community is that they, collectively, act as a “watchdog” over

mainstream media, keeping them honest in their reporting. Individuals combine their personal knowledge and experience to create a vast resource, a database of alternative voices from all aspects of life that, conceivably, offers a more democratic and unstructured way of engaging with and communicating news. Warnick contests the optimism that resides behind proponents of Internet technology, arguing that the Internet, even as it sheds the corporate infrastructure of television in favor of the pseudo-individuality that the Internet can offer, sets up a new dynamic of self-commodification (120). The result is that our ability to engage with our extended world may be composed of self-promotional strategies that position our agency as a commodity and thus, as an illusion to be bartered for.

Within each of the media outlets that I will examine, there resides an inherent desire, our desire as individuals, to feel as though we are part of a larger community and to understand our place within this community. It is evident in our desire to watch the news or to write a blog on Hurricane Katrina in the first place. Unfortunately, as we watch the news we become trapped in a form of spectacularized mediation in which action takes a back seat to watching, or more precisely, watching feels as though it is action. Our immersion in our own technologically mediated world contorts our interactions between each other, and thus, our response to other people's needs, slowing it, changing it, and in effect, changing us as well. We are left with little recourse for action within our larger global community or our capitalistic, consumer oriented framework. We cannot escape our own social inclinations; instead we, as consumers, must realize the implications of our consumption on our identities and our sense of community. Of course this knowledge, this awareness of ourselves, will not help the

starving and homeless people of our Gulf Coast region, necessarily, but it has the possibility to change our perspective, to alter our understanding of the people who share our world with us. As we begin to see past the images and the manipulated feelings, past the products and the contrived messages for sale, to the real people that are hurting, not their reality necessarily, but their humanity, it can change how we act, locally, so that the people that surround us and that call us neighbors can count on us for help in times of crisis. Or maybe we can change our social landscape enough, through a realization of our underlying humanity, that the injustices that contributed to and magnified the destruction in New Orleans can be rectified.

## CHAPTER 1 BROADCAST NEWS

Many of our cultural memories, our uniquely American moments are defined in relation to a television. Walter Cronkite echoing "...and that's the way it is" at the end of each CBS news broadcast or the green lights illuminating the night sky as scud missiles sailed into Baghdad are just a few. Sadly, we must include the horrid images of suffering and hopelessness in New Orleans in our collective consciousness as well, as they have become part of our identity as Americans through our interactions with television. We understand our surroundings, and ourselves at least on some level, through this medium. In fact, a recent poll suggests that most Americans still get their news, that is, information about their surroundings, from television news sources despite the upsurge in popularity of the Internet ("Public's"). Within television news programming, although there is a multitude of varieties, the two most popular remain the broadcast evening news, as broadcast by NBC, CBS, and ABC and cable news as broadcast by CNN and Fox news.

Each of these news outlets takes a differing approach to catering to, and creating niches for themselves within, an ever-changing American landscape. These two television media forms contain, inherently, traces of the changing perspectives of Americans towards our environment as well as the changing understanding of how we can represent, express, and understand it.

I will begin with broadcast journalism because the broadcast journalism of today is consistent with the style of journalism that was produced at the onset of television news broadcasts. Cable news is a much newer form of television media and by examining broadcast news initially it will become clear the movement that we as a viewing public are making. The broadcast journalism that we know today has roots deeply imbedded in the radio journalism of the World War II era. In fact, as Joe S. Foote points out in his introduction to Live from the Trenches, “television correspondents were mostly the same journalists who made a name in radio,” thus making early television broadcasts “radio news supplemented by a few pictures” (2). Because of this link to radio news, much of broadcast journalism focused on the verbal “story” being told by network anchors and their correspondents. The format for broadcast news remains verbocentric today as well, as anchors, or alternatively correspondents, primarily shoot “‘stand ups’ at the scene of a story, adding ‘B roll’ film later to amplify the story” (2). The visual components of the stories act as secondary supports for the main focus of the pieces, which is the verbal telling of the story itself. Time constraints, as well, increase the importance of verbal stories, as visual stimuli, such as “live” feeds, are not feasible within a 30-minute timeslot. Overall, the visual image, while much more prominent

today than in previous decades, remains a tool that only amplifies the verbal message of the broadcast networks' news stories.

The result is that while we “watch” the news, watching alone would offer very little understanding, while listening alone, perhaps from another room, would conceivably offer near the same understanding of the broadcast's message. Broadcast news centers our attention on the sounds of its broadcasts, and these sounds act as unifying devices, as Ong suggests. They situate “hearers” inside of a world in which sound “pours” into them, and more specifically, it situates them at the “center of [their] auditory world” (71). What Ong is suggesting is that the very nature of hearing sounds creates a participatory mystique that hints at the central significance of the listener to the exchange of ideas, something that reading a book or an essay does not. He suggests that such an auditory world, devoid of literacy, centers on the “unifying, centralizing, interiorizing economy of sound” (73). Of course, we are a literate culture, and yet the manifestations of orality are present in the way that we, as audiences, perceive both the information presented orally (the newscasts) as well as the senders of this information (the news anchors).

Because of the way that sound affects us, the broadcast news, which utilizes oral presentations, links us intrinsically to the sound of the stories that we hear and to the speakers of the stories as well. Our oral link to the sound of news stories explains the extraordinary intimacy that viewers express as they explain the appeal of their favorite anchors. ABC recently covered an honorarium to the late Peter Jennings in which the street housing ABC News' Headquarters, located in Manhattan, was renamed in his honor. Mayor Bloomberg spoke at the ceremony saying that "Peter Jennings spent

decades speaking directly to each of us, and [now] we'll walk down Peter Jennings Way" (Tscharskyj). Though the late Peter Jennings spoke to millions of viewers nightly, the reality is that it felt as though he was speaking solely to us. The intimacy of sound made his viewers "feel" a certain way towards Peter Jennings himself. The same happens with all anchors whose voices we are exposed to on a regular basis, allowing us to make value judgments on their character though we are never truly engaged in a conversation with them, and even though we only associate with them, in the loosest sense of the word, for less than 30 minutes in any given day. It makes sense, then, that we can say that some news anchors, the ones who we like, are "honest," or that they have "integrity" and conversely, the ones who we don't like, or who make mistakes, such as Dan Rather's notorious error concerning a falsified document regarding President George W. Bush's military service record, are "untrustworthy" or "dishonest."

Of course this manifestation of our consciousness is never made explicitly but is an implicit factor in the most American of pastimes, the advertising that accompanies broadcast news programs. Anchors become the face of their prospective news networks and are commodified for the effect that they have on their viewers. The role that our auditory sense plays in the way we feel about these news anchors becomes a selling point that is emphasized and advertised by the networks. Brian Williams of NBC's "The Nightly News with Brian Williams" is touted as being "the nation's most-watched newscaster" ("About"). Note that he is watched rather than his show and that if we watch his show, we can become part of the unifying experience that he offers through it. Of course his tenure is nothing compared to his mentor, Tom Brokaw, who hosted "The Nightly News" before him and is still advertised on NBC's website as being "one of the

most trusted and respected figures in broadcast journalism” (“About”). These figures gain credibility through repetitive broadcasts and become selling points for the networks for which they work by playing with our conscious affiliation to sound and the oral traditions that first made us aware of each other in the first place. The result of such corporate involvement in the landscape of broadcast news is the cementing of our intrinsic link to the power of the spoken word with the image of the news anchor as a progenitor of truth and integrity.

Of course, the corporate intrusion that occurs within the realm of broadcast news goes well beyond creating an aura of intimacy and integrity with which to surround lead anchors. The networks’ desires for profitability restructured the entire industry, changing it drastically. Downsizing during the 1980s made the networks lay off many people, and it was the correspondents who investigated the news who suffered the most. Many correspondents were laid off as networks relied on anchors to “read stories from the anchor desk with taped inserts” rather than to rely on “correspondent report[s] from the field” (Foote 15). The networks found that it was much cheaper to pay an anchor to report from a studio than to send a correspondent to remote locations for investigative journalism. Of course, the transition away from correspondents and towards anchors allows for the gravitational pull of anchor’s personalities, as described above, and results, as well, in a shift of the “center of gravity from newsgathering to news processing” (Foote15). The focus is no longer the story or, in fact, the truth behind the story, but rather, the telling of the story and the selling of the voice, the persona, who tells it. The result is that the anchors are able to transcend the stories that they report on. As Foote

points out, “television news has a lot more to do with the presenter than the material being presented” (14).

### Recurrent Verbal Images and How They Move Us

The general apparatus of the broadcast news, as described above, both dictates and mitigates the oral presentations of stories and alters our understanding of them. It serves as a backdrop of sorts upon which the stories that become our news unfold. Because of the importance of the oral expression to these broadcasts, I have analyzed several days of written transcripts from the major networks and found that although each of the networks has its own signature style of expressing and interpreting its stories, a recurrent pattern of images emerges when examining the broadcast news as a whole. The images are successful because they are able to create an undercurrent of expectation, a platform for all audience members to latch on to and that allows them access to the larger stories, such as Hurricane Katrina. These recurrent images are highly identifiable and readily accessible clichés that become means to their own ends and that manufacture understanding as well as truth and can mask the realities that they attempt to represent.

The first recurrent image concerns evaluations of the storm’s magnitude. Before Katrina came ashore, reporters began labeling the storm, cementing with it an image of colossal size and strength. ABC News reported on August 28<sup>th</sup> that Katrina was a “once in a lifetime event” (“World”). The same day, NBC quoted New Orleans’ Mayor Ray Nagin as saying the same thing, commenting later “this is the big one” (“NBC”). CBS claimed that everyone that they had spoken to the day before the hurricane believed “this one to be the worst ever” (“CBS”). The interesting thing about these statements is that,

though they came true, partially, they were made in a context in which it was impossible to know whether Katrina would live up to its image. The reporters made the prediction that “this is the big one” and so whether or not it ever became the behemoth storm that was predicted, it was reported that it most assuredly would (“NBC”). The way that this particular image of Katrina is portrayed creates a space between the reality of the storm and the reported reality, a pocket of gray, of vagueness, that insists upon us, as viewers, understanding that simply reporting ideas does not necessarily make them true; it makes them only news.

Another such prediction that became a news reality was the total eradication of New Orleans. New Orleans, it was predicted, would be completely destroyed. Again, the August 28<sup>th</sup> broadcast of ABC’s “World News Tonight” quotes one of its “experts” as saying, “New Orleans could no longer exist” (“World”), while CBS’ broadcast relates that the destruction will be “catastrophic.” Katrina will “potentially devastate New Orleans” (“CBS”). NBC relays that Katrina is the “doomsday scenario” for New Orleans (“NBC”). Here the reporters are much more careful to use modifying phrases such as “possibly” and “potentially,” but the result is the same. We as viewers hear only the threats and the devastation. The reality of this particular image is that, though several areas were flooded and some were completely destroyed by the floodwaters that accompanied Katrina, New Orleans still remains and was even able to host a Mardi Gras festival six months after the storm. My intention in pointing out this discrepancy is not to downplay the significance of the destruction due to Katrina, but merely to point out that the coverage of the storm often indulged in overblown rhetoric, in hyperbole, as it conjectured about the storm’s strength and intensity. The hyperbolic language, designed

to emphasize the uniqueness, the “once in a lifetime”-ness of Katrina, makes us feel as though we need to watch. The more that we watch, then, the more that the rhetoric of spectacle becomes part of our conceptual understanding of the hurricane, that motivates and designates our conceptions of truth and reality.

Paolo Carpi gnano calls this overindulgence, this epic enhancement of images, the “spectacle” of modern media (97). The idea is that the reality that was Hurricane Katrina became a very different entity than both the verbal and visual images that we watched on the news. Spectacle occurs as the images of Katrina become separated from us, the receivers of the images, or more precisely, as the senders of these images of Katrina become aware that the images are being created for an audience (95). The news stations understand that people are watching their transmissions of Hurricane Katrina and this understanding necessarily changes the goal of the images and portrayals that we see. The verbal images that I have described are constructed in such a way as to inform us of our surroundings, as well as to keep us watching, keep us listening. The fear is that members of the viewing public can easily be transformed into consumers of their world even as they attempt to understand it. All that these images require in order to shift our desire for understanding and connection into consumption is our acquiescence. Through the process of commodification, the packaging of these images changes so that the intent of the broadcasts shifts from the message, from the real Hurricane and the people afflicted by it, to the image itself (Carpi gnano 97). The power of the Hurricane, the magnitude of the winds, the devastation, are all magnified in the hopes of creating a fervor, elevating the storm to mammoth proportions even before it has done any damage. The hope is to

spark interest, to invite audience participation, but not in helping people of the Gulf Coast. Rather, the intent of the images is to spark interest in the images themselves.

While the overstatement of Katrina's destructive capabilities is one way of appealing to audiences, another way is to enrich the language itself by adding a level of artifice to the images that are portrayed. Behind many of the recurrent linguistic patterns of Hurricane Katrina coverage there resides an extended use of metaphoric language to represent and explain the hurricane. New Orleans, for example, sits several feet under sea level and is protected from flooding by several levee systems that hold back the water. ABC's Jeffrey Kofman suggests that, "once the water is in, it has no way of getting out, submerging the city like cereal in a bowl" ("World"). CBS's Lee Cowan says that "with the storm pushing the waters of Lake Pontchartrain to the south, that metropolitan crater is likely to fill up like a punch bowl with no place for the water to drain" ("CBS"). NBC's Martin Savidge suggests, "The waterways where New Orleans has worked and played for centuries now threaten the city from nearly all sides, poised to drown it in what officials call a toxic gumbo" ("NBC"). Aristotle describes metaphors as a collusion of familiar "words" with unfamiliar, or "exotic words," a union that produces understanding and thought through the examination and exploration of the two simultaneously in a search for similarities (Aristotle 235). Our attention, then, is drawn to the ways in which "gumbo," "cereal," and "punch," somehow are the city of New Orleans. We are drawn to the action of overflowing, the movement of filling up and spilling over. The metaphors divert our attention away from serious contemplation of the situation befalling New Orleans. Rather, the metaphors engage us in the overindulgent images of mass destruction and complete annihilation, while simultaneously distancing

us from the people behind the images, the residents of New Orleans, the cereal of the submerging city.

Although the images that I have mentioned include virtually universal and rather mundane images that exist within everyday life, there exists another subset of verbal images that create and reify our American Identity as well. Mark Strassmann of NBC comments that New Orleans will now be the “Big Uneasy” with Katrina looming on the horizon, while another reporter states that New Orleans is in for a bigger headache than Mardi Gras (“NBC”). A CBS correspondent, when commenting on the state of refugees in the Superdome on August the 29<sup>th</sup> after Katrina made landfall, replies that the circumstances have bred a “new breed of ‘Saint’ for this NFL stadium” (“CBS”). NBC’s John Seigenthaler relates that New Orleans “appears to be ground zero” (“NBC”). All of these images allude to and reify our collective American identity by using indirect methods of expression, from the pun of the “Big Uneasy” to the metaphor of the World Trade Towers and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The uniquely American experiences that reside behind these allusions are never mentioned outright, but viewers are very much expected to understand the references. The images create a sense of audience participation because we must think about exactly how New Orleans is “ground zero” or how Katrina will cause headaches like Mardi Gras. We are included in a pseudo-collective of viewers who understand the references mentioned and are thus, “in the know,” as Barbara Warnick terms it (105). We derive pleasure from our ability to understand and participate in our own cultural references. As Aristotle reiterates, “those words which produce knowledge for us are most pleasant,” (235) and through such cultural references we are able to contemplate and deliberate on our own membership in a

collective association, a group of fellow audience members, linked through images of our collective history. After all, such experiences as the attacks of September 11, 2001, or even Mardi Gras are experiences that few Americans have ever experienced directly. Rather, these moments in our collective history are images that have been accessed and understood through the medium of television. As we continue to amass collections of cultural “moments,” we further perpetuate our reliance on television and other mass media venues by compiling a worldview that is primarily composed of them. As for our understanding of Hurricane Katrina, when anchors used artistically rendered images from our collective past in order to illuminate the situation in New Orleans, broadcasters were dangling the social incentive of a collective past and, hence, a collective future in front of their fragmented audience. The shared moments of our social past were used as ways of shaping our understanding of the unfolding events of Katrina in order to unify our views on the future. Of course, the fragmented American news audience receives these images differently, but as our cultural references draw more and more on images derived from mass media broadcasts meant to unify the American audience into an American news-watching audience, our fragmented identities and points of view may well be stunted. Once again, these images, by drawing us away from understanding and knowledge, allow us to acquiesce within the images, images that unify us as an audience through pseudo-cultural images, but that also draw us further and further from the situation in New Orleans.

The artistic verbosity of verbal reports of Katrina extends into descriptions of nature and the storm itself, as well, as many broadcasters used human characteristics in describing it. NBC’s Brian Williams refers to the pre-landfall skies on August 28<sup>th</sup> as

being “angry;” as Martin Savidge reports, “The waterways where New Orleans has worked and played for centuries now threaten the city from nearly all sides” (“NBC”). As a reporter for ABC intimates, Katrina has a mind of its own that allows it to choose where and when it will make landfall. “These things do have a character of their own,” he comments. “They do wobble. They do change” (“World”). The use of personification is another metaphor, this time comparing the storm and its effects on nature to human personalities. Unlike the previous images which distance viewers from the reality behind the verbal images of the television personalities, the intimations of Hurricane Katrina’s human characteristics offer the ability to relate more closely to the storm itself. The human characteristic of anger and the action of threatening are much more approachable than the technical ideas of low-pressure systems and barometric pressure. The anger of Katrina is a way for audience members to access the story of the storm, to grow more intimate with Katrina, or with the images of Katrina portrayed in the news, while remaining relatively uninformed about hurricanes in general.

The personified images of Hurricane Katrina posit it as becoming increasingly more combative and as becoming more warlike in its destructive “desires.” A headline on NBC says that “Residents in Alabama prepare and pray they be spared from Katrina’s wrath,” and later on in the show, newscasters comment that as Katrina approaches “debris will become lethal” (“NBC”). Describing the inevitable showdown between New Orleans and Katrina, a newscaster suggests, “It is the doomsday scenario. Katrina is the storm city officials always feared was out there but prayed would never strike,” (“NBC”) while Jeffrey Kofman continues that New Orleans is a “city under siege” (“World”). What has been created through these confrontational images is a battle, an epic struggle

between the people of New Orleans and a human reincarnation of a hurricane with a name and with apparent emotions. As the battle rages, emanating from the mouths of reporters and encompassing us, our distance from the story itself allows us to straddle the fence and in essence choose both sides of the conflict. Images of cultural identity, such as the references to September 11, 2001, and to New Orleans as the “Big Uneasy,” link us to the hardships of New Orleanians through our relationship with them as fellow audience members and, consequently, as fellow Americans. Our humanity, as well, though diluted through so many layers of mediation, allows us compassion for the victims of such tragedies. Unfortunately, however, at the exact same moment, we are awed by the storm and understand its motivations and movements through its newly created “identity.” Katrina becomes an individual attempting to surmount the obstacles that New Orleans poses for it so that at least part of us wants it to succeed. We want to see the destruction, to see just how much damage the storm will create. Allusions to battle create tension, create an allure, an emotional draw. They create a narrative intended to keep viewers poised and interested, waiting to see what happens next. That is the key to the verbal images and to the war that the newscasters created. If at any one moment we as viewers can be made to feel as though we are connected to one side or the other, just loosely enough so that we can change sides if need be, then we must continue watching in order to know how to feel in the future.

None of these images, taken individually, can encapsulate our understanding of Hurricane Katrina, but each one contributes to our understanding of the storm and its aftermath. When we, as Americans, think of Hurricane Katrina, these are the images that we recall, images of an angry “Katrina,” New Orleans as a bowl filling to capacity, and

finally, an epic struggle for the “Big Uneasy,” images that were continually reified through countless broadcasts. In fact, the very repetition of the images mentioned, from the very people we have grown to trust, makes them become our truth. Most of what is said on the news is forgotten or ignored and only the key phrases, the repeated images “stick.” The repetition makes them true. As Walter Ong suggests in Orality and Literacy, repetitive phrases can become mnemonic devices that hold what little information that we can retain on the events that are occurring outside of our direct experiences (34). The easily repeatable and easily remembered phrases of newscasts become the foundation of our connection to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, and just as in primary oral cultures— that is, cultures that have never been exposed to literacy and to the written word— “thought in any extended form is impossible without [these formulaic phrases], for it consists in them,” at least as concerns the particular stories that are reported on in television news (Ong 35).

Through repetition, we grasp disparate verbal images and compile them into an understanding of Katrina that we are comfortable with. The news, as it transmits these disparate, recurrent images, also transforms our desire to become part of our world and to be informed of our surroundings, into strings of images that link us both culturally and intrinsically as members of an audience, probably the largest most spectacular audience on the planet, the American audience. As Ong suggests, we are in an age of second orality where recurrent images become part of our vocabulary for understanding and transmitting our ideals and our stories. “Originality consists not in the introduction of new materials but in fitting the traditional materials effectively into each individual, unique situation and/or audience” (Ong 59). The larger recurrent themes transmitted by

news stations are part of our American ideals and are, thus, part of our larger American identity that are continually reified and supported with each news story that exemplifies them. As we watch the news, our own American identity is reified and our connection to other Americans, or rather, our connection to our American-ness is reified as well. Our own capitalism, our own immersion in the sounds of the news, our own distractions are part of our identity as Americans and that is what we share as we extend ourselves into our larger community via television. The unfortunate side effect of the continued reiteration of our own American-ness is that we become isolated from our world. As we watch the news in order to reify our own sense of identity and channel our own sense of participation, the focus on the hungry, the sick, the wounded is quite overshadowed. And the disparate images, the sometimes mutually exclusive images, continue to bombard us, asking us to posit ourselves on this side or that, to choose which images we want to be a part of and we are posited and re-posited, again and again until we end up precisely where we began our exploration of Hurricane Katrina, on the couch in front of the television grasping out for a connection to a larger world in which we have less and less understanding and less and less interaction.

## CHAPTER 2 CABLE NEWS

Cable news is a recent edition to our repertoire of news agencies. Its popularity is growing very rapidly, however, and really came of age with its coverage of the first Iraq War in 1991. CNN was the first of these cable networks, appearing in 1980 with a 24-hour continuous news broadcast format. As Joe Foote explains, the only problem for correspondents at this time was “frantically trying to feed the beast and maintain[ing] a reasonable level of professionalism” (11). With so many transmissions going out every

single day, there was a constant demand for both reports from the correspondents and for live shots of on-the-scene footage. Cable news' "calling card" quickly became "extensive news gathering and on-the-spot reporting of breaking news" (Foote 11).

While broadcast news focuses more on the "processing" of news stories through the guise of a trusted anchor, cable news shifts its focus, because of the constant demands of being on the air, to an emphasis on live reporting and first-hand visual footage.

As cable news grew and maximized its strengths, the emphasis on visual imagery increased and received great feedback from its viewers, the American people. Part of its success stems from our immersion in our own literacy. Our literacy stems from our sight, our ability to read written manuscripts, to read books. As our culture deepens its dependency on written texts and literacy, it moves us further from our natural and oral roots (Ong 80). Our natural, cultural progression towards language and its technologies generally moves us away from understanding our world through our ears and towards understanding our world through our eyes (Ong 115). Such a movement towards seeing our world instead of hearing it is evident in our sayings, such as, "a picture is worth a thousand words" or "you have to see it to believe it." Of course, this shift in our perceptions has been occurring since the inception of our alphabet, but it may very well help to explain the recent shift towards a more visually oriented cable news.

Ong explains this paradigm shift as one that moves us from our natural state of oral, auditory understanding to the more synthesized and technologically reliant visual state of understanding our world (81). Unlike sound, which occurs around us and encompasses us, centering us within it, vision always occurs from without, according to Ong. "Sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance" (Ong 71). As

well, “vision comes to a human being from one direction at a time” so that there is “no way to immerse yourself ... in sight...sight isolates, sound incorporates” (71). We must see things from a distance or at a remove from them if we are to perceive them through sight. Moreover, vision offers a piecemeal reality that can never surround us as sound can. Your eyes must focus on something, isolating it from its surroundings in order to perceive it. So, while hearing oral reports of Hurricane Katrina has a centering effect that immerses us in the story, visual images of Katrina allow us a distance, a critical distance to view and to understand it.

Part of the critical distance afforded by our own literacy, and offered to us through our interaction with cable news, comes from cable venues’ shift away from news anchors. As literate audiences desire the visual images that accompany “breaking news stories” more and more, the role of anchors on sight-oriented news programs necessarily changes. “Liveness” and the visual image assume the authority that was once held by news anchors. The story, then, as well as the reporter, becomes secondary to the images of the story. With this shift in emphasis, the role of correspondents is greatly amplified. As the roles of field correspondents are amplified in order to gain access to this “live” footage, the role of anchors at cable networks has necessarily diminished. Of course, this keeps viewers from sharing the intimacy with cable news correspondents that seems to grow between network viewers and news anchors, an intimacy that grows from storytelling and is not necessarily fostered during story “showing.” The visual image becomes the prominent feature of the cable news broadcast and just as the oral story telling of network anchors is primary to their network broadcasts, the visual image or live

broadcasts become the primary source of an audience's interaction with cable news broadcasts.

As cable news diminishes the role of the storytelling anchors and enhances the live image, viewers' abilities to perceive—or, rather, the methods of perception—begin to change. While anchors “tell a story,” live images create a sense of location.

Carpignano observes that the object of the video camera is “not the narration but the presence of place” (Carpignano 104). Many of the stories brought to us live from the scene of the Gulf Coast begin or end with lingering distance shots that are filmed from above, through the use of helicopters or booms, depicting the destruction from the air, including the broken levees, the convoys entering the city, and the sprawling shots of Canal Street being completely submerged by water. With the emphasis on “live” shots of the devastation wrought by Katrina, viewers are transported to New Orleans and feel as though they are really there.

With live shots, then, people are linked directly to a “live space” establishing a “relationship between an act of monitoring and a happening” (Carpignano 105). With live television, we can watch as events like Hurricane Katrina occur and it becomes a way for viewers/audience members to step away, to distance themselves from the people involved in the news stories (such as the victims of Katrina) and distance themselves from the storytellers in the guise of anchors as well. With anchors, we listen to a news story, which “establishes a relationship between a recipient of information and an event” (Carpignano 104). The listener is directly engaged, through the mediated voice of the storyteller, to the event itself, to the landfall of Hurricane Katrina and to the devastation that followed. Through the storytelling voice, through the oral delivery, we are offered

the narrative of Katrina, a narrative that necessarily involves us in the passing of time that occurs in New Orleans and that occurs to the people of New Orleans. It is an immersion into the people of New Orleans' stories, that includes their narrative no matter how convoluted it has become. Live images of New Orleans allow us a connection only to the motions of Hurricane Katrina, the flooding, the looting, the verb-oriented action. The images create a direct visual link to the destruction of New Orleans without the New Orleanians necessarily in mind. Their narrative is lost within the larger pastiche of images that cable news offers, and these action-oriented images do not connect to people's stories, to their narratives, like oral storytelling does, so that the visual images of Katrina leave us less engaged with the victims' stories and, consequently, less engaged with the victims themselves. In other words, watching the images of the destruction of New Orleans without the verbal connection to someone's narrative, to someone's story, adds another layer of mediation that, through the act of watching, necessarily distances viewers from the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The added layer of visual mediation creates another choice for viewers as they are seemingly given the option of sitting and watching or of acting upon the images seen on the television and helping. Unfortunately, the fleeting visual images offered by cable news programs that present very little narrative except for the act of destruction, guide our choices, towards individuality and towards sitting and watching, and away from social obligations and action.

Watching becomes our way of engaging with the story; it becomes our replacement for help, for action. It also becomes our way of creating a connection to an otherwise vast and mystifying world, one that is slowly pulled from us by our immersion in the very mediation that television offers. Watching as a way of reaching out into our

world helps to explain why Jim Bitterman would comment on the content of news stories by saying that “Any story anywhere in the world can be made interesting if it is done properly and the right angle is found...I am convinced that Americans are interested in absolutely everything” (qtd. in Foote 114). This quote speaks to the desire of Americans to know about their world, to understand it and make a connection to it. Of course, it also points out the manipulation and contrivance that accompanies news broadcasts.

Executive producers often stack the lineup of the news in order to showcase the “most dramatic and interesting” stories that seem to offer more motion and visual stimulation than content. Chris Bury relates an anecdote about news coverage, saying, had it “been around in Jesus’ time, we would have covered the crucifixion and ignored the dawn of Christianity” (qtd. in Foote 113). The executive producers focus on visual imagery and fill their broadcasts with images in order to create a visual feast, a package that allows the most possible visual connections, the most kinetic links because we want connections, and connections without real connections, the feeling of interconnection without the work, is much easier. The spectacle makes it easier to satiate any feelings of isolation by catering to our visual desires and by allowing us to feel ok about it.

### Visual Images and Being There

What then are our visual desires and how does the cable news network go about fulfilling as well as creating them? Most of the prominent features of cable news programming are evident in one descriptive broadcast of Hurricane Katrina footage. It is a moment on Fox News on the September 5 broadcast of “Hannity and Colmes.” An anchor frames the scene with questions posed to a correspondent who is speaking live

from the scene. The television screen is broken into four main sections. The right half is a live shot of a convoy rolling through a flooded street, shot from above. The left of the screen oscillates between the field reporter and the anchor, each flashing on the screen as they speak. Beneath these two sections is a rotating Fox News emblem whose kinetic movement draws attention to the headline of the story. The headline reads “National Guard Troops Arrive in New Orleans.” The fourth area that is part of the scene is the “crawl” along the bottom. The crawl is a line of text that runs from the right side of the screen to the left side of the screen, continuously scrolling headlines and bits of information. As the field reporter speaks, his section suddenly overtakes the live shots of the convoy as he continues speaking about the miscommunication inherent in the help that the people of New Orleans were receiving. The anchor quickly checks in with another reporter and the headline fades and is replaced briefly by the reporter’s name and then quickly returns to the headline again. The reporter speaking is seen standing amongst evacuees in the Superdome and the shots are close-up interviews with the people standing around him. The scene switches back and forth between the reporters as they speak to each other until the scene finally rests with the reporter at the Superdome reporting on conditions within the Superdome while crying and holding an infant.

The most noticeable feature of this particular clip, and by extension the rest of cable news broadcasting, is the sheer amount of information on the screen at one time. In fact, the visual field is a vast movement of information and stimuli that engages our eyes. The movement itself as the screen is panned from correspondent to correspondent and from them to live images draws the attention of our eyes. So too does the fluttering flag in the upper left corner that designates which shots are live and which are not. Time as

well seems to move as it rotates along with the Fox News logo and transmits the time from all the time zones in the continental United States. Most intriguing, however, is the crawl that runs across the bottom of the screen giving little bits of information, small headlines that invite us in to many stories all at once, but with nothing too in-depth as to focus our attention. We can, if we choose, watch words themselves move across the screen. As these disparate images are dispersed on the screen, the eyes must dart, collecting information in a piecemeal fashion, not encompassing us as the sound of an anchor's voice does, but deluging us in a personalized collection of images that we amass for ourselves, through our eyes. And most of the images that we collect become distractions from the main story that is being transmitted, the story of the victims of Katrina. The screen is completely cluttered with distractions that draw at the eyes. Of course it is designed this way in order to keep our attention, to keep us watching because a bored viewer, an unstimulated viewer, is not a viewer at all. The massive amounts of information allow us the luxury of watching what we want, choosing what we want to see. We are given the illusion of choice with so much information being presented. Unfortunately, the information that we can "choose" from is highly truncated and contorted in order to make it fit into the created framework of the broadcasts, including the short headlines of the crawl, so that it is possible for viewers to come away with no better understanding of any given piece of information than had they never watched the program at all. The movement of the images becomes a way of attracting our eyes only and the choice becomes one of accepting the stimulation offered, or denying it by changing the channel.

As images become the dominant tool for information disbursement during these image-rich broadcasts, and our listening capabilities are put on hold as our watching facilities are put to use, the power center of the broadcasts is moved from the anchor and even the story to the audience so that the image-rich environment becomes a persuasion technique, an enticement offered to audience members through their eyes. Liveness becomes a tool for involving people in the images themselves, and thus in the participatory mystique that accompanies the broadcast of live transmissions. As such, there are moments during live broadcasts when images of our world are offered to us as images alone, with little or no context, no story, no actors, no plot summaries. The story of Katrina is no different. When examining the “live” footage in the clip from Fox News, the live shot of the convoys is offered with almost no context at all. In fact, convoys are mentioned once, tangentially, as the reporter in the studio mentions that convoys have been entering New Orleans, but as the convoy rolls across the screen, the locale as to where it is going is unknown, the location of the convoy as it is being shot is unknown, and the content of the convoy is unknown as well. The only information that we know about this convoy is that it is going towards New Orleans. It is not even clear whether the convoy is particularly close to New Orleans at all, though the flooded streets seem to indicate that they have reached the general vicinity. It is as though the mere mention of convoys creates a necessity for live shots of convoys, and the live shots of convoys seems to alleviate the need to contextualize the initial mention of the convoys. The clip becomes a stray image removed from its original context and placed within the framework of the news program, becoming a product, of sorts, an image forever cemented to our collective consciousness as a representative image of the clean-up efforts

after Hurricane Katrina. We become, then, twice removed by these context-free images, once by the visual images themselves, and once again by the way that they become so loosely fixed within our understanding of the relief effort following Hurricane Katrina.

Nick Couldry explains the power that live images have on our psyches and how they can achieve the levels of mediation that they do. He says that it is our desire to see live shots of “our world” that can, at least theoretically, allow for “the potential connection” to our world and to our “shared social realities as they are happening” (355). Live images draw us in, in the hopes that we as viewers can “connect” to our world through our eyes. As the images that we see are severed from their surroundings, from their realities, from their context, we are severed as well, from this “shared social reality” and our ability to access and determine it. We as viewers are trapped within images that appeal to our sense of sight and movement, but that offer little in the way of contextualization or content, or that include the narratives of the victims of Katrina. Our only way out is to determine the meanings of the images ourselves. Within the context of the story, within the context of Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath and convoys entering the city of New Orleans, we as viewers are free to interact with the images that we see and create for ourselves an understanding or a particular truth. Strangely enough, as long as we refrain from this choice, refrain from the unlimited options of interpretation, we are connected communally through the images, through the present moment of watching and experiencing with other viewers.

Of course not interpreting the images does not necessarily mean that viewers are simply feeling caught up in the moment of watching the event of Katrina. Not participating in the visual images presented by news stations can also be a symptom of

viewer fatigue. The almost unlimited choices of interpretation that live images offer to audience members can overwhelm viewers and can lead to “fundamental indifference,” to a desire to not choose what the images mean. As De Zengotita comments, too much choice makes people want to “glide on [...] because [we] are exposed to things like this all the time (De Zengotita 24). Too much freedom in choosing our reality causes fatigue and indifference to our community. As well, the moment that we do interpret the images our communal link is broken and viewers begin to experience the images of Katrina as individuals, losing themselves in their own responses to the images, and thus, losing themselves in the spectacle of free-floating, context-free images. Our sense of community reaches only as far as the images will allow and no further. Ultimately, we are allowed to fill these free-floating images with whatever we want, with our own desires, our own individuality, so that the convoys from the clip can be carrying whatever we want them to carry into the city of New Orleans, whether it be food and supplies, more confusion, heartache, and misery, or simply nothing at all.

People within the cable news industry are no less effected than viewers, by the over saturation of images that seem to deluge audience members and correspondents alike. The response within the industry is the legitimization of a subjective journalism that helps guide viewers through the vast assortment of images, helping to interpret and guide audience members through the choice making process. This subjective journalism has begun to chip away at the traditions of journalistic objectivity that are the bedrock of the kinds of investigative journalism found on traditional news programs like those of the broadcast news. As correspondents’ “interpretative legitimacy” is called into question because of live shots that seem to tell the story themselves, they “resort to a style of

presentation that emphasizes their presence in a collective group discussion” as if they are audience members as well, viewing the images that have usurped the correspondents’ own legitimacy (Carpignano 105). The loss of belief or credibility in the news anchor means a shift in ideology so that newer anchors on cable news channels make a move towards embracing the subjectivity and artistry that goes into making a news broadcast. They become recipients of the images that are being portrayed along side them just as much as viewers are and the anchors and correspondents cannot refrain from interpreting them any more than viewers can.

The introduction of subjectivity into modern cable news journalism explains how, within the Fox News clip mentioned earlier, Geraldo Rivera can say, while crying and holding a young infant who has spent days living in the Superdome, “It’s not a question of objectivity, it’s a question of reality...Let them walk out of here” (qtd. in “National”). The objective intent of journalism is eradicated, and, though we cannot determine how much of Geraldo’s crying is a gimmick and how much of it is a real reaction to the images of the children, his tears are the way that he is able to fill in the gaps, the holes in the images that he sees. His tears allow him to help create a “reality” out of the “objective” gaze of the video camera and his tears on camera create, for us the viewers, a subjective reality that contains both the images to be interpreted as well as an interpretation for them. It offers us guidance on how to feel, subtle hints as to the reaction that we as a social entity, as a culture, should be having. The live images open an alternate reality, a personal space in which we are asked to contribute to our own reality, while the oral “stories” offered by the correspondents, complete with subjectivity and tears, bind us socially to this altered and socially created reality. The images

themselves mediate our ability to connect with the victims of Katrina, while the reporters cement the disconnect by creating a spectacle of the images, like those of the convoys, that allows them to remain contextually isolated from any relevance to the people of New Orleans. If viewers accept the images at face value, they can, once again, extend themselves communally into a social group of like-minded individuals through the process of watching and refraining from interpreting. The result is a guided emotional roller coaster that ends with a predetermined and simplistic understanding of the events that befell New Orleanians. We know only what we, as viewers, should feel, while the lack of context and content within the broadcasts leave us wondering why.

At times, the oral presentation breaks down completely as the correspondents themselves are lost within the vagueness that their images create, unable to adequately report or comment upon the images that are being presented. During the eight-minute clip reporting on convoys entering the city of New Orleans mentioned earlier, the cable news correspondents repeat the phrase “I don’t know” five different times. When asked about the convoys and why people were not getting the supplies that they were carrying, Shepard Smith answers, “I don’t know.” When asked where people can go to get information and who was in charge of the situation, he answered “I don’t know,” and finally when asked what it was going to take to get the supplies in the hands of those who needed it, he answered “I don’t know” (qtd. in “National”). Of course, the loss of words, the inability to fully explain and understand the situation that they are reporting on can be attributed, in part, to Ted Koppel’s explanation of the state of journalism in general:

[The reporter] is bound to the transmission point, while producers and camera crews go out and gather material. Frequently, since the producers

and videotape editors have to put together the packages that will air on the various programs, only the camera crews are available to actually go out and gather material. They, for obvious reasons, are more concerned with the visual; so, despite the fact that more people than ever before are in the field disseminating news, there is less time and less focus than ever before on the actual gathering of editorial material. (qtd. in Foote 11)

Ted Koppel intimates that many correspondents may simply not know the answers to questions, such as those posed to Shepherd Smith, because they are unable to spend an adequate amount of time in the field. He is, implicitly, underscoring the shift that the medium of cable news is making as it extends its use of visuals and of the “live” stream. Cable news, because of its reliance on “liveness” to transmit “reality”, creates a medium of impressions and images that are often vague and removed, if not entirely, at least partially, from their context in order to create an impression. The mediation that is present in the transmission of live images, themselves, distances us from the subjects of the images, from the victims of Katrina, so that it is difficult to know what is happening to them. At the same time, we are never invited to “see” them from another vantage point. The spectacle of cable news focuses on disparate and contextually indistinct images that do not relay information about the victims of Katrina or their narrative or context. That is, the investment that we, as audience members, must make in order to make a connection of any type with the victims of Katrina is so vast and complex that most find it easier and more satisfying to allow for a pseudo-connection, for a connection that can be made through watching the screen, watching the images swim past. Such a connection leaves us not knowing what is happening in New Orleans so that as Shepherd

Smith says “I don’t know” he is really speaking as part of a larger group, speaking for a larger group of Americans that does not know either. We are able to connect, through viewing, once again, to a larger community of Americans who are unable to understand the events of Katrina, who find a voice in the guise of Shepherd Smith, at the same time as he is deepening our mystification of the events surrounding the victims of the tragedies. Only through mystification and inaction are we connected to a larger group of Americans who act and feel the same way.

Ironically, as the cable news outlets formulate a new brand of subjective journalism, one that strengthens the voice of individual interpretation over objective realities, the credibility of individual narratives, or first-hand experiences is downplayed. Theoretically, our most accurate understanding of the events of Hurricane Katrina would be from people who actually lived through the events. The use of eyewitness reporting, however, is minimal and becomes a regurgitative avowal of the images that are portrayed. As newscasters make generalizations about Katrina, they use eyewitness testimony as a way to corroborate the ideas that they have espoused, often giving witnesses a single line to voice the entirety of their message. Moreover, the questions that the reporters ask lead the answers and almost predict them in order to achieve a uniform and streamlined message that will fit the format of the story. This is, in part, due to reporters’ knowledge of what they want to be said and because of the more general and overarching sensationalizing of stories, making them more “desirable” and thus, more profitable. More intrinsically, however, it is another symptom of our continuing shift towards a reliance on our visual sense. Since the answers of the people being interviewed are so trite, becoming almost regurgitative avowals of what the reporters have already

preempted the interview with, the people who were actually there, who were actually affected by Hurricane Katrina, tend to lose the credibility that first-hand experience necessarily gives them.

Returning to the Fox News clip, many claims are made with very little reference to first-hand accounts at all. In fact, amidst all of the claims of suffering and confusion that the newscasters make, only two interviews with citizens of New Orleans are conducted. The correspondents speak— live from the Superdome— to two women holding their children in their arms. The first woman is asked how old her child is. The second is given a brief interview in which she is asked the age of her child as well as her own name. The correspondent then prompts his audience to look into the face of the baby for a sense of understanding. The questions asked of the women are simplistic and her answers offer us no story, no sense of kinship or authority in the situation. She is rendered a victim whose life Katrina has ravaged. It was a similar technique utilized by the anchors of network news as they personified Katrina in order to create tension. Here too, a tension is created between the child and whatever has ravaged its life. The child's nemesis is never really made clear and so we must fill in ourselves whether it is Katrina, or our government officials, or whether it is we ourselves who have ravaged the child by turning her into an image without a story. The child is turned into an image that we can digest through our eyes, no longer needing a name or a context intricately tied to Hurricane Katrina. Our understanding of hurricane Katrina, even through the guise of first-hand accounts of victims, become images that, through the mediation of watching, and through the commodified spectacle of cable television, become spectacles of the

event of Katrina that reflect an image of victims, created for and by television, for and by viewers.

Television news, then, leaves us quite removed from the events that we watch and that we hear, even though we feel as if we are engaged and participating in them. The verbal presentations that we see on the news surround us and invite us into a larger group, an audience that is perpetually bombarded with simplistic recurrent images that simplify and contort reality in order to allow us to remember it. While the oral presentations, the sounds of the newscasts, work on our ears, the visual imagery works on our eyes, bombarding us with a feast of visual imagery that distances us from the lives that are being effected by creating a sense of place, a scenery, upon which we recreate our own world, our own understanding and our own reality. Hurricane Katrina coverage, and all television news coverage by extension, becomes a subjective creation that leads us to a consumption of images. As we choose what we see and we choose what we believe about them, the images become ours and are fit into our personal conception, personal concoction of truth that can and often does, exclude other peoples' concoctions of truth. The real people of New Orleans, the real victims, are lost amidst the torrent of creation. They become images as well, even though they are starving, hurting and dying. They are not real somehow, or maybe not real enough. And as a garnish, the corporate infrastructure that engulfs the news, that engulfs all of television, commodifies our desire to see our world through conscious contortions, through spectacle and an emphasis on the recurrent images that enable us to feel as though we are connected. Our unlimited choice of what we can create from the disparate images of television allow us a brief connection to others making the same choices, or refraining from the choices, or escaping the choices

all together, but, sadly, the loose connection that we share through watching our national tragedies unfold before us, only lasts as long as the national tragedy lasts.

### CHAPTER 3 THE INTERNET AND BLOGS

Television news, then, compiles for us a montage of words, stories, and pictures that transforms Hurricane Katrina into a spectacle of reality, a brief sojourn of entertainment that generally fades into so many similar stories and so many similar pictures, a sojourn that leaves us sitting, hoping, feeling and yet ever watching. The watching, the otherness of television mediates the ability between people to connect with each other by creating a space, a remove, that separates the stories that we watch from our immediate lives. One of the theoretical solutions to this separation, this remove comes in the form of the Internet with its promise of immediacy and intimacy. The Internet seemingly offers a multitude of realities occurring simultaneously and these realities can all be accessed directly from the people experiencing them. Writers commenting on Internet activity often refer to its “intimate connection between writers and readers” (Goldsborough). This connection is expressed, as the victims of Hurricane Katrina— at least the ones who can afford online service— get online in order to tell their stories firsthand. Getting the narrative of peoples’ stories firsthand can help in reducing the level of mediation involved in accessing large global stories like Hurricane Katrina and can, possibly, connect us to the victims in a more intimate way. Through this cyber intimacy, the Internet purports to offer individuals a way to communicate with each other that bypasses the strict mediation and the strict modes of commercialism that are invested

in the television medium. With such access to peoples' feelings, desires, and needs, the understanding of Hurricane Katrina should, theoretically, be much more "real" and much more directly personal for those receiving it through the Internet. The intimacy would approach the level of my neighbor who was confronted, intimately, with the details of my misfortunes and acted in order to alleviate them. So too are the readers of Internet websites, at least theoretically, confronted with an intimacy that invites, even incites, action more than other forms of mass media.

One of the most interesting Internet developments that has come out of the Hurricane Katrina coverage has been the extensive use of Weblogs. A Weblog, or blog as it is often called, is "an online diary; a personal chronological log of thoughts published on a Web page" ("Blog"). The dominating features of blogs are the "chronological sequence" of entries, a rather rigorous updating contingency, and a focus on the materials that are being presented (Stone 39). As a blog is accessed, the most recent entry is displayed at the top of the page, while all previous entries are moved down the page chronologically. The remainder of the blog consists of interesting links to websites, newspapers online, anything really including the personal likes and dislikes of the blog's author that may or may not have anything to do with the blog entries at all. These links, as well, may include advertisements or links to search engines.

The first weblog is reported to have been <http://info.cern.ch/>, which came online in the early 1990's. It was basically a chronological archive of the websites that came online during that period of time (Winer). By the late 1990's there were a few blogs on the Web but it was a rather cumbersome process, one that demanded a knowledge of computer technologies and primarily a knowledge of html programming in order to create

websites of your own. It was in 1999 when blog traffic really increased with the inception of Pitas, a free weblog creator and later that year, Blogger, which took the computer programming out of blogging. As Rebecca Blood comments in “Weblogs: A History and Perspective,” Blogger’s “Web interface, accessible from any browser, consists of an empty form box into which the blogger can type...anything: a passing thought, an extended essay, or a childhood recollection. With a click, Blogger will post the...whatever...on the writer's website, archive it in the proper place, and present the writer with another empty box, just waiting to be filled” (Blood). This ease of newer weblog technologies expanded the personal use of weblog software and created a massive outflow of personal Weblogs. The result has been a community of bloggers who have created a space for themselves within, as well as access to the public forum regardless of their technological savvy.

With the gradual subsidence of the need for technological savvy that excluded many from accessing their public voice, there has been a general democratization of the blogging process. Anyone with the proper tools can become a blogger, and thus, enter into a public discussion on issues including those raised by Hurricane Katrina. Still, the reliance on technology presents a hurdle to mass participation within the public sphere if for no other reason than the economic barrier that insists upon the purchase of a computer and Internet access in order to enter into a blogging community. In such a case as Hurricane Katrina, the very people hit hardest by the storm are the ones least likely to be able to afford the luxury of technological access, and thus, the luxury of a public voice. For those who can afford it however, bloggers have personalized the public space occupied by their blogs. Each blog becomes an extension of personal space and an

extension, though a manipulation as well, of the personal voice of the authors of these blogs. Though this personal voice is extended through small snippets of information, through time, it emerges as a personality. As one blogger comments, “These fragments, pieced together over months, can provide an unexpectedly intimate view of what it is to be a particular individual in a particular place at a particular time” (Blood). These bloggers are able to recreate themselves within the public sphere and give voice to their personalities and access to their first-hand experiences in a way that is denied with television. Bloggers who have a consistent readership gain a trust and through extensive reading of a blog, a personality with which to connect. The personal connection is critical if bloggers are to become successful, as they must compete with a sea of other blogs for the attention of their audience. The continued reading of blogs for an extended period will allow a connection to this emerging personality that resembles the connection that audience members of broadcast news share with its anchors, but the connection that bloggers share is different in the respect that, unlike the personalities of television, who are so far out of our reach and exist beyond our grasp, these bloggers are “real” people who we can communicate with and who will respond back to us through posts on their own blog.

The unique thing about these blogs is this ability to communicate, this prospect of having a virtual conversation. For blog exchanges are primarily and almost exclusively written exchanges that are formatted and rearranged to seem oral, or rather to feel more oral. These blogs, because they are written texts, create the same psychodynamic reactions to them that written texts do. Readers must perceive the words of these blogs visually in order to understand them and thus must “view” them from without, at a

remove from them. At the same time, these words are constructed in a way that simulates the contours of the spoken word in its relaxed syntax and free-form style that approaches the dynamics of conversational language. They are written in a “self-consciously informal style” that hints at the breakdown of grammatical rules, including the exclusion of various forms of punctuation and even the omission of capital letters (Ong 133). Of course, neither of these devices is perceivable in an oral exchange. The effect of the form of blogs is that their written language creates a critical distance from which people can dissect and analyze texts, at the same time that it immerses an audience and invites them into a conversation, a dialogue that creates a connection that must exclude any critiques. In the context of Walter Ong’s discussion of visual references versus spoken and heard sound bites, these blogs become the ultimate collusion of both. They are the true secondary orality in that they offer a “direct and often intimate connection” that the act of conversation offers, but it is between the “writer and the readers” of these blogs, between the authors and their audience, a connection that involves a great deal of distance and anonymity (Goldsborough).

As technology shapes the forms of communication and invites us to participate in a more open system of writing, so too does our form of communication seem to shape and invite an infusion of our private lives with our public social endeavors. These blogs become brief moments of cohabitation where the public and the private can coexist within the context of mass media. People can extend their personal opinions into a public forum that creates the possibility for communication. After all, the self-proclaimed desire of many of these blogs is to “make connections” and to “learn and share knowledge” (Stone 9). Thus, they include many forms of information, including articles, links to

other Web sites, even clips of television news programs, public exchanges, that exist right along side personal comments, thoughts, and shared feelings. The intended result, or at least the purported result, is to create a more diverse system of information that is easily accessible and more engaging because it is more personal.

As the personal lives of these bloggers become more and more intertwined with the public world that their blogs speak to, participation in a blogging community can turn to aggressive action. The blogging community has even begun seeing itself as the “aggressive new watchdog in town...willing— even eager— to question, nitpick, or attack reports on the mainstream media” (Humphries). The personal lives of these bloggers, including anything from job skills to religious affiliations, allow them to create an expanded network of pooled resources and knowledge that, theoretically, allows for a more varied and nuanced understanding of the events that unfold through our mainstream media. These private voices become a way of expanding, confronting, and challenging the standard forums for information such as those presented on television. After all, the scandal that pushed Dan Rather to resign rather quickly was brought to light through the work of bloggers who realized his inaccuracies, and through extensive group involvement, via Web postings, made it known publicly that the mainstream media reports that he presented were indeed false. These blogs, then, become a way of action. As one blogger comments, “By writing a few lines each day, weblog editors begin to redefine media as a public, participatory endeavor” (Blood 6). These bloggers can inhabit public space; in other words, they can engage in public discourse by moving their private lives into the realm of public discourse and by merging the two through an emergent secondary orality, a shift in literacy. In such a way, these bloggers attempt to

become part of the story and thus part of their world in a way that seems more remote and even impossible through other forms of media.

### Blogs, Community, and the Search for Self

Blogs, then, have become a crossroads: a place where many disparate ideals seem to converge and meld; a place where orality and literacy, intimacy and impersonality, public life and private life, action and passivity intertwine into a single entity. This form of communication is the most readily accessible reaction to and manifestation of public discourse about Hurricane Katrina, and it works so quickly and efficiently that the connection to others is almost immediate and the disbursement of the message is maximized. But can this single entity really do all that it purports? Can blogs and the act of blogging really create this ever-illusory middle ground? It seems to be the consensus that this middle ground should be attempted for at least, as one blogger's purpose statement expresses:

I know— it seems really impersonal (and it's true that I don't know personally many of my fellow New Orleans bloggers)— but there are things people will say in writing that aren't expressed as honestly face-to-face. I started blogging before Hurricane Katrina, but with Katrina, blogging took on a completely new and more meaningful purpose -- to defend New Orleans, to communicate to the rest of the country what's happening, and to help create an extended community. (Schroeder)

The ultimate goal is to create this extended community, one that forever oscillates between intimacy and anonymity, and to create a dialogue within this community, a

dialogue between fellow bloggers who read each other's blogs and then post their comments on them on their own blog sites. The desire is to create a symphony of private voices that can converge on the public forum and create an alternative voice with diverse ideas. Greg Ruggiero of the Immediast Underground makes a distinction, quite reasonably, as he states the differences between creating audiences and creating a public discourse. "An audience is passive; a public is participatory. We need a definition of media that is public in its orientation" (qtd. in Blood). Self-examining bloggers, like Greg Ruggiero, view blogging as a movement towards action. The question is whether the blogging community can constitute a public that involves itself civically with action-oriented participation, or whether it creates a passive audience of its readers who are receivers of words and images in the same way that television audiences are.

It would seem that the mere action of writing, publicly, on Hurricane Katrina would constitute a civic form of participation unheard of within the confines of traditional forms of mass media, such as television. On blogger.com alone there are over one million blogs that sort under the keyword "Hurricane Katrina." Of course some of these blogs may simply mention Katrina in passing, but over all, the number indicates a fairly decent amount of public writing on the topic of Hurricane Katrina. Such results seem to waylay Barbara Warnick's fears of a low audience participation level for Internet activities. Her critique of websites involving political cartoons concluded that many of the sites she researched did not result in political activation because they did not invite audience participation and thus excite a dialogue (109). Rather, Warnick's websites became self-indulgent, often leading to a regurgitation of existing stereotypes that essentially stagnated the conversation on political issues (111). As the technology for

blogs has flourished and has now surpassed the technologies analyzed in Warnick's study, blogging and interaction among bloggers has gotten much easier and much less cumbersome. The easy access greatly increases the chances of successful communication by eliminating the daunting task of overcoming technological difficulties.

Another daunting task is, of course, to access an audience and engage them in a conversation about Katrina. The act of writing a blog does not necessarily guarantee a readership and certainly does not guarantee a conversation, but the tone that blogs utilize seems to open lines of communication more than other varieties of mass media. Blogs offer an unstructured narrative of bloggers' lives, beliefs, and feelings about Hurricane Katrina and the more information that an audience receives about the "real" people behind the large stories, the more engaged and connected to them we are invited to feel. One such invitation was begun by blogger MCQ who comments on our justice system, post-Katrina, as three looters were sentenced to 15 years in prison after stealing beer and liquor, while only months later, two men were found guilty of defrauding the government out of thousands of dollars by falsifying debris removal documents and were sentenced to only a year in prison. He comments that its arbitrary nature "is what I don't like about our justice system. I wish I had a solution, but I don't. But I'm certainly willing to listen to yours" (MCQ). His approach is to open up the lines of communication instead of limiting and restraining them, by inviting people to share in interpreting the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In fact, it is this type of openness coupled by the relative ease of commenting publicly about their world that makes blogs work at all. An underlying intimacy is inherent in MCQ's plea for understanding. As audience members, we are exposed to his personal views, to his point of view on justice in America. It seems as

though MCQ is asking, directly, for someone's ideas as he exposes his own personal lack of understanding. It is not a blanket statement but a direct request that is much less easily ignored even though it is not a request to anyone in particular. His intimate tone, or rather, his open display of his own beliefs and understanding opens up the lines of communication and transforms his personal ideas into the beginnings of a public discussion on American justice.

While intimacy seems to open the door for an opinionated discussion about the effects of Hurricane Katrina, the price of this opinionated discussion is its depth and the actual connection that seems so possible with such intimacy. A blogger describing Congressman William Jefferson's alleged bribery scandal in his People Get Ready blog describes Jefferson as an "a—hole" who is "crooked" as well as "a slumlord" and an "idiot" (Schroeder). Another blogger uses a form of disclaimer on his blog in order to preface a particular article that he likes and precedes to post on his blog.

This article is long. And it's not politically correct. By not politically correct, I mean it's biased against the current administration (as is the truth), and so it will piss off any of you true believers still drinking the Bush Kool-Aid. If this is you, you do not need to tell me that the article pisses you off, or that it's biased, because I know this already, and because, frankly, I no longer care what you think about anything. (Cubitt)

This highly subjective "journalism" offers a very intimate portrait of the beliefs of these bloggers. Of course it is a far cry from the supposed objectivity of the traditional forms of journalism and news disbursement, but blogs seem to be an extension of the subjectivity, the fragmenting narrative, offered by cable news anchors. As they lay out their own

“subjective” narrative of the unfolding events of Hurricane Katrina, cable news anchors, at times, lose themselves within their own narrative, unable to create, or to see, a larger picture. Here too, as Cubbitt and Schroeder defiantly speak out against injustice and the President’s mismanagement of Hurricane Katrina, understanding seems to falter.

Cubbitt’s disclaimer only shows personal dislike for the President, but no evidence as to why. Just as in cable news, an audiences’ understanding of Katrina is mediated through the narrator of a highly subjective, emotional response, in this case, of a blogger, leaving us with an even more simplified understanding of the national tragedy.

Of course much of the simplification and lack of depth found in blogging stems from its reliance on other forms of mass media, including broadcast and cable news, as sources for information. As sources become once more removed and images, both verbal and visual, are witnessed through another level of mediation, the search for understanding and connections are confounded that much more. Some of the simplification of images, however, stems from the subjectivity that is inherent in blogging. This subjectivity, and more importantly our awareness of this subjectivity, mediates our understanding of Hurricane Katrina and limits our avenues of interaction with the blog entries to an interaction with the personality that emerges from the blog itself. The desire for information and a depth of understanding of these national social issues is lost within highly personal blog entries. Cubbitt’s ideas, and therefore his blog, center on his own version of reality, a version that he extends outward fervently and adamantly. Upon reading his blog, we are given the choice of whether to react or not, but it is only a reaction to his beliefs and therefore, a reaction to him. With little or no background information, we are left with no access to our larger social sphere, to the rest of the

victims of Hurricane Katrina. Blogs, then, can limit our ability to communicate by establishing a self-reflexive subjective forum that links us as individuals, to other individuals without allowing for a reestablishment of our social connection to our larger world.

The very individuality and intimacy that allows blogs to become popular and flourish can very well be their downfall, as well. Intimacy is, in part, the openness of feelings and the ability to share them, through words, to whomever is reading them, wherever they are. Unfortunately, as openness and an intimate look into these authors' feelings are committed to the written form in the guise of Web pages, they become rigid and inflexible. The exchange, the gradual give and take that is inherent in informal oral exchanges, is not received in the same manner when committed to written words. The anonymity that accompanies the exchanges on the Internet, coupled with the intense individuality that blogging espouses, allows disagreements to escalate into name-calling, slander, and an eventual closing of the lines of communication. The disclaimer quoted above is an extreme example of what happens regularly, as the blogger suggests that he does not want to hear from people who do not share a similar outlook as him, ultimately closing the lines of communication completely. He effectively marginalizes readers who disagree with him about Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina and even invites them to not participate in a conversation at all. As the intimacy of the emotions heightens within blogging exchanges, so too does the marginalization of the blog's audience. This blogger's audience can no longer, conceivably, consist of anyone in the world, but rather, a very determined group of likeminded individuals who share his political understanding of what has occurred in New Orleans. It is no longer a dialogue, but a rant.

Closures of communication occur regularly as blogs progress into actual exchanges that often stem from some form of humor or sarcasm. As Clayton Cubitt refers, above, to “drinking the Bush Kool-Aid” he is making a sarcastic comparison between George Bush’s supporters and Jim Jones’ cult-like following of brainwashed individuals who were persuaded to commit mass suicide by drinking cyanide-laced Kool-Aid. The implicit message is that people who believe George Bush’s stance on Hurricane Katrina are brainwashed and that they are being persuaded to commit intellectual suicide. The sarcasm of the statement also confers a level of inferiority upon those of different beliefs, implying that their trust in George Bush is silly. Even the seemingly open attempt at a dialogue attempted by MCQ concerning the three men on trial for stealing beer is ultimately thwarted by his use of sarcasm as a way to clarify his position on the matter. It is very clear that though he says he does not understand the justice system, he has already made his mind up on it. He has already sided with the three defendants and is openly hostile to the system that includes FEMA and the debit card system. He mentions, “If the three had been smart, they'd have simply applied for their \$2,000 debit cards and bought the stuff” (MCQ). The result of this predetermined discussion is a bristling from those whose opinions differ in any way from the author’s. This particular conversation breaks down completely as the conversation about the judicial system turns to personal attacks and “The Real Deal” suggests that MCQ should “think before you blog, if you want to be taken seriously” (qtd. in MCQ).

It was humor, in the previous example, which initiated the confrontation between the two bloggers. It is part of a larger process, a vast blockage to the avenues of true conversation or true exchange, and its form stems from the form of blogging itself.

Rebecca Blood from “Rebecca’s Pocket” comments on the blogging phenomenon and its tendency towards humor and sarcasm.

Typically this commentary is characterized by an irreverent, sometimes sarcastic tone. More skillful editors manage to convey all of these things in the sentence or two with which they introduce the link (making them, as Halcyon pointed out to me, pioneers in the art and craft of microcontent). Indeed, the format of the typical weblog, providing only a very short space in which to write an entry, encourages pithiness on the part of the writer; longer commentary is often given its own space as a separate essay. (Blood)

Humor is something to be valued within the blogging community, making bloggers who use humor “pioneers” as long as they can keep their blog entries “short” and “pithy.” In fact, it is the very nature of blogs to create very short, emotionally charged responses that necessarily truncate the ability to create a dialogue. The compressed nature of blogs induces pithiness, induces humor and sarcasm that only cause fissures in an audience who will take sides along either flank of the joke. Humor, then, and the joke itself— a byproduct of the truncated form of blogs— becomes an agent of the breakdown of conversations and of the minimalization of the avenues of communication. The joke evolves from the choice delineated on either side of the joke. The pithy humor that is such a big part of blogging is also a way of truncating our choices for understanding. Those who see the situation in a similar manner will think the joke is funny and those who do not see the situation similarly, such as the responder “The Real Deal,” will not see the humor in such comments and they will posit themselves against the blogger. The exchange stops and the conversation changes from one concerning the judicial system

and the helping of Katrina victims, to a disagreement about who is right and who is wrong. This is evidenced by the multitude of personal attacks that make their way onto bloggers' sites. The conversations shrink into manageable bites, or rather, bytes that all but shadow the larger picture. So it is that William Jefferson is termed a "slumlord" and an "idiot," while the story behind why he is an "idiot" is somehow lacking. The background is missing, the connection to the story, to the people involved, the people who were injured by Jefferson's misdeeds, even Jefferson himself is missing. Rather, audiences are connected to the emotions that these bytes, these images from mass media such as those from news outlets have evoked in other audience members and the connection is such that one can agree or disagree but never really participate in creating a new communal understanding or connection.

As the blog entries themselves work to sectionalize and fractionalize the audiences of blogs into likeminded social units, the extensive use of advertising seems to move the arena of action into the arena of consumption. The Beyond Katrina blog is a blog whose self-proclaimed focus is a dedication to "asking the media to please NOT go away," or rather to keeping a focus on New Orleans after the storm itself has passed. Ironically, however, there is much going on within this blog that is not really concerned with the issues of Katrina at all (Saizan). For instance, the right side of Margaret Saizan's blog contains a list of search engines each with a hyperlink to their respective website. They are advertisements for corporate entities, including Yahoo, Google, Bloglines, and My AOL (Saizan). These corporate entities get advertising for their Internet products, and in turn, the advertisements lend credence to a virtually unknown author's blog and offer financial compensation as an added bonus. Lining the other side

of Margaret Saizan's blog entries are a list of the most popular searches, a guide of what others have looked for and what they have looked at. A company called "eurekster" sponsors this list. Below this is another list labeled "Ads by Google" that includes links to lists of charity work needed nationwide, various techniques for raising charity money, and even jobs within the Department of Homeland Security, the department of which FEMA was a part (Saizan). The corporate involvement in these lists is enormous to the extent that the content of the "Google Ads" section changes and evolves with the content of each website. The ads are tailored specifically to the issues of disaster relief and response, issues that are important to the blog itself. Such corporate involvement in the structure of the blogs complicates their independence and begs the question of corporate intrusion and influence upon blog readers' searching habits. At worst, these corporate entities could be manipulating Internet traffic in order to further their corporate interests, and at best, they could be creating a network of likeminded individuals who are captive audiences for their advertisement campaigns.

The important thing to remember, however, as the variety of advertisements contained within blogs are understood as corporate involvement in our public discourse of Hurricane Katrina, is that this involvement is invited and perhaps even incited by the authors of the blogs themselves. In fact, Biz Stone, author of Who Let the Blogs Out?: A Hyperconnected Peek at the World of Weblogs, encourages the use of advertisements to increase traffic on blogs and to link, as well, to other blogs and websites in order to create networks of readers who will visit your blogs again and again (172). Stone goes as far as to call these hyperlinks the "coin" of the blogosphere that allows users to "jump from one blog to the next," promoting "each blog even more" (172). Networking

becomes another name for advertising, and the advertising is for more than commercial products but for each other as bloggers and most importantly for the blogs themselves. Each link is calculated to increase blog traffic and to make the blog itself more interesting and more enticing to possible audience members.

Popularity becomes the main focus of blogs. No longer is the message the central idea, no longer is the discussion or the exchange of ideas central, but rather the message of the blogs becomes the blog itself. Bloggers are attempting to sell themselves. The most intriguing aspect of Margaret Saizan's blog is that despite her desire to remain focused on New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina, she herself seems unable to refrain from participating in a self-reflexive examination of her success at blogging. Along with her many advertisements and links to various websites and company Web pages is a traffic counter. It is more than an ordinary counter that counts just volume of traffic but also breaks down the traffic into the different countries of the readers of her blog. Such breakdowns, such precise and in-depth examinations of her blogging success, seem to imply a level of interest in her results and her successes. She even comments on her effect on audiences as she states that "Traffic has decreased significantly on this blog since June 1— the start of the new Hurricane season, but I don't give a damn [...] As long as I have one reader coming back to the blog, I'll practice in-your-face blogging" (Saizan). It seems, however, that she does "give a damn" as she is very acutely aware of her blog's traffic. Ironically, as well, she seems to conclude that having readers is what keeps her going as having at least one will keep her blog alive. Carried to its logical conclusion, this statement seems to imply that no readers, no audience would mean that the blog would no longer be important to the author.

As our technological advances make us more and more aware of our ever-increasing community, our global village, but then deny us access to it by dulling our ability to act within it, our desire to “do” and to “become” is channeled into ways of satisfying ourselves. Blogs become just this, ways of satisfying our desire to act by satiating our desire to become. Blogs give regular people the ability to create an online persona, voicing whatever opinions and ideas they may have. Blogs allow an instantaneous access to recognition and self-appreciation. They offer a level of celebrity, as they gain more and more traffic, that is simply unavailable through other forms of mass media. We are allowed to see our name in print and the traffic counters that are part of blogs’ physical makeup slowly calculate how successful we are at selling ourselves. As our virtual revolution descends to the common denominator of attention and how to keep it, however, the debate on Hurricane Katrina is lost and these bloggers, well-versed in the arts of capitalism, reduce the conversation, the ability to communicate, to a perpetual self-commodification.

It seems that blogs are doomed to repeat the tragic fragmenting results that television seems to instigate. The immediacy and intimacy of these blogs offers the chance to create a real connection, a real answer to the problems of Hurricane Katrina. In theory, they could engage us in a national debate, empower private voices and allow citizens to become a political and social power approaching real democracy. Blogging offers the ability to gain multiple perspectives. In fact, it offers the ultimate in multiple perspectives. It celebrates and accentuates our individuality in a way that invites and allows us all into public discussions about our world and our stake in it. Unfortunately, like any other technology, however, blogs can only become what we let them become.

Our literacy posits blogs in a quasi-personal state where we can share intimacy with others and create virtual oral exchanges while retaining the critical awareness that writing and literacy offers us. At the same time, the conversation is stilted by the recurrent images that are transmitted via television, both visually and orally, and are expounded upon in a manner that keeps the conversation very confrontational and simplistic. In fact, the form itself, the digital dialogue, the written orality of blogging that is informed by our literacy, aids in stunting the growth of this dialogue and the call to action that blogs seem to promise. The conversations, the dialogues that seem so possible within the realm of blogs would open avenues of action as people connect with one another and to their larger communities. Blogs could well be the conduit that leads to the kinds of action that are needed in times of crisis like Hurricane Katrina. In the end, however, it is our own social structures, our commercialism, our own intense individuality, our new-found identities and sense of self and our personal voice that keeps the conversation about Katrina from evolving, from being, really, about Katrina at all.

## CONCLUSION

### Reading and Hearing our Katrina

What can we do about our inability to act, our inability to escape our individualized existences? How do we reassert ourselves into the media dynamic and create a situation of action and intervention instead of passivity and indifference? How do we reconnect ourselves to the people affected by Katrina and the humanity that lies

beneath these stories of pain and devastation? Our only connection to the residents of New Orleans, for example, is through some form of medium that necessarily removes us from them. It is a remove that increases steadily along with our deeper immersion into literacy. This immersion is precisely why I chose broadcast news, cable news, and Internet blogs for this examination of mass media, because they represent this very progression. Though they are all simultaneous occurrences within the media moment of Hurricane Katrina, they evolved as different technologies that express and demand different levels of our own literacy. And it is this immersion in literacy, the way that we understand, that ultimately affects how we see each other and how we see our world. This immersion, coupled with our own capitalistic inclinations, helps to explain the intense individualization that has occurred in our mass media experiences and it helps to explain, as well, the massive amount of apathy towards the suffering people of New Orleans, and towards each other in general.

Broadcast news, the earliest of our mass media alternatives, remains an oral presentation, but its content stems directly from our literacy, inviting us to make connections, not to Katrina victims themselves, but to the anchors who tell their stories. It is ultimately the self-awareness of this communication that these anchors offer to us, a viewing public, that disallows any form of exchange and even fosters a sense of awe at the sheer magnitude of their image. Cable news takes this evolution of our literacy even farther as the sounds of human voices, and the verbal interaction that these voices offer, are replaced by a desire to watch them from afar. Cable news offers us the opportunity to see the streets of New Orleans flooding, the Superdome ripped open and the children crying without making the connection, the verbal connection that binds us to them.

Television, because of our immersion, complete immersion, in literacy, invites us to embark upon an extraordinary journey that incorporates sounds and images, that inhabits our eyes and ears and becomes a spectacle meant for watching from a distance, for pleasure, and all of it for us. Our personal notions of Katrina, these disparate conglomerations of truncated ideas strewn together from the torrent of television images and verbal sound bytes, become a context-free reality, a representation that separates us indiscriminately, not from the reality of Katrina, but the humanity behind Katrina. We attach ourselves to the sound of anchors' voices or maybe even to the places that stories happen, to New Orleans, the Lower Ninth Ward, the French Quarter, but almost never to the people who need help. And the people whose stories we do see become icons, they become what we see on television. Within the time that the camera pans over their lives, they alternatively become heroes or crooks, they become looters or thieves, they become survivors or they become too poor and too desperate. They lose the connection to their larger world, to us, by becoming unwitting pawns in the formation of a national, social narrative. They are assigned a meaning as their image is broadcast to audiences nationwide, whether it is a comment on ingrained racism in America, or whether it is a comment on the inadequacies of our governmental response to natural disasters. We then choose what our social narrative is, what our reality is, from these contorted images, from these assigned spectacles of reality. Meanwhile, these very real people become whatever we want them to become, and whatever the networks want them to become as they are filtered through layer upon layer of mediation, because they are no longer part of our collective social group and we can no longer see their inherent humanity.

As the needs of the many gradually give way to the needs and the desires of the individual, technology and our own literacy bring us the Internet and blogs. The Internet offers us the ultimate in the illusion of individuality, at least thus far, with blogs that offer instant validation, the instant “viewing” of our own thoughts and feelings, even a celebrity status to those who voice their own personality on their blogs. The Internet promises a direct connection to the people affected by Katrina, but blogs can quickly deteriorate as personal individualities are continually at odds with one another for readership. Blogs can become ways of espousing personal grudges. They can become ways of attacking ideas, institutions, even people that we don’t like. Often, they don’t attempt to move towards a closer understanding but move us farther away from each other by amplifying individuality over a communal connection, by rewarding wittiness and pithy sarcasm with viewership. Meanwhile, where is Katrina? Where is New Orleans? They become much less important than the personal interpretations of Katrina and New Orleans. And these interpretations are a conglomeration of what occurs regularly on the television. They are simplified, hackneyed understandings that, for the most part, never move past the initial stages of overarching stereotypes with no background or depth.

The victims of Katrina, because of our inability to escape from our own literacy and our own cultural consumerism, become dim echoes of some forgotten humanity. They are lost because we continually deny them, reject them and ultimately, replace them with ourselves. It is a tragic moment in our evolutionary transformation from oral community-bound citizens to literacy-oriented critical individuals. And yet, there is hope for us precisely because we have become so literate. What my examination of the

Hurricane Katrina media experience shows is that underneath our intense individuality is a desire to connect with each other. Despite the intense individualization of our technology-- and it is not technology itself but rather our literacy that informs the progression of this technology-- there remains implicitly in all of these mass media experiences a reaching out. It may very well be the only "real" event in all that I have examined in this paper. People want to connect with each other; they need to connect with each other. It is inherent in the enterprise of the news itself. Although it has become intensely commercialized, people want to know what is happening around them, they want to know about each other. It is inherent in our formation of ideas about Katrina and the desire to know what is happening in New Orleans. And, as well, it is inherent in the popularity of the Internet and the way that blogging has become another way of attempting to extend ourselves outward. Thomas DeZengotita describes our desire to be known to others, the desire to be recognized as something "primordial." "For human beings" he says, "the need to be recognized is almost as basic as food" (117). And with this need to be recognized is this need of others. It is a gregariousness that shines through the intense individualization of our lives and that accompanies our technological advances deeper and deeper into our own literacy.

Our literacy moves us continually inward and it propels our technology and our media with it. But as we begin to understand ourselves more and more, as we ponder our own individual existence and we wonder at our own place within this expansive world, we must remain aware of the world itself. Through our increased literacy we become more aware of our personal situation. And it is precisely the literacy of our society that allows me to write this essay. But we must begin to see each other again if tragedies like

those that befell New Orleanians are to be avoided. As we grow critical of our surroundings, we must also be critical of ourselves in order to maintain the balance between our communities and ourselves. It is not a great amount of action that is needed but a simple shift in our perception of our world. Instead of understanding the images, the repetitive verbal phrases as some sort of truth, we must place ourselves within situations and realize that any interpretation of Katrina, of any truth, will only evoke skewing and inaccuracy. In fact, the point is not even the accuracy of the stories that we see, that we comment on, but rather the humanity that exists beyond the story itself. It is this humanity that we must connect with. Even if we never see these people or speak to them, we must allow for them a space within our individualized world, our personal interpretive universe so that the human connection may remain open. It is this connection, this avowal, not of truth itself, but of humanity, the undeniable humanity that is part of every story, every utterance, and every blog. And maybe through self-awareness, we as individuals can change our environment enough; just enough in our little private spaces that the people around us won't suffer and they won't starve or sit on rooftops waiting for days to be rescued, and maybe they won't die waiting for help that isn't coming.

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