

# Comparing Visual Framing in Newspapers: Hurricane Katrina Versus Tsunami

By Porismita Borah

Visuals used after the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 have gathered heated discussions because the images horrified audiences across the world. This study uses visual framing to compare how two American newspapers visually portrayed the first week of these two natural disasters.

## Literature Review

A consistently growing body of research in the social sciences focuses on the concept of framing. Goffman<sup>1</sup> defined framing as the “principles of organization, which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them.” Frames help individuals organize what they see in everyday life. He calls frames the “schemata of interpretation” a framework that helps in making an otherwise meaningless succession of events into something meaningful. To Entman,<sup>2</sup> framing involves selection and salience. This study uses a consistent set of frames to examine the visuals of two natural disasters.

Although the tenets of framing theory have been extensively applied in analyzing texts, the question of how issues are framed in the images that stand alone or accompany the text, is not examined frequently. Messaris and Abraham proposed three distinguishing characteristics of visual images that lend themselves to framing and how these properties may influence the framing of news issues and events. They are the analogical quality of images, the indexicality of images and the lack of an explicit propositional syntax in images.

Analogical quality refers to the fact that associations between images and their meanings are based on “similarity or analogy.” Recognition of objects in photographs does not require “prior familiarity with the particular representational conventions.”<sup>3</sup> Messaris and Abraham borrow the term indexicality from Peirce, as cited in Saint-Martin,<sup>4</sup> who used it to differentiate photographs from other images. The lack of an explicit prepositional syntax refers to the fact that visual images do not have a set of conventions for making propositions such as cause-

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and-effect relationships. Prior research has demonstrated the use of visuals to depict issues differently—Messaris and Abraham,<sup>5</sup> Entman,<sup>6</sup> Gilens,<sup>7</sup> Fahmy.<sup>8</sup>

## Research Questions

The research questions asked in this study were:

### RQ1:

What were the salient frames used in the coverage of the tsunami and Katrina in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*?

### RQ2:

Is there a difference between the depictions of the two disasters in terms of the salient frames used in the coverage?

### RQ3:

To what extent did the newspapers show bodies in their photographs? Is there a difference in the portrayal of the dead between the two disasters?

## Method

The purpose of this inquiry was to identify a consistent set of frames to determine how two U.S. newspapers visually covered the Indian Ocean tsunami and the Hurricane Katrina disasters. This study employed a content analysis of all photographs that were related to the two disasters during the first week. Most framing studies on visuals—Entman,<sup>9</sup> Messaris and Abraham,<sup>10</sup> Iyengar<sup>11</sup>—have relied on both visuals and texts. However, following Fahmy's<sup>12</sup> method, this study answered

questions on the visual depiction of the disasters based only on the images. The study used both qualitative and quantitative measures to answer the research questions. Two major U.S. newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, were chosen.

A random sample of 264 images drawn in the first week's coverage of the disasters was coded to assess inter-coder reliability. Two coders were trained by practicing coding on a sample of images from other natural disasters. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa formula.<sup>13</sup> The percentage of agreement between the two coders was established at an average of 94.1 percent.

## Conceptualizations

### Frames

Generic issues such as elections, poverty and crime recur across time and cultures,<sup>14</sup> and a consistent set of frames can be developed to examine media content of such issues. A sample of relevant images from both the newspapers were analyzed to identify salient frames. Identification of the major frames was also based on the literature review of framing studies, including Kahneman and Tversky<sup>15</sup> and Dime-trova and Stromback.<sup>16</sup> Frames were coded as "not present" and "present." Salient frames identified fell into five categories—loss vs. gain, pragmatic, human-interest, political and other.

#### ◦ Loss vs. Gain Frame

The loss vs. gain frame was first used by Kahneman and Tversky<sup>17</sup> in one of the most common examples of the effects of framing. The authors

used the frames in the context of lives lost vs. lives saved in an experimental study design. In this study the lives-lost frame included images of the dead. On the other hand, images of those who survived the incidents and relief work being done on their behalf were coded as exhibiting the lives-saved frame.

• *Pragmatic Frame*

The pragmatic frame included images that showed the reality of the disaster in physical terms. In other words images of destruction, such as ruined homes, shattered buildings, flooded cities and general destruction were included in the pragmatic frame.

• *Human-Interest Frame*

This frame included images that highlighted the human dilemma in the two disasters. Images that showed grieving citizens, suffering and pain were considered to be in the human-interest frame.

• *Political Frame*

Pictures of politicians visiting the disaster sites made up this frame.

### *Portrayal of the Dead*

All images were analyzed based on these dimensions:

- Use of camera shots that imbue pictures with social meanings<sup>18</sup>
- Bodies were covered or left for open viewing
- Faces were visible to viewers
- Pages where the images appeared
- Size of the published image

The use of camera shots was coded as aerial, full, long, mid and close up. To specify whether the bodies were covered, all the images of the dead were coded as not covered, covered or not visible. To differentiate images

from those whose faces were not visible, all images were coded as not visible or visible. Size of the image was categorized as small (2.5 by 2.5 inches or less), medium (between 2.5 by 2.5 inches and 4.5 by 4.5 inches) and large (more than 4.5 by 4.5 inches).

## **Findings**

Data for the content analysis were gathered from the printed copies of the newspapers and from microform. A total of 264 photographs were retrieved from the two newspapers; 106 images of the tsunami disaster and 158 pictures of Hurricane Katrina.

### *Salient Frames*

Of the total images, 13.1 percent were coded as the "lives-lost" frame, while 36.2 percent pictures made up the "lives-saved" frame. Coders identified 35.8 percent photographs depicting the pragmatic frame. The human-interest frame included 9.9 percent images and the political frame consisted of 5.5 percent images. Some images that could not be included in any of the five identified categories were coded under the "other" frame.

### *Tsunami and Katrina Differences*

Chi-square tests were conducted for four of the five identified frames to examine the difference between the coverage of tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. There were no images identified under the political frame in case of the tsunami, so a comparison could not be made for the political frame. There was a significant difference between the tsunami and Katrina coverage in the case

of the lost frame (chi-square = 13.17,  $p < .001$ ) and human-interest frame (chi-square = 6.53,  $p < .05$ ). The differences between tsunami and Katrina coverage for the gain frame (chi-square = 3.81) and the pragmatic frame (chi-square = 4.61) were not significant.

*The New York Times* used 42 pictures to cover the tsunami and 52 pictures for Katrina in the first week after the disasters. In case of the tsunami, 23.8 percent of the pictures were used to depict the dead, 33.3 percent to show relief work and survivors, 23.8 percent to depict the destruction and 19.1 percent images portrayed emotion and none were for the political frame. *The Times* covered Katrina with more intensity, carrying 64 pictures to depict the Hurricane and its aftermath. During the first week, 5.7 percent of the pictures depicted the "lives-lost" frame, 48.3 percent showed relief work and survivors, 26.9 percent showed damages, 5.7 percent fit the human-interest frame and 13.4 percent showed politicians.

*The Times'* use of the human-interest frame was different between the two disasters. Of the few images of grief and emotion found in the Katrina coverage, most were full or long shots, signifying social distance. The tsunami images were more close-up shots of grieving and mourning victims, communicating a sense of strong personal relationships.

Compared to *The Times*, *The Post* ran a more visual coverage of both disasters with 64 images for the tsunami and 95 for Katrina. Nonetheless, both the papers framed the disasters quite similarly. In the case of the tsunami, *The Post* ran 20.3 percent showing bodies, 31.2 percent images fitting

the "lives saved" frame, 34.3 percent showing destruction and 14.2 percent depicting grief. Katrina's coverage was dominated by 46.3 percent showing destruction, 5.2 percent showing the dead, 36.8 percent portraying relief work, 5.2 percent showing emotion and 6.5 percent depicting the political involvement in the disaster.

*The Post* was also vigilant in showing emotions and bodies in the case of Katrina. One major difference from *The Times* was that *The Post* ran 44 destruction shots of Katrina, while *The Times* had only 14. As a result, although *The Post* emphasized the "lives-saved" frame (35 images) over the "lives-lost" frame (5 images) in the Katrina coverage, it also significantly showed the physical damages of the aftermath. Unlike the tsunami coverage, in the case of Katrina, both *The Times* ( $n = 7$ ) and *The Post* ( $n = 6$ ) used pictures that fitted the political frame.

### *Portrayal of the Dead*

Both the newspapers used images to depict the dead. *The Times* used 10 pictures of bodies in the tsunami coverage and three in Hurricane Katrina. *The Post* ran 13 pictures of bodies in the tsunami and five in Katrina. [See Tables 1 and 2]

Following Berger's categorization of the camera shots, there was a difference in depicting the dead between tsunami and Katrina coverage in the two newspapers. Both *The Times* and *The Post* used closer shots signifying a personal or social relationship, while depicting the tsunami victims. In the case of Hurricane Katrina, both newspapers used shots of the dead that signified public distance. Both news-

papers were cautious in showing closeup photos of the dead in the Katrina coverage. Also evident in the Katrina coverage was the use of smaller to medium pictures with *The Times* using one large picture, which was an aerial shot. In the case of the Katrina coverage, although both newspapers showed some of the dead, they tried to use pictures mostly of unrecognizable bodies without showing the faces. Despite this common trend, on Sept. 2 on page 23, *The Post* ran a small picture of a dead man sitting in a chair. This picture clearly showed the face of the dead person.

**Table 1**  
**Images of the dead in *The New York Times***

<i>Description</i>	<i>Camera</i>	<i>Bodies</i>	<i>Faces</i>	<i>Page</i>	<i>Size</i>
<i>Tsunami</i>					
Bodies lined up on street	2	0	1	11	2
Bodies of children lined up	2	0	1	1	1
Bodies lined up	1	2	0	13	2
Funeral pyre	2	2	0	1	1
Hands of the dead	5	0	0	12	1
Bodies strewn	1	0	0	14	2
Bodies being packed	2	1	0	10	2
Body bags lined up	2	1	0	7	2
DNA sample being taken from the dead	2	1	0	8	1
Hand of a dead	5	0	0	2	2
<i>Katrina</i>					
Wife crying near husband's body	3	1	0	1	3
A floating body in the waters	1	1	0	1	1
A body sprawling in the waters	3	0	0	12	3

### Limitations of Study

A study using a longer time frame could give a better view of the coverage. Some of the images were from microform. The availability of copies of the newspapers would have allowed for a better measurement of the size of the images.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The massive destruction of the tsunami is reflected in the photographs of damages used in both newspapers. It is evident that both newspapers used the five salient frames identified in the study differently for the two disasters. The newspapers gave more space to the "lives-saved" frame in both disasters. However, both papers

**Table 2**  
**Images of the dead in *The Washington Post***

<i>Description</i>	<i>Camera Shot</i>	<i>Bodies Covered or Not</i>	<i>Faces Visible or Not</i>	<i>Page Number</i>	<i>Size</i>
<i>Tsunami</i>					
Mother crying near bodies of her children	4	0	1	24	3
Bodies lined up	2	0	1	1	3
Family crying over a dead child	2	0	1	11	1
Mass grave	3	0	0	9	1
Funeral pyre	3	2	0	18	1
Bodies strewn	1	0	0	20	1
Bodies of children	4	0	1	38	2
Body on the road	2	1	0	16	3
Bodies in debris	2	1	0	18	1
Bodies in debris	2	0	0	23	3
Bodies in debris	2	0	0	16	3
Relatives carrying dead child	2	0	1	5	1
Bodies strewn	1	0	0	22	1
<i>Katrina</i>					
Wife crying near husband's body	3	1	0	12	3
Same picture as above	3	1	0	22	3
Dead man on a chair	3	0	1	23	3
A body floating	1	0	0	22	3
A body in convention center	3	1	0	1	2

also showed more of death and emotions in the case of the tsunami, while Hurricane Katrina's coverage included more depictions of relief work and survivors. After the initial images of flooded New Orleans and its evacuees,

the newspapers paid more attention in the relief work carried out and pictures of survivors.

The two most common frames used in both newspapers were the "lives saved" and "pragmatic" frames.

Chi-squares conducted did not find any significant differences in the use of these two frames between the two disasters. This, perhaps, is understandable as the newspapers used the two frames heavily in both disasters. However, chi-squares conducted for both the "lives-lost" and "human-interest" frames were significant. The differences between these two frames are seen in the qualitative analysis of the images, as well. In the tsunami coverage, both the newspapers showed the dead using uncovered, large close-up shots of the victims, while in the case of Katrina, the images used to show the dead were of long shots and smaller images. Likewise, the "human-interest" frame included different kinds of pictures. The tsunami coverage included large, close-up pictures of victims and relatives in deplorable conditions, which was avoided in the Katrina coverage. There were pictures depicting grief in Katrina, as well, but they were smaller and used only on inside pages. On the front page on Sept. 4, *The Times* carried a picture of a woman crying; however, the woman was receiving relief packages. A picture of Evelyn Turner mourning her husband's death was the only photo that both *The Times* and *The Post* ran of a victim grieving. However, this photo was a long shot with her husband's body was covered.

The newspapers did not use any images of politicians in the disaster, which took place thousands of miles away. In the case of Katrina, however, the government was blamed for inactivity and inability to evacuate the victims on time. At a time where there was outrage at the increasing number of deaths and helpless people

being stranded on flooded rooftops, the pictures of the president or other government officials were, perhaps, meant to reassure the people.

Earlier research shows that the size of images makes a difference in readers' perceptions. In an experimental study, Wanta<sup>19</sup> demonstrated that larger photographs draw readers to accompanying stories. In the case of the tsunami the images of bodies and those showing emotion were much larger than were the images used in Katrina coverage. In the Katrina coverage the larger pictures were aerial shots of physical destruction. The size of the images thus was one way of highlighting the main focus of the newspapers.

The tsunami victims were unknown faces, far away from the United States. While for Katrina's coverage, the newspapers had to be alert about not showing images that might cause outrage. The perception of the audience may have played an influential role. The American public is conservative about seeing the dead depicted in the media. *The Times* page one picture of dead children on Dec. 28 caused heated responses from the readers.<sup>20</sup> Deeply moving pictures have been shown in Katrina; however, "most pictures have maintained a degree of distance between the viewer (the camera lens) and photographic subject."<sup>21</sup>

The results from this study contribute to visual framing literature by demonstrating the different treatment of identified frames in two very similar natural disasters. The use of quantitative as well as qualitative methods of data collection helps to examine the images in greater detail.

Notes

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