

Media coverage of hurricanes reinforces images of people of color as victims, study finds

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As Hurricane Ian made landfall, devastating parts of Florida, South Carolina and the Caribbean, readers saw media images of destruction, rescues and recovery. How images from such disasters are presented often cast people in certain roles. A new study from the University of

Kansas shows newspaper images from Hurricane Harvey in 2017 continued patterns of presenting people of color as victims and white people as rescuers bringing order back to the chaos. While those presentations may not have been conscious or ill-intentioned decisions, they reflect patterns in journalism and cultural values, according to the study's author.

Hurricane Harvey made landfall in Houston in 2017, and newspapers from across the country devoted extensive coverage to the disaster. Ever Josue Figueroa, assistant professor of journalism & [mass communications](#) at KU, watched the news like many others, but the Houston native noticed something about the presentation.

"I was watching the coverage and at the time was taking a course on [visual communication](#). I thought, "I want to do something with what just happened," Figueroa said. "The main crux of this paper is using an approach for analyzing images called semiotics. Basically, the premise is the way we create and interpret [visual images](#) is drawn from things we understand and have seen before."

For the study, Figueroa conducted a visual textual analysis of 106 front page images from Aug. 28, 2017, to Sept. 4, 2017. The results show [media coverage](#) presented people of color as displaced migrants, women as damsels in distress and white men as saviors and caretakers. The paper was published in the journal *Critical Studies in Media Communication*.

Analysis of the front-page images showed coverage fell into four main themes.

- People in floodwaters
- Shelters and salvation
- Masculine heroes

- Repair and maintenance of homes.

Among those themes, Figueroa noted that most photos of people in floodwaters were presented as people of color wading through the waters, attempting to escape the devastation. Those images are similar to common media photos of immigrants wading through the waters of the Rio Grande River to cross into the United States, Figueroa said. But while people were forced from their homes in both cases, they emphasized how people were moving toward rescue in the hurricane and toward a hopefully better life in terms of immigration.

The theme of shelter and salvation tended to show people of color receiving assistance from volunteers and shelter staff. White people in shelters were shown expressing grief or emotional trauma but not receiving material aid. Such images reinforce narratives of welfare and arguments about who is entitled to assistance and who abuses such aid.

"Everyone in those shelters largely experienced the same things, but when we look at the coverage patterns, there was a clear, racialized component to them," Figueroa said.

The masculine heroes theme was reflected in images of men, mostly white men, rescuing people, coming to the aid of victims and being in positions of authority, such as first responders or [government officials](#). One image showed a white man carrying a woman of color in his arms through floodwaters as the woman carried an infant in her own arms. The repeated use of these types of images reinforces patriarchal gender hierarchy to readers, Figueroa said.

The final theme was presentation of people repairing their homes, cleaning up from damages or otherwise rebuilding and beginning recovery from the destruction. However, most people in such images were white homeowners. Houston is a very diverse city, but that was not

necessarily reflected in how images were presented, the study found.

"Within those themes, I argue there were racialized and gendered ways of how people were presented," Figueroa said. "That reifies who is depicted as a homeowner or who is presented as a victim. All of that reiterates ideas of who controls or owns land. Who has self-agency or is dependent on others. It should be understood, the news photos also tell a story, and over time, they can perpetuate harmful cultural narratives and stereotypes of marginalized people and communities."

Figueroa emphasized that he was not blaming photographers for covering storms and recovery, nor first responders or government officials for helping people who need it. Rather, he said that such representations have happened for many years in American media and that they reflect our cultural values. Such racialized and gendered presentations, however, are not only a continuation of what we are familiar with as a nation but likely result from normalized work routines in traditional journalism.

Journalists have long worked closely with government officials. That relationship results in media often seeking out police, fire departments and first responders as well as federal government agents working in response to situations such as [natural disasters](#), similar to how embedded war correspondents regularly present news from the perspective of the officials they are closest to.

There are potential ways to address ingrained patterns, however, such as looking to the community response in such disasters, he said. Aligning with community members to find examples and present coverage of neighbors helping neighbors or covering civilian response could help dilute dominant themes. The idea of "solidarity journalism," or covering the lived experiences of people most affected by issues such as natural disasters, labor strife or the pandemic, to name a few examples, could

help address dominant themes of government response, economic effects and other presentations of such topics. Journalists should center news coverage from the perspective of people suffering from unjust conditions, rather than center coverage from the perspective of authority figures, Figueroa said.

"The findings from this study suggest that people of color are still the spectacle and their displacement served as the underlying metaphor of Hurricane Harvey. Marginalized people are represented as victims whose lives were ruined by natural disasters and go on journeys to seek salvation from authoritative figures," Figueroa wrote in the article.

"Marginalized groups should not be defined by their victimhood and instead should be given the opportunity to showcase their resilience and communal power. It is time for news media to provide a better representation of the communities they cover, one that is more truthful of the human experience during moments of crisis."

More information: Ever Josue Figueroa, Casting heroes and victims of disaster events: representations of race and gender in Hurricane Harvey front page news images, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2022.2121412](https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2022.2121412)

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