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Decoding Televisual Discourse, An Analysis of ‘Hurricane Katrina: 5 Years Later’

Upon the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, news channels such as CNN, NBC, and ABC aired tributes in remembrance of the New Orleans disaster. These tributes used the initial polysemic news coverage of the hurricane (from 2005) and combined it with new coverage, which was virtually the same on all the channels’ tributes. As a member of the audience I cannot argue that the media professionals involved shared the same agenda simply because I have decoded their messages in the same way. However, I do believe that the media professionals involved transformed the original broadcast messages from the negative discourse that we all know and remember, to a more apologetic discourse. This was particularly apparent in the ABC tribute, *Hurricane Katrina: 5 Years Later*, which I will be discussing. This tribute revisited the areas of New Orleans destroyed by the hurricane and showed the little progress that has been made to rebuild the city over the past five years. However, instead of broadcasting in the ways that the immediate news coverage of 2005 did, this tribute used more sympathetic language and imagery.

Considering the idea that reality exists outside language, but is constantly mediated by and through language (Storey 11), I will argue that regardless of any change that may have actually occurred over the past five years in areas affected by the hurricane, media professionals aimed to change the audience views of original news coverage of the disaster from negative and hostile to accepting and empathetic, by changing the language used in airing *Hurricane Katrina: 5 Years Later*.

One of the biggest issues with the 2005 news coverage of Hurricane Katrina was the way that they referred to blacks and whites. Black families seen taking food, suitcases, and other items from stores were

called looters. White families doing the same thing, which is essentially stealing, were simply said to be, “trying to survive.” As an audience, many Americans were offended, and understandably so, as the differences in the language used to describe these families have different, gutting connotations. It can be assumed that media professionals were simply reinforcing the racial hierarchy of America, it can also be said that they were not prepared for the way that the audience would decode their broadcasts and react to what they’d seen and heard. “In other words, meanings and messages are not ‘simply transmitted’, they are always produced: first by the encoder [...] second, by the audience” (Storey 11).

The uproar that the racist broadcasts caused was a rare example of unity amongst the audience in their decoding process. Stuart Hall touches on the fact that in decoding, there is always the possibility of ‘misunderstanding’. It seems that this can be attributed to language and the ways it is used. In the English language especially, many phrases and idioms can have connotations that are unrelated to their actual meaning. Hall continues that, “...[more often] broadcasters are concerned that the audience has failed to take the meaning as they – the broadcasters – intended” (Storey 12). However, in the case of the 2005 broadcasts of Hurricane Katrina it seems that the broadcasters were more alarmed by the fact that the majority of their audience recognized the negative racial undertones of their language. For it is important to remember that social communication is complex and always contains more than one potential ‘reading’ (Storey 14). In what seemed to be an attempt to regain the favoritism of their audience, ABC aired their Hurricane Katrina tribute, approaching the discussion of the disaster very differently than before. By changing the televisual discourse on Hurricane Katrina with use of more gentle and neutral language, ABC aimed to mend ties with their audience. The change in language shifted the unity of the audience in their decoding and brought back the more prominent three ways of decoding. “‘Watching television’ cannot be assumed to be a one-dimensional activity which has equivalent meaning or significance at all times for all who perform it” (Morley 16), and media professionals are aware of this. By using more subversive language in the tribute than the outwardly

racist language used in the original 2005 broadcasts, audiences began to decode the messages differently. Some felt that the situation in New Orleans must be better because there was significantly less discussion of looting and other negative bi-products of the disaster. Others were skeptical and didn't believe that anything had changed at all, and others, still, saw this tribute as an attempt to keep in mind the victims of Hurricane Katrina passively and without any action that could potentially help those victims. All three of these views further the idea that reality exists outside of language, because regardless of the ways that the members of this audience decoded the *Hurricane Katrina: 5 Years Later*, what is actually happening in New Orleans can exist in only one way that is not comprehensible to those who are not there.

In understanding the messages in any form of social communication, it is important to realize that there is no one way to understand what, as an audience member, you are being exposed to. This is especially clear in television, and even more so in news broadcasts where language can be manipulated for its connotations, thus influencing the greater discourse as we see in the case of *Hurricane Katrina: 5 Years Later*.

Works Cited

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