Ducking for cover in the 'blame game': news framing of the findings of two reports into the 2010–11 Queensland floods

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After a disaster, the media typically focus on who is to blame. However, relatively little is known about how the narrative of blame plays out in media coverage of the release of official disaster reports. This paper examines coverage by two Australian newspapers (The Courier-Mail and The Australian) of the release of the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry's Interim Report and its Final Report to identify whether and how the news frame of blame was used. Given the absence of blame in the Final Report, the newspapers resorted to the frame of 'failure' in news and feature articles, while continuing to raise questions in editorials and opinion pieces about who was to blame. This study argues that situating coverage of the report within the news frame of failure and questioning who was to blame for the disaster limited the media's ability to facilitate a discussion about the prevention of similar disasters in the future.

Introduction

Following a disaster the media frequently go looking for someone to blame. This is because they have a sense–making role with respect to their audiences that they fulfil by bringing a narrative to bear on stories about disasters and their aftermath. Disasters create the perception that nature and society are no longer logical; this violates 'all the rules of plot', leading individuals and communities to question who they are, why the world is unpredictable, and why order has ceased temporarily (Erikson, 1994, p. 147). Identifying the news frames used to report the aftermath of disasters is important because, as Bruns and Eltham (2010, p. 94) reminded us when referring to Vaughan's (1996) work, the media can and do 'shape public memories, and in so doing, obscure deeper causal, structural and systemic factors' associated with disasters. McMullan and McClung (2006) found that the most frequently used news frame in stories about official disaster inquiries is that of blame or responsibility.

This study analyses coverage of the release of the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry's *Interim Report*[1] and its *Final Report*[2] and their findings in two newspapers—

The Courier-Mail and *The Australian*—to determine what news frames were given preference. *The Courier-Mail* was chosen because it is Queensland's only daily metropolitan newspaper whose circulation covers the state; *The Australian* was selected because it is the national newspaper and could be expected to grant significant coverage to the release of the report. *The Australian* also has a commitment to investigative journalism and, after such a significant disaster (with the associated loss of 35 lives), could be expected to pursue a fourth-estate role in its coverage of the two reports.

The objective was to identify whether, and to what extent, these newspapers relied on the blame frame, since the research shows that the media usually frame post-disaster coverage through the lens of blame. The study examined how the blame frame was actualised in the reportage and whether the news frames employed remained the same or changed over time. The two reports were published 7.5 months apart, on 1 August 2011 and 16 March 2012, respectively. Research tells us that the media frequently concentrate on allocating blame after a disaster, and thanks to McMullan and McClung's (2006) work, we know more about the discourses that characterise news reportage of official disaster inquiries. McMullan and McClung (2006) found that, while the actual inquiries of disasters attract significant media attention, the release of the reports of those inquiries garner very little attention, despite the significance of the findings.

The Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry presented a unique opportunity to identify how some news media framed coverage of the release of the official reports (both interim and final) in the absence of blame for the floods being apportioned by the body. The reports and recommendations of disaster inquiries provide the news media with an excellent opportunity to frame their reportage in ways that emphasise the necessity of preventing and preparing for disasters of similar magnitude in the future. This study focuses on two newspapers because newspapers typically have the space to analyse lengthy reports whereas television news and the majority of radio news bulletins are restricted by time.

The *Interim Report* was released on 1 August 2011 following the conclusion of the Commission of Inquiry's investigation into the Queensland floods. The floods, which occurred in late 2010 and early 2011, cost in excess of an estimated AUD 13 billion (Thomas, 2011). The *Interim Report* explored the principal issues associated with the operation of the Wivenhoe Dam and the rescue services, and it included a series of key recommendations so that Queensland could improve its preparations for the 2011–12 wet season. The Floods Commission released a *Final Report* on 16 March 2012, which centred on matters concerning land development and its contribution to the floods.

This paper begins with an overview of research on the media's role during and after disasters, and then explores the literature on media approaches to the coverage of official disaster inquiries. It considers literature from the crisis communications field, which suggests that laying blame for disasters is counter-productive. Next it assesses the newspapers' coverage, identifying how blame and associated frames were used, and discusses the implications of this for reportage of the findings of disaster inquiries.

The role of the media in a disaster

Scholars agree that traditional media plays a critical role in providing information to the public during a time of disaster (Keys, 1993; Cohen, Hughes, and White, 2006; Cretikos et al., 2008), which 'gives the media considerable power' to shape opinion and to connect people and communities (Littlefield and Quenette, 2007, p. 29). This power is extended to the role of the media as a 'judge' of operational and political management of the disaster, thus providing it with the authority 'to assign blame when the situation requires it' (Littlefield and Quenette, 2007, p. 29). Assigning blame is nothing new: in 1993, in the Emergency Management Australia publication, *Macedeon Digest*, the then State Planning Co-ordinator for the NSW (New South Wales) State Emergency Service, Chas Keys, contended that there was a perception among emergency managers that the media were 'very quick and zealous in laying blame for disasters or for the mishandling of them that sometimes occurs' (Keys, 1993, p. 13). Keys (1993, p. 13) concluded with an arguably valid observation:

> *Nobody enjoys taking the blame, especially when a case can be made that it is unfairly apportioned or ill-directed. Media people, of course, sometimes see the definition and sheeting home of responsibility as an inevitable and necessary part of the story of an event – a natural final chapter.*

Defining the 'blame game'

There is little disagreement among scholars that the 'blame game' resides at the political level. For example, political scientists define it as a 'set of interactions between elected politicians and the general public, or voters at large' (Hood, 2002, p. 15). In its most basic form, the blame game is about political elites attempting to 'deflect, deflate or diffuse' the blame during negative events (Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor, 2008). As Olson (2000) asserts, disasters are 'political occasions' because the event needs management and explanation. 'Politicisation' of the disaster increases as the affected community, or at times an entire society, moves from emergency response through the recovery and reconstruction phases (Olson, 2000, p. 265). Olson (2000, p. 278) points to six 'disaster excuses' used by government officials:

- blame the event—impossible to anticipate because of the size and impact;
- blame the previous guys—responsibility lies with the previous administration;
- blame the context—insufficient resources impacted on good intentions;
- blame us all—too many involved to pinpoint one person or agency;
- blame them up/down there—responsibility is shunted up or down the chain of command; and
- plea of ignorance—the consequences could not be foreseen.

Although political elites may not be responsible for causing the disaster, Arceneaux and Stein (2006, p. 51) contend that citizens appropriate blame on officialdom 'in

terms of how it handles the disaster'. They note that, 'in the event that voters believe that government could have done more to prevent the level of damage, they are willing to attribute blame and punish incumbents accordingly' (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006, p. 50). The sheeting home of blame is not necessarily aimed at the impact phase of a disaster, as Olson (2000, p. 273) argues; blame can be attributed in the period before the disaster to 'those perceived to be in control'. Drabeck and Quarentelli (1967) found that blame tended to centre on 'who' rather than 'what' caused the disaster. They suggest that personalising blame is a way of:

> *scapegoating in which people can work off their frustrations and anxieties, as well as the feelings of guilt, anger, shock and horror brought on by the disaster and a desire to prevent a future disaster when it seems within human power to do so* (Drabeck and Quarentelli, 1967, p. 12).

Maestas et al. (2008, pp. 610–611) provide a neat summation of the apportionment of blame in the media during and after disasters: 'Political actors have incentives to try to manipulate the assignment of blame to ward off political consequences, and media have incentives to cover the resulting political fights'.

Blame driven by emotions

Disasters can bring out the worst in people who undertake 'a relentless search for scapegoats to blame for destruction and loss of life' (Drabek and Quarantelli, 1967, p. 12). For Wettenhall (2009, p. 259), this finding is understandable because of 'avoidable errors' such as delayed warnings. Heath (1998, p. 396) states that this manhunt for 'those responsible' goes beyond organisations and government authorities to encompass individuals, 'therefore purging the organization or community of blame and allowing them to feel closer to being innocent victims'. There are other benefits to finger-pointing by disaster victims: it allows them to 'maintain a level of control' (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006, p. 49) with the level of blame dictated by the severity of the impact of the disaster. Psychologists O'Connor, Kotze, and Wright (2011, p. 115) argue that blaming a person rather than an organisation is 'an early, simple and artificial solution to complex inter-personal or situational problems'.

Blame driven by media

As natural disasters are seen as 'acts of God', blame is not automatically assigned by the public unless the response is being poorly managed (Lerbinger, 1997). Given that the media enjoy a 'privileged position' in reporting a disaster, Littlefield and Quenette (2007) found that this offered a platform for the construction of blame and to shape public opinion on the management of the situation. Vasterman, Yzermans, and Dirkzwager (2005, p. 111) termed media framing of a disaster as 'media hypes', a self-generating wave of intense coverage during a disaster:

> *During the hype, the media will generate more news on the topic by reporting comparable incidents, by reinterpreting incidents in the past, by digging into backgrounds, by (morally or ideologically) evaluating events and performances, and by paying attention to society's reactions triggered by the previous news wave.*

Media hypes deliver one specific frame, while ignoring other perspectives. If the frame is focused on disaster-related health issues, then 'people tend to adopt the explanations offered by the media and integrate them into their story about their own health complaints' (Vasterman, Yzermans, and Dirkzwager, 2005, p. 112). Mitroff (2004, p. 25) describes media narration of a crisis as 'a self-contained moral story in that there are clear victims and villains', a story that is replayed 'over and over again'. Mitroff (2004, pp. 25–26) emphasises that this process seals their fate:

> *The identities of the victims and villains are locked in early in the unfolding crisis and tend to become permanent. In this way the media removes any traces of moral ambiguity. In fact the media attempt to create moral certainty both consciously and unconsciously in order to soothe the underlying emotions and anxieties of the public.*

Mitroff (2004) argues that, in a crisis situation, the media present the individual faces of personal tragedies and take the side of people over corporations, which are presumed guilty and must 'prove their innocence'. 'Once a person or organization is perceived as a villain it is extremely difficult to shed the label' (Mitroff, 2004, p. 26). Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen's (2007, p. 22) examination of media coverage of six man-made disasters in the United Kingdom between 1929 and 1999 found that disaster reporting has evolved to 'increasingly give expressive authority to victims of the disaster rather than the officials and elites responding to it'. Bainbridge and Galloway's (2010, p. 102) analysis of newspaper stories in the week following the 2009 Victoria bushfire disaster in Australia discovered that the media 'developed discourses of blame that continually reframed the fires as a series of crises – around shifting responsibilities, inappropriate preparations and, most significantly, inadequate communication'.

Hurricane Katrina in 2005, where media, among other actors, broadcast unsubstantiated rumours, impacting on emergency operations, provides a useful example. Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski (2006) reported that the media framed Katrina as 'civil unrest' to the point of 'urban warfare', much of it without evidence. This diverted the priorities of officials from rescue to law enforcement, prompting a significant military response. The narrative of blame happened quickly. Maestas et al. (2008, p. 615) discovered that one-third of stories broadcast one week after the disaster referred to 'blame and responsibility', increasing to one-half of the coverage in weeks three to seven. However, as Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski (2006) point out, following the 'media frenzy', journalists themselves became the biggest critics of the reporting practices. These later attempts to correct the record cannot repair the damaged caused by inaccurate media reportage in the unfolding disaster.

Reportage of reports about disasters

The way in which the news media represent and mediate coverage of a disaster and its aftermath is significantly different than the way in which they represent public inquiries held into such events (McMullan and McClung, 2006, p. 79). In examining the construction of truth in media reports about the Westray mining disaster in Plymouth, Nova Scotia, Canada, McMullan and McClung (2006) identified considerable differences in the types of news discourses immediately after the explosion and later during the public inquiry. Twenty-six miners were killed after an explosion in an underground mine on 9 May 1992. Early coverage underlined the 'accident discourse' but this was almost totally absent in media coverage of the public inquiry (McMullan and McClung, 2006, pp. 79–80). Initial media reportage of Westray was dominated by the themes of unseen dangers and information control by the groups involved in it. However, very different discourses were evident in the media coverage of the public inquiry into Westray, in particular economic and political discourses and an organisational context of immortality with associated questioning of credibility (McMullan and McClung, 2006, pp. 79–80). The media also produces what McMullan and McClung (2006, p. 68) label as 'regimes of truth' about disaster inquiries. They elaborate on the function of the press in this respect: 'The press functions as an important site for the production and dissemination of "truth"' (McMullan and McClung, 2006, p. 69).

Managing the blame game

Within the corporate context, the attribution of blame during a crisis is a frequent response driven by unexpected situations without an obvious cause (Brown and White, 2010, p. 76). Blame is magnified if the organisation is at fault, or reduced if the cause is accidental or unintended (Chao and Gower, 2006). Interestingly, Seeger and Padgett (2010, p. 134) found that during some natural disasters, 'cooperation and healing' became the hallmark of community recovery where blame and cause are 'not the primary concern'. Consequently, they argue that removing blame from the corporate post-crisis environment can drive renewal and recovery. They cite, for example, the owner of Malden Mills, a timber company in Indiana, United States. When its factories were destroyed by fire, the owner began the rebuilding process immediately without 'shifting blame or denying responsibility' (Seeger and Padgett, 2010, p. 134). This approach was greeted with enthusiasm and support by workers, despite the tenuous financial implications resulting from the fire. Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007, pp. 134–138) note that this discourse of renewal is effective when organisations replace blame with a genuine desire to foster 'opportunities for renewal', driven by leadership that creates 'a compelling vision of how he or she will overcome the inherent constraints of the crisis' by 'communicating from a value position'. This is achieved when a goal-orientated organisation looks to the future rather than retrospectively seeking causal links to the crisis based on blame and responsibility (Seeger and Padgett, 2010).

Method

This study draws on Gitlin's (1980, p. 7) definition of news frames as 'persistent selection, emphasis, and exclusion'. Gitlin (1980) suggested that frames enable journalists to process and package large amounts of information quickly; in the case of the *Interim Report*, which was 266 pages, and the *Final Report*, which was 658 pages, they had to do just that. We acknowledge that, in covering the release of the Commission's *Interim Report*, journalists had to deal with many complexities in a very short period of time and they were not given advance copies of the document prior to the press conference at which then Queensland Premier Anna Bligh announced its release (*The Courier-Mail*, 6 August 2011, p. 66). Similarly, they were not furnished with copies of the *Final Report* before its launch.

This study identifies the news frames used by the two newspapers under review because they point up the ability of any entity— governments, individuals, media outlets, organisations, or social movements—'to delineate other people's reality, highlighting one interpretation while de-emphasizing a less favored one' (Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, 2008, p. 54). In addition, it examines news headlines because, as Pan and Kosicki (1993) suggested, these are the most powerful framing device of the syntactical structure of a news story.

There are numerous angles from which journalists can report issues and events. Framing theory recognises the important role of news frames in alerting audiences to certain explanations and courses of action at the expense of others, as well as the kinds of grand narratives that are woven into these news stories. Hence, news frames can be seen as having a considerable influence on the way in which audiences, including policymakers, understand and respond to issues and events.

This research analysed coverage by two newspapers (*The Courier-Mail* and *The Australian*) of the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry's *Interim Report* and *Final Report*, released, as noted above, on 1 August 2011 and 16 March 2012, respectively. The *Interim Report* was prepared and released so that strategies could be implemented to prevent similar flooding in the 2011–12 wet season. The *Final Report* dealt with matters concerning development on flood plains and operation of the Wivenhoe and Somerset Dams.

Two searches were conducted of the news database Factiva, which captures the content of all editions of the two newspapers included in the study. The first search concentrated on their coverage of the *Interim Report*, and ranged from 1 August 2011 (the date of release) to 11 October 2011 (the date on which the first search occurred). The second search to identify articles about the release of the *Final Report* captured content between 16 March 2012 (the date of release) and 1 August 2012 (the date on which the second search took place). To be included in the data set stories had to be primarily about the release of either report, not merely mention one or the other in passing reference to different topics.

As mentioned above, *The Courier-Mail* was chosen because it is a daily metropolitan newspaper whose circulation covers the state of Queensland, where the floods happened, and *The Australian* was selected because it is the national newspaper and

could be expected to devote significant coverage to the Commission's findings. According to *The Courier-Mail*'s website, the newspaper has a circulation of 163,090 on Monday–Friday and 215,184 on a Saturday.[3] According to *The Australian*'s website, as of February 2012, the paper had a weekday circulation of 133,701 and a weekend circulation of 295,066.[4] Key search terms used to pinpoint relevant newspaper articles included 'Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry *Interim Report*', 'floods', and 'Queensland floods'.

The two data sets were composed of 50 news, features, and opinion stories from both newspapers. The first data set—stories about the release of the *Interim Report*—consisted of 29 news, features, and opinion pieces published by the two newspapers. Of this data set, 13 (44.8 per cent) articles were published in *The Courier-Mail* and 16 (55.2 per cent) in *The Australian*. Both newspapers gave the stories significant prominence, placing the majority of them in the Early General News section (14 or 87.5 per cent in *The Australian* and 9 or 56.25 per cent in *The Courier-Mail*).[5] The other two stories in *The Australian* appeared in the Opinion/Editorial section, whereas the remaining four stories in *The Courier-Mail* were split evenly between the Opinion/Editorial and Features pages.

The second data set—stories about the release of the *Final Report*—consisted of 21 news, features, and opinion pieces published by both newspapers. Of these 12 (57 per cent) were published in *The Courier-Mail* and 9 (43 per cent) in *The Australian*. In *The Australian*, stories about the *Final Report* were given less prominence than those about the *Interim Report*, with 4 (44 per cent) stories in *The Australian* and 7 (58.3 per cent) in *The Courier-Mail* appearing in the Early General News section. Three opinion pieces were published in *The Australian* on pages 17, 30, and 34, and two feature articles were published on pages 13 and 21. *The Courier-Mail* gave relative prominence to the *Final Report* with 7 (58.3 per cent) stories published in the Early General News section. In *The Courier-Mail*, 3 news stories appeared on pages 11, 13, and 17, plus an opinion piece on page 29 and an editorial on page 20.

Previous research into news media framing of disasters was used to develop the list of news frames. This study drew on an article by McMullan and McClung (2006, p. 74), which identified nine discourses employed in media coverage of the Westray disaster inquiry. To construct the list of news frames, each article was read several times by one of the authors and a list of commonly occurring frames was developed, including those found by McMullan and McClung (2009). Four themes were detected in our data sets that McMullan and McClung also found in their study: accident, moral approbation, reform, and regulatory failure. However, three of the nine discourses that McMullan and McClung (2009) state the media used to frame the Westray disaster were not present in the news articles analysed during this research: the law and order, the legal, and the political economy discourses. We added our own categories because, as the stories were read and re-read, certain frames that McMullan and McClung (2009) did not find were revealed in our data sets. In addition to the aforementioned frames, we identified the following: the cost of flood recovery, the flood victims' personal accounts, and a legal class action case being launched on behalf

Table 1. Themes identified in the coverage by the two newspapers of the *Interim* and *Final Reports*

Identified frames	Meaning of the frame
Regulatory failure	'[T]he regulatory failure discourse where the explosion was narrated as an event caused by health and safety inspectors who were unable or unwilling to monitor and regulate the mine site' (McMullan and McClung, 2006, p. 74)
Failure of government	'[T]he failure of government discourse that viewed the explosion and its consequences as the result of reckless and irresponsible decisions made by senior politicians and government officials' (McMullan and McClung, 2006, p. 74)
Accident	'[T]he accident discourse where the explosion was constructed as a spontaneous act of nature beyond human prediction and control, and framed by a vocabulary of harm, loss, grief, bravery, and sacrifice said to be typical of miners and their communities' (McMullan and McClung, 2006, p. 74)
Reform	'[T]he reform discourse that registered Westray in an iconography of social change and new preventative measures; and (i) ''other indexed reports'' that were not represented by any of the above themes' (McMullan and McClung, 2006, p.74)
Moral approbation	'[T]he moral approbation discourse where Westray and its aftermath was constituted as a morality drama' (McMullan and McClung, 2006, p. 74)
Cost of floods	The economic cost of replacing damaged infrastructure as a result of the floods.
Legal action	The possibility of a class action on behalf of flood victims was raised in response to the possibility that the Inquiry's Final Report would identify who was to blame for the floods.
Flood victims' personal accounts	Stories about those directly affected by the floods.

Table 2. Primary and secondary news frames used in reporting the release of the *Interim* and *Final Reports*

	The Australian Interim Report		The Australian Final Report		The Courier-Mail Interim Report		The Courier-Mail Final Report	
News frame	Pri.	Sec.	Pri.	Sec.	Pri.	Sec.	Pri.	Sec.
Regulatory failure	5	4	3	4	2	1	1	5
Government failure	–	2	–	1	3	5	2	1
Accident	4	2	2	1	–	2	2	1
Legal	2	1	3	1	1	–	2	1
Reform (better preparedness and response)	5	4	–	1	5	5	3	1
Cost	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	3
Moral approbation	–	–	1	1	2	–	2	–
Total	**16**	**14**	**9**	**9**	**13**	**13**	**12**	**12**

of flood victims. Table 1 contains a list and associated explanations of themes iden-
tified in the two data sets.

After the initial reading of the newspaper articles, each individual story was re-
read and coded to determine the primary and secondary news frames (see Table 2).
The story type (news, feature, opinion, editorial) was noted, as was the page on
which each story appeared. The latter assisted in gauging the prominence accorded
to stories about the floods reports.

The *Interim Report*: a story of failure and reform

The Australian primarily told the story of the release of the *Interim Report* through the
news frames of regulatory failure, accident, and reform. It accorded almost equal
weight to each of these frames, publishing five stories (31.25 per cent) that used the
regulatory failure frame, four (25 per cent) that used the accident frame, and five
(31.25 per cent) that used the reform frame. The frame of regulatory failure encom-
passed the sub-themes of individual and systems failure, with an emphasis on the
failure of individuals to follow regulations and the inadequacy of systems designed
to decrease the extent of flooding. Individual failure was most commonly emphasised
by *The Australian* (6 August 2011, p. 11) through a focus on the failure of the dam
engineers, for example: 'The flood engineers had not done drills for a crucial strat-
egy involving the most significant releases of water to protect the integrity of the
structure'. *The Australian* encapsulated the sub-theme of systems failure by underscor-
ing problems within Wivenhoe Dam's operating manual. The systems failure theme
included the malfunction of the national emergency alert system, which was at the
heart of a news story in *The Australian* (4 August 2011, p. 8) entitled 'Cryptic SMS
alerts sparked mass panic'. The story went on to detail the failure of the SMS (Short
Message Service) alert system:

> *The Gillard government is reviewing the nation's emergency SMS alert system, which deliv-
> ered cryptic, delayed and irrelevant warnings that sparked mass panic during Queensland's
> flood emergency.*

The Commission's *Interim Report* paid significant attention to the problems reported
by *The Australian*. The regulatory failure news frame was operationalised by an edito-
rial that also focused on the matter of who was to blame for the floods. For instance,
in an editorial in *The Australian* (2 August 2011, p. 15) on the release of the *Interim Report*
the newspaper asked who was responsible for the disaster:

> *Another crucial finding of the report was that Wivenhoe Dam's flood engineers breached
> their operating manual by failing to take forecast rainfall information into account when
> they were determining the volume and timing of water releases from the dam at a critical stage.
> That finding, and the question of who bears responsibility for it, opens the door to potential
> damages against the state as the legal indemnity for the dam's operators, SEQWater, relies
> on the manual being followed.*

The accident frame was also used by *The Australian* to tell the story of the floods, but this frame predominantly involved emphasising the floods as a catastrophe, the plight of the flood victims, and the heroic deeds of some individuals. For example, *The Australian* told its readers (2 August 2011, p. 1):

> *The rain started at about noon. It poured down in icy sheets that soon turned the lazy-flowing creeks of the Lockyer Valley into chocolate-coloured torrents of death. By 1.40pm, it was already too late for many of those in the path of the 'inland tsunami' that engulfed communities west of Brisbane on January 10. The speed of the disaster that overwhelmed emergency services and communications, leaving people to fend for themselves, is dramatically described in the interim report of the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry released yesterday.*

Later in the same story, the heroic acts of individuals were emphasised:

> *When all else failed, the locals were left to their own devices. Grantham men Ray van Dijk and Daniel Moore paddled through the churning water in a canoe, and between them reckon they saved '22 lives and 12 dogs'.*

The Australian also used the 'reform' frame to report the release of the *Interim Report*. This frame centred on the idea that if the state could be better prepared for flood events and be better situated to respond to them, the likelihood of a repeat event would significantly decrease. For instance, *The Australian* (1 August 2011, p. 5) said that:

> *Wivenhoe Dam operators will be allowed to release huge, pre-emptive amounts of its drinking supply during the coming wet season to avoid the mistakes of this year's Brisbane floods under recommendations in the interim report of the Queensland floods commission. The long-awaited report will focus on ramping up the preparedness of authorities, amid warnings of more major flooding later this year, after January's floods, which inundated 22,000 homes in Brisbane and Ipswich.*

As well as a focus on improved preparation, the reform frame positioned the *Interim Report* as a document that would provide a framework that would prevent an event of similar magnitude from occurring in the future. A sub-headline told readers of *The Australian* (2 August 2011, p. 15) that 'Lessons must be learned from the inquiry's interim report', while another story on the same day reinforced this theme: 'In its wide-ranging interim report, handed down yesterday, the commission of inquiry makes 175 recommendations to improve Queensland's preparations for a flood disaster'.

The *Interim Report* presented a significant challenge for journalists seeking to report its release using the blame frame. This was because the Commission did not directly apportion blame for the floods or the damage they caused to any individuals or organisations, which precluded, at least in news and feature stories, the direct employment of the blame frame. It was left to editorial and opinion writers to enact the blame frame within their articles through a focus on the regulatory failure frame and by

repeatedly raising questions about who was responsible for the Queensland floods. *The Australian* (2 August 2011, p. 15) underlined the regulatory failure theme in the following headline: 'Nature and bad judgment led to flood devastation'. Here, the use of the term 'bad judgement' indicates that somebody was to blame for the floods. The issue of who was to blame was a theme within the failure of government frame, raised in a headline on another topic in *The Australian* (2 August 2011, p. 9): 'Minister failed to fix confusion'. In this instance, the failure theme was enacted through a stress on the minister's lack of action in the face of a looming disaster. A story in *The Australian* (6 August 2011, p. 7) actualised his failure by telling its readers that the minister had 'baulked' and that he 'oversaw months of delay and confusion':

> *The report homed in on Water Utilities Minister Stephen Robertson, who oversaw months of delay and confusion among his top bureaucrats on a decision to partially drain Wivenhoe. He baulked and it wasn't until the days before January's floods, when there were fears the dam wall would break – after the reservoir and rivers were swollen – that the huge releases were made. In the end, it was too late.*

The *Interim Report*: a story of failure and a need for reform

The Courier-Mail's coverage of the *Interim Report* was framed through the lens of government failure, while the report was positioned as the basis for much needed reform. The failure of government theme was enacted through a focus on the failure of the government minister who was responsible for a decision about whether or not to release water from Wivenhoe Dam. *The Courier-Mail* (10 August 2011, p. 24) concentrated on the failings of the minister and another politician in an opinion piece:

> *The interim report contained thinly veiled criticisms of Water Minister Stephen Robertson, who presided over two months of confusion about whether or not to release water from Wivenhoe Dam before the floods. Ignored and then brow-beaten by the utilities, he did nothing. Holmes says Labor's high-profile Ashgrove MP [Member of Parliament], Kate Jones, was also a responsible DERM [Department of Environment and Resource Management] Minister before the floods in her role as Environment Minister.*

When using the reform theme *The Courier-Mail* homed in on a commitment made by several government agencies to improve systems that had failed during the floods. In one news story *The Courier-Mail* (2 August 2011, p. 5) reported:

> *Local Government Association of Queensland [LGAQ] President Paul Bell said LGAQ senior officers had met Acting Queensland Police Commissioner Ian Stewart, Department of Community Safety Director-General Jim McGowan and Queensland Fire and Rescue Service Commissioner Lee Johnson to discuss improving disaster management systems and all had committed themselves to coming up with an improved process by the end of October.*

The focus on government failure and the need for reform provide the opportunity for politicians to engage in the blame game. Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor (2008) note that political elites 'deflect, deflate or diffuse' blame during negative events. Bligh tried unsuccessfully to deflect attempts by her political opponents to highlight her minister's responsibility for failing to take action over the storage levels of the dams—*The Courier-Mail* (3 August 2011, p. 6) headlined a story 'Bligh defends "dithering" minister from criticism'. Further examples of attempts to play the blame game included a news story in *The Courier-Mail* (4 August 2011, p. 5) titled 'Political fallout from flood probe sparks up House', which told readers:

> *Fall-out from the flood report spilled into Parliament yesterday with renewed calls for the sacking of Water Minister Stephen Robertson.*

However, in the absence of blame being laid by the *Interim Report* for the floods and the associated devastation, *The Courier-Mail* was left with few options in relation to the framing of the story and so it emphasised that someone should shoulder the blame for the floods. In an editorial (2 August 2011, p. 20), for instance, the newspaper highlighted the lack of apportionment of blame by the Commission:

> *ANYONE[6] looking for scalps would have been disappointed. So, too, anyone looking to score political points.*

The editorial writer went on to demand that failure to act should be punished, while also reminding readers of the flood engineers' failure:

> *Although the interim report does not assign particular blame, it does note that flood engineers were in breach of the Wivenhoe Dam manual when they failed to take rainfall forecasts into account when making vital decisions about water releases near the height of the flooding. . . . Deliberate failure to perform should be identified and penalties meted out.*

The *Final Report*: a story of regulatory failure

The Australian framed reportage of the release of the *Final Report* through the lens of regulatory failure and legal action. This latter theme involved a focus on a potential class action by those affected by the floods. Of the nine articles published about the *Final Report*, three were framed in terms of regulatory failure and three in terms of legal action. The regulatory failure theme focused largely on the problems with Wivenhoe Dam's operating manual, with the floods framed as the result of the failings of that manual, and the subsequent problems associated with its use by engineers. This was evidenced in a front-page story in *The Australian* (17 March 2012, p. 1):

> *What is not disputed is that the dam manual needs rewriting. The commission found it was 'ambiguous, unclear and difficult to use' and was 'not based on the best, most current research and information'.*

The remaining three articles published by *The Australian* included two that used the accident frame, concentrating mainly on the victims of the floods, and another that used the moral approbation frame, centring on allegations about the evidence given to the Queensland Floods Commission by three dam engineers. These individuals faced misconduct allegations through the Criminal Misconduct Commission (CMC) as a result of evidence given to the Commission, but the CMC dismissed them in August 2012. In December 2012, a magistrate fined one of the engineers AUD 1,500 for working while unregistered during the floods.

While nine articles is admittedly a small data set, the absence of a more sustained focus on reportage of the *Final Report* and its recommendations is significant—the final section of this paper explores some reasons why this may have been the case. In examining news frames those that are not present can be just as significant as those that appear. In *The Australian*'s coverage of the *Final Report*, it was striking that the frame of reform was absent. This was surprising because that Report contained a significant list of recommendations aimed at alleviating similar flood events in the future.

The Australian's framing of stories through the legal frame worked in conjunction with the regulatory failure frame, such as in the article headline 'Damages to flow from dam breach Wivenhoe engineers referred to corruption watchdog' (17 March 2012, p. 1). The article elaborated:

> . . . a royal commission-style probe found the Wivenhoe Dam was mismanaged and that a cover-up attempted to conceal the truth. The Floods Commission of Inquiry's finding that the engineers who operated Australia's largest dam failed to adopt the correct strategy to protect Brisbane from inundation for about 36 hours from Saturday, January 8, last year, has given a major boost to the hopes of thousands of victims.

The Courier-Mail's coverage of the *Final Report*, meanwhile, focused on the frames of reform and failure. In the former area the emphasis was on the *Final Report*'s provision of a necessary framework for much-needed reform. There were three stories within the reform frame and three within the failure frame. In relation to the reform theme, *The Courier-Mail* (19 March 2012, p. 20) told its readers that:

> Flood inquiry Commissioner Cate Holmes has given the voters of Queensland a remarkably comprehensive checklist for measuring the competence of the next State Government. Her final report, which she delivered on Friday, contains 18 pages of more than 175 specific and highly detailed recommendations for improving Queensland's ability to withstand the ravages of floods.

The newspaper's use of the reform frame brought into question the issue of why reform in relation to flood events and dam management had not been pursued earlier. In effect, this again raised the matter of who was to blame for the floods (*The Courier-Mail*, 19 March 2012, p. 20, editorial):

And indeed the commission had stressed several times that it was not seeking to attribute blame or seek out wrong-doers. But still, on the evidence of close to 200 recommendations from the commission on how things might be done better in the future, it is fair for the people of Queensland to ask why it has taken one of the worst natural disasters in the state's recent history for these matters to only now be identified.

Regulatory failure was enacted in the following headline: 'Dam engineers found in breach of manual' (*The Courier-Mail*, 17 March 2012, p. 6). The news story that followed this headline went on to tell readers that:

Dam engineers[7] breached their operations manual in 2011 by failing to 'consciously' choose and use strategies to operate Wivenhoe and Somerset dams, the flood inquiry found.

Discussion

Formal disaster inquiries and their findings provide a way for affected communities to make sense of the events; identifying who is to blame for the disaster is part of that process. When blame is absent in official reports and the findings of these inquiries, the media takes on the quest of laying blame as part of their sense-making role for their audiences. To comprehend the magnitude of the floods disaster for their readership, in the absence of official blame being apportioned by the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry, *The Courier-Mail* and *The Australian* newspapers had to invoke other frames in reporting the release of these documents.

This study offers an example of what happens when a newspaper decides that its fourth-estate role goes beyond acting as a check on the government, the judiciary, and the executive (Schultz, 1994), to actively pinpointing who is to blame for a disaster. In this case, *The Australian* went from reporting the story of the release of the *Interim Report* through the lens of regulatory failure, accident, and reform, to reporting the story of the release of the *Final Report* using the failure and legal frames. In the 7.5 months between the release of the *Interim* and *Final Reports*, *The Australian* mounted a campaign to bring three dam engineers to justice over claims of 'an alleged fictitious reconstruction by the engineers of their actions and alleged dishonesty in evidence to the inquiry' (Thomas, 2012, p. 1). When the *Final Report* did not blame the engineers, *The Australian* was forced to rely on the frame of failure, highlighting the failure of the dam manual during the floods. The reform frame was notably absent from its reportage of the release of the *Final Report* and so the opportunity to focus on its recommendations and frame the opportunities it provided to enact reform was lost. The failure frame may have been the next best option for reporting the story because it carries with it the implication that if those who fail can be identified, then it should be possible to apportion blame and hold someone to account for the event and the associated damage. *The Australian* may have taken this approach because it is considered one of the few media outlets that devote resources to investigative journalism, and it may have conceptualised its fourth-estate role here as one

in which it should find out who was to blame for the floods. *The Courier-Mail*, meanwhile, gave equal weight to the release of the *Interim* and *Final Reports*, framing the story as one of failure and reform.

The lengthy gap between the release of the *Interim* and *Final Reports* may explain why there was less coverage by both newspapers of the *Final Report*. The issue may have been deemed less newsworthy or there may have been a perception that public interest in the findings had diminished. There was significant political and community pressure on the Commission to release an *Interim Report* in the lead up to the 2011–12 wet season, which may have contributed to the additional coverage of it by both newspapers.

In focusing on the regulatory failure frame and in seeking to pinpoint someone to blame for this failure, *The Australian* obscured the importance of the findings of the *Final Report*. The research tells us that it is relatively rare to discover that blame is not apportioned for disasters and their consequences, particularly when official commissions or inquiries have been held into the events. Drabek and Quarantelli (1967, p. 12) found that after a disaster, there is an unrelenting 'search for scapegoats to blame for destruction and loss of life'. This was the case with the media coverage of the release of the *Interim Report*.

The Australian's failure to concentrate on the reform theme—that is, the recommendations and how they would be costed and implemented and what impacts they would have on future events of a similar magnitude—may have left questions in the minds of the newspaper's readers over the process of the floods inquiry and its outcomes. The *Final Report* made 177 recommendations about planning development and management of the floods as well about myriad other issues. It may have been that *The Australian* found reportage of the conflict and the drama associated with the inquiry much more interesting and newsworthy than its actual findings. The inquiry took many months and just as McMullan and McClung (2006) gleaned in the case of Westray, the media devoted significant attention to it, but once the report was released it gained very little traction with the two newspapers and its findings were under-reported. *The Courier-Mail* paid a little more attention than *The Australian* to the theme of reform in its coverage of the *Interim Report* and the *Final Report*.

Seeking to apportion blame is, as O'Connor, Kotze, and Wright (2011) argue, a 'simple and artificial solution' to a complex problem. Identifying who is to blame for a disaster is part of what journalists perceive as their fourth-estate role, particularly in respect of acting as a check and balance on government (Schultz, 1994). While the quest of *The Courier-Mail* and *The Australian* to reveal who was to blame could be viewed by some as a relatively exceptional example of the media fulfilling its fourth-estate role, the focus on seeking who is to blame for a disaster may not be especially useful or productive as it precludes public discussion of why a disaster occurred and, more importantly, how to prevent an event of similar magnitude occurring in the future. McMullan and McClung (2006) also highlighted during reporting of inquiries into disasters the focus on who was to blame within a context of immorality and failure to act, with resultant questioning of the credibility of the government

and the authorities. That was also the case in the coverage of the Queensland Floods Commission's *Interim* and *Final Reports* by *The Courier-Mail* and *The Australian*.

This study revealed that the frames employed prevented these newspapers from any in-depth examination of *why* the floods happened. This accords with the finding of Maestas et al. (2008) that the focus of media attention often shifts in the blame stage of a disaster to preclude analysing why the disaster took place. The absences in the two newspapers' coverage and the issues that were given scant attention were as interesting as the themes that were covered. There was a very brief mention in a story published by *The Australian* (3 August 2011, p. 8) that the recommendations of the *Interim Report* could not be implemented before the 2011–12 wet season, despite Bligh promising they would be fully realised. The failure of *The Australian* to follow up on this issue precluded vital discussions about what strategies could be put in place in case the state faced another wet season like that of 2010–11. The lack of a flood event in southeast Queensland during the 2011–12 wet season was no doubt a relief for those affected by the earlier floods, but it meant that the state government did not face media scrutiny about why the recommendations of the *Interim Report* were not implemented.

Conclusion

Examining the reportage of disasters by various forms of media is important for those charged with communicating with the public before, during, and after disasters and in identifying the potential for changing journalistic approaches to reporting these types of stories. A more nuanced approach to post-disaster and disaster inquiry reportage by newspapers would, while enabling the media to fulfil its fourth-estate obligations, also facilitate public discussion of recovery from disasters. This would enable the media to explore how measures might be introduced to reduce the impact of, and to manage adequately, similar events. The problem with framing the story of the release of the reports and their findings using the lens of failure, as well as the associated quest to lay blame, is that ultimately this shapes public memory of the disaster, subsequently obscuring the 'deeper causal, structural and systemic factors' (Bruns and Eltham, 2010, p. 94) that contributed to the disaster. In failing to concentrate on these latter issues, *The Australian* helped to mould the cultural memory of this event as a tragedy with few, if any, ways of preventing a similar catastrophic reoccurrence. *The Courier-Mail*'s readership may have perceived its coverage of the two reports differently because of its consistent focus on the frames of failure and reform.

Further research into early news media coverage of the Queensland floods as they unfolded, and the news frames that characterised that coverage, would make a valuable contribution to understanding the media coverage of different stages of significant disasters and the focus that journalists place on these types of stories, particularly in relation to official inquiries and subsequent reports. This understanding would assist in changing journalistic practices in relation to these kinds of events and in educating journalism students about disaster reportage. It is possible to use research

to change actively journalists reporting practices, as demonstrated by a three-year study of organisational change in newsrooms owned by APN News and Media (Massey and Ewart, 2012). The company used the findings to alter journalistic practices. This experience showed that newsrooms are willing to take on the findings of research and to work with their journalistic staff to amend their practices. It would be instructive to see how the newspapers studied here would respond to suggestions for modifying journalistic practice towards the coverage of disaster inquiries.

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Endnotes

1.   See http://www.floodcommission.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/8781/QFCI-Interim-Report-August-2011.pdf (last accessed on 25 June 2014).
2.   See http://www.floodcommission.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/11698/QFCI-Final-Report-March-2012.pdf (last accessed on 25 June 2014).
3.   See http://www.newscorpaustralia.com/brand/courier-mail (last accessed on 22 June 2014).
4.   See http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/news/the-australian-leads-the-pack-in-circulation/story-e6frg906-1226267191629 (last accessed on 19 June 2014).
5.   Stories published in the Early General News pages of a newspaper are more prominent because these pages make up the first section of the newspaper and are considered more likely to be read than stories that appear in other sections of the newspaper.
6.   The word anyone was capitalised in the original version of the published story.
7.   The original newspaper article published these two words in a bold typeface.

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