

# FEMA's fall and redemption— applied narrative analysis

FEMA's fall  
and  
redemption

Lex Drennan

*School of Government and International Relations,  
Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to recover the narratives constructed by the disaster management policy network in Washington, DC, about the management of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy. Recovering and analysing these narratives provides an opportunity to understand the stories constructed about these events and consider the implications of this framing for post-event learning and adaptation of government policy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research was conducted through an extended ethnographic study in Washington, DC, that incorporated field observation, qualitative interviews and desktop research.

**Findings** – The meta-narratives recovered through this research point to a collective tendency to fit the experiences of Hurricane Katrina and Sandy into a neatly constructed redemption arc. This narrative framing poses significant risk to policy learning and highlights the importance of exploring counter-narratives as part of the policy analysis process.

**Research limitations/implications** – The narratives in this paper reflect the stories and beliefs of the participants interviewed. As such, it is inherently subjective and should not be generalised. Nonetheless, it is illustrative of how narrative framing can obscure important learnings from disasters.

**Originality/value** – The paper represents a valuable addition to the field of disaster management policy analysis. It extends the tools of narrative analysis and administrative ethnography into the disaster management policy domain and demonstrates how these techniques can be used to analyse complex historical events.

**Keywords** Hurricane Katrina, Narrative analysis, Hurricane Sandy, Administrative ethnography, Policy and disaster management

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Following the landfall of Hurricane Katrina, an overwhelming sense of outrage grew within the America public (Chertoff quoted in Sommers *et al.*, 2006). In the world's most powerful democracy, people drowned in their homes, desperately waiting for rescues that never arrived, bodies decomposed in the streets and public order appeared to fall apart (Tierney *et al.*, 2006; Sommers *et al.*, 2006). President Bush, his Administration and in particular the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were held accountable for this egregious failure (Durham, 2008; House of Representatives, 2006).

Seven years later, under President Obama, a storm of unprecedented size and composition struck the north eastern coast of America. Hurricane Sandy, an 800-km wide ex-tropical storm combined with a blizzard to plunge 11 states into darkness, caused over 150 deaths and left 8.5m people without power or gas for days (FEMA, 2013a; National Hurricane Center, 2012).

This paper examines some of the key aspects of Hurricane Katrina that gave rise to the narrative of FEMA's failure and the redemption earned through its response to Hurricane Sandy (Durham, 2008; Jenkins, 2007). The prelude to this narrative is found in the 11 September 2001, World Trade Centre attacks. The ongoing impact of this event on US domestic policy echoes throughout the FEMA story (Kettl, 2013; 't Hart *et al.*, 2009). These points comprise the beginning, middle and end of FEMA's redemption narrative. The narrative incorporates themes about how America perceives itself as the world's only superpower, the pervasive impact of 11 September on US domestic policy, the institutional failure of poor US states, lack of policy learnings and the power of narrative framing (Parker *et al.*, 2009; Kalyango and Eckler, 2010; Durham, 2008). Analysing this narrative



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highlights the risk of oversimplifying complex events and the importance of seeking counter-narratives (Roe, 1994).

This paper draws on an embedded ethnographic study to recover and analyse how these events have been framed into narratives inside the disaster management policy network of Washington, DC. There is extensive literature on the response, recovery operations and the community experiences of these two events. This paper extends the perspectives for learning and analysis by viewing these events through the lens of government elites in the Washington, DC, policy network.

The importance of qualitative research, and understanding a disaster's impacts from the respondents' perspective is well documented in the disaster management field (Chamlee-Wright and Storr, 2011; Boasso *et al.*, 2015; Norris *et al.*, 2008; Quarantelli, 2008; Dynes and Tierney, 1994; Dynes, 1970). However, there is less exploration of the narratives government elites create from disaster response experiences and the meaning embedded in these narratives. Nor is there a significant body of analysis of what these narratives mean for the development and implementation of government policy (Rhodes, 2014). Studying the elites of public administration and the various actors in a policy network provide insight into how policy issues are framed, solutions developed and advocated for and finally how decisions are made (Rhodes 2011).

This paper builds on the extensive work undertaken by Rhodes and Bevir (Bevir and Rhodes, 2005, 2006; Rhodes 2011; Bevir, 2011) by applying the tools of ethnography to the field of disaster management policy.

The process of narrative analysis is showcased in this paper; from collecting respondent narratives, ground-truthing these with desktop data, the development of a meta-narrative and the process of uncovering counter-narratives that challenge these paradigms (Roe, 1992). The term meta-narrative is used here to describe a narrative that arises out of and encompasses respondent narratives (Given, 2008). It is necessarily a subjective interpretation of respondent narratives, but as all these discussions of narratives and assigned meaning are subjective it is nonetheless not without value as an interpretive tool (Lofland *et al.*, 2006; King and Horrocks, 2010). The narratives presented in this paper provide one lens through which to view a complex issue. There are, no doubt, many others.

This paper is structured in four parts. The literature on narrative analysis and administrative ethnography are considered followed by an overview of the research methodology. The meta-narrative of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy are then presented in the form of a discrete novella, representing the narrative arc of how this story was most frequently conveyed by respondents. Finally, a counter-narrative is put forward and analysed.

## Literature review

### *Policy networks*

Policy networks comprise numerous actors, both inside and outside government bureaucracies, who seek to engage with and influence the process of policy development and implementation (Kingdon and Thurber, 2011; Bevir and Richards, 2009). According to Bevir and Richards (2009, p. 6) they "are an institutional setting in which public and private actors interact" to realise their preferences. Distinctions are made between more tightly bound policy communities, which tend to share beliefs and goals, and broader networks in which actors compete to influence outcomes (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992).

The increased focus on the role of non-governmental actors in creating policy reflects the shift towards network governance rather than the traditional hierarchical, bureaucratic-led approach (Heinrich, 2007; Head, 2008). Understanding the multiple, competing voices which influence the policy development process moves away from the neatly-circumscribed policy development cycle towards a broader conception of the actors and interactions involved in policy development (Althaus *et al.*, 2012). This understanding of a policy network aligns

with Kingdon's perspective on the multiple streams that influence policy decision making, along with the role of policy entrepreneurs in exploiting policy windows (Kingdon and Thurber, 2011).

### *Administrative ethnography*

Simply put, administrative ethnography is the application of ethnographic methods to the study of public administration (Bevir, 2011; Rhodes, 2011). The lack of administrative ethnography is notable (Auyero and Joseph, 2007; Rhodes, 2014), although recently, Cappellaro (2017) observed a threefold increase in the number of administrative ethnographic studies published per year from 1990 to 2010. Yet as Cappellaro (2017) identifies, the contribution of administrative ethnography remains a relatively small part of studies into the field of public administration.

Nonetheless, proponents of the interpretive turn have demonstrated how the tools of ethnography can be meaningfully applied to a variety of elements within public administration, from studying front-line workers to the decision-making politics of elites (Rhodes and Tiernan, 2016; Kaufman, 1960). Whilst administrative ethnography originated from the approaches of anthropological field studies, these methods have evolved to a broader spectrum of techniques (Cappellaro, 2017; Boll and Rhodes, 2015). Rhodes (2014) identifies a toolkit of ethnographic approaches, extending the discipline beyond the traditional embedded field study to incorporate "hit-and-run" ethnographic snapshots of particular times and locations. The purpose of these techniques, whether deep field observation or multi-point snapshots, is to recover the stories participants in administrative networks tell themselves about their actions and the meaning ascribed to it (Bevir and Rhodes, 2005; Bevir, 2011).

In the disaster management field there exists a significant body of work examining the narratives of individuals who have experienced disasters. This research explores how these narratives shape their understanding of events and affect their recovery, with a particular focus on public choice theory and community resilience constructs (Chamlee-Wright and Storr, 2011; Madsen and O'Mullan, 2013; Rooney and White, 2007; Tuohy and Stephens, 2012). In the main, this research uses narratives to understand the meaning constructed by individuals and how it affects their behaviour. These narratives are considered in their context as resources of community resilience (Sherrieb *et al.*, 2010; Norris *et al.*, 2008; Cutter *et al.*, 2008)—their potential relevance as a tool of policy analysis is not directly addressed.

### *Narrative analysis*

The case for interpretivism has been argued by Bevir (2011, p. 190) as "social science relies on explanations that refer to the reasons people had for acting [...] social explanations thus resemble narratives". Rhodes (2014, p. 320) further outlines its importance noting, "An interpretive approach seeks to understand the webs of significance that people spin for themselves". A growing body of literature in policy studies explores how story-telling is relevant to policy development and implementation (Roe, 1994). These stories encapsulate the challenges confronted by organisations and preserve both meaning and ways of perceiving events that occur around and within an organisation (Borins, 2011; Denning, 2005). Through telling their stories, people create their reality and assign meaning to historical events (Riessman, 2008).

In his seminal work on front-line administrative practice, Kaufman (1960) showcased how narratives can have a significant impact on administrative behaviour. They provide both the "glue" that holds highly decentralised administrative networks together and serve as a lens through which action, inaction and organisational pathologies can be understood (Kaufman, 1960; Rhodes, 2011; Borins, 2011). These narratives in their

aggregate, are the institutional memory that explain both what gets done, how and why (Pollitt, 2015; Rhodes, 2011, 2014).

When considering approaches to solving wicked problems such as managing a wide-area disaster, it is challenging to apply a rational analytic frame to this complexity. The multiple competing narratives of such events make the interpretation of events a highly subjective activity. Under circumstances such as these, Kaplan (1986, p. 768) observes, "There is another way of imposing order on complexity, considering relevant factors, and making policy recommendations: the narrative structure, or stories, can do all of that, and where no broadly agreed upon criteria exist, do so as validly as other forms of policy analysis".

### Methodology

This case study was developed through a mixed method ethnographic study (Rhodes, 2014). The methodological design incorporated a two-month period of embedded field work in the United States Congress, specifically in the office of Congressman Jerrold Nadler (D-NY) (Rhodes, 2011; Riessman, 2008; Yin, 2009). A total of 15 interviews were conducted using a semi-structured, qualitative approach. Respondents included Congressmen, congressional staffers, congressional researchers and current and former FEMA staff. These interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, after which an iterative process of thematic analysis was undertaken. In addition, research was conducted through attending numerous functions and speaking to all manner of DC residents regarding their thoughts on Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy. These observations and interactions were recorded as field notes and used to supplement interviews.

The case study design is comparative and conveyed in a narrative arc to allow an analysis of the implications of the narrative framing (Yin, 2009; Roe, 1994; Cronon, 1992). This paper re-tells and interprets the stories of interviewees (Riessman, 2008). This re-telling is informed by desktop research into both events to identify objective facts that sit beneath these narrative accounts (Yin, 2009; Bryman, 2012).

### FEMA's fall and redemption

A story in five parts in which FEMA faces and overcomes an existential crisis.

#### *Prelude*

In which America is changed forever and FEMA's mission changes.

At 8.46 a.m. and then at 9.03 a.m. on 11 September 2001, two hijacked passenger jet planes were flown into the World Trade Towers. A third plane struck the Pentagon and a fourth crashed southeast of Pittsburgh (9/11 Commission, 2004). In total, over 3,000 people, including first responders such as police and emergency services, died that day. It is no exaggeration to say the event changed the course of American history (9/11 Commission, 2004). One interviewee, a staffer in Congressman Nadler's office, whose district encompasses the World Trade complex, was still moved to tears talking about the attack—14 years on. Its echoes are everywhere in America and it continues to cast a long shadow over foreign and domestic policy.

The impacts of September 11 on government policy were stark and immediate as the Bush Administration rapidly pivoted its focus to foreign affairs and domestic security. A month after the attack, America passed the Patriot Act and invaded Afghanistan. By the end of 2002 Congress had passed legislation enabling the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, which comprised 22 disparate agencies including FEMA (Department of Homeland Security, 2014). A total of 18 months after the attacks, America and the

“Coalition of the Willing” invaded Iraq (Anderson, 2011). The domestic side-effects of this pivot were to become visible when, four years on, Hurricane Katrina made landfall 60 miles away from New Orleans (Parker *et al.*, 2009; Birkland and Waterman, 2008).

### *Landfall*

In which the levees fail and New Orleans drowns.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on 29 August 2006 at Buras, Louisiana, as a Category 3 hurricane. The storm surge that preceded it over-topped New Orleans' levees, causing catastrophic flooding of 80 per cent of the city (Wolshon, 2006; Townsend, 2006; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2005).

Despite moving over 1 million people out of harm's way, nearly 20 per cent of the city's population remained in place. As would soon become apparent, these were predominantly the black, elderly, poor and marginalised in the city; those without easy access to transport (Wolshon, 2006; Townsend, 2006; Sharkey, 2007). The storm caused over 1,500 confirmed fatalities, with at least 1,440 of them occurring in Louisiana (Townsend, 2006; Norwalk, 2007). The New Orleans death toll accounts for the majority of these deaths (Norwalk, 2007; Brunkhard *et al.*, 2008).

The unequal impacts of Katrina added to the outraged perception that the government, spearheaded by FEMA, had failed to protect its weakest, poorest and black citizens (Durham, 2008; Tierney *et al.*, 2006; Sommers *et al.*, 2006). The sense of abandonment was most vividly portrayed through the disarray at the Superdome Stadium where 25,000 refugees were stranded for nearly seven days with limited access to sanitation, food and water (House of Representatives, 2006; Sommers *et al.*, 2006; Jenkins, 2007).

Following landfall, full dewatering of the city took 44 days and added a complex social dimension of public health problems and extensive population displacement to the physical damage caused by the hurricane. There is a growing consensus that New Orleans will never recover its pre-Katrina population and that the Hurricane's impacts have permanently changed the social and economic face of the region (Vigdor, 2008).

### *Failure*

In which FEMA is held accountable for the destruction of New Orleans.

Most of New Orleans is below sea level and is buttressed by a series of levees with a storm surge protection level of 18–20 feet (NASA, 2005). A FEMA exercise entitled “Hurricane Pam”, conducted the year before Katrina, highlighted the potentially devastating consequences of a direct strike by a Category 3 hurricane and levee wall failure (Parker *et al.*, 2009). In short, the risks were well known. And yet, President Bush was quoted as saying “I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees” (President Bush quoted in Warrick, 2006). Similarly, DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff stated that “Katrina was breathtaking in its surprise [...] That ‘perfect storm’ of a combination of catastrophes exceeded the foresight of the planners, and maybe anybody's foresight [...]” (CNN, 2005).

The indelible recollection of Hurricane Katrina, according to the people to whom I spoke, is the confusion, lack of control and coordination between government agencies and various levels of government (see also Littlefield and Quenette, 2007). President Bush, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and FEMA Director Michael Brown were the foci of the general outrage of the perceived government incompetence (Parker *et al.*, 2009; Walsh, 2012; Lipton and Schmitt, 2005).

The media frequently outpaced government agencies in their access to information regarding conditions on the ground, reinforcing the public impression that officials were

incompetent and there was no one in control (Tierney *et al.*, 2006; Durham, 2008; Littlefield and Quenette, 2007). This situation was showcased when the FEMA Director, Michael Brown, stated on national TV that he was unaware of the Superdome situation for three days after Katrina made landfall (Kettl, 2013).

Hurricane Katrina has been labelled “a failure of initiative”, both for the poorly managed response to the disaster and because of the incomprehension that such risks could be well known, yet not acted upon (House of Representatives, 2006; Parker *et al.*, 2009). Governments at all levels, from parish through to federal, proved unable to appropriately interpret and act upon the warnings and information they received regarding Hurricane Katrina. This “failure of initiative” arose from entangled streams of government overconfidence, policy inattention and a lack of institutional capacity to effectively manage the response operation (Parker *et al.*, 2009; Roberts, 2006; ‘t Hart *et al.*, 2009; Birkland and Waterman, 2008).

### *Frankenstorm*

In which Hurricane Sandy threatens North Eastern USA and President Obama suspends his re-election campaign.

In the years following Hurricane Katrina, extensive reviews, reorganisation and re-investment into FEMA occurred (House of Representatives, 2006; Townsend, 2006). The agency was rebuilt and its new leadership committed to ensuring such failures were not repeated (Congressional Research Service, 2006; Roberts, 2006). When ex-Hurricane Sandy appeared in October 2012, the US public held its breath and the media went into overdrive (Soltis and Seifman, 2012; Gershman and Holthaus, 2012).

Hurricane Sandy quickly gained the moniker “Frankenstorm” for its Halloween timing and unprecedented meteorological behaviour (Soltis and Seifman, 2012; Gershman and Holthaus, 2012). On the night of 29 October 2012, Hurricane Sandy made landfall in New Jersey, subsequently moving through New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Ohio and into Canada (National Hurricane Center, 2012). It caused over 150 deaths and resulted in economic damage of \$50bn (Congressional Research Services, 2013a, b; FEMA, 2013a).

By the time Sandy made landfall, President Obama had issued emergency declarations for 11 states, giving them access to federal resources to help prepare for the storm’s arrival (FEMA, 2012). Prior to landfall extensive resources were deployed around regions most likely to be affected. Limited evacuations of hospitals and nursing homes were undertaken. Sandy highlighted the vulnerability of critical infrastructure in the New York area, from basement fuse boxes to substations with insufficient storm surge protection (New York City, 2013; FEMA, 2013a). The impact of the storm, in winter, demonstrated the critical reliance of megacities on a complex network of supply chain and service delivery. The coordination networks established during the response phase were maintained well into the relief stage of recovery along with the establishment of a dedicated Sandy Recovery Office (FEMA, 2013a).

### *Redemption*

In which FEMA is praised for its performance and absolved of its failure.

With the debacle of Katrina still echoing loudly, FEMA, and the federal government more broadly, were under the spotlight during this event (Schmidt and Lipton, 2012). Key differences include the early declarations of disaster by the president and the rapid activation of coordination and advisory capacity (‘t Hart *et al.*, 2009). This early activation enabled states to access financial and material resources prior to the storm making landfall and provided sufficient time for disaster response networks across government to be established.

Furthermore, the President vocally and visibly set out the Federal Government's commitment to making things happen, ordering the removal of red-tape, placing all the resources of the Federal Government on standby for the response and providing his personal mobile phone number to the Governors of the most threatened states (Walsh, 2012). Obama's statements clearly established the expectation that all levels of government and all agencies would cooperate, in contrast to the disorder and disunity seen in the response to Hurricane Katrina (Walsh, 2012; Krugman, 2012).

President Obama and FEMA were generally praised for their response to Sandy (Walsh, 2012; Krugman, 2012; Vogel, 2012). Obama garnered the bipartisan engagement that was notably absent in Katrina, standing side by side with Republican State Governors and pointedly putting a halt to his re-election campaign to oversee the event's management (Walsh, 2012; Lesniewski, 2012; Dwoskin, 2012). FEMA meanwhile received headlines such as "After Sandy, FEMA Goes From Goat to Glory" (Phillips, 2012) and "Officials and experts praising FEMA for its response to Hurricane Sandy" (Vogel, 2012).

In the immediate post-mortem, most commentary focused on the warnings issued by the National Weather Services and whether appropriate information was conveyed in a sufficiently timely manner to enable public officials to make critical decisions and order evacuations (National Weather Service, 2013). FEMA was, by and large, perceived to have performed credibly and to have redeemed itself after Katrina (Phillips, 2012; Vogel, 2012; Dwoskin, 2012).

### **Analysing the narrative of FEMA's fall and redemption**

Where Katrina differed from the many previous disasters in the USA, and around the world, was the unprecedented scale of disorder, destruction and human suffering it caused in a country perceived as the world's richest, strongest and most capable (House of Representatives, 2006). This perception was no doubt shaped by the media's intense coverage of the incident; the media often appeared better informed than government agencies and their reporting heavily influenced government decision making (Tierney *et al.*, 2006).

In the welter of inquiries and reviews that followed the disaster, the most common theme involved efforts to come to grips with fundamental questions of "how" and "why"? The House Select Committee Report on Katrina expressed this sentiment clearly: "It remains difficult to understand how government could respond so ineffectively to a disaster that was anticipated for years, and for which specific dire warnings had been issued for days. This crisis was not only predictable, it was predicted" (House of Representatives, 2006, p. xi).

Underlying the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina is a complex story of lack of prominence on the policy agendas, failures in planning, underfunding and bureaucratic infighting that compromised all levels of government response to Hurricane Katrina well before the hurricane made landfall (Parker *et al.*, 2009; 't Hart *et al.*, 2009; Birkland and Waterman, 2008; Rosenthal *et al.*, 1991). Interagency coordination, at all levels, was lacking (House of Representatives, 2006; Townsend, 2006). Funding for FEMA, as well as for the New Orleans levee system, had been systematically reduced in the preceding four years as funding was shifted to the national security agenda (Parker *et al.*, 2009). Rolling FEMA into the Department of Homeland Security and broadening its mandate to national security, whilst decreasing resources, significantly impaired FEMA's capabilities (Parker *et al.*, 2009; Birkland and Waterman, 2008). Beyond the loss of personnel, these changes led to the atrophy of critical relationships with state and local emergency managers.

Changes in federal-level bureaucratic structures had ostensibly been disseminated with the 2004 National Response Plan. However, subsequent reviews highlighted a misplaced faith in "fantasy documents" that suggested comprehensive disaster planning and preparedness that was not, in fact, matched by organisational knowledge and capability (House of Representatives, 2006; Clarke, 1999; Birkland, 2009). Furthermore, the National

Response Plan did not anticipate that local police, fire and medical personnel might be incapacitated in the disaster, leading to further delays in the provision of federal government assistance (House of Representatives, 2006; Parker *et al.*, 2009). This failure to anticipate the collapse of first responder capability is striking given it is precisely what occurred during 9/11 and highlights a noteworthy case of failure in policy learning (see Elliott *et al.*, 2000; Elliott and Macpherson, 2010; Elliott, 2009; for a discussion of lack of learning from crises).

Following a period of introspection and renewal, the subsequent response to Hurricane Sandy provided an uplifting denouement to the story of FEMA's failure. This denouement provided essential closure to the horror of Katrina, where "Closure is a matter of concluding rather than merely stopping" (Carroll, 2007, p. 2). It showed a capable administration, providing strong leadership regardless of political ideology and prioritising the provision of help to those in need. Based on the opinions conveyed by the respondents in Washington, DC, the management of Sandy showcased how a first world power should manage a major disaster.

#### *A counter-narrative*

In the many discussions about Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy that informed this research, a critical counter-narrative emerged to the popular FEMA failure/redemption story. Congressional researchers and ex-FEMA staff believed that considering the geographic and demographic context of New Orleans, the Katrina response operation was actually a credible performance. Subsequent analysis of media reporting of Katrina suggests that biased and unsubstantiated reporting of the event contributed to the failure narrative by framing stories through a "civil unrest" and "war zone" lens (Tierney *et al.*, 2006). And as one member of the Congressional Research Service noted, "FEMA did better during Sandy because Sandy was not Katrina and New York is not New Orleans". This observation goes to the heart of the question of context when analysing narratives. Sandy was a far less severe weather event than Katrina, notwithstanding its unique meteorological composition. Neither the nature of the weather events, nor their impacts are comparable (National Hurricane Center, 2012; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2005).

The observation that New York is not New Orleans is also more than a commentary on the geography that made New Orleans so vulnerable. The critical issue of institutional capacity is obscured by the easy narrative of FEMA's failure and redemption. FEMA, as a federal agency, must engage with state and local administrations to deliver services, support planning and preparation and coordinate response operations (FEMA, 2013b; Birkland and Waterman, 2008). In addition to the issue of FEMA's institutional capacity to deliver such services, there is also the question of the institutional capacity of the state to receive support, apply and enact effective emergency management activities (Roberts, 2006; Fukuyama, 2014).

Observing that New York City is not New Orleans is a reflection on the markedly disparate levels of economic performance and institutional capacity of the two regions. The difference in population, infrastructure and government capacity is telling. New York City has a population of 8.4m and a per capita GDP of \$69,074. This is well in excess of New Orleans with approximately 380,000 people and a per capita GDP of \$56,943 and the entire state of Louisiana with 4.625m people and a per capita GDP of \$47,997 (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2013; United States Census Bureau, 2014). Louisiana, a comparatively poor state with low levels of institutional capacity, high levels of corruption and limited legitimacy in the eyes of its residents, was unable to muster and manage the response to a disaster far more significant than that which impacted the stronger states of New York and New Jersey (Liu and Mikesell, 2014).

The narratives people construct embody their belief systems and inform their priorities (Bevir, 2011). And these narratives matter as they underpin advocacy and action (Alkon, 2004;



Kingdon and Thurber, 2011). The normative “should” conveyed in the dominant meta-narrative, that the management of Sandy was how FEMA, and by extension the US Government, “should” respond to a disaster, is particularly problematic. As the counter-narrative shows, the success of the Sandy response was highly contingent. Yet a narrative arc which neatly resolves the question of FEMA’s redemption, without considering the nuances of this outcome, can easily lead to complacency. In a competitive policy landscape, with many issues vying for attention and funding, such a narrative can easily allow attention to become focussed elsewhere with a corresponding de-prioritisation of budgets and policy focus—thereby repeating the cycle that preceded Katrina (Birkland and Waterman, 2008).

### Discussion

The narrative of FEMA’s failure and redemption, showcased in its management of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, provides a fascinating insight into American political and cultural mythology. The powerful belief in American exceptionalism, in its position as a world superpower, made the events of Katrina an unacceptable failure. Occurring under the leadership of a deeply unpopular president, the narrative expanded to one of institutional and presidential failure. This narrative is neatly bookended by FEMA’s successful management of Sandy, the visible and proactive leadership provided by Obama and the comparatively low human cost of that event. Leaving the story there provides a tidy counter-point and effectively ties off the plot in an easily packaged form, allowing FEMA and government elites to enjoy a successful resolution to the narrative (Carroll, 2007).

However, a narrative as sweeping as two major disasters, across two presidents, impacting over 15 states and millions of people, cannot help but be an over-simplification. Below the surface lie sub-plots of institutional capacity and the politics of agenda setting. The meta-narrative recovered from respondents and presented in this paper is, in a way, a distraction from the critical learnings that can be identified through these two events. Understanding how agenda setting and the determinants of institutional capacity affect disaster management can provide insights that are of value to a broad range of practitioners and actors in the future.

These learnings, however, do not come in a neatly packaged narrative of failure and redemption. Rather, they point to the messy and contingent nature of events and that, if any counter-narrative were applied to Sandy it would likely be articulated as “FEMA got lucky”. But that narrative does not serve a broader cultural and political purpose and, hence, the real learnings that can be found between Katrina and Sandy risk being obscured and, ultimately, lost.

### Conclusion

This paper has showcased how the techniques of ethnography and narrative analysis can be applied to the field of public administration and understanding policy networks. Through a process of field research, interviews and observation, I have sought to recover and retell the narrative of FEMA’s fall and redemption as seen through the eyes of government elites in Washington, DC. Exploring the lens of elites involved in the Washington, DC, disaster management policy network can provide a useful insight into the politics of how policy agendas are shaped. There are many lenses through which such complex events can be seen, and different learnings can be extracted from each perspective. The paper points to the very human instinct to bring order to complexity via a readily understood narrative framing. For the researcher and practitioner alike, this narrative serves as a useful reminder that critical policy learnings often lie in complexity; and that easily obscured, messy and contradictory counter-narratives can hold enduring value for the policy analyst.

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### About the author

Lex Drennan is as Adjunct Industry Fellow within the Climate Change Response Program at Griffith University. Lex completed her Masters of Public Administration by research at Griffith University and continues to research and write in the fields of disaster resilience. She has held senior roles in the public and private sector, leading the development and implementation of crisis and disaster management policy, plans and frameworks. Her broad experience across crisis and disaster management includes mining oil and gas, natural hazards management, critical infrastructure protection and resilience and business continuity management in infrastructure and financial services. Lex Drennan can be contacted at: [ldrennan@griffith.edu.au](mailto:ldrennan@griffith.edu.au)

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