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Hurricane Maria: How the Media Blackballed Puerto Rico

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Agenda setting theory, the news's ability to influence the public's perception on what is and is not important. The theory is centered upon two main points: (1) The media and the press do not mirror reality; they filter and mold it; (2) the media's deliberate coverage on what we, the public, should deem as important (Mass Media, n.d.). For instance, news stories are never presented chronologically or by the numbers of people affected by them, but rather in order of what either the editor or producer concludes to be the most attractive to the audience (Agenda Setting, 2012). In addition, the theory portrays the media's effective shaping tactics, in which the more attention they give a story, the more the public will label it as important.

This theory stems from the selective exposure theory, which stipulates how the media can determine what the public should worry about, what the public will talk about and consider, and what they will construct opinions on. Also, the theory can be affiliated as a cognitive paradigm example because its very nature deals with how the public views reality. What the media releases essentially creates a "reality" for us, the public. We are inclined to believe what they tell us and guide our worldly perceptions. The cognitive nature of this theory depicts individuals as equal products and producers of their environment.

On the morning of September 20, 2017, Puerto Rico was struck with a devastating natural disaster. The powerful category four storm, Hurricane Maria, ransacked the island and drove its 3.4 million residents into a state of emergency. Puerto Rico is officially a commonwealth of America, granting them citizenship and ability to travel between the island and the U.S. mainland freely. It is an archipelago located in the Northeast

Caribbean Sea and known for its beautiful beaches, historic city of Old San Juan, and massive El Yunque Rainforest (Schwartz, 2018).

Hurricane Maria came just a few weeks after the island was already hit with another storm, Hurricane Irma. Hurricane Irma skirted Puerto Rico and left 1 million people without power.

Maria was the worst storm to hit Puerto Rico in over 80 years, leaving behind \$94 billion in damages and an 8 percent shrink in economy. The hurricane resulted in 64 deaths and over 1,000 fatalities. Thousands of homes have been ruined and some communities have been entirely wiped out. More than 250,000 Puerto Rican's have left the island to re-start their lives on the U.S. mainland. The island's complete infrastructure will take several years to rebuild. Families and businesses remained without electricity for months, while clean water, food, and medicines were in very low supply. Less than half the islands residents received electricity two months after the storm. Today, a large majority of the island is still without power and clean water (Schwartz, 2018).

Despite Puerto Rico's dire need, they have struggled to obtain sufficient relief funds from the U.S. government. This struggle comes of no surprise, as Puerto Rico has battles with this struggle often. The island's territorial status makes them vulnerable to unequal treatment, as they get excluded from major federal programs like for instance, Medicaid (Schwartz, 2018).

With the anticipation of the storm, lots of media coverage was expected, but instead the media showed little to no interest. Before landfall, it was mentioned in 125 sentences per day, while "rocket man," President Trump's epithet for North Korea's leader Kim Jong-Un, was mentioned in 3,500 sentences. Upon arrival of the hurricane,

the media occupied themselves with other news stories, such as the NFL protest, the Russia Facebook ordeal, and “rocket man” (Mays, 2017). Following President Trump’s tweets concerning the NFL, the phrase “national anthem” was said in more sentences on TV news than “Puerto Rico” and “Hurricane Maria” combined (Mehta, 2017). Coverage of the disaster was still minimal after the hurricane ceased. The Russia Facebook situation and “rocket man” both overshadowed all details of Puerto Rico. On the other hand, Hurricane Harvey, which happened on August 25 in Texas, roughly a month before Maria, received extensive coverage. Immediately after landfall, Harvey was mentioned in 6,500 sentences per day, where as Puerto Rico was mentioned only in 2,500 sentences per day after landfall (Mays, 2017). According to an analysis of five political talk shows that aired the Sunday after Maria arrived, collectively all five programs produced less than one minute of coverage dedicated to the humanitarian emergency in Puerto Rico, and three of the five shows failed to mention Puerto Rico at all (Lewis, 2017). In addition, only 27 percent of Americans say they’ve closely followed the news about Hurricane Maria effects in Puerto Rico, where as 39 percent tuned in for Hurricane Harvey updates (Edwards-Levy, 2017). Also, only 19 percent of Americans knew anyone was effected by Hurricane Maria’s disastrous sweeping, while 33 percent knew about Harvey (Edwards-Levy, 2017).

Not only did Puerto Rico not gain the attention it should have, but when it did start to get recognized, it was made about President Trump and not the island’s devastating state of emergency. It was a full five days later after the disaster that Puerto Rico gained a burst of attention, although it still didn’t come close to the same amount as Hurricane Harvey received. This burst of attention was directed at President Trump’s

conversational statements regarding the island. Among some of his statements, Trump repetitively mentioned Puerto Rico's debt crisis, insinuated Puerto Rican workers weren't willing to help relief efforts, engaged in a feud with the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz, and regarded uncomplimentary coverage as fake (Mehta, 2017). Two weeks following the hurricane, a quarter of online news headlines were directed at Trump and Puerto Rico, not about the hurricane or relief efforts. Only 10 percent of headlines were directed at Trump in affiliation with Hurricane Harvey (Mehta, 2017).

Hurricane Harvey, along with other previous hurricanes like Irma, received round-the-clock attention from networks and vigorous coverage on every news platform. Puerto Rico was downplayed and given little national importance, which is why their case corresponds with the agenda setting theory. Agenda setting is the news's way of informing the public on what is "important," but why wasn't Puerto Rico considered just as important as Harvey, or any other American hurricane at that? Cable news networks set the national agenda, but when it came to Puerto Rico, they found other topics to occupy themselves with. Bruce Shapiro, executive director of the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, shares an interesting outlook of just why this may be.

"Puerto Rico has been a very poor stepchild of U.S. news coverage for a very long time," he said. "It has been subjected to a slow-motion Category 5 bankruptcy and crisis for several years and that has never merited serious coverage by most important news organizations...These are not some kind of unconscious editorial decisions. This is out of sight, out of mind. The reality is Puerto Rico has been

historically neglected by the American media — its politics, its environment, its economic issues. Why not hurricanes (Farhi, 2017)?"

Shapiro sheds an interesting viewpoint, because he might just be right, or at least not very far off. When situations get de-emphasized in the media less money and relief is offered toward the disaster. Puerto Rico's response from the U.S. federal government has been regarded as slow, for reasons reaching from incompetence or racism from the administration to a national lack of attention for the citizens of Puerto Rico. There is no telling whether this is true or not, but a plausible perspective is that nobody paid Puerto Rico much mind because of neglectful coverage decisions in the U.S. newsrooms (Farhi, 2017).

The news had every opportunity to shed much more light on Puerto Rico's crisis, but decided to direct news coverage to other topics at the time. Agenda setting theory is a powerful tool whether it is used to a topics advantage or not. It can gain a subject all the attention it deserves, or it can exclude a topic, neglecting all the relevant matters the public should know, rather than what the media holds self-interest in.

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