



Return to ‘a new normal’: Discourses of resilience to natural disasters in Australian newspapers 2006–2010



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ABSTRACT

Resilience, as a concept that conceptualises response to change, is gaining currency in the public discourse. In Australia, the term ‘resilience’ is frequently used by the news media in connection with natural disasters. Media representation of resilience to natural disasters—as rapid onset events characterised by visible thresholds—provides an instructive lens through which to learn about resilience, and bring into focus, differences between academic and broader public perspectives on the concept. In this paper we analyse resilience discourses in Australian newspaper articles from 2006 to 2010. We consider the use of the term ‘resilience’ and three attributes of resilience that are important in determining how communities respond to disasters: structure and function, self-organisation, and learning and adaptation. Our results show that while the media discourse helps to illuminate what makes communities resilient to disasters, it also highlights how resilience can be undermined when: the term, used most often by actors at from outside the affected community, becomes an ‘aspirational rhetorical device’; place attachment manifests as ‘lock in’ whereby individuals cannot easily leave a disaster-affected community; emphasis post disaster is on reinstating the status quo rather than encouraging transformation; and excessive or inequitably distributed external assistance to a community threatens self-efficacy and cohesion. Media discourse tends to lack reflection on learning beyond formal preparedness programs, but places value on sharing experience. Our analysis has theoretical and practical outcomes: theoretically, this analysis further enriches the descriptions of the three attributes as central concepts in resilience theory. Practically, this work highlights the difficulty in communicating about resilience to encourage constructive response to disasters, but also provides insight into making resilience theory more accessible and relevant to the disaster management community for Australia and globally.

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1. Introduction

‘Reconstruction is on track with more than \$1 billion spent. This would not have been possible without the incredible strength, determination and the resilience of local communities. While many people have said things will never be the same we have to believe that the fire-affected communities will return to a ‘new normal’ and thrive once again.’ Chair of the Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, Sunbury Leader, 2.03.2010, 2009 Victorian bushfires.

In recent years ‘resilience’ has emerged as a framework for conceptualising and navigating various types of environmental,

economic, political, or cultural change, including disturbance events such as natural disasters (Walker et al., 2002; Folke, 2006). The concept of resilience is also gaining currency in the public discourse—in news media and public policy for example—in relation to societal hardships or situations of adversity affecting social–ecological systems (e.g. Brown, 2013; Turner, 2013). The construction and use of the resilience concept in broad society differ from the theoretical underpinnings of resilience espoused in some academic circles (with some exceptions e.g. Manyena, 2006; Hastrup, 2008). While there is no universal definition or conceptual model of resilience—nor do we suggest one is needed—it is instructive to understand both the similarities and differences between resilience theory and its usage in the ‘real world’ and the relevance of resilience scholarship to pragmatic concerns (Gunderson and Folke, 2011).

Concepts of resilience are increasingly linked to natural disasters including through media reporting. During and following

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natural disasters, news media coverage creates a collective social script which helps to shape how the community, both at the affected and broader scale, begins the coping and recovery processes (Gortner and Pennebaker, 2003). News coverage of the disaster may also prompt response by citizens (Bohensky and Leitch, 2014) as well as state and national agencies (Barnes et al., 2008; Norris et al., 2008). The news media both reflects and shapes public opinion and therefore, critical examination of use of concepts of resilience to natural disasters in news media can provide insights to resilience theory. Such insights from ‘everyday use’ of concepts of resilience can improve application of resilience thinking (Walker and Westley, 2011), build theory with practical examples (Anderies et al., 2006; Aldrich, 2012), and better support management of social–ecological systems (Gunderson, 2010).

While the increasing use of notions of resilience is noted across a number of domains (Xu and Marinova, 2013) there has been no systematic study of the use of the term resilience in the media. Like similar complex, intangible and uncertain issues, resilience is a difficult issue for the media to convey (Carvalho, 2000; Morehouse and Sonnett, 2010). To explore how themes of resilience to natural disasters are constructed in the news media we systematically investigate Australian newspaper coverage of natural disasters from 2006 to 2010. Our aim was to examine the media construction of resilience in the context of natural disasters and to compare how this discourse reflects the central tenets of resilience theory.

2. Analytical approach: resilience and natural disasters in the media

The analytical framework in this paper brings together two broad arenas of problem framing in the context of natural disasters: resilience theory and news media.

2.1. News media and natural disasters

The news media provides a social construction of an event: it can reflect and shape public opinion by defining and limiting the discourse around key events such as disasters (Miles and Morse, 2007; Carvalho, 2000) while focusing public attention on particular aspects (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Parenti, 1993; Carvalho, 2007). Despite the rise of social and electronic media, newspapers still set the daily agenda for other forms of media and influence opinion formation of decision makers (Miles and Morse, 2007; Josephi, 2011). Newspaper articles, as an archived source of social data, have the advantage of providing easily accessible data from a breadth of perspectives through non-intrusive methods (Gortner and Pennebaker, 2003; Carvalho, 2008) and better quality data than online media sources (Holt and Barkemeyer, 2012). Like other types of social data, however, use of news media includes assumptions and caveats that require a cognisance of the filtering and framing that occurs through journalistic practices (Boykoff, 2011). Media discourse tends to be shaped by cultural, organisational and ideological mechanisms that operate through all stages of the news production processes including: editorial judgments of news values and newsworthiness (Scanlon, 2007; Fahmy et al., 2007); selection of news sources; and the social influence of these actors through their ‘framing power’ (Carvalho, 2000, p. 23). Framing power occurs through language, images, sound bites, and pull quotes (Bednarek and Caple, 2012); and positioning mechanisms such as location on a front page or leading a news bulletin. All of these are set within the vested interests of the media organisation and of the issue’s stakeholders (Parenti, 1993).

Natural disasters—and the associated social and ecological disruption and recovery—are highly ‘newsworthy’ (Barnes et al., 2008; Davis and French, 2008). As focusing events, disasters are

‘disorder’ stories with news values of proximity, relevance, magnitude, human interest, unfolding drama, as well as portraying the dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O’Neill, 2001; O’Neill and Harcup, 2009). Typically media coverage of a disaster includes description of the event, the response and recovery, and responsibilities (Vasterman et al., 2005; Norris et al., 2008). The media news cycle tends to move from general causal claims to specifics (Cowan et al., 2002); Pantti and Wahl-Jorgenson (2011, p. 108) describe this as a ‘discourse of horror’ depicting consequences of the tragedy, followed by a ‘discourse of grief’ focused on victims and communities to satisfy news requirements for ‘local’ or ‘humanizing’ angles (Scanlon, 2007). Media coverage is considered important for raising awareness of the tragedy yet its scrutiny is criticised for its power to influence responses (Davis and French, 2008) and also its intrusiveness can tie up resources and create additional pressure for affected communities and recovery (Vasterman et al., 2005).

The role of the news media during times of natural disasters has been widely studied, in particular there has been a focus on the factors and values that influence a disaster’s news worthiness and therefore media coverage (e.g. Gortner and Pennebaker, 2003; Barnes et al., 2008; Joye, 2010). Media scholars have considered the related issues of the nationalism or ethnocentricity of national versus foreign coverage (e.g. Joye, 2010); media discourses of hierarchy, inequality and suffering of an affected region (e.g. Joye, 2009; Dow, 2010); relationships between media coverage and humanitarian aid (Franks, 2008); and public perceptions of risk regarding natural hazards (Cohen et al., 2007; Miles and Morse, 2007; Pasquaré and Oppizzi, 2012). There is evidence that differences in media coverage of disasters can contribute to differences in community risk perception and preparedness (Kitzinger, 1999; Miles and Morse, 2007; Cowan et al., 2002) and community cohesion (Hawdon et al., 2012).

2.2. Resilience theory in the natural disaster context

Natural disaster analysis has traditionally focused on concepts of vulnerability, risk, and emergency management (McEntire et al., 2002). Increasingly, perspectives from social–ecological system resilience theory are being considered in the disaster context (Longstaff and Yang, 2008; Masten and Obradovic, 2008; Gunderson, 2010; Mainka and McNeely, 2011; Walker and Westley, 2011). Resilience theory views a natural disaster as a perturbation or disturbance to a social–ecological system (Gunderson, 2010). Resilience theory can add value to the existing scholarship on disaster management through its emphasis on complex systems dynamics (i.e. uncertainty, non-linearity, unpredictability); ideas of flexibility, novelty and innovation; and multi-scale (spatial and temporal) perspectives. Thus a resilience approach can support more proactive engagement in managing change such as human response to, and recovery from, natural disasters.

There are numerous definitions of resilience (Norris et al., 2008). Whilst divergence in these definitions may be attributed to scale, unit of analysis, or discipline, there tends to be general agreement on notions of capacity, complexity, connectedness, adaptation and feedbacks (Brown, 2013). A widely used definition of resilience that has been applied to both social and ecological systems follows Carpenter et al. (2001), Walker et al. (2002), Folke (2006) and Gunderson et al. (2006). In line with ‘resilience thinking’ (Gunderson and Holling, 2002), this definition of resilience attempts to consider the underlying system processes and controls that confer or erode resilience as the system evolves through time. Central to this paper, this definition suggests that a resilient system has three attributes, each of which is important in determining how communities respond to disasters: (1) a

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