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Abstract
Media coverage of natural disasters informs audiences, but it also can serve as a catalyst for the formation of rhetorical communities, groups of people who subscribe to the rhetorical vision purveyed in media coverage of events. Existing research literature on communities and on the role of communities in disaster recovery points to the need for community as a basic part of the recovery process. National media coverage of the April 27, 2011, tornadoes that struck Tuscaloosa, Ala., contained fantasy themes that constructed a rhetorical vision of hope and survival. A fantasy theme analysis of three national sports media articles, when viewed through the lens of Ernest Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory, suggests the chaining themes and resulting rhetorical community contributed to the city’s continuing disaster recovery efforts.

This research contributes to the understanding of rhetorical community and its role in disaster recovery and organizational communications and to the importance of narrative in news coverage of events by demonstrating the nature of rhetorical community as a participatory group. The results provide a look at the way in which rhetorical vision carries motive for action in rhetorical communities and their effectiveness as a body of support in times of crisis. Further research is needed in several areas, including the way in which the expanded rhetorical community contributes to recovery efforts and whether a rhetorical vision represented in the media after a news event matches the measured rhetorical vision of the community.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over a three-day period in April 2011, tornadoes ripped through the southeastern United States, killing hundreds of people, injuring thousands more, and doing billions of dollars worth of damages to homes, businesses, and lives. One of the hardest hit areas was Tuscaloosa, Ala. On the afternoon of April 27, 2011, an EF4 tornado with winds of up to 200 mph destroyed 13 percent of the city and killed 51 people. Although most people never experience a tornado, media coverage after natural disasters can contribute to readers’ and viewers’ understanding of events and help them feel as though they share an experience with survivors. Rhetorical analysis of media coverage after a natural disaster provides an understanding of the experiences of Tuscaloosa residents on that April afternoon, and an analysis of community and disaster recovery sheds light on the way in which this insight can contribute to recovery efforts.

Statement of the Problem

When geographic areas are affected by natural disasters, such as tornadoes, resources available for recovery efforts depend largely on the community. Clopton (2005) pointed out that communities linked by loyalty to a winning sports team have tighter community bonds. Tighter community bonds, in turn, contribute to faster recovery from disasters. In the case of Tuscaloosa, with its championship football team, an analysis of the symbolism in media coverage of the tornado viewed through the lens of symbolic convergence theory and further research on perception management suggests that the rhetorical vision in the post-disaster coverage contributed to the extension of the community of support and thus to the recovery of Tuscaloosa.

Ernest Boorman’s (1982) symbolic convergence theory explains the way fantasy themes can chain throughout a particular group and become a rhetorical vision, extending the common
ground between group members and creating a sense of community, which can then motivate members to action. Additional research into the effect on directed fantasy themes and managing rhetorical vision (Barton & O’Leary, 1974; Cragan & Shields, 1998; Duffy, 1997) suggests that by managing the rhetorical vision in messages, rhetors can manage public perception and consequently direct public action. This additional research consisted primarily of managed public relations campaigns, which involved researching the desires of the target audience and constructing fantasy themes to accomplish a specific purpose. Although research shows that a sense of community positively affects disaster recovery (Landau, 2007), little research has been done linking the effects of fantasy themes in news coverage to disaster recovery or the effect of rhetorical community to disaster recovery. Thus, this study builds on previous work involving public relations campaigns, rhetorical communities, and disaster recovery and extends that work into applicability in areas of crisis communications and disaster relief and recovery.

**Importance of the Study**

Although research has documented fantasy themes, symbolic convergence, rhetorical vision and rhetorical community, and the effect of community on disaster recovery (Barton, & O'Leary, 1974; Bormann, 1972; Bormann, 1982; Bormann, Cragan, & Shields, 1996; Bormann, Knutson, & Musolf, 1997; Brake, Dückers, De Vries, Van Duin, Rooze, & Spreeuwenberg, 2009; Chalew, 2007; Chang, 2010; Landau, 2007), previous research has focused on more traditionally defined communities, those tied together by geographic location or by personal characteristic of community members. There has been little or no research focused on the effect of rhetorical communities on disaster recovery or of the effect of disasters on rhetorical communities. Because rhetorical communities and brand and fan communities share similar characteristics, the current study has implications for disaster communications and for
organizational communications both in crisis and non-crisis situations. By documenting the
growth of rhetorical community inspired by the rhetorical visions found in media coverage
surrounding the Tuscaloosa tornadoes, the study sheds light on the types of rhetorical visions that
inspire community and the extent to which those communities behave relative to disaster
recovery. In addition, the changing and expanding world of global technology would benefit
from an exploration of community based less on member characteristics and more on purpose.
The following study attempts to shed light on communities united in purpose by rhetorical vision
and its inherent motivations.

Definition of Terms Used

**Community** – Community is a relational term referring to human interaction and
interconnectedness. It is generally defined in terms of the word immediately preceding it
(Brown, 2002), such as ethnic communities, online communities, or brand communities. Brown
(2002) defines community in terms of communication, as a “metaphor, cultural artifact, or
terministic screen that constructs, and, in turn, is constructed by the discourses and actions” of
the groups involved (p. 93). Celeste Condit (2006), describes communication in much the same
way, in terms of community, as the “weaving and reweaving of visible and invisible four-
dimensional webs, which constitute and reconstitute matter and ideation as humans, discourse,
and other beings within a dynamic field of many forces” (p. 3).

**Symbolic convergence theory** – Symbolic convergence theory (SCT) is based on the
work of Ernest Bormann (1972, 1982) in group fantasy sharing. It explains the way common
themes, or fantasy themes, are used by groups to co-create their symbolic worlds, forming
common symbolic ground that serves as a unifying bond between group members (Cragan &
Shields, 1998). Cragan and Shields said SCT
seeks to explain three things: (1) the process of how people come to share (or cease to share) a common symbolic reality; (2) why group consciousness begins, rises, and is sustained, thereby providing meaning; and (3) the recurring forms of communication indicative of a shared group consciousness. (1998, p. 94)

SCT comes from the symbolic paradigm of communication theory and is composed of basic building blocks contained within the message, the medium, and the communicators.

**Fantasy themes** – Fantasy themes are a basic unit of SCT, embodying “a dramatizing message depicting characters engaged in action in a setting that accounts for and explains human experience” (Cragan & Shields, 1998, pp. 98-99). Fantasy themes cannot be simple symbols found at random in rhetorical artifacts, however. To be a fantasy theme, the theme must have substantive content; exhibit structural qualities such as the inclusion of characters (or dramatis personae), plot, or scene; and style attributes such as themes that are dramatized further, embellished, or reconfigured by other group members (Cragan & Shields, 1998).

**Dramatis personae** – Dramatis personae are the characters in a fantasy theme, those who act within the plot, similar to the concept of literary characters (Cragan & Shields, 1998). Fantasy themes that depict character provide insight into human motivations within the characters, portraying the dramatis personae within the fantasy theme as a representative of a larger human reality.

**Rhetorical vision** – “A rhetorical vision is a composite drama that catches up large groups of people in a common symbolic reality (Bormann, 1972)” (as cited in Cragan & Shields, 1998, p. 102). When fantasy themes are related on a broad scale, they constitute a rhetorical vision, or a symbolic common ground that results from the development of a shared fantasy life.
in a group setting. Rhetorical visions can contain multiple fantasy themes that act in the same fashion as the elements of character, setting, and plot constitute fantasy themes.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

The following chapters will provide a literature review, methodology, analysis, and conclusion for this study. Chapter 2 provides an exemplary review of the literature on fantasy themes and symbolic convergence theory, community, and the effect of community on disaster relief. Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the methodology, including the rationale and limitations, and a brief description of the artifacts. Chapter 4 includes a more comprehensive description of the artifacts and the analysis and discussion of fantasy themes, rhetorical community, and the effect of community in disaster recovery. Chapter 5 concludes the study with a summary, recommendations for further research, and conclusions.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter discusses the philosophical assumptions and theoretical basis for using fantasy theme analysis and symbolic convergence theory to relate media coverage and sense of community to disaster recovery. The first part of the chapter focuses on the philosophical assumption of communication as co-creation of symbolic reality and one of the primary forces in human life. The second part of the chapter relates the theoretical perspective, first by outlining symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis, one of its basic tenets, second by relating symbolic convergence to community and discussing the literature on community, and third by relating community to disaster relief and recovery. The applications of the findings to the current study are discussed at the end of each section.

Philosophical Assumptions

Communication is one of the most critical parts of human life. Most of the time, humans are communicating, whether or not they are aware of doing so. Effective communication, or communication that accomplishes the purpose of linking human beings in a state of mutual understanding, however, involves more than simply the transmission and receiving of messages. Ernest Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory (SCT) states that people use fantasy themes to co-create symbolic reality (Cragan & Shields, 1998). This shared symbolic reality strengthens the bonds between people within a group, providing the mutual understanding and motivation necessary for a shared group consciousness. SCT belongs to the symbolic paradigm of communication theory, which says that humans create a symbolic reality through communication, which “spurs people to action, stabilization, or even inaction” (Cragan & Shields, 1998, p. 95). Communication is a way to establish society, a mutual understanding that enables human beings to live and work together. It provides a frame for understanding the world
and the ways in which humans relate to one another. These shared experiences, goals and histories, and mutual understandings provide the basis for community (Bormann, 1982), which creates an interconnected network of support necessary for living, especially in times of loss or disaster (Landau, 2007).

Theoretical Perspective

**Symbolic convergence theory.** In the early 1970s, Ernest Bormann formulated a theory that explained the way groups used symbolic communication, analyzing that communication in terms of fantasy themes (Bormann, 1972; Cragan & Shields, 1998). Bormann (1982) credited Robert Bales for the discovery of the way fantasy themes are shared in small group communication, saying that Bales’ work provided “an account of how dramatizing communication creates social reality for groups of people and … a way to examine messages for insights into the group’s culture, motivation, emotional style, and cohesion” (Bormann, 1972, p. 396). Shared dramatic communication involving fantasy themes created common ground for group members, even those with no history, providing a basis for discovery of shared meaning and motivation (Bormann, 1972; Cragan & Shields, 1998). Continued work in fantasy theme analysis, which groups and analyzes the symbolic facts within group communication, eventually led to the development of SCT, which states that fantasy sharing among group members co-creates a shared symbolic reality, or symbolic convergence (Bormann, 1982).

Fantasy themes are the basic unit of analysis in SCT. Bormann (1972) noted that a fantasy chain consists of characters in a dramatic situation removed from the current real situation of the group. The characters can be real or fictitious, and the dramatic situation can include remembrances of past events or hopes for the future (Bormann, 1972). Cragan and Shields (1998) defined fantasy themes as “a dramatizing message depicting characters engaged
in action in a setting that accounts for and explains human experience” (pp. 98-99). This definition gives three units of structural analysis for studying and defining fantasy themes: character, setting, and action. These structural concepts provide insight into the manner in which rhetorical communities use fantasy themes to create symbolic reality. A fourth structural unit of analysis is rhetorical vision, defined as “a composite drama that catches up large groups of people in a common symbolic reality” (Cragan & Shields, 1998, p. 102). A rhetorical vision groups many different fantasy themes in an effort to clarify confusing reality. One example of this is Bormann, Cragan, and Shields’ (1996) work on the rhetorical visions of the Cold War in America. Analyzing the various fantasy themes in popular culture and media after World War II, the authors found three overarching but transitory rhetorical visions, One World, Power Politics, and Red Fascism (Bormann et al., 1996, p. 1). The creators of these rhetorical visions relied on fantasy types – fantasy themes that share elements of character, scene, or plot or that explain new events in a commonly understood form (Cragan & Shields, 1998) – to create symbolic realities. Rhetoricians during the Cold War commonly took fantasy types from the hot war (World War II) and used those to frame the reality surrounding their current situation, such as the good vs. evil rhetorical vision of Red Fascism, in which Germany was presented as analogous to the USSR and Americans were the good to fascism’s evil (Bormann et al., 1996, p. 6). Through the use of a commonly understood frame of reference (the recent World War foe of Germany), rhetoricians could provide a common ground for understanding the confusing reality of the post-World War II Soviet Union. By using this particular frame of reference, rhetoricians framed understanding in a way that favored a particular symbolic reality over the others.

Bormann et al.’s (1996) analysis of Cold War rhetorical visions provided specific examples of the way in which framing the same set of circumstances with various rhetorical
visions shapes public understanding and thus symbolic reality. Barton and O’Leary (1974) and Duffy (1997) provide examples of the way in which rhetorical visions can be used to manage public opinion and promote a particular course of action. Barton and O’Leary (1974) used a directed study of small rural communities’ own symbolic reality to help the communities formulate a rhetorical vision that would appeal to graduating medical students. By studying the themes that characterized the current symbolic reality, the authors noted those same themes were not appealing to graduating medical students, to whom the communities had devoted much recruitment effort. By analyzing the themes and reconstructing the rhetorical vision to mesh with that of the medical students, the communities succeeded in recruiting physicians for a cooperative clinic (Barton & O’Leary, 1974). Duffy (1997) studied the use of rhetorical vision in persuasive communications in an effort to win approval for a riverboat gaming in Iowa. The rhetoricians on the side of the gaming company framed the debate in terms of their representation of historical accuracy (riverboats on the Mississippi) and economic development while minimizing the actual gaming. Duffy attributed the passage of the bill legalizing gaming in a state that had previously opposed such a bill at least partially to the efforts of the public relations campaign (Duffy, 1997).

Research on fantasy theme analysis and symbolic convergence theory suggests that when fantasy themes are shared within groups, no matter the size or history of the group, they create a common ground for community (Bormann, 1972; Bormann, 1982; Bormann, 1982a; Bormann et al., 1996; Cragan & Shields, 1998). This common ground not only encourages or creates a sense of community, it provides motivation for action in compliance with the shared rhetorical vision. Research from Barton and O’Leary (1974) and Duffy (1997) showed that rhetorical vision not only can create a sense of community but influence the community to act in a way that agrees
with the motivation inherent in the symbolic community. In terms of this study, SCT literature suggests the ability of fantasy themes in media coverage surrounding disaster situations to foster a sense of community and inspire action not only in people who are already members of the local geographic community but in those to whom the fantasy theme appeals and who share in its vision of reality.

**Community.** This section examines the literature on the idea of community and the various types of communities. Thinking about community as a process of construction that is continually changing and being changed through communication opens the possibility of defining community much more broadly than is possible with standard definitions.

**Types of communities.** Although studies based on geographic communities certainly exist, literature also defines community in terms of ethnic communities (Katz, 2009), online, or virtual, communities (Brown, 2002; Page, 2004), rhetorical communities (Bormann, 1972; Duffy, 1997), brand communities (Amato, Bodkin, & Peters, 2010), and, similarly, fan communities (Amato et al., 2010; Hardy, Barcelona, Hickox, & Lazaro, 2006; Clopton, 2005; Toma, 2003). Despite the different adjectives, these community types have characteristics in common. Katz’s (2009) ethnic communities share a geographic space and similar ethnic backgrounds, and those localities and backgrounds form the basis for “neighborhood storytelling” (p. 2). This type of storytelling, which includes sharing resources as well as media coverage involving the community, forms a shared rhetoric that binds the group and governs the way in which people inside the community interact with those outside the community (Katz, 2009). For example, family members may come into contact with community resources and share those in private family interactions, or community organizations may become storytellers by communicating resources to their constituents (Katz, 2009). Rhetoric is repeated from one
storyteller to another until it forms a bond between community members. This same bond is mirrored in online, or virtual, communities despite the lack of personal contact, shared location, or other personal similarities between members. Page (2004) defined community as an intentionally formed group with shared interests in a study of former publishing company employees who interacted on an online listserv newsletter. During the two years the newsletter was produced, the expanding group shared stories and concerns and constructed a common culture or rhetorical vision (Page, 2004). This shared rhetorical vision is a common theme of various types of communities. Although communities defined by personal characteristics and geography are not necessarily relational communities, virtual communities, rhetorical communities, and fan communities are intentional communities that require participation and relation with other members. This study is concerned with rhetorical communities and fan communities in particular, and each of these types of communities is presented in more detail.

Rhetorical communities. Bormann (as cited in Duffy, 1997) noted that people who share a rhetorical vision form a rhetorical community. Thus many different types of communities that can be described in other ways (e.g. ethnic or virtual) are rhetorical communities. These communities embrace community values, “identifying certain activities as appropriate or improper” (Duffy, 1997, p. 129). When one group member tells a story, for example, involving ethical or moral choices, if other group members respond by telling similar stories or stories that branch out from the original story, the group members have created symbolic convergence and thus a community, regardless of other characteristics group members may or may not share. The rhetoric shared by a group provides clues to its shared social traditions, values, relationships, and motives. Even in a group with no history, analysis of the types of fantasy themes that chain through the group provides information on the newly constructed social reality. Whether a
vision is shared or a fantasy chains is somewhat dependent on the artistry with which the fantasy theme is presented (Bormann, 1982). Once shared, however, the rhetorical visions provide meaning and transcendence over everyday circumstance for participants in the rhetorical community (Bormann, 1972). The rhetorical vision becomes an essential part of the character of the community members.

Once we participate in the rhetorical vision of a community or movement, even if we keep an aesthetic distance, we have come vicariously to experience a way of life that would otherwise be less accessible to us, we have enlarged our awareness, we have become more fully human. (Bormann, 1972, p. 407)

**Fan communities.** Amato et al. (2010) equated fan communities to brand communities, defined as a group of people, non-geographically bound, who form social relations, narrations, myths, and folklore centered on a brand they admire. “When values are shared by community members and drivers, a community culture emerges, creating bonds that reinforce fan loyalty to drivers and sponsors” (Amato et al., 2010, p. 8). NASCAR fans in the study showed a strong sense of identification with the drivers, even to imagining themselves as part of the driver’s family or wanting the driver literally to become part of their family (Amato et al., 2010). In addition, stories told by study participants revealed fantasy themes that showed consistent values shared throughout the fan community (Amato et al., 2010). The folklore of community through empathy and identification with the drivers and through shared values inspires more engagement with NASCAR and inspires greater loyalty in its fans by renewing the fantasy themes with each race or interaction with drivers and teams. Hardy et al. (2006) noted that teams can build on social, physical, and human capital as a way of building image in a brand community, but the
authors argued that building community, with deeper ties and more impact, requires a long-term focus.

In this respect, college sports, football in particular, is uniquely positioned to build community locally and in a non-geographically based fan community. Football provides a means for universities to connect with constituents and express their unique culture and community (Toma, 2003). Not only does football serve as an agent of community through establishing and renewing connections, the emotions associated with it contribute to the emotions within the fan community. Wilkerson and Doddler (as cited in Clopton, 2005) found that communities who participate in sports and those who win at sports experienced “higher levels of the community collective conscience” (p. 37). The experience of being a sports fan, especially a college football fan, is an experience of relationship with other community members (athletes, students, alumni) and the rituals associated with the community (tailgating, parades, marching bands, slogans).

Football is, by nature, distinctive, central, and enduring. Different teams are represented by different symbols and other cultural forms; teams are something about which many people care passionately; and sports recur season after season, providing continuity and representing history. Football Saturdays, moreover, conform to typical American values, serve the expression of community and the advancement of civic pride, and advance the national-level stature that attaches to the academic side of only a few institutions. (Toma, 2003, p. 168).

In a similar fashion to the way NASCAR fans identify with drivers and support those whose values are in agreement with their own (Amato et al., 2010), when the brand image of a
university or its team is a positive one, community constituents are more engaged with the community and are more likely to support it (Toma, 2003).

Although not technically a study of fan community, Ziakas and Costa’s (2010) study on rural events and sense of community provides additional information on the way events such as festivals maintain and enhance the sense of community in a similar way as that of college sports. “Community events can be understood as symbolic social spaces that create a dramaturgical context invoking and conveying the foundational components of a host community” (Ziakas & Costa, 2010, p. 10). The authors reported that study participants rediscovered a connection with the “essence of the community” (p. 15) and their place and participation within the community. In the same way, as they participate in game day and the rituals associated with it, Alabama football fans and university community members reestablish their connection with the university community and renew their place and participation in its rituals and fantasy themes. This reestablishment of connections reaffirms the shared values and rhetorical vision of the community, helping to renew the emotional connection and fantasy chaining that contributes to a shared sense of community.

**Community and disaster relief and recovery.** Communities with strong internal ties, and those that span more than one type, tend to make faster recovery after disasters. Brake et al. (2009) cited “supportive context” (p. 339), characterized as listening, sharing information, and preserving close social contacts, as the basis for additional help for post-disaster psychological trauma. The authors also identified a sense of connectedness (or community) and a sense of hope as necessary for post-disaster recovery from psychological trauma. Strong ties with the community can also be a predictor of whether someone will leave the community in time of disaster (Chang, 2010). In a field study that contradicted prior work on community cohesion in
time of disaster, Chang (2010) found “community cohesion was predicted by a sense of community, community cognition and degree of community participation” (p. 298). Bormann’s work on symbolic convergence and the literature on community already discussed suggest the strong sense of community fostered by symbolic common ground and the participatory nature of rhetorical communities confirm Chang’s findings. Chang also found that all the participants in his study reported their feelings of community cohesion were stronger after the disaster, meaning they were willing to cooperate to achieve mutually desired goals.

Additional situational evidence bears out these conclusions. After Hurricane Katrina devastated parts of the Gulf Coast and the resulting levee failures flooded much of New Orleans, communities with both ethnic and local ties (and thus strong feelings of cohesion) stand out in the literature as examples of faster recovery. New Orleans’ Jewish community claimed a revitalized and committed, although physically smaller, community after its planned community-based recovery initiatives (Chalew, 2007). New Orleans’ Vietnamese community has ethnic, local, and religious ties that together form a strong community identity (Leong, Airriess, Wei, Chia-Chen Chen, & Keith, 2007), which also includes shared history, goals, and motivations. Leong et al. (2007) also attributed the community’s quick recovery to its existing strong leadership structure, which had evolved over the previous 20 years since the community was established. Consistent with Chang’s findings, Vietnamese evacuees who had previously experienced migration as refugees from Vietnam reported their ties to the community as stronger because of the previous hardship, which they deemed a much more harrowing event than the hurricane (Leong et al., 2007).

Field research on disaster relief and recovery is difficult due to the sporadic nature of disasters. Research on disaster recovery generally focuses on logistical issues and those of
immediate infrastructure needs. Some work has been done, however, to analyze the importance of community in disaster recovery. The findings discussed above indicate the importance of community cohesion and sense of community to the ability of groups to recover from disaster. Additionally, groups sometimes found their commitment to communities strengthened after a disaster, making them more committed to rebuilding the community. The shared goals, history, and focus in the communities studied here are due, in part, to ethnic and geographic links. Members of a rhetorical community, although not likely to be mutually affected by natural disasters due to their location-specific effects, might not have strong enough ties. If the disaster were a crisis that struck an organization, the constituent community would not necessarily be geographically bound and would function more as a brand or rhetorical community. No research has been done to study the effect of rhetorical communities on disaster recovery or on whether the community ties of a rhetorical community are strong enough to encourage continued cohesion. Because a community’s rhetorical vision reveals the character of the community itself, rhetorical analysis can reveal the types of rhetorical visions shared by a particular rhetorical community and to some degree the extent of that community through study of rhetorical artifacts. With a better understanding of the extent and shared vision of rhetorical communities and the way that vision impacts community ties, organizational and crisis communication is better informed of strategies for reaching and persuading constituencies, even in times when rhetorical visions cannot be scripted or directed.

**Purpose of the Research**

Community has long been a subject of research, with most studies focused on communities defined by particular descriptors, e.g. ethnic, neighborhood, online, virtual, fan, brand. With the increasing global reach of communications, however, research on communities
characterized not by what they are, but what they do, is imperative. Rhetorical communities are intentional communities characterized by participation in a particular rhetorical vision (Bormann, 1972). Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory can be used to study the formation of rhetorical communities through fantasy theme analysis. Using this paradigm, it is possible to follow the formation of a rhetorical community based around a particular rhetorical vision. Although research has shown that rhetors have successfully steered public opinion using fantasy themes, this study follows themes partially encapsulated in news coverage that was undirected.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the fantasy themes in media coverage after the April 2011 tornadoes by using fantasy themes as building blocks for the rhetorical vision that inspires the University of Alabama’s fan community. By classifying the fantasy themes and analyzing them through the lens of Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory, this study seeks to discover the ways in which fantasy themes and rhetorical vision influence community and the ways in which the resulting rhetorical communities respond in times of disaster.

In conclusion, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

Q1: How does rhetorical vision influence sense of community?

Q2: How does a rhetorical community respond to a crisis situation?

Although fantasy themes in media coverage of spot news events such as disasters cannot always be directed, awareness of fantasy themes and symbolism and their contribution to community is useful for crisis communications and disaster relief and recovery. Knowledge of the way in which fantasy themes can bolster community spirit in time of need, whether a local area is struggling to recover from a disaster or an organization is struggling to reassure constituents after a crisis, provides communicators with a tool useful for enhancing connections, loyalty, and hope, which can mean the difference between a community’s recovery or decline. In addition,
organizations can learn new ways of managing their own rhetorical vision to appeal to brand and fan communities in times of crisis and methods for strengthening those community bonds.
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

This chapter describes the scope and methodology of the study, including the research design and limitations, ethics and reliability, selection of artifacts, and a brief description of each artifact.

Scope

This study analyzed and discussed media coverage focused on the April 27, 2011, tornadoes that struck Tuscaloosa, Ala., and the resulting recovery efforts. Representative articles from national media were chosen because of their representation of the extent of the rhetorical community of those who responded to the tornado. The city of Tuscaloosa is home to approximately 178,000 people in the metropolitan area (Chamber of Commerce of West Alabama, n.d.), roughly 28,000 of whom are students at the University of Alabama (Addy & Ijaz, 2010). The university is an integral part of the metropolitan area, employing more than 8,600 people and having an estimated $1.3 billion expenditure impact on the local economy (Addy & Ijaz, 2010).

Economic recovery from the tornadoes is ongoing, thus this study analyzed artifacts spaced out over a time period of a few weeks after the tornadoes to January of 2012, illustrating the continued strength of the rhetorical community. The artifacts were selected from the University of Alabama’s own athletic department communications and from various national media outlets, illuminating the extent of the rhetorical community.

Methodology

Because the scope of the project seeks to analyze the effect of media coverage and a rhetorical vision, rhetorical criticism using fantasy theme analysis is an appropriate method of study. Bormann’s (1972, 1982) work linking rhetorical vision and community and the literature
discussed in the previous chapters that link community with disaster recovery suggest a link between rhetorical vision, and thus rhetorical community, with disaster recovery. News coverage of the Tuscaloosa tornadoes provides an excellent example of fantasy themes and rhetorical vision during a period of disaster recovery, allowing analysis of the rhetorical community’s response.

**Research Design.** Fantasy themes are “the primary unit of analysis” (Cragan & Shields, 1998, p. 98) of symbolic convergence theory. Fantasy themes are dramatic elements of a story “depicting characters engaged in action in a setting that accounts for and explains human experience” (Cragan & Shields, 1998, pp. 98-99). Cragan and Shields (1998) noted that fantasy themes have structural, substantive, and stylistic qualities. Structural qualities are recognizable in media when the fantasy themes have obviously chained, when particular phrases or images are repeated across multiple venues. Substantive qualities include the depiction of *dramatis personae*, or characters, plot lines, and setting; and stylistic qualities include the dramatizing, embellishment, and sharing of the themes (Cragan & Shields, 1998). Analysis of fantasy themes in artifacts involves cataloging, or coding, the fantasy themes present in terms of message structure (character, plot, and setting) and analyzing the patterns of the fantasy themes to construct the rhetorical vision (Foss, 2009).

Once the rhetorical vision is identified, analysis reveals the rhetorical community – those who participate in the rhetorical vision or the co-creation of reality that is an epistemological assumption of symbolic convergence theory (Cragan & Shields, 1998). Foss (2009) noted that motivation is contained within the rhetorical vision itself. “As Bormann explains: ‘Motives do not exist to be expressed in communication but rather arise in the expression itself and come to be embedded in the drama of the fantasy themes that generated and serve to sustain them.’”
（Foss, 2009, pp. 100-101）。换句话说，一个特定的修辞学社区成员的行为反映该修辞学愿景，使他们团结一致，并证明参与该修辞学社区。

**Reliability and ethics.** 修辞批评涉及研究修辞学作品，这些作品可以任何形式出现，并利用这些作品来揭露围绕我们世界的潜在信息。因为修辞批评是质性研究，对这些作品信息的解读是每个批评家的“独特框架和偏见”（Foss, 2009, p. 18）。Foss指出，尽管如此，批评家仍然有责任向学术界提出可辩护、合理、连贯的批评。在分析和选择作品时，批评家有责任代表现状。为了这一目的，选择的研究成果代表许多传达相同信息的成果样本，而不是单一作品，这些作品因为其符合特定观点而选择。这些潜在信息是相同的，因此对新兴修辞学社区的研究是既有效又合乎伦理的，因为它代表了现有的社区。前一章详述了现有学术关于幻想主题分析、符号一致理论、社区和灾难恢复，以及研究问题的理性。下述章节的研究将前一章的理论与这些研究联系起来，并提供使用这些研究成果的理论理由。

在这个阶段，作为研究人员，我认为我必须包括我的个人注释，说明我和这些作品的联系。我出生在阿拉巴马州 Tuscaloosa，仍然认为那里是我的家乡。我认为自己是阿拉巴马大学橄榄球队的修辞学粉丝。我相信这种个人兴趣提供了独特的视角。
perspective on this research, although I made every effort in conducting the analysis to be both ethical and reasonable in both the analysis and my conclusions.

Artifacts

This study analyzed three artifacts covering the April 27, 2011, tornado that struck Tuscaloosa, Ala., its aftermath, and the recovery process. Three artifacts are examples of media coverage of the tornado and its aftermath. The following section discusses the selection of those artifacts and includes a brief description of each.

Selection. The purpose of the study is to follow the development and analyze the extent of the rhetorical community that emerged after the tornadoes struck Tuscaloosa. To that end, the artifacts selected were national media stories or local artifacts that illustrated the fantasy themes and the extent of the ties to the rhetorical community. Artifacts selected were chosen for their in-depth coverage (more than 600 words), their discussion of the impact of the tornado or the recovery efforts on the community, and their inclusion of references to University of Alabama athletes or Alabama football as a part of the recovery process.

Description. The first artifact is the cover story and associated art featured in the May 23, 2011, issue of *Sports Illustrated*, a national magazine with an article written by a local writer only a few weeks after the storm, illustrating the potential for development from local rhetorical community to national rhetorical community. In contrast to the size of the geographic community of Tuscaloosa residents (176,000), and the University of Alabama Alumni Association’s 30,000 members (University of Alabama Alumni Association, n.d.), *Sports Illustrated* has a stated circulation of 3.2 million and a readership of 21 million (*Sports Illustrated*, 2011). Although coverage of the tornadoes was nationwide, the article was the first to tell the story through the lens of athletics and University of Alabama athletes thus instigating
the fantasy themes. _Sports Illustrated_’s coverage is also unique in that the magazine, which does cover news events that relate to sports, has never in its history featured a non-game related disaster photograph on its cover. The cover image featured the title “Tuscaloosa” instead of a University of Alabama sports team and images of the devastation instead of a football game.

The second artifact is a _Los Angeles Times_ article published in August, four months after the tornadoes. The _Los Angeles Times_ is a national newspaper on the West coast of the United States, a continent away from Tuscaloosa, Ala., with an average circulation of 723,000 on weekdays and more than 1 million on Sundays (Los Angeles Times, n.d.). The article, written by an author with no previous connection to the University or to the city, illustrates the extent of growth of the rhetorical community, both geographically and temporally, through the use of chaining fantasy themes.

The third artifact, an _NBC Sports_ story written two days before the University of Alabama played and won the Bowl Championship Series National Championship football game, illustrates the continuing fantasy themes and the connection of the rhetorical vision with recovery. The article echoed the theme of several post-game interviews and pre-game stories, with attention still focused on the tornadoes and the role of athletics in the recovery process nearly nine months later.

The rhetorical artifacts selected for study provide examples of the way in which fantasy themes served to enhance and extend a rhetorical community, which in turn played a role in the continued recovery efforts of the city of Tuscaloosa. The artifacts provided a variety of artistically rendered fantasy themes and provided evidence of the chaining that characterizes symbolic convergence and the resulting formation of a rhetorical community.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction

The following chapter presents the results of the analysis of three artifacts using fantasy theme analysis and looking through the lens of Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory. As discussed in the literature review, FTA reveals themes present in the artifacts, which, when analyzed, reveal the rhetorical vision represented by the artifacts. The analysis is grouped according to the following themes common to all three artifacts: athletes as heroes, athletics as hope, survival, and the community as a team. Following the analysis is a discussion that links the rhetorical vision to the rhetorical community and its effect on disaster relief efforts.

Analysis

Despite the eight months that separate the first-published article from the last-published article, common fantasy themes run throughout, providing evidence of the chaining of fantasy themes that characterizes symbolic convergence. At the heart of the symbolism that unites the artifacts is struggle: the struggle of the University of Alabama athletics against their opponents, the struggle of the city’s residents first against the tornado and then against the overwhelming task of recovery, the struggle of individuals to overcome loss and despair and to replace those with hope. Disasters are characterized by before and after, and the coverage of the Tuscaloosa tornadoes is no different. Before the tornado, the athletes were athletes and students. After the tornado they were survivors and heroes. Before a football game there is opportunity and hope. After a football game, hopefully, there is victory. Before the tornado, there were many people who happened to be living in the city of Tuscaloosa. After the tornado, there was one team, united in the cause of recovery. The overarching rhetorical vision is one of hope and determination revealed through the use of five major fantasy themes.
**Athletes as heroes.** The major fantasy theme of athletes as heroes is found predominantly in the artifact published just weeks after the tornadoes struck the city. Anderson (2011) reported the stories of University of Alabama athletes as they experienced the April 27, 2011, tornado and its aftermath. The article, accompanied by photographs that depicted each athlete stoically at the location in which he or she rode out the tornado inset with smaller photos of the athletes in their public roles (Bruty, 2011), uses the narratives to fashion fantasy themes of the athletes as heroes, survivors who went above and beyond to help others who were devastated by the storm. The photos serve as visual cues to anchor the meaning of the narratives: students who started out on a normal day who survived a devastating storm and then went on to help others. One narrative shows former University of Alabama football standout Javier Arenas in the living room of his house near the University campus. When he heard the tornado was headed his way, he took shelter in a bathroom. After it was over, he wandered the streets in confusion, alerting rescuers to two women buried in the gas-filled rubble of a collapsed building (Anderson, 2011, p. 38). Then, he drove home to Kansas City, where he plays football for the Kansas City Chiefs, but couldn’t stay away from the town he still considers home. So he loaded up his vehicle with supplies and drove back to Tuscaloosa to distribute them. Baseball players Nathan Kilcrease and Josh Rosecrans also rode out the storm in their bathtub, hanging onto each other and the mattress protecting their heads from flying debris. After the storm, they rescued a neighbor from the rubble of his house (Anderson, 2011, p. 40). The next day, the entire baseball team, while helping a teammate clear debris from his house, formed a human chain into the rubble of the house across the street to salvage items for the mother of a student who died inside (Anderson, 2011, p. 40).
The emphasis on the heroism of the university’s athletes continued even to the last-published artifact of the three chosen for this study, the *NBC Sports* article published nine months after the storm and just two days before the BCS National Championship football game. Estes (2012) noted the heroism of the athletes from the University of Alabama, who worked “to bring joy back to the town” (Estes, 2012, para. 9), and the heroism of athletes from Kent State University, Alabama’s first opponent of the 2011-2012 football season, who came during the summer to help rebuild and conduct a football clinic. The heroism, Estes reported, did not go unnoticed by Alabama football fans, who rewarded the team with a loud ovation as they took the field at Bryant-Denny Stadium in the opening game (Estes, 2012). Athletes were not the only ones who supported or contributed to rebuilding efforts after the tornado, but University of Alabama athletics, especially football, has a national interest. Sports writers cover athletes, and Estes (2012), Anderson (2011), and Bruty (2011) covered the actions of athletes that went beyond simply surviving the storm to contributing to the city’s overall recovery both physically and psychologically.

**Athletics as hope.** The University of Alabama Athletics Department took its role in recovery seriously, donating $1 million in the days after the storm to the University’s relief fund (Alabama Crimson Tide, 2011). Individual athletes contributed their time and talents to the recovery effort. Beyond that, however, athletics had another role, which the media characterized as providing hope for the city’s residents in the aftermath of the destruction. “Tuscaloosa is among the most sports-obsessed cities in America – greetings of ‘Roll Tide’ are as common here as a simple ‘hello.’ Athletics will play a special role in rebuilding it, brick by brick, life by life” (Anderson, 2011, p. 37). Dufresne (2011) noted the centrality of football in the lives of Tuscaloosa residents in his coverage, which linked the University’s No. 1 college football
ranking to a season that could provide a welcome distraction from cleanup efforts. In a state where athletics, especially football, is king, athletics is described as “the fulcrum of recovery” (Dufresne, 2011, para. 19). Athletics provides a source of pride and commitment that residents can build on to recover, a fact not lost on the athletes themselves (Dufresne, 2011).

“Lots of people lost everything,” Crimson Tide safety Mark Barron said. “They lost material things, but they also lost hope. When the season starts, they follow Alabama, so if we got out and have a great season for them, we can give them a little something back.” (para. 20)

Post-season coverage continued to present the football program’s success as a source of hope and inspiration for a city still struggling to recover. Even the headline, “Tornado tragedy fueled Alabama’s run to title game” (Estes, 2012), links the team’s stellar season to a desire to overcome the odds and provide hope and healing to a torn community.

This has, without question, helped motivate the Tide to an 11-1 record and a meeting with LSU on Monday in the BCS Championship Game in New Orleans. Before the season began, as the state continued to remove debris and rebuild lives, Alabama players said they wanted to do what they could on the field to help people feel good again.

“…We’ve played hard this season for the people of Tuscaloosa. Hopefully we can win it all for them.” (Estes, 2012, para. 7-8)

Even in the days just after the storm, Anderson’s (2011) article points out similar themes. He tells the story of Alabama baseball players Josh Rosecrans and Nathan Kilcrease as they first survive the storm and then contribute to rescue efforts. Photographs show the two baseball players perched on the rubble of their house, where they rode out the tornado in the bathtub (Bruty, 2011). But the devastation of the photo is offset by the narrative, which contrasts the
chaos of the storm with the heroic efforts of Rosecrans and Kilcrease in recovering mementoes and clothing for a victim’s family. The players’ own words portray the role of athletics in providing hope: “Maybe through baseball we can put a smile, if only for a few hours, on people’s faces and make them forget the heartache” (Anderson, 2011, p. 40). Eleven days after the storm, Anderson reported, the Rosecrans recorded the final two outs in a 9-0 win over LSU on the baseball diamond. “The crowd of 4,19 at Sewell-Thomas thundered as the team surrounded Rosecrans on the pitcher’s mound. Here, for a few sweet moments, all felt normal in T-town” (Anderson, 2011, p. 40). The football team and its quest for a championship team, Estes said, is another constant that brings hope to those still working to rebuild.

They have been raising national championship banners in Tuscaloosa for nearly 90 years, and on Monday they will try to add yet another to the collection,

And in the process, as Richardson said, they will attempt to bring joy back to the state. (Estes, 2012, para. 18-19)

All three artifacts, from the first days after the storm to the coverage nine months later, echoed the theme of hope provided by University of Alabama athletics. Alabama football Coach Nick Saban characterized it as a psychological escape athletics could provide for the community (Anderson, 2011). Coverage equated work on the athletic field to the city’s recovery, and the hope of opportunity in a new football season to the hope of recovery for the city. Crimson Tide long snapper Carson Tinker’s story is perhaps the best example. He became a symbol of the city’s survival and recovery after he, like so many others, rode out the storm huddled in a closet with his roommates and girlfriend, 22-year-old honors student Ashley Harrison. Tinker was thrown into the field across the street from his house but survived. Harrison was killed in the storm. Three days later, Anderson reported, Tinker’s mother was pushing him in a wheelchair
down the hall of Druid City Hospital in Tuscaloosa, where he and nearly a thousand other residents were treated for storm-related injuries. Tinker was clad in an Alabama T-shirt, and a female employee greeted him with “Roll Tide.” When he replied in kind, she told him, “We’ve got a lot to look forward to this fall. A whole lot” (Anderson, 2011, p. 41). For Tuscaloosa residents, athletics is a symbol of hope and opportunity that can bring a smile even in the midst of devastation.

**Survival.** The third fantasy theme, that of survival, is inherent not only in the *dramatis personae* chosen to represent the residents who survived the storm and are working to rebuild, the fantasy theme of survival is personified in the setting itself. Each narrative in each artifact connects to the University of Alabama, either physically or psychologically. In each artifact, the storm is described geographically in terms of the university and its iconic Bryant-Denny Stadium, which “looms in the distance, dominating the battered T-town skyline” (Anderson, 2011, p. 37). The stadium was untouched, making it a beacon of hope and a symbol of the community’s survival, both economically and physically. Estes (2012) reported that people asked about the stadium as their second question after hearing about the tornadoes’ devastation, not because they are callous but because of footage which showed the tornado dwarfing the largest structure on Alabama’s campus. “The fine line between Alabama not fielding a football team this year and Alabama being The Times’ preseason No. 1 is the arbitrary variance of a compass degree” (Dufresne, 2011, para. 18). Not fielding a football team would have had a multimillion dollar impact on the local economy; fielding a football team including Carson Tinker, a symbol of so many others who lost more than belongings, is evidence that the university and the city will survive.
Bruty’s (2011) photographs of the athletes show each one in the remains of a house or in the doorway of the apartment where each did, in fact, survive. The stark images of devastation, piles of rubble against a bleak horizon dotted with more destruction, and the solemn face of the athletes mark them as survivors. The smaller photographs of the athletes on the football field, the baseball diamond, or in the gymnasium mark their more public role as representatives of the University of Alabama athletics program, a program that the text of the article notes will and does continue. The athletes are survivors. The program itself is a survivor. The university is a survivor. Just as these symbols survived, the city will survive. As they persevere and work toward success in athletics, they represent the city which will do the same. The photographs are another example of the media’s portrayal of the fantasy theme of survival. The devastation contrasted with the solidity of the university also suggests survival as a fantasy theme. As long as the city’s symbols stand and as long as athletics perseveres, the city will do the same.

**Community as a team.** Starting from the first-published article, athletics and the athletes themselves are presented as symbols of the whole. The cover image of *Sports Illustrated*’s May 23, 2011, edition featured University of Alabama football standout Javier Arenas (who at the time played for the Kansas City Chiefs) wearing Alabama crimson and standing amid the wreckage of what had been his house. The title read simply “Tuscaloosa: What the tornado took” (Bruty, 2011). The image makes Alabama football in the person of Arenas and in the use of Alabama crimson in the titular font synonymous with Tuscaloosa. The city, the image says to the reader, suffered this damage, and the football program, the football team, and Alabama athletes are part of that city. The team and the city suffered together. Anderson (2011) uses the narratives of each athlete’s survival story to fashion the fantasy theme of athletes as symbols of the larger Tuscaloosa community. Bruty’s (2011) interior location
photographs contrasted with the smaller photos of each athlete in his or her public role
emphasize the athletes as both community members and team members. Dufresne (2011) opens
with language that evokes the fantasy theme of the city as a team united against an opponent:
“…what ripped through his city April 27 made everyone chroniclers, first responders, and
teammates” (para. 3). The tornado is presented less as a force of nature than as an opponent, one
that unites the city in opposition in the same way athletes unite against an opposing team on the
field or in the gym.

Estes (2012) reported the team’s work toward the championship as reflective of the state
of the city of Tuscaloosa itself, a team working toward recovery. The attribution of that journey
as belonging to the city, not just the Alabama football team, is not because the University of
Alabama is the only game in town. The city of Tuscaloosa is home to two other post-secondary
schools, although neither has Alabama’s national spotlight. And there are residents of the city
who owe their sporting allegiance to other schools, even to the University of Alabama’s biggest
rival, Auburn University. But in the coverage of post-tornado Tuscaloosa, the city is one team,
united in purpose.

And there was no doubt that for many people, part of the healing process would come
from watching their beloved Crimson Tide play football. That was evident in the weeks
following the tornadoes from the not uncommon sight of “Roll Tide” flags sticking
stubbornly out of the rubble. (Estes, 2012, para. 6)

The team, for its part, is presented as analogous to and representative of the community. In the
aftermath of the storm, when athletes were among those who cleaned up debris and distributed
relief supplies, media coverage portrayed the city as one team with recovery as its goal.

Dufresne (2011) reported Alabama football Coach Nick Saban provided leadership here as on
the football field, further cementing the fantasy theme of community as a team. “Everyone looked to see how the state's most important citizen responded in crisis. Saban led with his usual square-jawed, laser-beam focus. He has spearheaded the recovery effort” (Dufresne, 2011, para. 24). Saban encouraged the team to support the community, just as the community has always supported the team, making the roles interchangeable.

Media coverage noted, too, the extension of the community’s team to include those who do not actually live in the city of Tuscaloosa. National Guard troops who came into Tuscaloosa to help with recovery in the days after the storm were cheered by the presence of Alabama athletes and video of Crimson Tide highlights. “This is Roll Tide country. Like most of the people in here, I’ve been an Alabama fan since even before I was born” (Anderson, 2011, p. 37). Dufresne (2011) reported on the tornado’s effect on Alabama’s year-round rivalry with in-state opponent Auburn University, saying the disaster reconnected fans who occasionally carried the rivalry too far. “Auburn coach Gene Chizik declared solidarity with the Tide, stating emphatically, ‘It’s not about an Alabama or an Auburn thing. It’s the state that has been devastated. This is real life.’” (Estes, 2012, para. 14). The devotion to a cause that characterizes the community extends the metaphor of community as team to an even wider audience. “Everyone can wrap their arms around Tuscaloosa. No football town in America has been so devoted and destroyed” (Dufresne, 2011, para. 46). The fantasy theme of community as a team includes all those who would unite in the common cause against the city’s opponent and contribute to its victory.

Discussion

Analysis of the three media artifacts covering the April 27, 2011, tornadoes that struck Tuscaloosa, Ala., reveals four main fantasy themes: athletes as heroes, athletics as hope,
survival, and community as a team. These four main fantasy themes portray the state of the city of Tuscaloosa immediately after the tornadoes and during the nine months following. An analysis of these fantasy themes provides insight into the rhetorical vision of hope and survival that motivates the rhetorical community of Tuscaloosa supporters. Bormann’s work on fantasy themes and other research on symbolic convergence suggests that readers of the media artifacts, which reach a nationwide audience of tens of millions, might also share these rhetorical visions and identify with the Tuscaloosa community, forming a new rhetorical community with the purpose of supporting that rhetorical vision (Bormann, 1982; Cragan & Shields, 1999; Duffy, 1997).

**Rhetorical community.** Symbolic convergence theory holds that the rhetorical community is made up of those who share a particular rhetorical vision, the co-creation of a particular reality. In the case of the Alabama tornadoes, that rhetorical vision, and thus the rhetorical community, was shared nationally and over an extended period, providing motivation for a national rhetorical community to support Tuscaloosa’s recovery efforts. Previous research on using fantasy themes to direct rhetorical vision (Barton & O'Leary, 1974; Duffy, 1997) has shown that constructed fantasy themes can serve to motivate rhetorical communities toward a particular set of actions. In the case of the coverage of the Tuscaloosa tornadoes, however, fantasy themes chained and created symbolic convergence without direction from a public relations firm or any other type of organization. The themes which were first shared as part of Anderson’s (2011) coverage of the tornadoes and their impact on the community through the lens of University of Alabama athletes chained spontaneously throughout coverage of the football season. Sports coverage, for which Alabama has a national platform, echoed the same fantasy themes in the start-of-season coverage of the Crimson Tide football team in August.
and in the coverage of the national championship game in which Alabama participated in January 2012 (Estes, 2012). This symbolic convergence demonstrates the spread of the rhetorical community of Alabama supporters to a nationwide audience over the span of nine months.

Bales’ (1970) research on group fantasy sharing suggests those fantasies that address common group concerns are more likely to be shared by the group, creating a sense of group cohesion (as cited in Bormann et al., 1997). Although shared group fantasies can be made-up, they can be real situations expressed in such a way that they explain current reality and resonate with members of the rhetorical community, in this case those for whom the experience of hope and determination of survivors resonate coupled with the group of Alabama fans and supporters who already associate themselves with the community. The medium of national publications and sports-oriented provides the possibility for the rhetorical visions to resonate with many who would not otherwise have a connection with Tuscaloosa, Ala., extending the rhetorical community despite a lack of other connection.

The study attempted to answer two research questions. The first question asked:

**Q1: How does rhetorical vision influence sense of community?**

Rhetorical vision acts as a catalyst to bring community members into a participatory community grouped around a common sense of purpose. Society is made up of various communities of varying sizes, most of which are characterized by descriptive adjectives that require a certain location or personal characteristic for membership. Membership in these types of communities is less a matter of action than existence, and most people belong to more than one (see fig. 1). For example, residents of a particular geographic area are members of that municipal community, but they may also be members of an ethnic community, or a school
community. Some of these communities require absolutely no participatory action for “membership;” others require minimal levels of participation such as attending a particular school. However, if a rhetorical vision appeals to any of these community members, the rhetorical vision serves as a catalyst for the group members to unite into a rhetorical community of those who share that particular rhetorical vision.

Membership in the rhetorical community is not contingent on membership in any other community, it depends solely on sharing the vision of reality proffered by the rhetorical vision. Participating, or sharing, in this vision, is necessary to be a member of the community, thus the rhetorical vision is also motivation, making a rhetorical community necessarily a more active membership than that of other types of communities. Like other communities, however, the strength of attachment to a rhetorical vision, and thus a rhetorical community, varies within the membership. Research (Bormann et al., 1996) shows that to inspire strong ties with the community and facilitate continued strength of relationship requires a constant renewing of the rhetorical vision, which renews the sense of commitment to the community, the motivation to continue as a member, and thus the community itself.

The rhetorical community of Alabama fans, for the purposes of this study those who share the rhetorical vision of hope and recovery, is defined not by location or personal trait but by purpose. Membership in a rhetorical community is intentional and requires not only hearing
but participating in the rhetorical vision, which can provide motivation for action (Bormann, 1972). Participation includes sharing the vision of determination and teamwork that characterizes the rhetorical community of Alabama fans portrayed by the media coverage of the tornadoes. Community leaders also hoped participation would include additional help for the city’s disaster recovery efforts. Although detailed demographic studies of members of the extended rhetorical community are not possible, the media artifacts did demonstrate the extension of the rhetorical community because of shared rhetorical vision. Dufresne (2011) mentioned Kent State University players and coaches who came to Tuscaloosa during the summer of 2011 to help rebuild houses and conduct a football clinic, illustrating the inclusion of those outside the traditional community of Alabama fans for whom the appeal of disaster relief efforts in Tuscaloosa is through sports and through the appeal of the rhetorical vision of hope and determination. Their participation in the rhetorical community was through direct assistance in rebuilding efforts.

Similarly, Estes’ (2012) coverage of Auburn, Ala.’s, contributions to the Tuscaloosa relief efforts through “Toomer’s for Tuscaloosa” illustrates the same point, participation in the rhetorical community by those who would not normally be part of a rhetorical community involving the University of Alabama. “Toomer’s for Tuscaloosa,” in fact, represents the inclusion and participation of people who are normally part of a rhetorical community in opposition to that of the University of Alabama’s fan community, fans of rival Auburn University. Estes’ coverage quoted Auburn University football coach Gene Chizik as saying relief efforts were larger than the game of football or than the rivalry between the two schools. Fans and students from other schools said the same. “‘They’re hurting, and we're going to help them,’ (Auburn student Warren) Tidwell said. ‘It's not about football at this point. It's about
human beings helping other human beings.” (George, 2011, para. 7). Those interviewed about inter-school relief attributed their help to the larger need of disaster survivors. In other words, they participated in the rhetorical community based on the appeal of the rhetorical vision of hope and determination in the media coverage of the tornadoes. For others, the appeal was based on the rhetorical vision of football as a larger community, even a community that crosses traditional boundaries of school loyalty. The rhetorical vision of hope and determination of Tuscaloosa’s residents served as a catalyst to pull members from various communities (football fans, students at other universities, residents of Alabama, and others) and meld them into a new community of Tuscaloosa supporters, those who participated in the rhetorical vision and responded to Tuscaloosa’s relief and recovery needs.

The second question asked:

_Q2: How does a rhetorical community respond to a crisis situation?_

Based on the response of the rhetorical community of Tuscaloosa supporters formed by the rhetorical vision in this study, the response of a rhetorical community in a crisis situation mirrors that of a geographic community with strong internal ties. Because membership in a rhetorical community is participatory, members’ ties to the community are strong. Motivation for action lies in the participation and acceptance of the rhetorical vision of hope and determination, thus community members are motivated to help achieve the vision. Research suggests that the extended sense of community support contributes to faster recovery from the psychological trauma (Brake et al., 2009). Anecdotal evidence from the media artifacts, such as the guardsmen who are cheered when Alabama football player Javier Arenas visits (Anderson, 2011), or the ovation offered by Alabama fans to Kent State after that team’s contribution to recovery efforts (Dufresne, 2011), appears to confirm the idea of community-supported
psychological recovery. In addition, the strong sense of community generated by participation in the rhetorical vision is evident in the response of those who are part of the extended rhetorical community. They exhibit strong feelings of community cohesion, which were stronger and more encompassing after the disaster.

“What happened at Alabama, it hit kind of close to home for a lot of us because of the fact that it’s an SEC (Southeastern Conference) school and we consider all of the SEC schools as kind of a family,” said Ryan Smith, president of (the University of) Kentucky’s student government. “Just devastation that we couldn’t even imagine, and we wanted to help.” (George, 2011, para. 19)

Members of the core rhetorical community of Tuscaloosa supporters behaved in much the same way as a strongly linked geographic community with multiple community ties (Chang, 2010). As his research suggested, the core community of Alabama fans responded with strengthened resolve and tighter community bonds. As the rhetorical vision spread, additional community members joined the rhetorical community who would normally not be part of that core group, strengthening the community both numerically and psychologically, thus making available more resources to achieve the group’s core vision of recovery.

More research is needed to discover whether the bonds of the rhetorical community will withstand the test of time, however. Bormann et al.’s (1996) research on cold war rhetorical vision suggests that all rhetorical visions, and thus the rhetorical communities they inspire, have a natural life cycle. They all have a beginning, middle, and end unless the rhetorical vision is constantly renewed. In the case of the core Alabama fan community, the rhetorical vision of the University is renewed every year and many times during the year through football games, participation in university activities, and through association with other members of the
rhetorical community (Toma, 2003). For members of the rhetorical community inspired by the vision of hope and survival after the tornadoes, however, the vision may not be renewed often enough or strongly enough to motivate them to membership past a certain point. For example, although Dufresne’s (2011) admonition to support Alabama as a psychological means to offset the destruction likely inspired many, such as those who normally support opposition football programs, to cheer for Alabama, that impetus will be absent by the beginning of the 2012-2013 football season, when Alabama will be the defending national champion instead of the underdog that almost missed the season. If, however, the city of Tuscaloosa or the University of Alabama can renew the vision by reminding its rhetorical community of the rhetorical vision of hope and determination, it may inspire continued or renewed membership and support.

Rhetoric and community. The analysis of the artifacts in this study sheds light on the relationship between rhetoric and community, illustrating the concept that rhetorical visions contain master analogues which extend their meaning beyond a particular situation and make them applicable to humanity as a whole. The fantasy themes of athletes as heroes, athletics as hope, survival, and community as a team combined to form a rhetorical vision of survival that appealed on the basis of its ability to explain the human experience of survival and recovery after the tornadoes. The master analogue contained in the rhetorical vision appeals to a wide range of people beyond traditional community definitions based on its explanation of the idea of struggle versus an opponent or versus negative circumstances and of the idea of determination to overcome those circumstances. The vision also likely appeals to readers based on their own vision or expectation of heroism, positive action within negative circumstances. Although many of the readers of the three articles studied in this analysis have not experienced a tornado, they
can relate to the broader human experience of struggle and determination, forming a symbolic common ground with Tuscaloosa residents.

The rhetorical community formed as a result of the media coverage of the Tuscaloosa tornadoes extended those who supported the University of Alabama Crimson Tide, and by extension the city of Tuscaloosa, far beyond geographic boundaries (Dufresne, 2011) and beyond the boundaries of traditional fan communities (George, 2011). The extended community provides a wider base of support on which the city can draw as part of the continuing recovery process.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Communication is an essential part of what it means to be human. Through communication humans exchange ideas, transmit and receive information, and co-create the lens through which they view the world. Community, the way in which humans relate to one another, is also an essential part of humanity. Throughout history, communities have been formed primarily based on geographic or personal characteristics. Because of the near global reach of communications in the 21st Century, however, society requires an expanded definition of community that can include those that transcend the boundaries of geography or personal characteristic. This study provided insight into an example of a rhetorical community, a community of purpose that goes beyond geography and personal characteristic to unite a group according to motivation and action based in a common idea. Through an analysis of three artifacts, examples of media coverage of the tornadoes that struck Tuscaloosa, Ala., on April 27, 2011, the study revealed fantasy themes. These themes combined to form a rhetorical vision of hope and survival which, when viewed through the lens of Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory, explained the formation of a rhetorical community of supporters of the University of Alabama athletics and by extension the city of Tuscaloosa. Combining this analysis with previous work on the role of community in disaster recovery, the study suggests that the extended community of supporters formed through the rhetorical vision provided an extended network from which the recovering community could draw resources and support for the recovery effort.

Limitations

Many SCT researchers gather demographic data to establish the rhetorical vision reality-link, which “allows for the identification of the people who share the fantasy or vision” (Cragan
& Shields, 1998, p. 112). Often, these results provide information on whether a targeted appeal did, in fact, reach its intended audience. The extent of the rhetorical community in this case study, however, makes a demographic analysis difficult. Although the initial rhetorical community (people who support University of Alabama athletics) is quantifiable to some extent, demographic information on the extended rhetorical community evidenced by the artifacts is measurable only in the vaguest of terms. Time and resource limitations prevent a complete demographic analysis of the rhetorical community. Such an analysis, however, would be useful in further research to determine the demographic, sociographic, and psychosocial characteristics of the rhetorical community to aid in predictions of future behavior.

Because of the nature of rhetorical criticism, the researcher’s viewpoint necessarily influences use of the method. My personal connection with the geographic and rhetorical community of University of Alabama athletic fans and as someone who has experienced natural disasters could be said to inform or influence the identification of themes in the media coverage. However, ethical research requires the researcher to acknowledge these types of limits but to strive for truth in research. In this study, the artifacts chosen were representative of the media coverage in both subject and tone. Research on media coverage of disasters should include both positive and negative coverage where it exists, and rhetorical criticism should include both positive and negative themes where they may be found. As a member of the community, I am more likely to see positive themes rather than negative themes and base my conclusions on those. Researchers with no connection to the community they study might have a more objective viewpoint.
Recommendations for Further Study

Further study of the characteristics of rhetorical community members would be informative and provide additional insight into the reason for the appeal, or lack of appeal, of a particular rhetorical vision. Comparative research on different rhetorical visions, perhaps opposing visions, would also be informative, perhaps shedding light on why some rhetorical visions chain and others do not, or why some enjoy a much larger reach than others. These types of research into the nature of rhetorical community would provide an additional framework for organizational and disaster communications when trying to target particular groups or when trying to craft a particular rhetorical vision. In addition, further research on whether rhetorical visions as represented in media coverage of events, such as man-made crisis situations or natural disasters, correctly represent the measurable rhetorical vision of the existing community as affected by the disaster would inform future studies as well as disaster and organizational communications. Finally, additional research on the lifespan and life cycles of rhetorical communities via rhetorical visions is needed.

Conclusions

The preceding chapters included a review of literature on symbolic convergence theory, rhetorical visions, community, and disaster relief. This research shows shared fantasies within a group form fantasy themes, also commonly understood as inside jokes. These fantasy themes, when part of a larger set, form rhetorical visions, which, when shared, form rhetorical communities through the process of symbolic convergence. Communities form part of the basis of the network of strength and support that helps hasten disaster recovery in cases of natural disaster.
One example of a rhetorical community formed through symbolic convergence is the community of support for University of Alabama athletics, and by extension the city of Tuscaloosa, that emerged after tornadoes struck the city in April 2011. This study traced the development of that rhetorical community through the use of fantasy themes in three articles beginning just after the tornadoes and ending with the end of the University of Alabama’s football season in January 2012. The artifacts, all articles in national news or sports publications, illustrate the chaining fantasy themes of athletes as heroes, athletics as hope, survival, and community as a team. These themes built a rhetorical vision of hope and determination that appealed to more than just those who were already supporters of the University of Alabama’s Crimson Tide football team or who were residents of Tuscaloosa or even the state of Alabama. They appealed on a much wider scale based on the larger human connection – the larger human tendency to hope and to be determined. Through those rhetorical visions, those who otherwise had no connection with the city of Tuscaloosa, the University of Alabama, football, or even tornadoes could understand on a fundamental level the experience of Tuscaloosa residents on the afternoon of April 27, 2011. That connection provided common symbolic ground to form the rhetorical community that supported Tuscaloosa’s recovery efforts.

Bormann et al. (1996) and Toma (2003) showed that rhetorical visions, and thus rhetorical communities, have a lifespan unless those visions, and the bonds of community that go with them, are renewed. For University of Alabama supporters, those bonds are renewed every spring during A-Day, the Alabama spring scrimmage game, and every fall at every football game or tailgating event. They are renewed for every freshman class that begins the process of learning traditions that serve as fantasy themes for the University of Alabama community. The rhetorical community of Alabama supporters united by the vision of hope and determination,
however, will change with time, with those whose connection was through fantasies of heroism and survival perhaps falling away from the community if those fantasies are not renewed. Others will return most of their support to their home schools at the beginning of the 2012 football season.

For Tuscaloosa, the media’s coverage of athletes and the University and their equation with heroism and survival, along with the team’s extended and much-discussed championship season, meant new members of the “Alabama Nation” and more resources dedicated to the task of recovery. For Tuscaloosa, the narrative mattered. For disaster and organizational communications, the lesson here is that the narrative matters. Duffy (1997) demonstrated the applicability of symbolic convergence theory and rhetorical vision to planned public relations campaigns. This study showed that rhetorical visions can chain spontaneously even over the long term, with no direction from public relations practitioners or other communicators. The study also showed that narratives that inspire sympathies with the vision of heroism, hope, and determination, inspire action in those for whom that vision resonates. The University of Alabama’s athletes began the summer as heroes and survivors. They ended their football season as heroes and victors. The vision presented in the media coverage provided motivation for the rhetorical community of Alabama supporters to do no less.
References


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MENTOR AGREEMENT (To be submitted with Thesis Proposal)

You have been asked to serve as a Mentor for ___Christa C. Bell___, who is completing the requirements for her Masters Degree in Communication and Leadership Studies. As a mentor you are asked to share ideas with this student and read the next to final draft of their thesis. You are not expected to directly supervise this student’s work but rather meet with them as a “young colleague.” If you are willing to serve as a Mentor for her, please sign this agreement.

I am willing to serve as a Mentor for ___Christa Bell________ as she completes her thesis. I realize I do not need to supervise their work in any direct fashion and will only serve as a more experienced colleague with a younger colleague. I will provide help in the way of suggestions, ideas and resources and am willing to review drafts of their written work. I also agree to read the next to last draft of the student’s thesis and will sign my name on the title page of their final draft. My signature on the thesis only indicates that I have read it and is no indication of the quality of the work. I will not be asked to assign a grade or make any evaluative comments to the course convener.

Signature ___________
Title ___________
Email and telephone number ___________
Date ___________