The readings this week address a number of important issues in regards to disaster management, specifically in the areas of media coverage and preparedness. The explicit common thread between the articles was the emphasis, in both areas of research, upon the multi-level nature of disasters, including the implications that exist at the individual, community/local, state, and societal levels of analysis. More implicitly, however, the articles all used a comprehensive framework with undertones of systems theory to understand, albeit different, but important issues surrounding disasters. Haddow, Bullock, and Coppola (2007) examined preparedness using systems theory, covering multiple dimensions of readiness. Lawrence and Birkland (2004) examine the role the media does or does not have regarding informing policy-making, and Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski, (2006) studied the ways in which media can influence peoples’ preparedness for disasters and the response provided for victims.

Lawrence and Birkland (2004) focused on issues pertaining to the Columbine shootings by analyzing media sources and congressional legislative activity to better understand the relationship between the two institutions. A focal point of the study included how the media and congress differently shape the definition of the problem and the underlying causes, and whether they influenced each other in this process. For example, the media tended to place emphasis on gun control, school violence, and elements of popular culture, such as video games as the problem behind the Columbine event. In contrast, although gun control was equally important in the congressional arena, school violence and issues of criminal justice were also debated consistently.

In addition, both entities tend to have the ability to create an agenda or sense of importance about specific events and underlying causes, and it was shown in this study that the relationship could sometimes be bidirectional in nature. More specifically, the research revealed that the intense media coverage on the Columbine event, resulted in significantly more bills pertaining to possible problem definitions. However, pre-existing agendas in the political sphere, such as gun control, simply gained momentum and justification for legislation aimed at tighter restrictions on firearms, which influenced what the media reported.

Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski’s (2006) article on the media’s influence upon disasters, using Katrina as a case study, complimented Lawerence and Birkland (2004) in that it widened the scope of analysis, examining the possibility that the media has the ability shape policy and public behaviour in disaster situations. In the case of Katrina the media was responsible for creating and reinforcing disaster myths, which has direct safety implications for the public. In addition, in the case of Katrina, the media emphasized lawlessness, looting, and the panic myth, while also portraying ethnic minorities, mostly African-American males, as the perpetrators. One theme that seems to be present in the disaster literature is the notion that disasters can often magnify social issues such as poverty, racism, and sexism, making some communities more vulnerable than others (Sanderson, 2000; Morrow, 1999). This was clear in the case of Katrina, the people with less resources, such as low-income families, and the elderly were, at times, compromised. However, Tierney et al. (2006) focus the fact that the printed media
misrepresents findings about disasters, despite an abundant amount on empirical research debunking many of these commonly-held ideas, such as widespread panic in disasters, social instability and chaos, and a dramatic increase in antisocial behavior creating circumstances that are less than ideal for mitigating risk and carrying out evacuation and response appropriately. The implications for such an emphasis on such disaster myths can be fatal because they create a sense of mistrust between the individuals and communities and their local or state governments. As pointed out in this article, the evacuation shadow can occur when the media dramatizes the possibility of a disaster, compelling people to evacuate areas that are not directly at risk.

One of the most significant findings of this article echoes the findings of Lawerence and Birkland (2004), that the media can sometimes have a powerful influence on what becomes important in the political arena. In the case of Katrina, the media’s emphasis on looting and lawlessness, caused the government to implement strategies of militarism by bringing in the National Guard to maintain order in the so-called ‘war zone,’ that was New Orleans and the Superdome. Tierney et al. (2006) note that on the individual, community, and societal level this can impact how people may respond and did respond to Katrina, not only during the event, but also in the aftermath.

Lastly, (Haddow, Bullock, and Coppola, 2007) use a systems approach to examine how preparedness is comprised of inherently interrelated and dependent social systems, which need to work together effectively in order to optimize local readiness for natural disasters. Although this chapter differs in regards to specific content with the other readings this week, it provides a foundation for understanding the complicated nature of disasters, proving that connections between entities, whether it be the media, local government, communities and their leaders, emergency response teams, or the everyday citizen, are imperative to properly minimizing the impact of the disaster.

Notably, FEMA and NEMA have created assessment techniques aimed at setting standards for preparedness among communities, such as the Community and Family Preparedness Program. This program is designed to inform the public about effective plans and strategies that prepare individuals and families for response to disaster, essentially creating additional resources for the larger community.

In addition, this chapter identified the importance of local government and emergency teams to be aware of special populations in the community. This area could have been expanded upon with the incorporation of GIS systems, an excellent tool for documenting areas of vulnerability, including identifying populations that are likely to lack the resources for sufficient preparedness (Morrow, 1999). The potential for local emergency management groups to be able to map resources, vulnerability, and areas of preparedness, would allow for a higher overall standard of readiness for natural disasters.

The readings this week provide valuable information and multiple frameworks for understanding the influence of certain groups, such as the media, on the public and the response to disaster.
Additional References
