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Natural Hazard Problem and Solution Definition in the News Media: the Case of Tropical Storm Allison

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Focusing events such as natural or technological disasters can have significant impacts on public policy and planning in both the near and long term. These impacts can manifest at different temporal scales ranging from the period of immediate attention and disaster relief through the period of recovery and reconstruction and beyond. These impacts and associated decisions can be studied in retrospect and understood as not only short-term reactions, but as long-term components of subsequent natural hazard planning and public policy. By studying in detail how an event was defined, and the policy and planning alternatives that were raised or recommended in response to a disaster event, we can better understand the role that disaster-related focusing events play in the long-term evolution of a community's public policy, infrastructural planning efforts, and responses to natural disasters.

This paper will use a focusing event framework to explore the local and regional policy impacts over time of a major urban flood in Houston, Texas, Tropical Storm Allison. Tropical Storm Allison (TSA), dropped 36 inches of rain on Houston over a period of four days in early June 2001, and was responsible for 22 deaths, 70,000 flood damaged homes, and $5 billion in damage to the region. The primary data source for this effort is a database of 500 articles from the major regional newspaper, the Houston Chronicle, over the period of 2001 through 2008. These articles were coded for multiple variables, including, cause, effect and impact (financial and social), blame, problem and solution definition and solution acceptance). This paper focuses primarily on the measures of problem definition (how was TSA, as an event, defined in the media, for example, as an act of God, or as a result of poor planning or decision making, etc), and on solution definition (what solutions were proposed to mitigate or adapt to future storms of this magnitude, how were they linked to the definition of the problem, and what was the perceived acceptability of such solutions among divers stakeholders). As such, this paper will contribute to our efforts to further link the social and policy sciences theory and methods with natural hazards research.