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COMMUNITAS IN YOUTUBE COMMENTS:
THE MARCH 2012 HENRYVILLE TORNADOES

By
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B.S., University of Louisville, 2009

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Communication
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2014

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A Thesis Approved on
April 17, 2014

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife

Joyce Slawsky

who put up with me during this process

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I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Greg Leichty for his guidance and advice on this project. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Karen Freberg and Dr. Robert Carini, for their comments and assistance over the past few months. In addition, I would like to thank Dr. Steve Sohn and Dr. Jennifer Gregg for keeping after me to complete this, and Karen Battoe for spending so much time on coding. And finally, I would like to thank the faculty and staff of the Communication department, chaired by Dr. Al Futrell, for making me feel a part of the team, including Katherine Thompson, who gave me my first teaching opportunity.

ABSTRACT

COMMUNITAS IN YOUTUBE COMMENTS: THE MARCH 2012 HENRYVILLE TORNADOES

Richard Slawsky

April 15, 2014

This paper serves as a critical case in analyzing the emergence of *communitas* in online discussions. Although *communitas*, or the unstructured community that often emerges in the wake of major societal upheavals, has often been documented in a common geographic setting, little research has been done into the emergence of *communitas* in online or computer-mediated settings. Determining whether or not *communitas* emerges in the comment streams attached to YouTube videos related to the tornadoes that struck Henryville, Ind., on March 2, 2012, will serve as an indicator that *communitas* will emerge in other online channels as well. This project consisted of coding those comment streams to identify the emergence of *communitas* as well as determine the effect of *communitas* on subsequent indicators of negative and positive emotion. Analysis indicated that *communitas* did emerge and inhibited indicators of negative emotion.

Keywords: *communitas*, liminality, YouTube, online

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INTRODUCTION

Whatever the reason may be, it seems as if natural disasters are occurring on an ever-increasing basis. Although determining whether that is true is a subject for another study; what is apparent is that technology is changing the way we communicate. While 100 years ago it might have taken months for news of a faraway natural disaster to reach us, today we can follow the news in near real time via a variety of channels. And while years ago discussion of the emotional effects of those disasters may have been confined to family, friends and neighbors, today that discussion takes place around the globe.

The discussion of the effects of a natural disaster isn't just confined to text or audio. The adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" is as true as it ever was, and today videos carry an equal if not greater weight as does a static image. Many of those videos are hosted on the social media site YouTube. While the shared experience of a natural disaster has helped create the spirit of community Turner defines as *communitas* (1995) in a face-to-face context, this paper analyzes the emergence of *communitas* in an online setting. Specifically, I will look at the emergence of *communitas* in comments related to YouTube videos documenting a natural disaster.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there are many different definitions of the term, Alexander (1993) defines a natural disaster as “some rapid, instantaneous or profound impact of the natural environment upon the socio-economic system” (p. 4). According to Fritz (1961), a disaster is “an event, concentrated in time and space, in which a society, or a relatively self-sufficient subdivision of a society, undergoes severe danger and incurs such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfillment of all or some of the essential functions of the society is prevented” (p. 655). The term often describes an event or series of events that stem from natural, technological or social factors that involve a great deal of emotion and possibly several fatalities (Perry, 2007).

While the terms “crisis” and “disaster” are often used interchangeably and are generally linked, “crisis” applies to situations that are unexpected and nearly unmanageable, causing widespread uncertainty (U. Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort, 2001). A crisis can be defined as “a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a social system, which—under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances—necessitates making critical decisions.” (Rosenthal and Charles, 1989. p. 10) While the definition covers disasters, a crisis can also be an event that does not meet the definition of disaster (Perry, 2007).

Notable disasters in recent years include the tsunami that struck Southeast Asia on December 26, 2004. In that incident, more than 220,000 people died when a giant wave hit the coast along the Indian Ocean (Kristensen, Weisæth, & Heir, 2009). In the United States, more than 1,600 people died when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans as a Category 3 storm on August 29, 2005, with the resulting storm surge overtopping levees and flooding much of the city (Lam, Arenas, Pace, LeSage, & Campanella, 2012). In March 2011, an earthquake with a magnitude estimated at 9.0 struck off the coast of Japan in the Pacific Ocean. The quake created a tsunami that reached as high as 123 feet and struck the Tohoku region, resulting in more than 16,000 deaths and serious damage to the Fukushima nuclear reactor (Fuse, 2012).

Disaster communication

One of the many things connecting these and similar events is that those who were affected by them struggle to make sense of what they experienced and create order out of chaos. Sensemaking is rooted in both individual and social actions (Weick, 1995). Those directly affected may have lost loved ones or property. Societal roles may have temporarily broken down as normal job routines come to a temporary halt and put the various classes on equal footing in the struggle to begin the recovery process (Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 1999). Others may know someone directly affected and be called upon to offer physical or financial assistance. Even those not connected to the event may experience the reliving of some personal trauma after being exposed to information about the disaster via the media.

A disaster often spawns what Barton termed a therapeutic community (1969). Those affected by disasters often attempt to first solve their own problems, and then communicate with members of their social network if unsuccessful. New social networks comprised of those who have been similarly affected by the disaster may end up being a source of comfort (Solomon, 1985).

According to Seeger and Ulmer (2002) discussion in the wake of a natural disaster often revolves around ideas of “harm, responsibility, fault, culpability, blame, guilt, liability, compensation, and victimage” (p. 126). In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, those affected by the storm suffered from “grief, shock, mood shifts, confusion, anger, marital discord, guilt, escape fantasies and substance abuse” (Knapp, 2007). On the other hand, some researchers have found that people occasionally experience positive feelings in the wake of some traumatic event, showing “neither extreme distress nor unusual health problems” (Bonanno, 2004, p. 25).

In the wake of a natural disaster, there frequently is a qualitative shift in the forms of communication and social exchanges that occur. Victor Turner’s work (1969) on liminality and *communitas* looks at the shift that occurs when normal roles and social status are suspended for a period of time. When a natural disaster strikes, normal societal roles are temporarily disrupted. Businesses and schools may temporarily shut down, homes may be destroyed and people may find themselves living in a shelter. The normal scripts of day-to-day life are cast aside as people struggle to cope with the challenges brought on by the disaster. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, assessments taken seven weeks after the disaster indicated that nearly half of those affected by the storm showed levels of emotional distress that indicated the need for mental health services (Knapp,

2007). In a study of those affected by the 2004 tsunami in southeast Asia that resulted in the deaths of more than 220,000 people, increased levels of psychiatric disorders were found in those directly affected nearly two years following the disaster (Kristensen et al., 2009). On the other hand, some of those affected by a devastating ice storm that struck Western Kentucky in 2009 recalled their experiences fondly and labeling it “fun and adventurous” (Smith, Coffelt, Rives, & Sollitto, 2012, p. 56).

Liminality and communitas

The characteristics of natural disasters suggest the period immediately following such events has similarities to “liminal periods” that individuals experience when they go through rites of passage. Victor Turner (1995) characterizes a liminal period as a state of “betwixt and between” when typical roles and routines of order temporarily collapse and the state of affairs contains few if any of the attributes of either the previous state or the state to come. During that period a “structureless, shared consciousness of uncommon identity, without rank, property, or insignia” emerges (Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 1999). That shared consciousness, Oliver-Smith says, is a condition of communitas. Esposito defines communitas as a group of people united not by a property but by a sort of shared obligation (2009).

As opposed to community, or a common living area, communitas is achieved through groups having experienced a common liminal state via those rites of passage (Turner, 1969). Edith Turner calls communitas “a group’s pleasure in sharing common experiences with one’s fellows” and compares those creating communitas out of a liminal

state to a “merry band of outlaws from society.” Emotions associated with *communitas* include sympathy, compassion and empathy (E. Turner, 2008, p. 79).

Disasters, whether natural or man-made, frequently set the stage for the emergence of *communitas* as those affected are in a shared period of liminality, dropping their normal routines to cope with the situation at hand and joining with others in the same state of affairs. In the days immediately following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Abrams, Albright and Panofsky found that New Yorkers developed a spontaneous camaraderie with complete strangers borne out of a desire to seek solidarity with those similarly affected. Most interactions simply involved walking with or offering comfort to others, and many people reported deriving pleasure from those interactions (2004).

Communitas is characterized by a significant degree of suspension of normal roles and social routines as people move from relating to people in terms of the social structure to dealing with people as individuals as whole persons (E. Turner, 2008). According to Oliver-Smith, the liminal period and resulting *communitas* brought on by a crisis or catastrophe throws victims into a “relatively unstructured common consciousness,” decreasing or eliminating societal ranks. Ultimately, though, *communitas* eventually fades away as those affected return to more predictable behavior with the move of circumstances away from the immediate emergency to a period of reconstruction and recovery (Oliver-Smith, p. 165).

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same state of affairs. In the days immediately following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Abrams, Albright and Panofsky found that New Yorkers developed a spontaneous camaraderie with complete strangers borne out of a desire to seek solidarity with those similarly affected. Most interactions simply involved walking with or offering comfort to others, and many people reported deriving pleasure from those interactions (2004).

The liminal period brought about by an event such as a natural or man-made disaster consists of three distinct phases: Separation, when the individual becomes disconnected from his or her former role; transition, when the individual is in an ambiguous period between life stages or social roles; and Reincorporation, when the individual begins to establish new roles or relationships (Knapp, 2007). In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, Abrams, Albright, and Panofsky noticed the most intense phase lasted about two days.

“During this initial period, until approximately two days after the disaster, the intense interactions between relative strangers had a number of features. First, many respondents reported that although they felt deeply unsettled about the initial reports they encountered about the disaster, the extent really sunk in only after they interacted with other people, whether known or strangers” (Abrams, Albright, & Panofsky, 2004, p. 199).

Ultimately, the authors found that the period of a “plurality of meanings, perspectives, and expression” lasted until about the third week of October, or about six weeks after the attacks (p. 193).

Linda Jencson looked at the *communitas* that developed in the wake of the North Dakota/Minnesota Red River Valley Flood of 1997. In that case, the spring thaw in the wake of a record snowfall the previous winter caused the water level of the Red River to rise dramatically. The city of Fargo, N.D., was cut off from the rest of the world not only in a physical sense because floodwaters made roads impassable, but in an emotional sense as the collapse of the power grid cut residents off from the normal trappings of modern life. Jencsen, who was a resident of Fargo at the time of the flood, compared the *communitas* that sprang up in the disaster response as being similar to what might occur in a war zone. Despite the confusion surrounding the community, life became temporarily simpler as residents shifted their attention from normal routines to focus on recovery efforts. The mayor of the town of Moorhead, for example, filled sandbags alongside convicts who had been released from jail to help with the efforts. Women worked alongside men to stack those sandbags, while muddy boots and gloves became the standard mode of dress (2001).

In addition, the effect was not just a result of the flood but was also shaped in part by past experiences. Those affected by a previous, similar disaster may experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress, prompting them to seek out *communitas* forged out of the new disaster. Jencsen refers to stories of individuals who had previously experienced traumas such as the London Blitzkrieg of World War II and relived those events because of the flooding (2001).

Ultimately, the liminal period created by the disruption of a natural disaster creates a sense of *communitas* as those affected come together to share grief over what they lost and begin the process of rebuilding. For a brief period the normal societal roles

fall away, class structure disappears and people come together. Often, once the sense of *communitas* dissipates, participants look back on those times with fondness (Jencson, 2001).

It is important to note that not every disaster situation results in the emergence of *communitas*. The opposite can occur as well. In the days following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, for example, although many police officers remained at their posts as the city descended into anarchy, dozens of others simply walked off the job. Some joined in the widespread looting (Michael & Lee, 2005) and several were charged in the thefts of automobiles from a local Cadillac dealership (Staff, 2006). In the wake of a heat wave that struck Chicago in July 1995, hundreds of elderly residents died in part because of a lack of a support network. Many of those residents had in the years prior to the heat wave created their own isolation out of mistrust of their neighbors (Klinenberg, 2002). And sociologist Kai Erickson documented the emotional trauma suffered by displaced residents in the aftermath of the flooding of Buffalo Creek in Logan County, W. Va., following the collapse of a coal slurry impoundment dam. Because much of the recovery work was done by strangers from outside the community, many residents felt as if they had lost control of their community to an occupying army (Erikson, 1976).

Disaster communication and social media

In December 1967, the Department of Defense issued a \$19,800 contract to study the design of a computer network. Emerging from that four-month study was the ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network). The first head of ARPANET was J.C.R. Licklider. He saw the potential of the network as a

communication medium that would serve as the basis for a world-wide community. The ARPANET led to the modern-day Internet ("Internet History From ARPANET to Broadband," 2007). Today, nearly 80% of residents of North America have Internet access ("Internet world States - Usage and Population statistics," 2013).

Even before the widespread availability of the Internet, technology has served to deliver counseling and therapy. Online services such as CompuServe brought electronic communication to the masses, and online message boards devoted to the discussion of mental health issues. Online support groups quickly became a major component of the burgeoning network (Fink, 1999).

Phases and boundaries of liminality

In her study of the *communitas* that developed in the wake of the North Dakota/Red River Valley flood, Jencsen described *communitas* as taking place in a "specific, sacralized, bounded space" (p. 48). In that case, the floods created a literal, geographic boundary around Fargo. The Internet and social media has moved *communitas* beyond the physical, though. In the post-Katrina discussion boards in New Orleans, for example, participants were in nearly every state around the country (Slawsky, 2009).

The phases of *communitas* in the post-Katrina discussions were indicated by the types of topics that emerged over the course of the first few weeks following the storm. Initially, the discussion centered on locating friends whose whereabouts were unknown. That period was the most intense for about three days. Because most areas were inaccessible for several weeks, topics then turned to reports from emergency workers

who were able to describe the conditions in those areas and discussions of when residents might be allowed to return. Once that discussion subsided, after about three weeks, comments turned to sharing experiences in dealing with FEMA. After several weeks, interactions with insurance companies became the norm, eventually giving way to discussions on cleanup and repair followed by solicitations from attorneys offering to assist with insurance settlements. One feature completely lacking in those early days was the type of spam and “troll” comments that are a feature of most unmoderated online discussion boards (Slawsky, 2009).

The growth of social media

The widespread availability of Internet access, driven in part by the use of Internet-enabled mobile phones, has spawned the phenomenon of social media. Kietzmann et al. refer to social media as mobile and Web-based technologies used to “create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, cocreate, discuss, and modify user-generated content” (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Although social media seems a fairly recent phenomenon, it is actually nearly as old as the Internet. While services such as Twitter and Facebook have only been in existence for five years or so, the previously mentioned online discussion boards, along with email and Usenet, were an early form of social media (Bennett, 2012).

One of the key characteristics of social media along with online news sources and other forms of “new media” is interactivity (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012).

According to Lievrouw and Livingstone, that interactivity gives “users the means to

generate, seek, and share content selectively, and to interact with other individuals and groups, on a scale that was impractical with traditional mass media” (Lievrouw, 2002).

The Internet and accompanying social media networks have emerged in recent years as a major way for those affected by a disaster to share information. In St. Bernard Parish, La., in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, residents used Internet discussion forums that had been set up by the Times-Picayune newspaper first as a way to track down missing friends and relatives and later as a way to communicate information about issues ranging from dealing with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and insurance companies to the status of various employers in the area. Because residents of St. Bernard were literally scattered to all 50 states, the discussion forums served as a virtual re-creation of the physical community that had been destroyed. The language used on the forums, from the local references to the verbiage unique to the area, was identical to the language one might hear in a neighborhood grocery store. Later, discussions turned to more mundane issues such those related to dealings with FEMA, insurance companies, rebuilding efforts and working with contractors (Slawsky, 2009).

Despite the growing phenomenon of social media the Internet is generally perceived to weaken social ties and increase isolation, with people losing contact with their social environment the more time they spend on the Internet. As little as five hours of Internet use a week leads to a decrease in social activities (Nie & Erbring, 2000).

In a disaster situation, though, the opposite tends to be true. Procopio and Procopio found that many of those affected by Hurricane Katrina turned to the Internet as a way to sustain their community in the wake of the disaster after the failings of other forms of communication prompted a move online. Subjects used the Internet to activate

both strong and weak social ties, including family, social, geographic and school-related, with nearly half reporting that they contacted people with which they hadn't communicated in more than a year. New Orleans residents turned to the Internet as a form of emotional support, with no significant difference between men and women in either the posting of messages of encouragement or the reading of those messages (2007).

In examining social media use following the flooding of the Brisbane River in Queensland, Australia, in 2011, researchers identified four categories of use: Monitoring information, Community and communication, Awareness, and Affirmation. In the Monitoring information category, participants used social media as a way to keep abreast of the situation, primarily as an observer with little if any two-way communication. In the Community and communication category participants used social media as a way to receive assurance regarding things such as the safety of friends and relatives and the status of property. In the Awareness category the participant used social media as a way to expand their awareness of the situation and how it might affect their lives. In the Community and communication category, participants used social media as a way to fulfill their need to communicate with others. That communication might involve using information sourced from a social media platform (Bunce, Partridge, & Davis, 2012).

While the sense of *communitas* created via the Internet during Katrina was primarily driven by postings of text on discussion boards, social media would seem to be an obvious place to look for the emergence of *communitas* in the wake of a disaster. The combination of video-capable mobile phones and easy access to social media platforms could serve to create the conditions for those affected by a disaster to come together and share their experiences.

YouTube

One of the fastest-growing social media channels to come on the scene is the online video service YouTube. The idea for the service was born in February 2005 when Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Karim, who had previously worked together at the online payment service Paypal, began working on a video service similar to image-sharing service Flickr. They registered the domain YouTube.com shortly after (Lidsky, 2010).

The first video, a few seconds of Karim at the San Diego Zoo, was posted on the site in April 2005. The service officially debuts in mid-December 2005. The television show Saturday Night Live aired a YouTube video several days after the debut of the service, and the video subsequently attracted more than 2 million “views.” In 2006, Google purchased YouTube for \$1.65 billion. By 2009, videos on the service had attracted more than 1 billion views a day.

In the years since its launch YouTube has emerged as a primary outlet for information about natural disasters. A 2012 study from the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism found that videos of disasters, including the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan, were one of the most popular types of content searched for on YouTube. The study analyzed the most-viewed videos from January 2011 to March 2012 (Staff, 2012).

“Worldwide, YouTube is becoming a major platform for viewing news,” according to the report. “In 2011 and early 2012, the most searched term of the month on YouTube was a news-related event five out of 15 months, according to the company's

internal data.” Most of those videos were recorded by ordinary citizens rather than official news organizations (Rosenstiel, 2012).

“More than a third of the most watched videos (39 percent) were clearly identified as coming from citizens,” the report said. “Another 51 percent bore the logo of a news organization, though some of that footage, too, appeared to have been originally shot by users rather than journalists” (Rosenstiel, 2012).

A September 2013 report by research firm comScore Inc. indicated that 188.5 million Americans watched 46.7 billion online content videos in August 2013. YouTube was the primary driver of that activity with 167 million unique viewers, more than double the No. 2 video site AOL (Adamo, 2013).

According to a 2007 survey more than half of those who watch videos online share links to those videos with others. In addition, YouTube videos offer viewers the ability to both rate those videos and to post comments about them. Approximately 13 percent of those who have watched videos on YouTube say they have rated those videos with an equal number saying they have posted comments about what they have viewed (Madden, 2007). Those viewing or replying to comments will generally see about nine previous comments in addition to one or two highly rated comments. Commenters on YouTube videos may be geographically scattered, with participants interacting with those outside of their normal social circle (Thelwall, Sud, & Vis, 2012).

Liminality and communitas in YouTube comments

Wittenbach asserts that communitas can manifest itself in online communities as fans share their experiences via a sports website (2007) while communitas was clearly

evident in the post-Katrina discussion boards (Slawsky, 2009). The anonymity of Twitter has also been shown to serve as a breeding grounds for *communitas* (Herwig, 2009). To date, though, few if any studies have looked at the potential for *communitas* to emerge in YouTube comments.

Most scholarly research involving YouTube videos as data involved a content analysis with a coding system. Others used reviewers to make judgments on the videos (Kousha, Thelwall, & Abdoli, 2012). A number of YouTube videos in recent years have inspired comment streams that seem to indicate a gathering of like-minded individuals. In one extremely negative example, a Cheerios commercial posted on YouTube featuring an interracial couple and viewed more than 4.5 million times and generated so many racist comments the commenting feature was disabled (Leanne, 2013).

Could indicators of *communitas* emerge from comments associated with disaster-related videos on YouTube? If so, that would serve as additional evidence that liminality and *communitas* are substantial realities in the aftermath of a natural disaster. In particular, it would serve to indicate that *communitas* transcends the local context to a more geographically dispersed narrative.

The disaster

On March 2, 2012, more than 20 people died across Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky and Ohio as the result of dozens of tornadoes spawned by a massive storm system. Much of the devastation was centered on the small town of Henryville, Ind., about 30 miles north of Louisville, Ky. All of the schools in Henryville were destroyed in the storms (Suhr, 2012).

A search of YouTube via the social media search engine Topsy indicted that within 30 minutes of the first tornado striking Henryville a video of the storm was posted to YouTube. Other videos soon followed. Most of the initial videos were those shot by citizens using video-capable smartphones. Later, clips from news reports about the storms found their way to the site followed by security camera footage of the storms' impact, clips from service agencies such as the Salvation Army and Catholic Charities, news footage and government-supplied B-roll. A few weeks after the storm, a "best video" contest to have the country music band Lady Antebellum play at the prom of a local high school prompted the posting of those videos, and several memorial videos shot by local residents also made it to the site. Within minutes of the first video being posted, the first comment appeared; the apropos "Holy? S***."

In analyzing the comments attached to videos related to the tornadoes affecting Henryville, Ind., I plan to address the following hypothesis:

H1: The presence of indicators of *communitas* reduces the frequency of elements of criticism and negativity and other negative expressions of emotion.

H2: The presence of criticism will reduce the likelihood of indicators of *communitas* and positive expressions of emotion.

H3: The frequency of *communitas* indicators will change over time.

In addition, I plan to address the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent to comments attached to videos related to the Henryville tornadoes show indicators of the emergence of communitas? Examples include comments such as “I grew up not far from you guys, in Floyds Knobs. I live in Chicago now. I still feel like I was right there with you all on Friday. So scary. My thoughts and prayers are with all of those who lost loved ones as well as property.” or “My husband is on E Whisky Run today helping to search. His co-worker lost everything...her house, animals... everything. How strange to have a video of the tornado that destroyed everything. I am grateful you are ok... and continue pray for everyone affected. I hope your dear friend was spared.”

RQ2: To what extent do commenters to videos related to the Henryville tornadoes express emotions related to the disaster, including expressions of emotional support for those affected.

RQ3: What codes tend to concur with a given case?

RQ4: Do the frequency of given codes differ by the type of video produced?

METHODS

It is important to note that the sample analyzed in the study is not representative of the population of YouTube users viewing disaster videos, YouTube users in general or the general population as a whole. Not only were the commenters on the videos in the study already existing Internet users, they were obviously users of the YouTube video site, interested in the subject matter and motivated to post a response. In some cases commenters disclosed information such as gender, age and location although those instances were relatively few.

The selection of videos related to the Henryville tornadoes as a subject for this study was driven primarily by my proximity to the town. Henryville is approximately 22 miles north of Louisville, Ky., where my base of the University of Louisville is located. The disaster was a prominent topic for the various news outlets in Louisville for months following the event and many Louisville residents had a personal connection to the town. In addition, Louisville has been affected by similar disasters, in particular an outbreak on April 3, 1974, when two F-5 tornadoes struck the area in what still stands as the largest tornado outbreak in the United States.

To test my hypotheses and answer my research questions, in July 2012 I visited the social media search site Topsy.com. Topsy allows users to search a variety of social media applications, including the video site YouTube, using parameters including

keywords and date range. I used the keyword “Henryville” and the date range of March 2, 2012, to March 30, 2012, which was the four-week span following the event.

My search returned 92 videos that had been posted in the four weeks following the event. Of those, seven were later removed due to copyright issues or other terms-of-service violations, resulting in a sample of 85 videos. I created a variable Video_Type and placed each of those videos into one of three categories:

Professional, consisting of general news footage and Internet-based news source footage.

Citizen, consisting of:

- “As-it happened” citizen video – Footage of tornadoes taken with a mobile phone or hand-held video camera
- Lady Antebellum contest videos – In the wake of the event, the country music band Lady Antebellum sponsored a contest where area high schools created and submitted videos detailing why they deserved to have the band play at their high school prom. The band chose Henryville High School as the winner and performed a private show for students.
- Unrelated – Videos that had the keyword Henryville associated with them but were otherwise unrelated to the event.

And Miscellaneous; video taken from a security camera in the area.

Once the videos were selected, I compiled viewer comments accompanying each video. The number of comments ranged from zero to as many as 876. The video with 876 comments was the first video posted, an “as-it-happened” video that appeared on YouTube within 30 minutes of the event. Spelling and grammar errors were left intact.

I then turned to creating a codebook for the videos using applied thematic analysis. Two coders analyzed the comments accompanying each video and developed codes based on the themes that emerged. Following the initial pass through the comments the codebook involved 61 individual codes falling under six distinct categories consisting of humor, effective or emotional responses, the event, criticism, personal connection and other.

Following that first pass the coders discussed which codes were similar enough to be combined into a single code and which ones might be eliminated due to low frequency. Separate codes for expression of emotion such as sorrow and sadness were combined into a single code. Expressions of feelings such as sympathy, concern and thankfulness, originally separate codes, were also condensed into one code. Reactions to those videos depicting an actual tornado, such as fear, terror or amazement at the power of the storm were combined into one code as well. The various codes with a theme of personal connection were condensed into two main codes, “we live in the area or were personally affected” and “personal connection to the area.”

After several additional passes some codes were eliminated completely while others were combined into a single code. The end result was 43 individual codes in the original six categories. Each coder then made multiple passes through his (and her) file.

The next step of the coding process was to calculate intercoder reliability. Taking 28 comments as the mean, I eliminated the cases with zero comments and separated the remaining cases into two groups: 1-27 comments and 28 or more comments. The end result was 33 cases in each group. Starting at the first case in each group and picking every fifth case, I ended up with seven cases from each group. Using the intercoder reliability function of QDA Miner, I then calculated Scott's Pi for each code. Basing my minimum reliability level on Frey et al.'s recommendation of .70 or higher (Frey, 1991). The final Scott's Pi levels for the codebook ranged from .76 to 1.0. The two coders then resolved remaining coding differences via discussion. In cases where the two coders disagreed, the tie was broken by involving a third coder.

Table 1

Table of codes
Humor <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Humorous
Affective or emotional responses <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Praise for first responders• Expressions of solidarity• Concern about the fate of the world• Props to the video poster• What would I have done?• Expressions of sorrow/sadness• Fear/amazement at the power• Evidence of climate change• Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location• Glad I don't live there or wasn't there• Expression of inconvenience• Expressions of gratitude• Expressions of happiness• Reports of deaths
The event <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Location tracking• Follow-up news• General comment on the state of the weather
Criticism <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accusations of fakery• Criticism of other commenters• Criticism of video/video poster• Criticism of area and those affected• Not appropriate to criticize• This was/was not a government conspiracy• Should have been more prepared• Destruction was a good thing• God did/did not do this

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinions about FEMA
<p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Request for or information on providing assistance • Solicitation of business • Comparison to previous events • Residual (uncategorized) • Our community will recover • Participation in contest • Insurance
<p>Personal connection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "There but for the grace of God ..." • We live in the area or were personally affected • Personal connection to the area • Had a similar experience
<p>From the original poster</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comment on the filming process • Licensing information • Where to go for more info • Response about comment screening

Examples of posts that were coded for “Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness” included comments such as “Was your friend ok?” and “Do you folks have a shelter? (i’m writing this at 5:20 mins into the video)... I hope you’re ok, among with your friends and family. Nasty stuff.,” while sympathy posts included comments such as “wow omg! im sorry. i hope all your friends and neighbors are ok” and “Good footage and im glad you and your puppy are ok!”

Many of the posts included a comment directed at the poster of the video, which I coded as “Props to the video poster.” Those sorts of posts included comments such as “Wow. Nice footage. Glad to see you were at a good distance? to capture it. Also, if your camera didn't do it justice, maybe an IMAX camera might.” and “Thanks for the video...it was scary even here just to watch....”

One of the unexpected code types that emerged early in the analysis were those that indicated the poster had some sort of personal connection to the area. Examples of those types of codes included “Wow... thank you for sharing this. I grew up not far from you guys, in Floyds Knobs. I live in Chicago now. I still feel like I was right there with you all on Friday. So scary. My thoughts and prayers are with all of those who lost loved ones as well as property” or “this is my town. wiped out. we dont have tornado siren just in the city, of salem. pekin is a little town outside of it makes me sad! my heart goes out to the victims.” We originally defined separate codes for situations such as “we were there” and “we live in the area” as well as codes for comments by those with a personal connection to the area but were not there at the time of the storm, such as “that’s my hometown” or “have friends or family in the area.”

Obviously, it was possible for a single post to consist of multiple codes. In addition, it quickly became apparent that discussions between commenters frequently emerged in the posting stream. Often, those discussions took the form of a response, sometimes critical, to a comment to the poster. Examples of that include “Ohhh big man. Insulting people trying to save their lives because they didn't waste precious time trying to corral their dog. You're disgusting for even spouting such drivel.” and “Worst.

Comment. Ever. I wonder how still you'd hold the camera with the Finger of God
barrelling down on you?"

Based on the topics outlined in my literature review, certain codes were identified
as indicators of *communitas*, with those being:

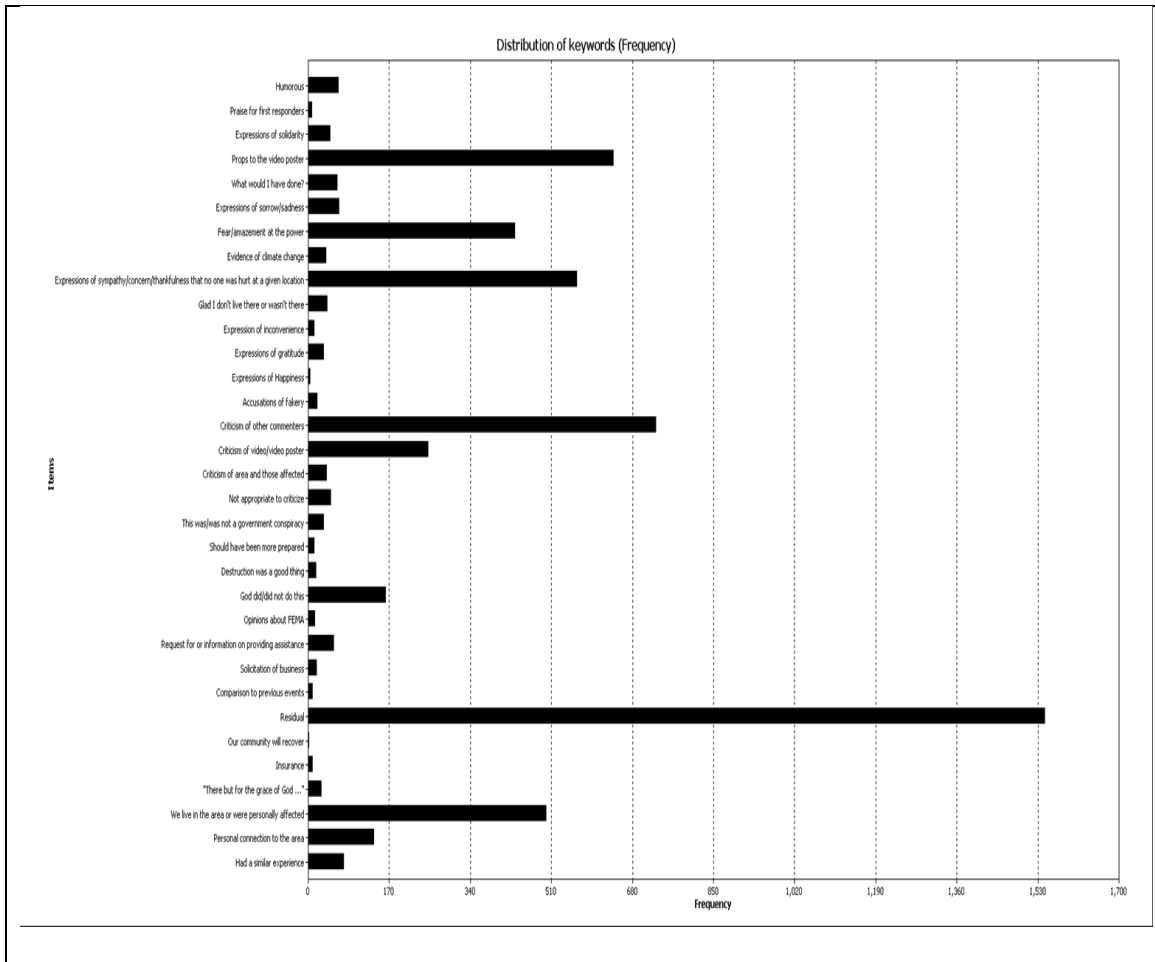
Table 2

Indicators of <i>communitas</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expressions of solidarity• Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location• Our community will recover• We live in the area or were personally affected• Personal connection to the area• Had a similar experience

RESULTS

The final count over the 66 videos in my sample that had associated comments was 3,984 individual comments. Those comments were tagged with a total 5,984 individual codes. Of those, 1,545 comments were coded with the singular code Residual, which was applied to comments where no other code seemed to be appropriate. Examples of comments coded Residual were one-word comments such as “What?” or meaningless phrases such as “Da da da!” In addition, comments that lacked an expression of emotion or simply didn’t fall under my defined codes also received the Residual tag. Examples included a discussion of what appeared in a particular video such as “It’s a light shining through the car window and rain.” Subtracting those Residual-coded comments, then, left 2,439 comments to which 4,439 codes were applied.

Of those remaining comments, the top code applied was “criticism of other commenters,” with 730 comments (29.9 percent) over 33 of the total 66 cases (50.0 percent) receiving that code. That was followed by “Props to the video poster,” at 641 comments (10.7 percent of codes, 66.7 percent of cases) and “Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location” at 564 comments (9.4 percent of codes, 60.6 percent of cases).



Relating the codes to my hypotheses:

H1: The presence of indicators of *communitas* reduces the frequency of elements of criticism and negativity and other negative expressions of emotion.

Using the Code Sequences analyzer of QDA Miner, I compared the occurrences of the three codes, Criticism of other commenters, Criticism of video/video poster and Criticism of area and those affected, as they followed occurrences of the codes identified as indicators of *communitas*. The analysis resulted in the following table:

Table 3

Positive indicators of emotion vs. criticism									
Code A	Code B	Freq A	Freq B	% of A	% of B	z	Prob.	Expected	
Expressions of solidarity	Criticism of video/video poster	47	252	4.3%	1.2%	3.03	.015	0.7	
Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location	Criticism of area and those affected	564	40	1.8%	17.5%	-1.15	.159	10.7	
Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location	Criticism of other commenters	564	730	14.5%	15.2%	-11.2	.000	195.0	
Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location	Criticism of video/video poster	564	252	8.3%	16.3%	-3.70	.000	67.3	
Had a similar experience	Criticism of area and those affected	75	40	2.7%	5.0%	-0.71	.365	3.2	
Had a similar experience	Criticism of other commenters	75	730	26.7%	4.2%	-6.87	.000	59.3	
Had a similar experience	Criticism of video/video poster	75	252	10.7%	4.0%	-2.67	.003	20.5	
Personal connection to the area	Criticism of area and those affected	138	40	0.7%	2.5%	-0.86	.332	2.3	
Personal connection to the area	Criticism of other commenters	138	730	10.9%	2.3%	-7.10	.000	41.4	
Personal connection to the area	Criticism of video/video poster	138	252	8.0%	5.2%	-0.40	.413	14.3	
We live in the area or were personally affected	Criticism of area and those affected	500	40	1.4%	17.5%	-1.20	.146	10.9	
We live in the area or were personally affected	Criticism of other commenters	500	730	17.8%	13.7%	-13.1	.000	198.6	
We live in the area or were personally affected	Criticism of video/video poster	500	252	11.6%	15.5%	-4.11	.000	68.5	
We live in the area or were personally affected	Criticism of video/video poster	500	252	11.0%	16.7%	-3.27	.000	64.8	

A negative z-value indicates the frequencies were less than expected, with seven of the 14 comparisons resulting in a significant level of less-than-expected frequency ($p \leq .05$).

As a result, H1 is supported.

H2: The presence of criticism will reduce the likelihood of indicators of *communitas* and positive expressions of emotion.

This analysis essentially involved reversing the sequence order compared with H1, resulting in the following table.

Table 4

		Criticism vs. positive expressions of emotion						
Code A	Code B	Freq A	Freq B	% of A	% of B	z	Prob.	Expected
Criticism of area and those affected	Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location	40	564	27.5%	3.0%	-0.64	.314	19.1
Criticism of area and those affected	Had a similar experience	40	75	2.5%	1.3%	-1.00	.270	2.5
Criticism of area and those affected	Personal connection to the area	40	138	2.5%	0.7%	-1.80	.044	4.7
Criticism of area and those affected	We live in the area or were personally affected	40	500	30.0%	3.4%	0.01	.551	17.0
Criticism of other commenters	Expressions of solidarity	730	47	0.7%	6.4%	-3.39	.000	16.5
Criticism of other commenters	Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location	730	564	15.9%	16.3%	-9.97	.000	198.5
Criticism of other commenters	Had a similar experience	730	75	2.5%	20.0%	-2.28	.010	26.4
Criticism of other commenters	Our community will recover	730	3	0.5%	66.7%	0.92	.285	1.1

Criticism of other commenters	Personal connection to the area	730	138	3.3%	15.2%	-4.18	.000	48.6
Criticism of other commenters	We live in the area or were personally affected	730	500	13.6%	17.0%	-8.69	.000	176.0
Criticism of video/video poster	Expressions of solidarity	252	47	0.8%	6.4%	-1.37	.114	6.4
Criticism of video/video poster	Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location	252	564	15.1%	7.1%	-5.55	.000	76.9
Criticism of video/video poster	Had a similar experience	252	75	2.4%	12.0%	-0.40	.425	10.2
Criticism of video/video poster	Personal connection to the area	252	138	6.0%	10.1%	-1.17	.145	18.8
Criticism of video/video poster	We live in the area or were personally affected	252	500	19.0%	9.4%	-3.25	.001	68.2

In this analysis nine of the 15 comparisons resulted in a significant negative z-value. H2 is supported as well.

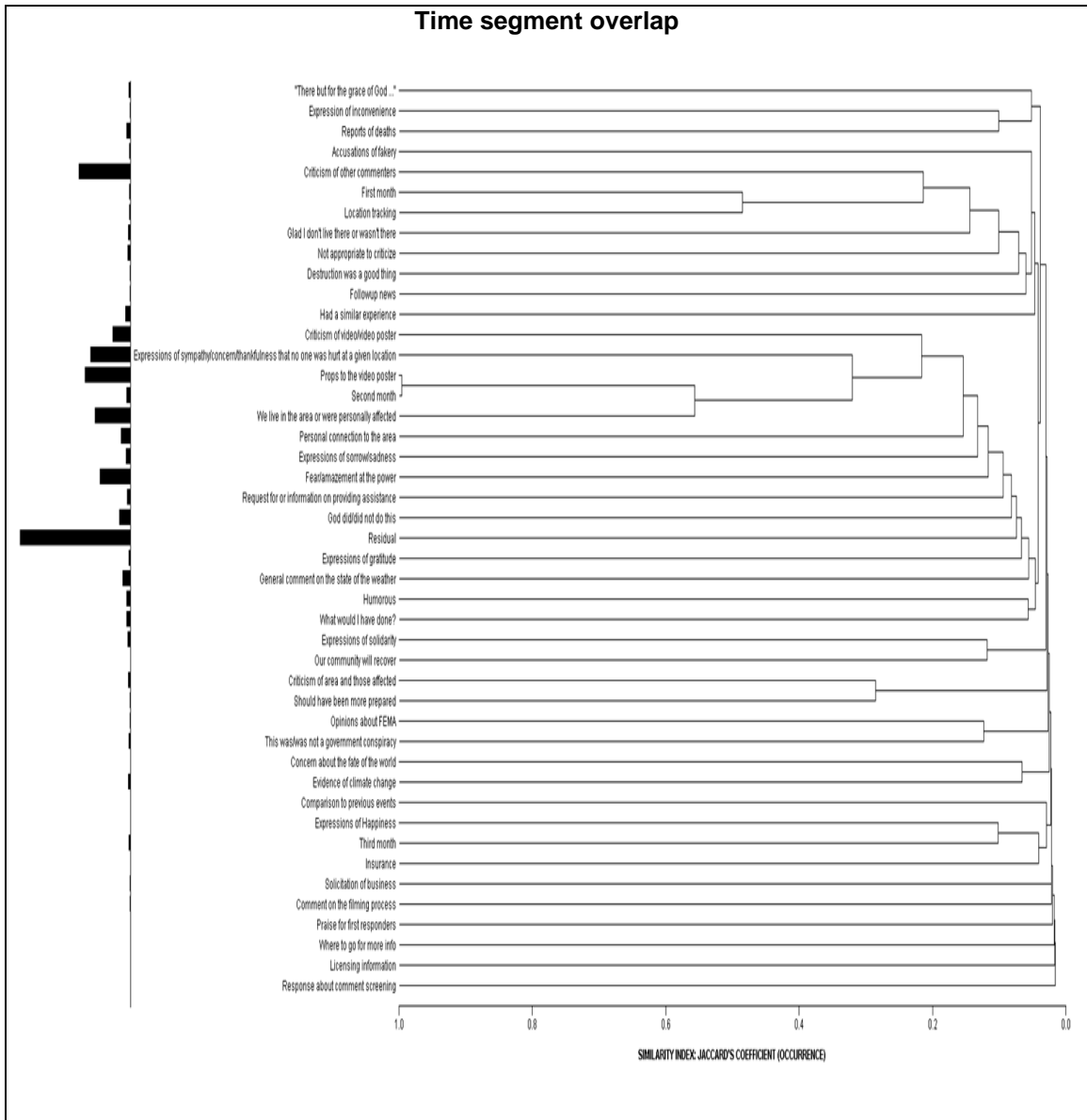
H3: The frequency of communitas indicators will change over time.

To examine this hypothesis, I created a time code corresponding with three time following time periods within the data set: comments made within a month of the video posting, comments made within two months of the video posting and comments made more than two months after the video. In each comment file, I placed a single code for time that overlapped with all of the comments that were made during the period in question. A cluster analysis was then run to determine if particular codes were particularly likely to be associated with particular periods. If particular codes appeared to be relatively unique to a particular period, the co-occurrence matrices would be examined to further describe and delineate particular patterns.

The results appear in the dendrogram below. With one or two exceptions, there were very few codes that were particularly prominent during one of the time

periods. The most notable exception was that praise for the video poster was particularly likely during the second month of the comment period. The degree of affinity or similarity between particular codes and particular time periods was in fact remarkably low according to Jaccard's similarity grouping index in the dendrogram.

Unfortunately, the time stamp function of YouTube calculates time from the posting of the comment to the present day, changing as the time of the comment recedes further and further in the past. Although comments made today might be identified as being made “a few minutes ago” or “two hours ago,” the more time that has elapsed between the comment and when it was viewed the more nebulous that measure becomes. Because my census was not conducted until several months after the actual posting of videos and comments, the time was only measured as “3 months ago” and so forth, with no indicator of what date was used as a baseline. As a result, the time indicator and resulting analysis was vague at best.



To begin answering the research questions I conducted a frequency analysis of the codes indicating *communitas*.

RQ1: To what extent to comments attached to videos related to the Henryville tornadoes show indicators of the emergence of *communitas*?

As mentioned previously, one initially unexpected result was the number of comments that asserted the poster's connection to Henryville and nearby areas that had been affected by the tornadoes. More than half (51.8 percent) of the 85 cases analyzed contained comments indicating a poster's connection to the area. Many, obviously, were comments made by individuals who lived in the area. For example, a poster using the nickname `belay2014` made this comment, "I am praying for all the tornado victims in Henryville and Marysville I am right in the middle of those two towns and it did not hit me and I am so thankful for that I am going to do everything I can for our neighboring towns I pray everyone is ok in these two towns."

Another poster using the nickname `MrHolyFries` makes this comment, "Yeah this storm just missed my house but hit the one around it! I do feel for those who have lost their loved ones in this storm!"

Even some of those living nearby but not directly affected took the opportunity to express emotional support for those affected. `Click53` states "We surveyed the area last evening, after dining in a nearby small town. Most roads were blocked, keeping out people like me (understandably), but these are my southern Indiana neighbors, and I just had to see for myself what the landscape now held. Damage and devastation could be seen on every small road, over every hill, treeline along ridge gone, people sifting aimlessly through homes. Individuals walking their properties like zombies. All lost in this heap of what was once their life. Awful."

Often, commenters would indicate a personal connection to the area even if they were no longer residents. Nearly a third of the cases analyzed (31.8 percent) contained posts by individuals in that category. Examples included comments such as "I drive up

IN60 all the time it still blows my mind that the tornado was that high over the hills.” and “I used to live in Indiana had my fair share of tornadoes. My thoughts and prayers are with them.”

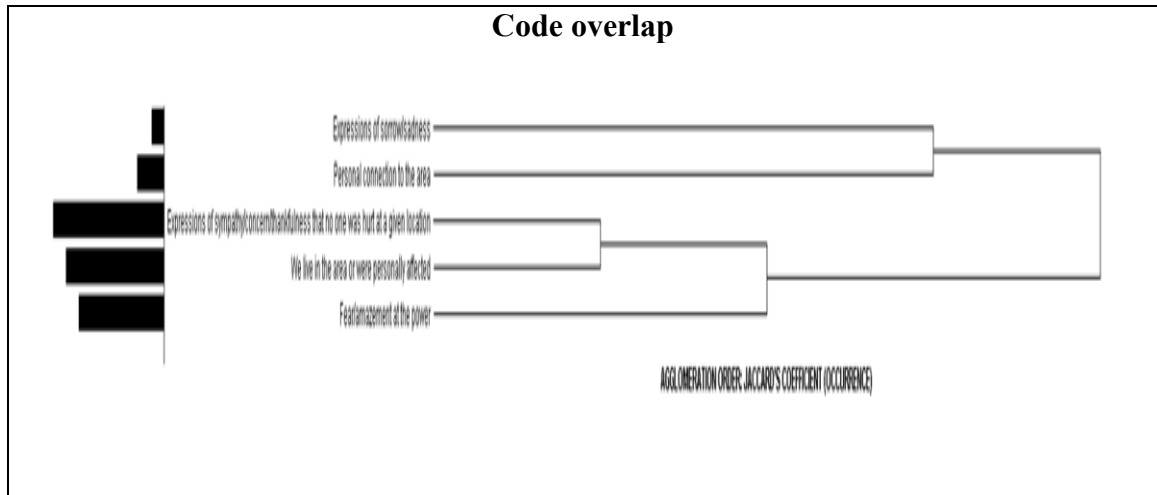
Comments indicating the poster had undergone a similar experience and shared the pain and grief of the residents of Henryville included statements such as “My best friend I've known my entire life, 24 y/o, was killed in the F-5 tornado that hit University of Alabama 2011. He was a fellow musician. I never dreamed I'd never get another chance to play music together again. As tribute to Blake, I've submitted a video for America's Got Talent 2012. Please see my video, it's only 3 minutes long, and any subscribers/viewers. God bless us, as He blessed all of us, through Blake.” and “Both of my parents died and my best friend died because of a tornado that happened in Kansas a couple years back.” Slightly less than a fourth of cases (25.8 percent included such comments.

Table 5

Frequency of communitas indicators					
Category	Code	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Affective or emotional responses	Expressions of solidarity	47	0.8%	12	14.1%
Affective or emotional responses	Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location	564	9.2%	40	47.1%
Other	Our community will recover	3	0.0%	2	2.4%
Personal connection	We live in the area or were personally affected	500	8.2%	44	51.8%
Personal connection	Personal connection to the area	138	2.3%	27	31.8%
Personal connection	Had a similar experience	75	1.2%	20	23.5%

RQ2: To what extent do commenters to videos related to the Henryville tornadoes express emotions related to the disaster, including expressions of emotional support for those affected?

The major emotional expression, using the code “Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location” was seen in almost half (47.1 percent) of the 85 cases. Comments falling under this category included statements such as “My heart goes out to those affected by the storms. I’ll be making donations to red cross to try and help.” and “I Only live 8 miles from Henryville, So sad these towns are wiped out. Have friends in them and so far all are alive, but much loss of property. They are saying it was 1/2 mile wide it went through numerous counties. Pray for these people in their time of need.” Often, expressions of emotions coincided with indicators that the commenter had a personal connection to the area.



Expressions of fear or amazement at the power of the tornadoes occurred in 43.5 percent of cases. Examples of those emotions included statements such as “OMG wow that must be scary to be those people that live near it!!!!!!” and “Damn! Was that an F3? Tornadoes that large are rare in Indiana.” as well as “JESUS CHRIST! That is a cataclysmic cyclone of death capable of displacing any physical matter in its path! Why would you ever want to live in their spawning ground?!” Expressions of sorrow and/or sadness occurred in 25.9 percent of the cases and included such comments as “so sad.. I’m lost for words. praying for all there.” and “It saddens me to see the effects Mother Nature has on Communities such as Henryville IN. To know someone from that specific area. My heart goes out to everyone there that has been hit by these gawd awful tornado's. My thoughts and prayers are with you.”

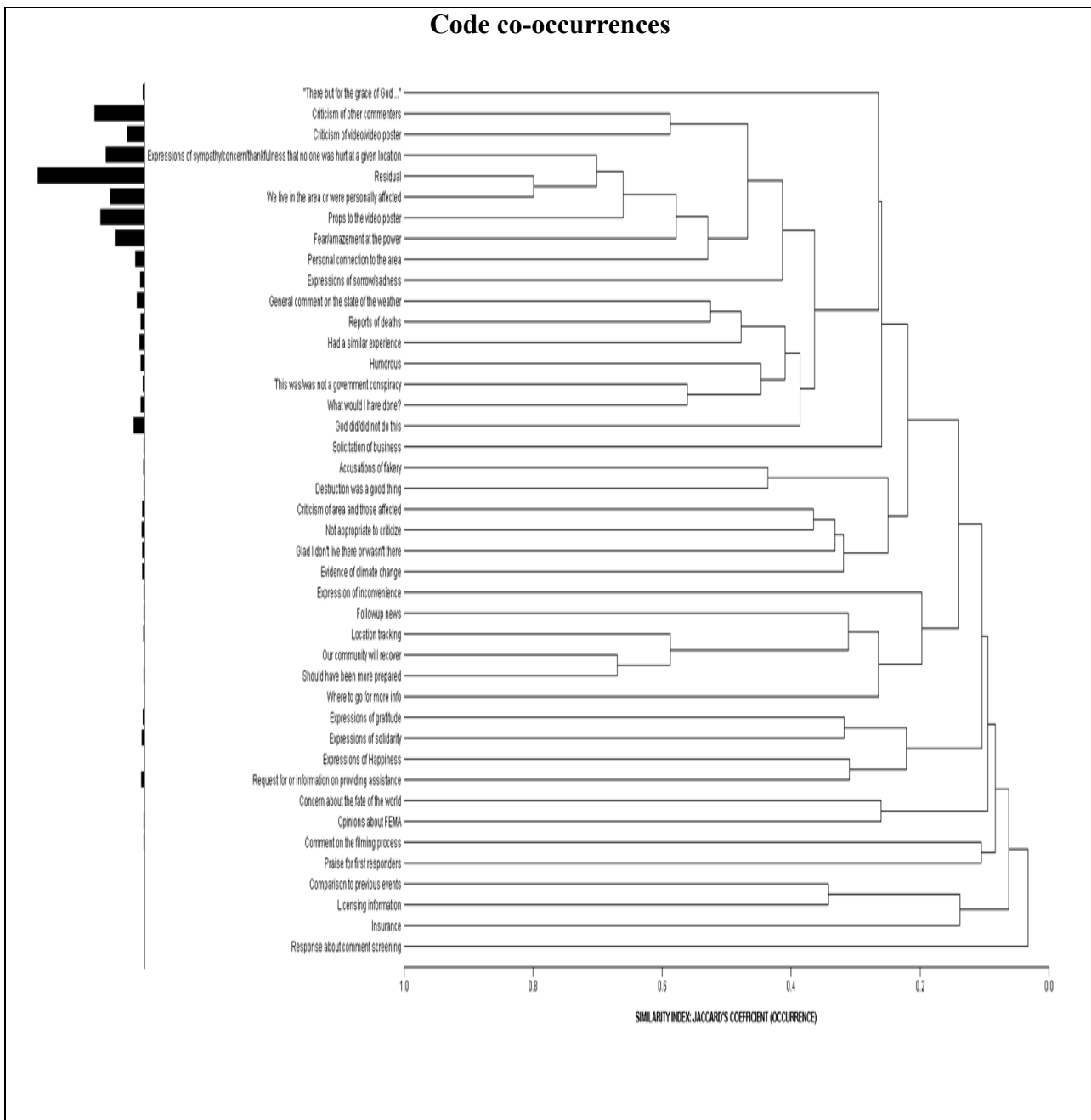
Table 6

Indicators of emotion					
Category	Code	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Affective or emotional responses	Expressions of sorrow/sadness	66	1.1%	22	25.9%
Affective or emotional responses	Fear/amazement at the power	434	7.1%	37	43.5%
Affective or emotional responses	Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location	564	9.2%	40	47.1%
Affective or emotional responses	Expression of inconvenience	14	0.2%	4	4.7%
Affective or emotional responses	Expressions of gratitude	33	0.5%	5	5.9%
Affective or emotional responses	Expressions of Happiness	5	0.1%	3	3.5%

RQ3: What codes tend to concur with a given case?

The dendrogram below gives an indication of what types of codes tended to occur in close proximity to other codes. In general, codes associated with emotion and those identified as indicators of *communitas* tended to be grouped with other *communitas* indicators. Of the six codes identified as indicators of *communitas*, all but “Expressions of solidarity” were grouped together. In addition, codes indicating criticism tended to be grouped with other criticism indicators. Two of the three codes indicating criticism were grouped together. Additionally, the main cluster of *communitas* codes and the main cluster of criticism codes were closely grouped as well.

Code co-occurrences



RQ4: Do the frequency of given codes differ by the type of video produced?

In nearly every instance codes involving some sort of emotional expression were attached to the “as it happened”-type videos; those taken by citizens with smartphone video cameras from the side of the road or out their back doors. Possible reasons for that may include the fact that these types of videos not only captured the power and immediacy of the storms, they often captured a commentary from the individuals doing the recording. Those commentaries were often in the form of expressions of fear and amazement as well as the occasional shouted instructions to those nearby. Although security camera footage also captured the power of the tornadoes they lacked the emotional content of the citizen-captured videos. Most of the videos in the professional category consisted of post-storm damage, and those that did include footage of the actual tornadoes lacked the emotional impact of the citizen recordings.

Table 7

Code occurrence by video type					
	1=citizen	2=professional	3=miscellaneous	F-test	P value
Expressions of solidarity	11	1		4.037	.021
Expressions of sympathy/concern/thankfulness that no one was hurt at a given location	28	7	5	3.475	.036
Criticism of other commenters	22	9	2	2.763	.069
Criticism of video/video poster	20	3	1	5.979	.004
Criticism of area and those affected	7	3		1.232	.297
Our community will recover	2			0.815	.446
We live in the area or were personally affected	32	7	5	6.251	.003
Personal connection to the area	21	6		6.058	.004
Had a similar experience	17	3		5.588	.005

DISCUSSION

I undertook this project as a critical case, to determine whether the type of *communitas* that can develop in the physical world in the wake of a disaster would also occur in the virtual world. YouTube often attracts negative comments, as evidenced by an ad for Cheerios cereal featuring an interracial couple that was released only on the video site. The ad attracted so many negative comments that cereal maker General Mills was prompted to disable the commenting function (Vincent Leary, 2013). Youtube is also a somewhat less social interaction focused form of social media. In other words, if indicators of *communitas* emerge in Youtube comments following a natural disaster, it seems likely that *communitas* indicators should occur in a broad variety of social media following a natural disaster. In my examination of YouTube videos indicators of *communitas* were apparent, making it seem likely that these indicators emerge in other forms of social media as well. Due to the number of videos posted and the size of the accompanying comment stream I was able to conduct a census of my subject material, eliminating the need for sampling.

In analyzing what types of comments tended to spawn or limit other types of comments attached to videos associated with the Henryville tornadoes, my analysis found that comments that served to indicate the emergence of *communitas* tended to inhibit comments that were critical of other commenters, the area affected or the videos themselves. The reverse was true as well, with comments expressing criticism tending to

inhibit comments associated with *communitas*. Whatever affect was the first to emerge in the comment stream tended to be maintained throughout that stream.

The emergence of *communitas* seemed to be clearly indicated in my analysis, with more than half of the comment streams containing posts indicating that the commenter lived in the area and more than a third indicating that the commenter had a personal connection to the area even if he or she no longer lived there. Nearly a fourth of cases studied contained comments indicating that the poster had undergone a similar experience.

Many commenters took the opportunity to express emotions about the event and those affected, with more than 47 percent expressing sympathy, concern or thankfulness that no one had been injured at a given location. More than 43 percent of cases included comments expressing fear or amazement at the power of the storms while 26 percent of cases included comments indicating sorrow or sadness that such an event had occurred.

The type of video posted appeared to have an effect on the types of emotions expressed. Videos that were shot by average citizens tended to garner more of both positive and negative expressions of emotions than did videos shot by professional news crews or footage obtained from security cameras, even if those videos show damage as great as the citizen videos.

An alternate theoretical possibility could be that our indicators are simply indicators of positive emotion, and could be interpreted as continuity of that emotion. In addition, in the data set given codes were more likely to be followed by codes in the same category indicating topic continuity within the comment streams, e.g. “I’m from the Henryville area” followed by “So am I.” At this time, it is unclear whether the specific

features of *communitas* inhibit the expression of negative emotion, or whether it is the broader features of emotional expression that do so.

The biggest limitation with this analysis was the inability to capture demographic information about the video poster and commenters. Although participants in YouTube have the ability to link to a Facebook profile that would include information such as age, gender and location, in most cases the poster has chosen not to do so. In addition, the fact that most people post using an anonymous profile likely affects the type of comments they post and the language they use. The conversation would possibly be much different if posters were required to use their real names.

The lack of an accurate time stamp accompanying the YouTube video comments also made it difficult to measure change in the indicators over time. Although comments made within a few hours of sampling do include an hour-by-hour time stamp, once a few weeks have passed the stamp changes to a “3 months ago” and “4 months ago” format with no clear indicator of how that passage of time is measured. Because I did not sample the comments until several months after the actual incident the limited amount of chronological information I was able to gather was of questionable accuracy and value. To overcome this limitation a future study would likely have to take a sample of comments within a few days of the actual incident being analyzed and continue adding to the comment sample as time progressed.

Because this was a relatively local phenomenon, the possibility that many of the participants in the comment streams may have known each other might have influenced the number of personal indicators seen. Future studies that look at more geographically dispersed cases may find a decreased level of personal connection in such comment

streams. Still, many of the posts receiving the “Personal connection to the area” code indicated that the commenter no longer lived in the area but had at some point in the past. In those cases it is unlikely the commenter has a prior relationship with other commenters.

As mentioned earlier, one of the uses of online discussion boards in the early days of the Internet was to foster therapeutic discussion. The author’s personal experience using online forums after being displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 demonstrated the effectiveness of online discussions as a way to solve problems and alleviate stress in the wake of that disaster (Slawsky, 2009). The implications of this study include the effect of social media as a therapeutic tool in the wake of a disaster, as well as its usefulness as a communication network for marshalling resources and supplementing recover efforts.

A future study might compare levels of post-traumatic stress disorder in those affected by disasters to the subjects’ use of social media to express feelings about the disaster. If higher use of social media to express emotions about a disaster correlates to a reduction in PTSD, it might be advantageous for mental health professionals to encourage social media use and even provide online access in shelters and similar facilities where those affected may communicate with others online.

Previous studies of communitas in the wake of a disaster have not made a distinction between natural disasters such as the Henryville tornadoes and man-made disasters such as the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. That difference may be a feature of a future study. Complicating that, though, may be the fact that some events such as Hurricane Katrina have components of both natural and man-made disasters. While the force of the hurricane certainly was a driver of the flooding in the days

following the storm, poor levee construction and coastal erosion as a result of shipping activity were viewed as contributing factors. I might expect that in such a situation indicators of communitas would be positively correlated with comments critical of those perceived to be responsible for the disaster.

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