

Heroes, Villains, and Blackouts: A Rhetorical Criticism of the News Media Narrative of the  
2021 Texas Power Crisis

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**Abstract**

The present study sought to determine what social reality news media broadcasts created for their audiences during the 2021 Texas power freeze. The study was conducted through a rhetorical criticism of applying symbolic convergence theory to four communication artifacts from news broadcasts from February 2021. The results of this study indicate three fantasy themes that contributed to the overall rhetorical vision, or social reality, for the audience of the crisis. First, Texas was portrayed as the fallen hero. Second, heroes were identified as active participants in the crisis who represented a large group of people, while villains were identified as passive. Third, there was always someone to blame. Finally, these three fantasy themes led to the rhetorical vision that when established organizations fail, it is up to the individual to take responsibility and step into hero-hood. Given its recency, more research should be done to determine the effects of this social reality on survivors of the crisis.

*Keywords:* Symbolic convergence theory, fantasy theme analysis, Texas power crisis, ERCOT, heroes, villains

## **Heroes, Villains, and Blackouts: A Rhetorical Criticism of the News Media Narrative of the Texas Power Crisis**

News media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century constantly spread information about the latest crises. With the increasing use of technology to receive and disseminate current events, audiences are consistently faced with information overload as they sort through the issues that are important to them. In early 2021, amid the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, Winter Storm Uri moved across the United States, bringing cold temperatures and icy conditions to even the southernmost states. While Texans struggled to maintain their daily routines in freezing temperatures, they were hit with state-wide blackouts and loss of water from frozen pipes. Consequently, news media broadcast the Texas power crisis to audiences nationwide, sharing information as the crisis developed from bad to worse. This rhetorical criticism seeks to determine what social reality news media broadcasts during the 2021 Texas power freeze created for their audiences.

### **About the Texas Power Crisis of 2021**

#### **Winter Storm Uri**

In mid-February 2021, a series of winter storms swept through the United States. Unofficially referred to as Winter Storm Uri, these storms stretched from Washington to Maine, dipping into the far south of Texas before heading north up the East Coast. The polar vortex brought cold air and storms across the country (National Weather Service, n.d.). Texas faced record low temperatures, with Dallas, Austin, Houston, and San Antonio reaching colder temperatures than Anchorage, Alaska (Spectrum News, 2021).

From February 11, 2021, to February 12, 2021, North and Central Texas experienced freezing rain that led to high ice accumulations throughout the region. Some portions of Central Texas reported half an inch of ice covering the ground (National Weather Service, n.d.). As

Winter Storm Uri swept through the state from February 13, 2021, to February 17, 2021, regions across Texas experienced sharp drops in temperature, ice, and snow. The Dallas/Fort Worth area reported 139 consecutive hours at or below freezing temperatures from February 13, 2021, to February 19, 2021, and Waco reported 205 consecutive hours at or below freezing from February 10, 2021, to February 19, 2021 (National Weather Service, n.d).

### **The Failure of the Texas Interconnection**

The Texas Interconnection is the power grid that provides electricity to most Texas households (Busby et al., 2021). It was unable to keep up with the power demands brought on by Winter Storm Uri, which led to widespread electric power losses. At its peak, more 10 million Texans did not have electricity (Busby et al., 2021). Additionally, nearly 15 million Texans were without water or under a boil water notice on February 20, 2021, days after the storm had ended (McNamara, 2021). Furthermore, the icy conditions led to empty grocery store shelves and left Texans facing mass food shortages across the state (Busby et al., 2021). Death toll estimates vary from more conservative reports of 246 deaths to more liberal estimates of 702 deaths due to the consequences of Winter Storm Uri and the power crisis (Svitek, 2022).

The Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) manages the flow of electricity in the Texas Interconnection, which supplies electric power to over 26 million Texans (ERCOT, n.d.). During Winter Storm Uri, the Texas Interconnection faced high electricity demands from consumers who were trying to stay warm in frigid temperatures. The electric power output slowed as the production companies tried to keep up with the high demands (Cai et al., 2022). However, the problem was aggravated by the structure of the Texas Interconnection and mismanagement from ERCOT. Natural gas and electricity production in Texas are codependent, meaning that natural gas production relies on electricity and electricity production relies on

natural gas. Furthermore, in the state of Texas, natural gas fuels 42% of power production while wind, coal, nuclear, and solar fuel sources provide significantly less energy towards electric power production (Cai et al., 2022). Therefore, a disruption in the natural gas and electricity loop would have a considerable effect on energy supply. During Winter Storm Uri, ERCOT ordered the utilities to reduce power demand (Cai et al., 2022). Although ERCOT intended to reduce further risk to the power grid, the results were disastrous. Natural gas producers were unable to send enough fuel to power plants and some wells could not operate in the cold conditions (Cai et al., 2022). Therefore, a tense situation with freezing temperatures, high power demands, and frozen equipment was aggravated by the natural gas/electricity loop and the management of ERCOT.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Culture of Crisis Preparedness**

Although the 2021 Texas blackout is a recent crisis, it is one of many natural disasters that rely on effective crisis preparedness communication. Castañeda et al. (2020) emphasized how understanding the culture of natural disaster preparedness among certain people groups allows for more effective crisis communication. Castañeda et al. (2020) surveyed over 1,500 adults from Iquique and Concepción, two coastal Chilean cities that are often affected by tsunamis and earthquakes. The results indicated that adults who experienced more natural disasters were more likely to be prepared for natural disasters than those who had not experienced as many. Furthermore, as more time passes between crises, the degree of natural disaster preparedness within a community decreases. Finally, Castañeda et al. (2020) discovered that there was no significant difference between men and women in their levels of preparedness.

Therefore, it is important for natural disaster preparedness to be implemented within the household, community, and workplace.

Medina (2016) studied how a culture of disaster preparedness would affect society. Medina (2016) describes a paradigm shift that would shift society's perspective from a reactive approach to a disaster risk management "all-hazards" approach. Furthermore, she details how an "all hazards" approach will better prepare society for natural disasters because there would be a greater emphasis on the prevention and preparedness stages of disaster risk management (Medina, 2016). In terms of this study, Medina's research highlights the importance of analyzing previous crisis response to better guide future natural disaster response.

### **Analysis of Communicating Crisis Information**

Robinson et al. (2019) focused their study on how crisis information is communicated among members of a community. Contemporary life is dense with communication media, such as social media, television, radio, phone call, text, video call, email, and more. Therefore, it is important for government organizations that communicate crisis information to understand how people most effectively receive and send information (Robinson et al., 2019). Robinson et al. (2019) investigated how tornado warnings were communicated to affected citizens. They discovered that although traditional communication media is still the most effective in sharing tornado warnings, cellular phones have also become important communication tools for the dissemination of crisis information. Furthermore, citizen to citizen information is the most trusted (Robinson et al., 2019). From this research, Robinson et al. (2019) concluded that effective crisis communication must balance sharing information across several platforms to reach the widest audience possible.

Furthering the conversation on the use of social media to disseminate crisis information, Imran et al. (2015) studied how social media platforms are used to communicate timely information to mass audiences affected by crises. Furthermore, Imran et al. (2015) studied how audiences can use social media to effectively search for information related to disaster situations. Although there are several disadvantages to receiving crisis information through social media, such as information overload, inaccuracy, and prioritization of messages, Imran et al. (2015) concluded that disseminating crisis information through social media has the potential to save lives, and therefore should be used by emergency management organizations.

### **Previous Studies of the 2021 Texas Power Crisis**

Previous studies of the 2021 Texas power crisis focus on identifying the blackout's causes and preventing a similar incident to occur again. Many scholars believe that the power freeze was the result of a market failure, the inability of Texas to properly winterize its power grid, or a failure of renewable energy sources (Smead, 2021). Prior to the freeze, the state's electricity grid was believed to be one of the most efficient in the country. However, the system is believed to have failed in February 2021 because Texas did not properly winterize the electricity and gas power grids. Severe cold weather led to a spike in power usage, which led to fuel shortages. Frozen equipment combined with low fuel and high demand resulted in blackouts throughout Texas. Furthermore, during the pre-crisis and crisis stages, there was little communication from state leaders about what to expect, how to prepare, and available resources (Busby et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the Texas power market is managed by the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT). The failure of the Texas power grid, which resulted in state-wide blackouts, hundreds of deaths, and billions of dollars in economic losses, is ERCOT's responsibility.



Therefore, ERCOT is blamed for failing to winterize its power grids, not relying on clean energy sources, and isolating from other power sources (Smead, 2021). However, the severity of Winter Storm Uri could not have been predicted. Although ERCOT is not entirely at fault, they are responsible for ensuring that a power freeze does not happen again (Smead, 2021).

To prevent a similar crisis from happening in the future, several researchers have detailed prevention plans based on data from the 2021 blackouts. Smead (2021) suggests a “spinning reserve” that would allow energy to be maintained off-grid until it is needed to supplement a lack of energy within the grid (para. 12). However, there are many factors within the producer/pipeline issues that would need to be addressed before a spinning reserve would be feasible (Smead, 2021). Finally, Smead (2021) concludes his proposed solutions by alluding to a potential mechanism that would ensure that ERCOT’s generators are more secure for all types of weather.

### **Symbolic Convergence Theory in Crisis Communication**

Symbolic convergence theory has previously been used to analyze crisis communication artifacts. Perreault and Perreault (2019) analyzed how symbolic convergence theory was used in reputation management of 2015 Duggar family scandal. The study focused on how a fantasy theme analysis of several social media artifacts revealed the shared rhetorical vision of the event and how it changed during the phases of crisis communication (Perreault & Perreault, 2019). The study identified the setting, antagonists, and protagonists that contributed to the fantasy themes present during the scandal, concluding that the intended rhetorical vision was that the Duggars are a devout and faithful religious family, despite the actions of Josh Duggar (Perreault et al., 2019).

Similarly, symbolic convergence theory has been used to analyze content within the climate crisis campaign. Pramana et al. (2021) focused on the fantasy themes present in the Greenpeace Indonesia campaign on Instagram. Through their research, Pramana et al. (2021) identified three primary fantasy themes and the protagonists, antagonists, setting, and plot in each image. Finally, the research indicated that each fantasy theme chained out to provide education about climate change and support grassroots climate advocacy among its audience (Pramana et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Bell (2012) analyzed the national media coverage of the tornadoes that swept through Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in April 2011. The study conducted a fantasy theme analysis of several communication artifacts that constructed a rhetorical vision of hope and survival (Bell, 2012). Bell (2012) found that the fantasy themes created a rhetorical community that united the people of Tuscaloosa in their state of crisis. Overall, these literatures indicate that the fantasy themes and rhetorical visions that are created through symbolic convergence theory help unify the community in crisis. Furthermore, they indicate that symbolic convergence theory can be a powerful tool in crisis communication, reputation management, and creating unity through shared meaning making.

### **Rhetorical Theory Review**

Symbolic convergence theory is a general communication theory that relates to small group communication. It attempts to describe how a community of people share a group consciousness and group cohesiveness through shared meaning-making (Bormann, 1985). It defines group consciousness through the emotions, motives, meanings, and realities that group members share with each other. Symbolic convergence theory's central belief is that group

members cooperatively create and sustain a shared reality through their interactions with each other (Bormann, 1985).

Bormann (2001) defines a fantasy as “the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need” (p. 5). A fantasy develops into a fantasy chain when group members interact with one another and perpetuate the fantasy. The fantasy theme develops in response to the intended rhetorical vision (Bormann, 2001). The rhetorical vision is the fantasy chain that has effectively chained out into a completed dramatized message. It unifies the group within a shared social reality (Bormann, 2001). Finally, members of the group united by the rhetorical vision have a symbolic cue that calls the group back into the fantasy (Bormann, 2001).

### **Methodology**

The crisis communication strategies of the 2021 Texas power crisis were examined through the symbolic convergence theory’s fantasy theme analysis.

### **Artifacts**

When applied to the Texas power freeze, the symbolic convergence theory explains the audience’s response to four specific communication artifacts. The four communication artifacts are Church et al.’s February 18, 2021, news report on Atlanta’s CNN Newsroom, King et al.’s February 17, 2021, news report on Atlanta’s CNN Newsroom, Mulder’s February 14, 2021, news report for Chicago’s TCA Regional News, and Harlow et al.’s February 19, 2021, news report for Erin Burnett OutFront.

### **Fantasy Theme Analysis**

A fantasy theme analysis is a method of rhetorical criticism that stems from symbolic convergence theory. Bormann claims that fantasy themes are used by groups to make meaning of

the world around them (Kidd, 1998). Furthermore, a rhetor rarely uses just one fantasy theme. Rhetors normally use several fantasy themes that all contribute to the same rhetorical vision in order to catch up as much of their audience into the shared reality as possible. To understand the meanings and messages that each group holds true, a rhetorical critic must first analyze the elements of each fantasy theme that create a story for the audience to be caught up in. The three primary elements of a fantasy theme are the characters, settings, and actions (Kidd, 1998).

### *Character*

Oftentimes, a fantasy theme revolves around several characters that the audience can easily identify and fit within their shared reality. First, there is a central character, called the protagonist, that the audience is led to root for (Kidd, 1998). The protagonist works towards a goal that the audience can identify with. Next, the protagonist faces opposition from the antagonist, although this opposition is not always inherently bad (Kidd, 1998). Finally, there are supporting characters that help bring the audience into the story and encourage the plot. Wise elders, an admiring crowd, friends of the protagonist and antagonist, and victims in need of assistance are all supporting characters in a fantasy theme (Kidd, 1998).

### *Setting*

The setting of a fantasy theme affects how it is able to catch up its audience in a shared reality. Some settings do not affect the fantasy theme while others are extremely symbolic and necessary for the fantasy theme to succeed (Kidd, 1998).

### *Action*

The action of a fantasy theme does not just refer to what the characters do, but also what beliefs they hold and what values are implied (Kidd, 1998).

## Procedure

In this study, a fantasy theme analysis was conducted to research each communication artifact. First, the protagonists, antagonists, supporting characters, setting, and action were identified in each communication artifact. Then, each artifact was examined to identify the fantasy themes that contribute to the rhetorical vision of the whole. Next, the artifacts were analyzed to determine the rhetorical vision. Finally, conclusions were drawn to determine how each news report used symbolic convergence theory to create a social reality that communicated crisis preparedness information to their audience.

## Results

### Fantasy Theme One: Texas is the Tragic Hero

During the media's reporting of the Texas power crisis, Texas is portrayed as the noble, tragic hero who needs saving. In his book *Poetics*, Aristotle (ca 350 B.C.E./n.d.) describes how a tragic hero should evoke pity and fear from the audience. Furthermore, the tragic hero's story must turn from good to bad, the catalyst being a flaw in the character of the tragic hero. Aristotle (ca 350 B.C.E./n.d.) writes:

The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad.

It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a

character either such as we have described, or better rather than worse. (para. 49)

Furthermore, tragic heroes are morally grounded and have good qualities. However, in Greek tragedies, it is these admirable qualities that become the flaws that lead to the tragic fall of the hero (Aristotle, ca 350 B.C.E./n.d.).

Likewise, each communication artifact identified Texas as the tragic hero through a 'fatal' flaw and a fall arc. Daniel Cohan, Associate Professor of Civil and Environmental

Engineering at Rice University, spoke with Brianna Keilar, CNN reporter, on February 17<sup>th</sup> about the progression of the Texas power crisis. Cohan (2021) said:

But we are seeing how vulnerable our national gas and our electricity systems are to each other when we are so reliant on natural gas for supplying both our electricity and our heat...so what we're seeing is not just a failure of individual components or individual natural gas power plants, but a failure of the overall systems to supply an adequate and properly pressurized stream so that power plants can use it for electricity, and an inadequate diversification to have other sources of power as well. (paras. 6-10)

Through this excerpt, Cohan is addressing the fatal flaw of Texas: the independency of the Texas Interconnection with the power systems of the rest of the United States. The Texas Interconnection's reliance on natural gas for supplying its electricity and heat, although successful in average weather conditions, has revealed itself as the state's 'fatal' flaw in extreme weather.

This narrative of Texas as the tragic hero and the independency of the Texas Interconnection as its 'fatal' flaw chained out as the power crisis continued. CNN reporter Rosemary Church (2021), in the February 18<sup>th</sup> broadcast, identifies Texas as the energy capital of the United States (para. 49). In the same report, CNN reporter John Deferios and CEO of Occidental Petroleum Vicki Hollub refer to Texas as the energy capital of the United States and the country's largest producer of oil and gas (para. 50). In this broadcast, the independence of the Texas Interconnection is further perpetrated as the flaw that led to the tragic fall of Texas. However, Texas' identity as the tragic hero is amplified through the state's previous reign as the energy capital of the United States. Similar to Ancient Greek tragedies, it is a highly admirable quality of the hero that has ultimately led to its downfall.

Furthermore, reporter Poppy Harlow continues to chain out the fantasy theme of Texas as the tragic hero during a February 19<sup>th</sup> CNN broadcast with Senior Political Analyst John Avlon. Avlon (2021) says:

Texas is in trouble and people are suffering. I mean, the interviews that Omar did shows you how personal this is. This is rattling people to their core. It feels like a failed state.

They're not getting water. They're burning furniture just to stay warm. And this is one of America's greatest states, the so-called energy backbone of the country and that backbone is broken and there's a lot of reckoning to be had. (paras. 47-48)

The language used in this excerpt, such as “suffering,” “rattling,” “failed state,” and “so-called” continue to chain out this fantasy theme of Texas as the tragic hero (paras. 47-48). It describes the fall arc that Texas has taken from the energy backbone of the United States to a state in dire need of electricity, heat, and running water. Similar to Aristotle's description of the tragic hero, Texas' fortune has moved from good to bad, catalyzed by the flaw of the independence of the Texas Interconnection.

### **Fantasy Theme Two: Heroes Are Active Representatives of a Larger Group of People, While Villains Are Passive**

Furthermore, the news media's reporting of the Texas Power Crisis creates the fantasy that heroes are actively working to correct the problem while villains are passively avoiding action to correct the problem. On February 18<sup>th</sup>, Church spoke with Yasmine Smith, Director of Justice and Advocacy for the Austin Area Urban League. When asked about her opinion on the Governor Abbott's responsibility for the power crisis, Smith (2021) responded:

This is not the time to be pointing fingers. This is the time to be looking at what you have around you, and making sure your neighbors are okay. And it would be a disappointing

failure if we, as Texas, did not grow and learn from this experience. So, it should not happen again in the future. (para. 36)

Then, Smith was asked about her primary concerns for the next several days. Smith (2021) responded:

I am worried, especially about our unhoused neighbors who, for some reason, could not get into some type of shelter, having gone back to those encampments. I am worried about families in their homes right now, under twenty degrees, running out of food. I am worried about how the city I love and is my hometown that I love so much, Austin, is going to survive and weather the storm if we do not get some serious relief. (para. 38)

Through this interview, Church is chaining out the fantasy that heroes are actively working to fix the power crisis and represent a larger group of people than just themselves. Instead of shifting blame, Smith focused on the importance of caring for one another and checking in on neighbors. She calls attention to values that are greater than the loss of power, such as community, kindness, gratitude, and growth. Furthermore, this fantasy theme chains out through Smith's representation of the people she works with at the Austin Area Urban League. She emphasizes her worry for Texans who do not have housing, power, food, or water, and in doing so, Smith identifies herself with the citizens of Austin, Texas. Although she is the director of an organization and is being interviewed on the news, she is just as much of a Texan as everyone else going through the power crisis. By establishing Austin as the city she loves and her hometown, Smith begins to represent the citizens of Austin, Texas, as a whole.

Moreover, the news media established the survivors of the power crisis as heroes doing whatever they could to survive. In the February 19<sup>th</sup> broadcast, Jenn Studebaker, resident of Austin, Texas (2021), said:



I lost half my income and then finally we're getting here. What am I going to do? I mean, we can barely live here. I'm sorry. It's like you just keep going and going and just this whole year is just keep going. And if we just make it one more month, then my tax return will come in or we get some funding. I can't pay my utility, so just let us have the tiny apartment, it's all I'm asking and maybe some water would be nice. (para. 26)

Through this interview, Harlow is continuing the chain out the fantasy that heroes are active representatives of a larger group of people. Studebaker is established as a normal person that all of Texas can identify with. She is representing the entirety of Texas to the rest of the country as someone who is barely getting by and in dire need of assistance. In this narrative, Studebaker is a hero because she is just trying to survive, to make it through the circumstances that she had no control over yet now finds herself in. However, she does not just represent herself, but entire communities, towns, counties, and even the state.

Additionally, the partisanship of this fantasy is clearly demonstrated through Harlow's interview with the mayor of Austin, Texas, Steve Adler. Adler is portrayed as a hero who represents his constituents and advocates for them. Adler (2021) says:

The part of my city that has water is being asked to boil it at this point. This is a community of people that are scared and upset and angry. Eventually we're going to need some better answers to why we're here are how we prevent it from ever happening again. But for right now, we're just trying to get water to our neighbors. (para. 32)

Adler's use of the plural pronouns "we," "we're," and "our" demonstrate how he is portraying himself as a member of the Austin, Texas, community. Instead of being the mayor at a high power distance from his constituents, Adler (2021) is ingraining himself as a member of the community who is "scared and upset and angry," just like his constituents (para. 32). Adler's

portrayal as a hero is evident from his identification with the Austin, Texas, community and active advocacy for the well-being of his constituents.

Conversely, Adler's role as an active hero is amplified when Harlow addresses Senator Ted Cruz's passivity during the power crisis. Through her diction, Harlow identifies Cruz as a villain due to his seeming lack of interest in advocating for his constituents. Harlow (2021) says, "[Cruz] just went on vacation in Cancun this week. It appears he only came back when he got caught" (para. 40). Here, Harlow introduces this idea that the villains of the power crisis are those who are able yet unwilling to do anything to support their suffering neighbors. She identifies Cruz as one of these villains, due to his vacation in Cancun during the crisis. When contrasted with the responsibility Adler feels for his constituents, it is apparent that Harlow is contributing to the fantasy theme of active heroes and passive villains.

Finally, the identification of Adler as a hero and Cruz as a villain is cemented near the end of Harlow's February 19<sup>th</sup> broadcast. Avlon (2021) says:

People are dunking on Ted Cruz because he's sort of an Ivy League populist who is now complaining about vitriol on Twitter when that's what he tends to traffic in and there's not a lot of goodwill towards Ted Cruz among his colleagues in the Senate. But you say you don't have control of the energy grid as a senator, you're right. What you can do it be there for your neighbors and your constituents, and raise money, and raise awareness and roll up your sleeves. You don't retreat to a vacation because it's uncomfortable. Everyone else is suffering. It's your job to be a leader and to help solve the problem by your example, if you can't do anything else. (paras. 61-62)

In this passage, Cruz is condemned for his passivity during the power freeze and seemingly escaping the crisis by going on vacation. Conversely, Adler, Smith, Beto O'Rourke, and

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are all praised for their leadership, advocacy, and support for Texans (Harlow et al., 2021). This fantasy theme chains out into a divisive separation between active heroes, who are willing to take action in the face of crisis, and passive villains.

### **Fantasy Theme Three: There is Always Someone to Blame**

Additionally, the news media's narrative participated in blame shift as the crisis progressed, chaining out the fantasy theme that there is always someone to blame. From the start of the crisis, when the nation was just realizing the gravity of the lack of power in Texas, the colder temperatures and poor weather were the antagonists. Conversely, ERCOT was the protagonist. A February 14<sup>th</sup> broadcast for Chicago's TCA Regional News, Mudler (2021) reports:

Texas electric grid operators are eyeing emergency response measures as increasingly colder temperatures force residents to place a greater demand on the state's electricity grid. The most extreme measure the Electric Reliability Council of Texas could take is calling for rotating blackouts across the state, wherein local electric providers would be asked to shave down energy usage by certain amounts. (paras. 1-2)

In this section, Mulder (2021) is establishing the weather as the antagonist, where the cold temperatures take the blame for the stress on the Texas Interconnection. Similarly, ERCOT is perceived as the protagonist because Texans trust that any action ERCOT takes will prevent the situation from becoming worse. However, this identification as ERCOT as the protagonist quickly shifts to antagonism several days later, as the crisis intensified and millions of Texans lost power.

During an interview with Cohan in her February 17<sup>th</sup> broadcast, Keilar (2021) describes the danger that Texans are in and establishes blame, saying:

Right now, nearly 70% of Texas is under some sort of winter weather alert with more than 3 million customers currently without power as extreme cold continues to grip the state. And today, there's a new issue emerging, water restrictions because of frozen pipes. In Galveston, stage 5 water restrictions in place this morning after a major water line broke from the lack of power. Everyone is looking for someone to blame here. So far the major fall guy is the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, known as ERCOT, and an independent organization that operates the state's power grid. (paras. 1-2)

Clearly, there is major tone shift in this report from previous days. Previously, ERCOT was perceived as the savior whose infallible judgement would protect Texans from the extreme cold and power crisis. Within three days, ERCOT's position changed to that of the antagonist, who is now to blame for the lack of power, frozen pipes, and water restrictions. Cohan (2021) continues to press the blame onto ERCOT, but also acknowledges the things ERCOT did correctly:

This is a totally unacceptable crisis for millions of people to be out of power, out of heat, for water systems to be going down now, and a deadly situation for people to be so cold in their homes. And so ERCOT shares a big part of the blame for that. They do planning each season. They got a lot of aspects of this season right. They weren't that far off on how much demand would be. They got a number of aspects correct. But I think what they didn't prepare for was the systemic failure that could happen when the natural gas systems that so many power plants rely on struggles as much as it is today. (paras. 12-13)

This interview furthers the narrative that ERCOT is to blame for the power crisis and that responsibility falls on them. However, it also addresses that ERCOT is not totally at fault. Despite Texas' reliance on ERCOT for managing the power supply, there were several things that ERCOT did right. Due to the unpredictable nature of the weather, Cohan establishes that

ERCOT would never have been able to handle the situation perfectly. However, giving ERCOT the benefit of the doubt quickly faded as the crisis worsened.

On February 18<sup>th</sup>, CNN correspondent Ed Lavandera shifted complete blame to ERCOT. Lavandera (2021) reported:

The bitter cold has now turned to heated anger after the catastrophic failure of the state's power grid. Texas Governor Greg Abbott made the rounds on the Texas television news programs to say it's a total failure of the organization known as ERCOT, which runs nearly all of the state's power grid. He's called for an investigation and for executives to resign. Most of Texas runs on its own power grid separate from the rest of the country. State leaders designed it this way to avoid federal regulation. ERCOT officials insist the decision to take power away for millions of homes using controlled outages spared the entire state from a systemwide failure that could've taken months to repair, and left even more people freezing. (paras. 10-12)

Not only has the entire blame shifted to ERCOT, but the methods that ERCOT previously enacted to prevent the situation from getting worse, are now ridiculed. Furthermore, these broadcasts chain out the fantasy theme that there is always somebody to blame. Despite the unpredictable nature of weather and the components that ERCOT was able to successfully implement, ERCOT still carried the blame because Texas' power is their responsibility. No matter the situation, the news surrounding the power crisis perpetuated the fantasy that there is always someone to blame when things go wrong.

### **Conclusions of Study**

A fantasy theme criticism of the news media narrative surrounding the 2021 Texas power crisis answers the question: what social reality did news media broadcasts during the 2021 Texas

power freeze create for their audiences? During the crisis, four news broadcasts chained out three fantasy themes that contributed to the crisis' rhetorical vision. First, the news portrayed Texas as the fallen hero. Like ancient Greek tragedies, Texas is the fallen hero whose story changes from good to bad, catalyzed by a flaw of the hero that was once one of its admirable and noble characteristics. Texas' independent power system, once a hallmark of Texan independence, became the reason for millions of Texans to go without power or water in extreme cold temperatures for days.

Second, the news media identified heroes as active representatives of a larger group of people, while villains as passive. This fantasy theme manifested in Yasmine Smith, Director of Austin Area Urban League; Jenn Studebaker, resident of Austin, Texas; and Steve Adler, mayor of Austin, Texas. Each of these three heroes were praised for their resilience, identified by their active role in helping the affected communities, and represented a group of people or cause larger than themselves. Conversely, Senator Ted Cruz was identified as a villain because of his vacation to Mexico, passivity in the face of crisis, and representation of the entire Republican party.

Third, the news media participated in blame shift and chained out the fantasy theme that there is always someone to blame. While the cold weather was originally the culprit, within a few days all blame was placed on the shoulders of ERCOT, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas. The measures that ERCOT had enacted to attempt to prevent state-wide blackouts became one of the primary grievances in the public's perception that ERCOT was not doing its job. Scapegoating ERCOT allowed the news media to point fingers at the same organization and establish the blame narrative.

Finally, each of these fantasy themes contributed to the rhetorical vision of the crisis. Through portraying Texas as the fallen hero, establishing active heroes and passive villains, and placing blame, the news media established the social reality of believing that when established organizations fail, it is up to the individual to take responsibility and step into hero-hood.

### **Contributions**

This study contributes to the field of communications through its fantasy theme analysis and choice of artifacts. First, this study demonstrates the relevancy of symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis. By applying symbolic convergence theory to news media, this study expands the scope of communication artifacts used for rhetorical criticism with symbolic convergence theory. Furthermore, this study contributes to the pool of research on the influence and communication of news media. It expands this field of study to include the influence of symbolic convergence theory on the audiences of news media, thereby evaluating the effectiveness of fantasy themes and rhetorical visions when incorporated into mass media.

Additionally, this study capitalizes on the recency of the Texas power crisis. It contributes to the pool of research on the Texas power crisis, which has not yet been extensively researched. This study's use of rhetorical criticism as a means of studying the Texas power crisis expands the field of communication research. Furthermore, this study expanded the scope of communication artifacts used in relation to symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis, as each artifact focused on news media broadcasts of the Texas power crisis.

### **Limitations and Areas of Future Research**

There were several limitations to this study. First, this study was limited by the recency of the power crisis. Since the crisis occurred approximately one year before the topic area was chosen for this study, there was not much previous research on the Texas power crisis.

Therefore, it was difficult to identify and specify the direction that this research should go, as the field was widely open. There were not benchmarks the researcher could follow to shape her research. Conversely, future research could use this study as a starting point, upon which they could expand the rhetorical criticism using symbolic convergence theory.

Furthermore, this study was limited in its scope. Although the four communication artifacts employed in this study were effectively studied to answer the research question, they could not give a nationwide generalization of the news media messaging of the Texas power crisis. Therefore, future research could use more than four news broadcasts to determine nationwide fantasy themes and rhetorical vision. Additionally, the scope of this study could increase if future research used other theories in its rhetorical criticism of the artifacts. This change would allow results to be more widely generalized to all news media during this time, in addition to conclusions that would more accurately affect the perceptions of Texans during the crisis.

Finally, this study was limited in potential artifact bias. Three of the four communication artifacts used in this study were released by the same news organization. The artifacts could have been framed to promote specific aspects of the crisis and downplay other aspects of the crisis. This possible source bias could have affected the identified the fantasy themes and led to a rhetorical vision that is different than a general nationwide rhetorical vision. Furthermore, viewers who consume communication information from the same channels or news organizations might have a predisposition to believe the social reality communicated by the identified fantasy themes and rhetorical vision than viewers who commonly consume news media from other channels or news organizations. Similarly, the political ideologies of the news organization responsible for the communication artifacts in this study could have influenced how



the crisis was framed and the social reality created for the viewers. Therefore, future research should seek to reduce potential source bias. Future research could use a balanced number of artifacts produced by different news organizations. Future research could also study communication artifacts produced by just one news organization. This change would allow future researchers to analyze the generalizability of the fantasy themes and rhetorical vision identified in this research, in addition to determining if the political ideologies or biases of the communication artifacts will affect the fantasy themes, rhetorical vision, and social reality created by the news media during the 2021 Texas power crisis.

### **Conclusion**

This research sought to determine what social reality news media broadcasts during the 2021 Texas power crisis created for their audiences. Ultimately, this rhetorical criticism determined that the news media surrounding the 2021 Texas power crisis chained out three fantasy themes to contribute to the audience's social reality. First, that Texas is the fallen hero. Second, that heroes are active representatives of a larger group of people, while villains are passive. Third, that there is always someone to blame. Consequently, these three fantasy themes contributed to the social reality of the crisis that millions of people shared. These findings are valuable to the field of communication research because they address the rhetoric of crisis communication and help determine how the news media attempts to portray crises to their audiences. Overall, this study suggests that the news media's narrative of the 2021 Texas power crisis chained out three fantasy themes to build a social reality for their audiences, believing that when established organizations fail, it is up to the individual to take responsibility and step into hero-hood.

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