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ABSTRACT:

**Reflecting or Directing Perceptions?
Fox Media's responses to disasters in tourism
destinations**

Sue Beeton, PhD
La Trobe University
Victoria, Australia 3068

s.beeton@latrobe.edu.au

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

Disasters at tourism destinations often receive extensive reporting in the news media, particularly when one or more of their own nationals are affected. From terrorism to natural disasters, the stories of tourists and, more recently, their local hosts, are fodder for Western news services. As major tourism generating regions, the effect of such reports on travelers from Western societies has a significant impact on tourism in many destinations. While the scope of the influence of the media on tourism visitation is a contested issue, it is generally accepted that the so-called "news" media has significant influence, not only on individual visitors but also on the vexed issue of government sponsored travel warnings.

Disasters fall into numerous categories, from internally controllable accidents and incidents to external political terrorist activities and natural disasters. Examples include adventure related accidents such as in mountain climbing (Mount Tasman, New Zealand) or canyoning (Interlaken, Sweden), passive accidents such as infrastructure collapse (Cave Creek, New Zealand), negligent incidents such as losing tourists (diving on the Great Barrier Reef, Australia), violent crime (the 'backpacker murders', Australia), disease (foot and mouth disease, UK, SARS or bird 'flu, Asia), terrorism (World Trade Centre', New York or bombings in Bali), or natural disasters (tsunami in Asia or hurricanes in Florida).

This paper examines the reporting of a range of disasters by one of the most pervasive media organisations, Fox News. It is postulated that reports of recent natural disasters such as the Asian tsunami and the Florida hurricanes as well as the 2001 terrorist attacks

in New York have begun to focus more on encouraging visitors to return rather than discouraging visitation, as had been the case during much of the 20th Century.

Method

Fox News was selected as an appropriate organisation for this study of media reporting and influence due to its wide spread around the world via the Internet and cable television. In addition, Fox News is acknowledged (and criticized) as exerting a strong influence in the Western world, particularly in the United States.

Archival stories of Fox News were searched for references to disasters and accidents and if there was any reference to tourism. A content analysis of the organisation's disaster reporting was undertaken in order to tease out themes and issues as well as trace any thematic changes over time.

Results

There is evidence of a shift in how disasters, accidents and incidents at tourist destinations are reported in the news media. There is also evidence that Fox News is extremely selective as to which events are reported and the extent and nature of the reporting.

Conclusion and Future Research

This exploratory study raises questions that require further investigation, particularly in terms of whether the nature of the report is driven by the type of incident (and degree of preventable 'fault') or whether Fox News is reflecting a change in community awareness

of the importance of tourism, both socially and economically. Or are they just looking for more stories due to the changes in news reporting and international communications, where independent sources such as the Internet and digital technology via mobile phones and cameras can often pre-empt traditional media? In addition, we need to improve our understanding on the level of influence of the media on potential visitors' propensity to travel, and in particular which groups are most influenced by such media.

Such questions require ongoing research and consideration, and the author calls for closer scrutiny of the popular news media and its influence on tourism around the world.