The Media and Hurricanes
Katrina and Rita

Lost and Found

Judith Sylvester
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Katrina and Rita
Judith Sylvester’s Publications

Books


Articles


The Media and Hurricanes
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Lost and Found

Judith Sylvester
To the journalists of Katrina and Rita.
May their outrage and their courage continue to see us through.
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And, to my colleague at the Manship School of Mass Communication and to all the LSU students who stepped up and pitched in when Katrina and Rita came. You're the best!

My gratitude to Manship School student Amy Wilson for indexing assistance.
Sunday, August 28, 2005, was a rare day in southern Louisiana. The sky overhead was a clear, intense blue. A light breeze had driven out the ever-present humidity. In one Baptist church, the sermon was coincidentally about Noah’s faith as he built an ark.

The only obvious signs that this was not a typical Sunday were the hand-scrawled notices in the windows of newly opened shops in an upscale and still-under-construction shopping center (“We are closing early for Hurricane Katrina”) and the steady and slow-moving lines of traffic contra-flowing out of New Orleans, Louisiana, through Baton Rouge, the state’s capital, to points east and north.

Those residents who had not evacuated or were at a “safe” distance from the coast went to bed that night knowing that Katrina, a Category 5 hurricane, was heading straight for the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts. Everyone knew this could be the Big One that had been predicted from many sources, including the New Orleans Times-Picayune, in recent months. Still, no one truly imagined what was about to happen to New Orleans, or Biloxi, Mississippi, or all the coastal communities in between.

Hurricanes are a part of living in coastal areas. They can and do strike the Eastern seaboard and the Gulf Coast with frightening regularity between June 1 and November 30 each year. They leave billions of dollars in damage in their wake.

Max Mayfield, who was director of the National Hurricane Center (NHC) during the extremely active 2005 season, said the first advisory for Katrina as a tropical depression was issued on August 23 while it was centered over the central Bahamas. The system strengthened to a tropical storm over the northwest Bahamas on August 24. “We were obviously concerned even before it made landfall in southeast Florida as a Category 1 hurricane. We became especially concerned for New Orleans on Friday afternoon. The 4 p.m. CDT advisory package shifted the track from the Florida Panhandle toward Mississippi and southeastern Louisiana.
Anytime there is a major hurricane headed toward the coast, there is an obvious concern.”

The media are intimately involved with hurricane preparedness, funneling warnings from NHC and the National Weather Service to millions of people when a hurricane threatens. They provide tracking, evacuation and shelter information. Hurricane Katrina, however, added many new dimensions to media coverage. Journalists across Louisiana and Mississippi continue to deal with Katrina’s legacy every day. Some estimates from economists, sociologists and politicians predict that full recovery and restoration of New Orleans and Louisiana will take as long as thirty years. Others say that the United States was changed forever. We are still too close to the event of Katrina to be able to see the impact of dispersing millions of people across the country. We don’t know yet how much culture has been lost. We don’t know yet the impact on resources, especially oil, gas and seafood. We don’t know yet the total impact on the media.

Katrina was the largest natural disaster to hit the United States. One of the costliest and deadliest hurricanes in history, it was the sixth-strongest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded and the third-strongest hurricane on record that made landfall in the United States. As of July 2007, the death toll stood at 1,624, with an additional 123 still missing. Ivor Van Heerden, director of the Louisiana State University (LSU) Director Center for the Study of Public Health Impacts of Hurricanes, said half of those deaths were due to the hurricane and half were due to an inadequate response in New Orleans. He also said that there are still bodies in the rubble of houses not fully demolished or cleared and in the coastal marshes. Damage estimates have run as high as $81.2 billion.

We know some of the economic damage the combined hurricanes caused. We are still gauging the physical and emotional toll Katrina and Rita had on Gulf Coast residents, many of whom still struggle with debilitating illnesses and depression. We know that half of the New Orleans population has not returned and that the influx of Hispanic workers has shifted the racial balance in the city. We know that Baton Rouge has been booming and, as one television station boasts in its self-promotional ads, is “poised to become the South’s next great city.” We also know that the political balance in the state has shifted (many of the displaced persons voted Democratic), but whether the state’s leading politicians will bring Louisiana into a new golden era with an improved educational and health care system or whether opportunities will be squandered remains to be seen.

We also don’t know yet the long-term impact on the country’s media, especially state and local media in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas. We do know that large media companies had to absorb the cost of damaged and
destroyed equipment and buildings. NBC and CNN added bureaus in New Orleans, while most other major news media have rented houses and kept hotel rooms for their staff members who rotate in and out. This disaster certainly boosted new media: online news products, text messaging, podcasts and satellite communication systems. But, clearly, traditional communication systems still have obstacles to overcome before they function efficiently in the face of disasters.

Katrina created some unusual media partnerships. Radio, television and newspapers in the most affected areas relied on sister outlets to keep information flowing into the region. That sometimes took the form of sharing studio and printing spaces. Journalists from other company media were brought in to assist local journalists who were overwhelmed and often facing the loss of their own homes and family members. The LSU Manship School of Mass Communication also served as shelter from the storm and highlighted the importance of partnerships between professional media and academia.

LSU had finished just one week of classes in the fall term before Katrina hit. The campus was transformed into a major medical center for critically ill patients from nursing homes and hospitals in the New Orleans area. A large animal-rescue center was set up in Parker Coliseum on campus. Journalists were given shelter and facilities on campus.

Virtually every college and university in New Orleans was closed, and most had sustained moderate-to-severe damage of campus buildings and grounds. Both Southern University and LSU had branch campuses in New Orleans. LSU’s medical and dental schools also were there. Campuses throughout Louisiana that were able to function, and especially Southern University and LSU, absorbed as many displaced students as they could. Many undergraduate classes doubled in size if space permitted. Textbook publishers were asked to donate hundreds of books and to get them to the campuses as soon as possible. More complex problems that went unresolved for much of the semester for many of the displaced students were related to housing and financial aid. Many students lived in overcrowded conditions both on and off campus for weeks, as reports came of illegal rent hikes and unavailability in nearby housing.

Public and private primary and secondary schools in Baton Rouge and other communities were also scrambling to enroll displaced students and get supplies, books and desks for these students.

At all levels, the questions were: “How long will I be here? Will I ever be able to go home?” Far too many people are still asking that question, many of whom are now in Houston, San Antonio, Atlanta and numerous other cities that opened their doors to Katrina’s displaced persons.
There are enduring mysteries from Katrina. There still are no definitive answers to the following questions:

- Why did the Bush administration fail to act more quickly and decisively to help both Louisiana and Mississippi?
- Why was there no plan to get the elderly and infirm out of New Orleans, and why were adequate shelters not established?
- Why were people stranded for days in the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center?
- Why was the New Orleans levee system neglected in the face of so many predictions and modeling that clearly warned that the system could be overtopped or could fail?
- How much of the disaster can be attributed to human error and folly?
- Is global warming causing or intensifying hurricanes?

This book also includes the impact of Hurricane Rita on Louisiana and Texas. Rita is recounted here because it devastated the regions of Louisiana that Katrina had ignored. Many of the journalists who had covered or were continuing to cover Katrina, less than a month later were covering Rita. Also, had Katrina not served as a role model for how not to handle a disaster, it is possible that Rita would have been the storm of the decade. Because of Katrina, more people evacuated and the military and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were more prepared. Also, had Rita stayed on its original path to Galveston, Houston might have resembled New Orleans.

Rita made landfall on September 24 near the Texas/Louisiana border as a Category 3 hurricane. It was the seventeenth named storm, the tenth hurricane, the fifth major hurricane and the third Category 5 hurricane of the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season. Rita caused $11.3 billion in damage. Louisiana was the only state to sustain catastrophic damage from both Katrina and Rita.

While Katrina was a relatively dry hurricane in that not much rain was generated after the hurricane made landfall, Rita was wet, drenching large areas of the central United States. Mayfield said, “All hurricanes are different. There is no good correlation between how strong a hurricane is and the amount of rainfall. Usually, the faster a system moves, the less the rainfall. But there are always exceptions due to dry air, organization of the deeper convection, etc.”

There are many factors that determine the strength and direction of hurricanes. While there is agreement that the 2005 hurricane season accelerated
the debate about global warming, there is no evidence that global warming created Katrina or Rita.

As you read this book, there are a number of questions you should consider in addition to the ones that Katrina and the response to Katrina raised. First, you should consider the scope of area of devastation and the kind of journalistic effort necessary to cover the largest natural disaster in United States history.

Each of the journalists interviewed were asked to reflect on specific issues of race and class. They were asked about imagery and terms used to report the story: refugees versus evacuees or displaced persons; comparisons to a third-world country and other disasters such as the Asian tsunami and 9/11; and black versus white in images and perceptions that the response was slower because New Orleans is a predominantly black city.

What role did new media, such as Internet blogging and podcasts, play in disaster coverage and rumors? How are rumors sparked and what responsibilities do media have in either creating them or verifying or killing them?

Were news organizations justified in spending more time and resources in covering New Orleans, which some would argue really was not destroyed by Katrina as much as by human incompetence?

Finally, what preparations can a journalist make when covering a disaster story? Are emotional preparations as important as physical preparations? What can journalists do to minimize or recover from stress- and trauma-related issues, such as depression, flashbacks and a general sense of pessimism?

You will probably have other questions as you look behind the scenes at how these journalists covered Katrina and Rita. Certainly not all journalists or even all news organizations are represented here. The best journalists and news organizations are represented as defined by their peers and journalism organizations that rewarded them with Pulitzers, Polk Awards, Emmys and Murrow Awards. In each case, coverage was comprehensive and of service to the publics these media serve. In each case, heroic measures were taken to report the many stories of Katrina and Rita.

As you read this book, also keep in mind that neither Katrina nor Rita is truly over. There are ripples through American society that will shape it and the American character. Incredible rebuilding still must take place. The Gulf Coast, and particularly New Orleans and Biloxi, should not be ignored or forgotten.
CHAPTER 1

Newspaper Section Introduction

Survival. That’s the main theme of Katrina coverage. The media reported thousands of survival stories in the weeks that trailed the most destructive hurricane in American history. But, try as they might, the New Orleans Times-Picayune staff could not possibly find a single survival story that rivals its own. Every one of the Times-Picayune employees has his or her own story to tell, but what is recounted here is the collective story of how a newspaper determinedly broke the news that New Orleans was drowning and then had to keep itself afloat literally and metaphorically in the days immediately following August 29, 2005.

The employees of the Biloxi Sun Herald have found themselves in the same metaphorical boat as the Times-Picayune staff in that most of them have suffered personal loss and have had to go to great lengths to keep publishing. Even as they have reported on the recovery and rebuilding of the Gulf Coast, they have had to adjust to the collapse of the Knight Ridder newspaper company and the rise of the McClatchy group.

The New York Times and the Dallas Morning News provide a regional and national perspective and were instrumental in keeping the country interested in displaced people from the Gulf Coast. Newspapers in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Lake Charles and Biloxi have recaptured their connections to their readers, provided unfathomable public service and proved the need for the printed page.

They lost buildings, equipment, overhead and staff. They found what it means to be a public servant and to help their readers make some of the most difficult and important decisions of their lives. They found what it means to be a community.

Jim Amoss, Editor, Times-Picayune

Times-Picayune editor Jim Amoss thinks in terms of heroes. “In our case, many heroes emerged on my staff from some very unexpected quarters,” he said.
“For us the story really begins on Saturday, August 27, before Hurricane Katrina hit and when it was looking more and more like this storm was not going to go to the Florida Panhandle as everyone had predicted but rather was hell bent on striking Louisiana and subsequently the Mississippi Gulf Coast. From those early hours of Saturday until Monday the storm never wavered more than 20 miles east or west. So, on Saturday began the Times-Picayune [staff’s] ritual of coming to the newsroom with their sleeping bags and bottles of wine and various things that would see us through the harrowing days.”

That’s when the personal decisions had to be made. “We forced nobody to come to work during the hurricane. It was strictly on a volunteer basis. You can’t tell someone who fears for their family’s survival or who has small children that they must come to the newspaper and abandon their families. So, we leave it to the individual. To be sure, we put pressure on people because we have to continue to publish the newspaper; but we do not force anyone to come. And there are stories of people who agonized over this choice.”

Some on the staff elected to take their families to safety. “I respect those choices although I professionally disagree with them,” Amoss said. He knew with certainty that his own place was in his newsroom. That didn’t mean his family agreed.

“There began in households across our city, including mine, a big argument. My wife, my son and I fought all day Saturday as did thousands of households across New Orleans because it is not easy psychologically to tear yourself away from your home, from your city, and New Orleanians are just not accustomed to doing it,” he said. “So, I had already staked out my position: ‘I’m staying here guys.’”

Amoss said they argued well into Saturday night, until, around midnight, they capitulated. “It helped that the mayor of New Orleans had declared a mandatory evacuation,” he said. “We packed two cars with everything that we thought was sentimental and valuable, and they [his wife and son] set out on what we thought would be a two- or three-day trek to safety and back. It turned out to be a six-week odyssey. I went to the newsroom with my sleeping bag.”

He would have preferred the privacy of his office to ride out the storm, but the Times-Picayune has floor-to-ceiling windows on the perimeter of the building. “When the wind started howling Sunday night, and we lost power about 2 a.m., no one wanted to be anywhere near those windows. In fact, at about 4 in the morning, one of them blew clear across one of the offices. So, we knew that we were wise to stay in the core of the building.”

“The storm raged all through Monday morning—really ferocious wind like nothing I’d ever seen before. You could stand at the entrance to our
newspaper and see the wind tearing off roofs and billboards and just blowing everything. This lasted until late Monday morning,” he said. “I think anybody who stays through a hurricane is taking a chance, but I didn’t think of it as risking our lives. I thought it was necessary in order to report what was happening to the city, to be an eyewitness both during and afterward.”

But Amoss admitted that even though they’d written extensively about the possibility of flooding in New Orleans and had published a series predicting almost exactly what happened three years before, no one pictured it exactly as it did unfold—“that the flood walls would break, that civil chaos would ensue and that the city would become an utterly lawless, uninhabitable place for a week, that the federal government would fail to take command of the situation and that both local and state officials would be overwhelmed by it. I guess if we could have predicted all those factors occurring, we would have done some things differently. I think we still would have stayed and witnessed the storm and reported on it.”

Gradually, calm returned, and they thought the worst was over. “We knew we had had a horrific storm, and that there would be months of cleanup work. But we thought at that point that it was a survivable event—a grave one, but nothing that couldn’t be put back together in a month or so.”

That’s what the national media were reporting. “They proclaimed at the top of their voices all through Monday afternoon and well into Monday night that ‘New Orleans has dodged a bullet.’ We all heard it. The TV reporters were playfully leaning into the wind in the French Quarter, which is where they had staked out their territory, saying the city had escaped.”

“While this was going on, we were doing some reporting in our own backyard,” Amoss said. “This is the newspaper’s great strength: reporting knowledge of your own backyard, and the need to tell your readers what is going on in the intimate corners of their neighborhoods.”

Rather like a modern-day Noah, Amoss sent forth two journalists on their bicycles to survey the damage (features editor James O’Byrne and art critic Doug MacCash, whose personal odysseys are recounted later in this book). At the same time, several photographers were fanning out in the opposite direction, into the eastern part of the city toward the Industrial Canal and the Lower 9th Ward. “They burst into the evening news meeting and said, ‘Guys, the real story is happening just a couple of miles from here. The levees have breached, and the city is going to be under water.’ At the same time our photographers from the eastern edge were coming in and were saying that the 9th Ward was completely flooded and St. Bernard Parish was gone. So, we put together a newspaper in those late hours of Monday night that said just the opposite of what CNN and all the national broadcast stations were broadcasting—and that is that New Orleans is going under.”
“When I say we were publishing, I should specify that our presses were no longer operating. We didn’t have enough generator power to turn them. The city had been evacuated. There were no readers to whom to deliver a paper, and for that matter we couldn’t get out of our building because of the flood waters,” Amoss said. “So, we published a fully paginated, PDF online version of the Times-Picayune, with a page 1 and a local section front and inside pages and stories and photos and they went to the readers of our Web site, NOLA.com. They were read by many, many people who thought, until they opened that home page, that New Orleans had dodged the bullet. And they found out otherwise.”

“The rest of our story is for us the most important part,” Amoss said. The Times-Picayune had to evacuate. The editors gathered in the newsroom and made a decision. They knew they weren’t safe and soon could no longer function as a newspaper. They would be trapped in their own building, preventing reporters and photographers from coming and going to do the necessary reporting.

“Within ten minutes we had assembled the 240 people who were in that building, which included some elderly relatives and some small children—family members of staffers. We herded them all into a dozen newspaper delivery trucks. Everybody from the publisher on down sat in the back of those delivery trucks on the floor, and one by one they pulled away from our parking lot into 3 to 4 feet of water on the service road leading to I-10,” Amoss said. “It was the scariest moment of my career as we drove down that service road, not knowing if we would be able to make it through. We got about 50 yards away, and this light on the dashboard of my truck started blinking ‘water in fuel.’ The water was above the headlights and we still had another half mile to go before we could reach the interstate.”

When the first truck got on that dry interstate, Amoss said, cheers erupted from inside that truck. One by one, the trucks reached the highway, crossed the Mississippi River downtown and stopped on the other side at the Times-Picayune West Bank bureau, which was dry but without power.

From there, some reporters went back into the city and the rest went to Houma, Louisiana, where the newspaper had a relationship with the Houma Courier. “We established a beach head there, and the bulk of us got on the road to go to Baton Rouge. We weren’t quite sure where we were going in Baton Rouge, but we needed to be in a big city. We needed to have the conditions of a big city newspaper,” Amoss said.

“I started dialing on my virtually nonfunctioning cell phone, dialing [LSU’s] Dean Jack Hamilton’s telephone number. It took me about twenty-five to thirty tries, but I finally got through. And I said something like, ‘Jack! I have about 180 people from the newsroom. We’re coming to Baton Rouge.