

First Informers in the Disaster Zone: The Lessons of Katrina

Albert L. May
Rapporteur



THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Communications and Society Program

Charles M. Firestone

Executive Director

Washington, DC

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109 Houghton Lab Lane
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The Aspen Institute
Communications and Society Program
One Dupont Circle, NW
Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 736-5818
Fax: (202) 467-0790

Charles M. Firestone
Executive Director

Patricia K. Kelly
Assistant Director

On the Cover: A breach in the floodwall at the 17th Street Canal sends water gushing through the levee into New Orleans' Ninth Ward, August 30, 2005.

Photo: Vincent Laforet/The New York Times/Redux

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The reader should note that this report is written from the perspective of an informed observer at the conference. Unless attributed to a particular person, none of the comments or ideas in this report should be taken as embodying the views or carrying the endorsement of any specific participant at the conference.

Foreword

When Hurricane Katrina stormed onto the Louisiana coastline shortly after sunrise on Monday, August 29, 2005, few people could imagine the magnitude of events about to unfold: the staggering number of lives lost, the destruction of entire communities, the mass migration of people not seen in the United States since the days of the Dust Bowl. There were countless stories of personal sacrifice, heroism, and charity. Most memorable, perhaps, was the public fury that the disaster unleashed on government leaders—reaching all the way to the White House. Nearly four years after the events of September 11, 2001 thrust the United States into a state of constant vigilance, Americans wanted to know: How could this happen? Looking ahead, the question now is this: Will we heed the lessons of Katrina and be better prepared when the next disaster strikes?

Hurricane Katrina showed the consequences of preparedness—or the lack thereof—in all aspects of disaster relief. The media have roles to play before, during, and after a disaster. In many incidents, journalists are among the first to arrive on the scene and report on events as they unfold; they are first informers in the disaster zone. Media and communication technologies can greatly aid or hinder efforts to prepare citizens for threats; convey important, lifesaving information during a crisis; assist in rescues, reunions, and relocations; support relief efforts; and promote accountability after the fact. At the same time, journalists are themselves vulnerable to the hazardous situations on which they report.

The Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, with funding provided by the Ford Foundation, created the Aspen Institute Disaster Communications Project to address the role of communications media and the flow of information surrounding disasters. Hurricane Katrina was our starting point. The conference, “Katrina’s Lessons,” took place May 17–19, 2006, at the Aspen Wye River Conference Center in Queenstown, Maryland.

The purpose of the conference was twofold: first, to assist media leaders in learning how they can improve their ability to cope with disasters in the future, and second, to bring together leaders of the media, affected

communities, and the homeland security apparatus to discuss how their relationships could be improved in anticipation of future disasters, spurring new partnerships in the process. Conference participants represented both new and mainstream media—broadcast, print, and online journalism—weblogs, critical government agencies and nonprofit organizations, and other experts who addressed the interrelationships among these organizations before, during, and after a disaster. A complete list of conference participants appears in the appendix.

First Informers in the Disaster Zone: The Lessons of Katrina, by Albert L. May, is the report of this conference. It contains a summary of the insights, experiences, and observations of the experts assembled at the conference. The report highlights one of the central facts documented in the aftermath of Katrina: the importance of maintaining a timely and accurate flow of information in a disaster zone. When information was neither timely nor accurate, people suffered. Achieving both timeliness and accuracy in an environment of 24/7 news and information and ever expanding media is difficult in the best of times; in the midst of chaos and uncertainty, it can be an immense challenge.

The report summarizes how new channels and networks for information that have arisen with the digital communications revolution are changing the top-down, command-and-control paradigm for information flow during times of crisis and what this evolution means for the new cadre of “first informers” challenging the old gatekeepers in government and media. It covers how prior planning and a willingness to collaborate paid off for some media entities and how distrust between media and government remains a barrier to improved crisis communications. The pages that follow contain many important observations and proposals.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the Ford Foundation for its generous support of the Aspen Institute Disaster Communications Project. In particular, we thank Jon Funabiki, Deputy Director of the Media, Arts and Culture program at the foundation, who has been a partner and friend of the Aspen Institute for many years. We share his vision for media and technology that can improve and enrich the lives of every person in society. We have been fortunate to work with Jon and his colleagues at the Ford

Foundation toward achieving this vision. Jon also contributed the Afterword to the report.

We were extremely fortunate to enlist the participation of many leaders from government, news organizations, media enterprises, and the nonprofit sector in this effort. All of the participants were affected in one way or another by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, and all took time away from very busy schedules to reflect on their experiences and share their knowledge with others. We thank them for coming to the conference and sharing their experiences with a commitment to improve disaster communications in the future.

George Foresman, Under Secretary for Preparedness in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, joined the conference for one session to share his thoughts on the role of the media in supporting emergency preparedness and response efforts. We appreciate his willingness to engage candidly with the conference participants, and we welcome his invitation to submit the ideas for improvement that were generated at the conference for his consideration. We especially thank him for introducing the concept of the “teachable moment” to our discussion. It provided the basis for framing specific recommendations of the conference.

Several participants who live and work in New Orleans and southern Louisiana—Martha Carr (New Orleans *Times-Picayune*), Jon Donley (NOLA.com), Brian Oberkirch (Slidell Hurricane Damage Blog) and Chris Slaughter (WWL-TV)—deserve special recognition. During the conference we were privileged to hear the personal stories of these journalists and editors who maintained a virtually continuous stream of reporting even as the storm destroyed their homes and devastated their families and communities. We thank them for coming and wish them well as they rebuild.

Albert L. May, Associate Professor of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University, served as rapporteur and prepared this report. We thank him for taking on the task of creating a coherent narrative out of a wide-ranging discussion that touched on many different themes and resisted simple conclusions. He has done so with great skill and good grace.

Finally, I thank my colleagues at the Aspen Institute who worked with me on the Disaster Communications Project. Charlie Firestone, executive director of the Communications and Society Program, conceived of the project as a way to respond to the devastation of Katrina, and he moderated the conference. Tricia Kelly, assistant director of the Communications and Society Program, and Mridulika Menon, senior project manager, stepped in to handle many of the details when their help and expertise were most needed. Maria Medrano, who has since left the Institute, got the project off the ground in the early weeks and months. David Stearman, our outside copyeditor, worked his usual magic with the draft, and Steve Johnson and Sogand Sepassi, the Institute's publications team, turned the soft copy into the report you see now. Thanks to all.

This report is issued under the auspices of the Aspen Institute; the conference participants are not responsible for its contents. Although it is an attempt to represent the views expressed during the conference, the report is not a consensus document. Unless directly quoted, participants were not asked to agree to the wording of the report, nor were they asked to endorse any or all of the proposals proffered in this report.

Amy Korzick Garmer
Director, Journalism Projects
Communications and Society Program
Washington, DC
August 2006

Executive Summary

Hurricane Katrina taught some hard lessons that one year later still reverberate through government, media, and society. In the wake of America's worst modern disaster, a steady flow of news stories, articles, books, government reports, and public forums have built a literature that provides guidance to vital institutions in coping with future calamities. The goal of this report is to add to that knowledge by exploring how the disaster transformed the gathering and dissemination of crisis information. This topic was confronted by participants in a conference hosted by the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program that took place May 17–19, 2006, in Queenstown, Maryland.

Conference Observations:

- The digital communication revolution exposed novel channels and networks for information flow that require reexamination of the relationships between media, government, and citizens. The traditional top-down paradigm was replaced by a more dynamic flow of information that empowered citizens and created ad hoc distributive information networks.
- The disaster environment created a new cadre of “first informers” that introduced fledgling players in crisis communication who enhanced the amount of information and number of sources, challenged the old gatekeepers of government and the traditional media, and exacerbated the pre-existing problem of sorting out truth amid chaos.
- Planning for disaster paid off, and spontaneous collaborative efforts among commercial rivals and different media platforms underscored not only the value of such combinations and content sharing but the need to coordinate and plan both.
- Distrust between media and government remains, and trust-building depends on mutual recognition of institutional limits and shared responsibility to a common constituency.

Journalists sought greater access to operational leaders and experts and more transparency by government. Government officials promised more of both but expressed concerns about exposing classified information, disseminating misinformation, and overtaxing personnel and resources that are already stretched thin.

- Traditional media and government should pursue innovative strategies to engage the new media and find “teachable moments” when messages of personal preparedness are likely to penetrate—particularly among members of minority and disadvantaged populations, with whom building trust also is critical.

Ideas for Improvement:

- News organizations should formulate and continually update individual plans for disaster, and they should reach out to each other to collaborate in sharing dissemination facilities, including transmitters and even facilities to offer wireless hotspots to the public.
- Old and new media should seek ways to exchange information to avoid redundancy, and they should be prepared to share content across platforms, including even experimenting with BarCamps and other innovative forms of exchanges.
- Media organizations should be more active in covering or participating in governmental disaster drills, including tabletop exercises, and they should be more involved with disaster planning, including periodic meetings with emergency management officials.
- Government should better implement existing policy to create centralized communications centers in the disaster zone that are pre-announced and staffed quickly by local, state, and federal responders and experts.

- Briefings by on-scene operational leaders should be regularized, and communication skills should be added to the job descriptions of disaster response officials, similar to the competence in public diplomacy required by the Foreign Service.
- Government and media should work to enhance transparency by providing more information on disaster-related web sites that use “search engine optimization” and other techniques to make such information more accessible and easier to find.
- Media entities should be enlisted in educational campaigns to convince Americans to make individual preparedness plans.
- Alternative and ethnic media and the community networks of minority and disadvantaged groups should be tapped to host joint media forums to enhance disaster preparedness, especially within vulnerable communities.

**FIRST INFORMERS IN THE
DISASTER ZONE:
THE LESSONS OF KATRINA**

Albert L. May

First Informers in the Disaster Zone: The Lessons of Katrina

Introduction

With Hurricane Katrina battering the Louisiana coastline, Jon Donley, editor of NOLA.com, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune's* associated web site, ensconced himself in the newspaper's "hurricane bunker." The refuge, a third-floor photo lab outfitted with emergency generators and triple-redundant Internet connectivity, had been built after Hurricane George brushed New Orleans in 1998 and provided a wake-up call for the "Big One."

Donley's mission was to publish the newspaper on NOLA.com over the Internet if the hurricane swamped the presses and the delivery trucks. On Monday, August 29, 2005, the contingency became real. "We knew that New Orleans was going to drown, but we still had a way to get the story out," said Donley, veteran newspaperman turned "new media" journalist.

NOLA.com had another mission. The web site had been spun off from the newspaper as a separate entity to experiment with new online approaches, including what is now known as "citizen journalism." As the city evacuated, the concept was put to the test. Donley posted messages from readers onto the site's public forums, reporting the first-hand experiences of the fleeing New Orleanians, including tips on evacuation routes. By early Monday morning, Donley said he had started to get messages from people trapped in attics; later he got pictures from cell phone cameras of rising water. Pleas for help mounted—calls for rescue, as well as assistance in finding relatives who had not heeded the warning to evacuate.

One of those people was Donley's 21-year-old daughter Sarah—who, despite her father's pleas to evacuate, had remained in the family home in Mandeville, a northern suburb that was then in the path of the storm. "I was keeping on the phone with my daughter, and at 6:30 in the morning I lost contact with her," Donley said in an interview. "We were getting reports of Slidell going under water and Mandeville.... I was frantic. I could not get hold of the police."

Many people caught in Katrina's devastation had such experiences, but for Donley his personal and professional lives intersected, as he joined the users of NOLA.com in seeking help online. He posted his own message: "If you are praying, my daughter, Sarah, is missing." He kept blogging about his daughter, posting her picture. Her story got picked up by television networks, which were turning to NOLA.com as an important link in the information flow around the disaster. The site counted more than 30 million page views on the third day after Katrina struck—up from its usual 6 million page views per week.¹

Donley's story had a happy ending: His message found its way to law enforcement officers who reunited Sarah with her father three days later in Baton Rouge. Thousands of harrowing tales have emerged in the wake of Katrina, but Donley and other practitioners of the new media added a new chapter to crisis communications in the digital media environment. In several ways, Donley was a "first informer" in a flow of information that burst its own levee system.

A decade after the World Wide Web emerged as a potential unifying media platform, Katrina forced its own convergence—sometimes planned, as with NOLA.com, and in other ways unexpected. At times the traditional flow of information from government to media to public reversed course. Often it spread through ad hoc distributive networks that provided unprecedented amounts of information—some of it flawed and much of it chaotic—through a system that engaged millions of Americans. As they watched the disaster unfold in real time on television, they empowered themselves by joining the online conversation, sending millions of dollars to relief organizations through the Internet, and signing up as volunteers. Anger at governmental ineptitude also rocked the White House, and the plight of the urban poor penetrated in the media in ways that had not been seen since the urban riots of the 1960s.

Katrina also exacerbated the already burgeoning distrust between media and government. As rival proxies for the public, the two institutions clashed openly during and after the storm. Although the media's performance was flawed, it emerged from Katrina feeling largely triumphant. Government, particularly at the federal level, emerged battered and embarrassed. Government officials promised to reexamine their approach to communications and to provide more accessibility for the media and transparency for the public.

For two institutions that share a constituency that depends on them in times of crisis, Katrina exposed their limitations as information gatekeepers and changed their perspective. In the future, no journalist in New Orleans is likely to consider the city's inhabitants mere customers—readers, viewers, or listeners; journalists will regard New Orleanians as fellow citizens threatened by the same flood waters as themselves. No government official will soon forget a political communications disaster that turned a federal agency's acronym into an epithet.

If there was a winner in Katrina, it was the recognition of the need for change: the need for communications planning, the importance of distributing information during a catastrophe, and heightened understanding that the digital environment has jointly empowered media, government, and citizens as a new cadre of first informers in the disaster zone.

With that impetus, the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program convened 20 experts for a conference at the Wye River Conference Center in Queenstown, Maryland, on May 17–19, 2006. The conference was funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation. Journalists, including members of the traditional media and new media, outnumbered government officials, all federal, by two-to-one. The journalists represented a national cable network, a major Internet portal, national journalism organizations, a major market television station, the blogosphere, and New Orleans news organizations. The government officials included an under secretary of Homeland Security, a director of the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), two former Bush White House spokesmen, and a senior official of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Added to that gumbo were a top spokesman for the American Red Cross and Aspen Institute President Walter Isaacson, who wore the hats of host, journalist, and vice-chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority. The sessions were moderated by Charles M. Firestone, executive director of the Aspen Institute

For two institutions that share a constituency that depends on them in times of crisis, Katrina exposed their limitations as information gatekeepers and changed their perspective.

Communications and Society Program. A list of the conference participants appears in the appendix to this report.

This report is written from the perspective of one informed observer at the conference; it is not meant to imply consensus by the group as a whole or the assent of any individual participant on any of the issues summarized herein. With Katrina as a chalkboard, the goal was to develop ideas to strengthen the ability of the media, homeland security, and other response-and-recovery professionals to educate, inform, and communicate with the public in future disasters.

Jon Donley's story of his online search for his daughter Sarah set a poignant tone for the start of the conference, but the phrase "first informer" was offered at the end of the conference by Frederick I. Young, senior vice president of news at Hearst-Argyle Television, which owns WSDU-TV in New Orleans. After hours of back-and-forth over the role of journalists as first responders and the boundaries between press and government, Young suggested that "first informers" had a universal application. "We should always remember," he said, "that there are people out there who are counting on us to get through whatever it is they're going through, whether they are standing on a roof or running away from water, or waiting for an insurance adjuster, or a hurricane, or a tornado, or a flood, or some powder that somebody finds somewhere."

The shared responsibility and recognition that accurate information can save lives—just as bad information can cost lives—were themes in a discussion that ranged from specific strategies for disseminating web-based information to a more nebulous debate on building trust between media and government. The discussion often focused on strategies to engage individuals in the new media mix and have them assume greater responsibility for their own safety through personal preparedness.

The media culture—itself roiled by the changes wrought by the digital revolution—more than once clashed with the more cautious and hierarchical culture of government. Few hard recommendations emerged, although several interesting proposals bubbled up. Some involved better implementation of existing doctrines to communicate crisis information; some involved novel, and untested, approaches. Moderator Charles Firestone divided the ideas for improvement—all trust-building notions—into three broad categories: first, more *openness*, including more accessibility by the media to decision makers and experts and more transparency in government for the media and the

public; second, greater *collaboration* between government and the media, between the various forms of media, and between the media and the community; and, third, enhanced *exchanges* between all of the above. The following are highlights of proposals that surfaced:

Openness

- Centralized communications centers in the disaster zone that are pre-announced and staffed quickly by local, state, and federal responders.
- A premium on communication as part of the job descriptions of disaster officials, taking a page from the public diplomacy effort.
- Enhancing transparency by providing more information on disaster-related web sites that incorporate techniques for making this information easier to find.

Collaboration

- Pre-planning among media to share information dissemination facilities, including transmitters that offer wireless hotspots to the public.
- Suspension of proprietary and competitive urges to create distributive networks that share content across media platforms.
- An experiment to bring together traditional media and new media for crisis planning, including BarCamps (to use the latest Internet jargon).

Exchanges

- Finding teachable moments when media and government can best seize public attention to communicate with citizens to enhance individual preparedness.

- A national effort in which media entities band together for a public education campaign to stimulate personal preparedness.
- Participation by journalists, including representatives of new media, in tabletop exercises and other drills that simulate government and media response in a crisis.

How Hurricane Katrina Was Different

The Magnitude of Katrina

To understand why the lessons of Katrina are worth studying, we must understand what made the disaster such a departure from past cataclysmic events. The twentieth century, of course, was replete with disasters—natural and manmade—that were similar to Katrina in some key aspects. Modern communication technology has played an important role in most of these disasters, at least since Marconi's wireless flashed the news of the sinking of Titanic on April 14, 1912—a confidence-shattering moment for the industrial age. Great calamities such as the floods of the lower Mississippi in 1927 wreaked social havoc similar to that from Katrina. In the age of television, other disaster spectacles have riveted the world, including the explosion of Mount St. Helens in 1980.

Yet, in important ways Katrina was simply bigger and more costly, more technologically transforming, and freighted with more social resonance than any other modern U.S. disaster. The September 11 attacks were traumatic and were part of a larger historical moment, but they involved far less territory and dislocated far fewer people—a point made by George W. Foresman, under secretary for preparedness for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Foresman noted that Katrina was 12 times more destructive than 1992's Hurricane Andrew by most disaster metrics. He told the conference the decade of the 1990s was a comparably tranquil period, with the notable exceptions of the Northridge earthquake in California, the Oklahoma City bombing, and floods of the upper Mississippi River valley.

"We didn't have very big events in this country, so state government, local government, and federal government got off without a hard test," Foresman said. "Katrina was our first hard test." A recent report by

Foresman's department neatly summed up just how big a disaster Katrina and her companion Hurricane Rita had been:

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita left more than 1,300 dead in their wake, caused more than \$80 billion in damage over 90,000 square miles, and forced mass evacuations from five states along the Gulf Coast. An estimated 600,000 households were displaced from affected areas, and 50,000-100,000 remained in temporary housing six months later.²

The impact could have been far worse, according to Weather Channel meteorologist Jim Cantore, because the less populated part of the Gulf Coast east of New Orleans took the brunt of the high winds. Cantore said that only 90 mph gusts were clocked in the city's metropolitan area. "In essence, New Orleans really did dodge the bullet," he said. "It was not a worst-case scenario for New Orleans; if it was, you would have lost the 10,000 to 30,000"—which some observers had predicted.

Although the 1990s did little to prepare the country for the trauma of the September 11 attacks and the devastation of the Gulf Coast hurricanes (and the worldwide shock of the Asian tsunami in 2004), that decade witnessed a radical change in communications technology. Those transformations included maturation of 24/7 cable television, the invention of the World Wide Web, and a host of digital technologies, including high-resolution satellite maps and inexpensive and readily available wireless mobile devices. The new media environment came into play on September 11, but in some respects the technology was overwhelmed as web sites froze from the initial traffic after the attacks. The blogosphere was still in its infancy in 2001, and, one could argue, September 11 was a throwback to past modes of crisis communication. Newspapers hit the streets with afternoon extras. As the disaster unfolded on television, CNN and other cable news networks saw huge spikes in viewers; as media critics noted, however, the familiar anchors of the broadcast networks—Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings, and Dan Rather—took on their avuncular roles of the past for a nation looking for comfort and reassurance.³ All three anchors were gone from the television news scene by the time of Katrina.

Government got much better press coverage in the wake of September 11 than it did after Katrina. In the immediate aftermath of

the September 11 attacks, the media followed the predictable precedent of suspending its adversarial role. Some journalists donned red, white, and blue lapel ribbons. The story that emerged painted government leadership, notably then-New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, and the first responders—firefighters and police officers—as heroes who sacrificed or risked their lives saving victims of the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

The circumstances of Katrina and September 11 were different in many ways. So was the governmental approach to the media, said one journalist in comparing the two episodes. In the aftermath of September 11, David Bohrman, Washington bureau chief for CNN, said, there was “a lot of forthrightness” from governmental officials at all levels in what he described as the Giuliani approach: “Here’s what we know; we don’t know a lot, and here’s all I can help you with right now, and, if I learn more or learn I was wrong, I’ll let you know in an hour.” That didn’t happen in the immediate aftermath of Katrina.

Communications Failures and Triumphs

Several government reports, including one from the Bush White House and two from Congress, also have agreed that Katrina was different—a failed response in many ways. Two public communications failures by government cited in those reports were particularly relevant to the conference.

The first failure was caused by lack of good situational awareness by federal officials themselves, who painted a rosy scenario that clashed with the pictures and reports from the scene from journalists. “Don’t you guys watch television? Don’t you guys listen to the radio?” ABC’s Ted Koppel famously asked Michael Brown, then FEMA director.⁴ Whereas federal and state officials appeared uninformed but unwilling to admit it, local officials in New Orleans exaggerated the mayhem and the expected death toll. “Federal, state, and local officials gave contradictory messages to the public, creating confusion and feeding the perception that government sources lacked credibility,” the White House report concluded.⁵

A second communication shortcoming by federal, state, and local officials that drew attention in the postmortems of the disaster was the failure to promptly establish forward joint information centers (JICs)—

interagency pools of communication specialists to disseminate information and counter misinformation. Creation of these JICs and integration of them into a joint information system was a goal of the National Response Plan that DHS had promulgated nine months before Katrina. However, Senate investigators concluded, “it appears this goal was not immediately carried out, or even understood, during the response to Hurricane Katrina.”⁶

Foresman summed up the communication failure:

Frankly, we got into a situation—and I can say this because I was not in this job—about five days into Katrina where everybody closed the door because they were taking in so many incoming rounds, and, for a whole bunch of reasons that we won’t recount here, we got into a real bad situation. It was a real bad situation because we lost any element of relationship between the media at large and the DHS organization, the state of Louisiana, and their organization in New Orleans—and the result was critical. We spent so much time being critical that we didn’t get critical information out to the populous at large.

“We spent so much time being critical that we didn’t get critical information out to the populous at large.”

George Foresman

Whereas the government emerged bruised from Katrina, the media’s performance won praise and prizes. After several years of scandals and newsroom cutbacks, diminishing credibility, and dwindling readers and viewers, news organizations took the disaster on at full tilt. In the eyes of some observers, they stepped in as surrogates for the public and advocates for victims, sometimes dropping any pretense of detachment or objectivity. Reporters standing waist-deep in water or shouting from highway overpasses, not anchors in the studio, marked journalism that was both emphatic and empathetic. As the governmental response faltered and the adversarial grace period evaporated, journalists immediately questioned authority and demanded action. In *The Great Deluge*—a comprehensive book on the first week of the

disaster—historian Douglas Brinkley portrayed journalists as heroes of the saga: “When FEMA and the White House were floundering, the media stepped into the fray with gutsy reporting and deep moral principle. They got some details wrong, but, more important, they got the urgency exactly right.”⁷

Some establishment journalists proclaimed the Katrina coverage a victory for the traditional media of print and broadcast over the upstart Internet. Marc Fisher, a columnist for the *Washington Post*, wrote in the *American Journalism Review*:

So as the summer of 2005 came to a violent end, journalism journeyed back, setting aside for a few days the allure of the Internet and the promise of a nation of citizen reporters. Once again, we understood the power of

Katrina was different...there was a difference in how the online environment changed the media mix and altered the flow of information during and after the disaster.

mass media, the shared experience of a nation gathering in its living rooms to see momentous events on television, to feel the satisfaction of reading a newspaper’s first shot at making sense of difficult and complex times. Web, schmeb: Without electricity, those who lived in the path of Hurricane Katrina depended on old battery-powered radios and whatever newspaper they could borrow for a few minutes from the guy in the next cot.⁸

A more critical view of the media performance also has emerged as journalists themselves and government investigators have questioned the accuracy of much of the reporting, particularly the exaggeration of the level of violence and images of looting and helplessness that fed racial stereotypes. In a report issued in March 2006, U.S. House of Representatives investigators blamed media reports of violence for delaying “critical elements of the response effort” and discouraging some residents in dry neighborhoods from heeding calls to evacuate. The House report said:

Throughout the early days of the response, media reports from New Orleans featured rampant looting, gunfire, crime, and lawlessness, including murders and alleged sexual assaults at the Superdome and Convention Center. Few of these reports were substantiated, and those that were—such as the gunfire—were later understood to be actually coming from individuals trapped and trying to attract the attention of rescuers in helicopters.⁹

Some of the misinformation, as the reports noted, came from local officials, particularly Mayor Ray Nagin and then-Police Superintendent Eddie Compass. Nonetheless, in a report on a “crisis of confidence” in American journalism, the Carnegie Corporation found little excuse for the media, which “could not be absolved from blame” in airing the misinformation.¹⁰

Thus, Katrina was different from past disasters in terms of its sheer scope and in the performance of government and media. Moreover, there was a difference in how the online environment changed the media mix and altered the flow of information during and after the disaster. As one pair of new media experts put it, Katrina “revealed extraordinary changes taking place within a society increasingly connected by digital networks, a society at the cusp of a new era in human history in which individuals possess an unprecedented capacity to access, share, create and apply information.”¹¹ The story was told vividly by several conference participants who had lived it in Katrina.

Disaster Coverage Goes Online

When WWL-TV needed a new transmitter in the mid-1990s, it made a decision that would set it apart from its competitors in the New Orleans television market during Katrina. It stayed on the air. Chris Slaughter, assistant news director and a 30-year veteran of the station (now owned by Dallas-based Belo Corporation), described how the station built a transmitter site as a fall-back refuge if a storm required evacuation of its French Quarter headquarters. This transmitter was built 20 feet above ground atop a concrete bunker that included a 40,000 gallon fuel supply for emergency generators and self-sufficient living quarters. The tower was built to withstand 130–140 mph winds, Slaughter said. Like the *Times-Picayune*, the station updated its plan-

ning after Hurricane George, and Slaughter described how the planning paid off as Katrina threatened. Staffers were dispersed in preselected sites, and television journalists hunkered down to ride out the storm.

This example of textbook planning stands as an important lesson of Katrina. Yet even WWL-TV planners did not anticipate what would happen when the storm passed: Its viewers were dispersed outside its market or, for those who stayed, were without electricity to watch the broadcast. In unprecedented ways, the media faced the task of communicating with a city in exile. Like other New Orleans stations, WWL-TV turned to its web site and rerouted its signal through corporate cousins—chain ownership paid off in Katrina—and through cable and satellite providers. WWL-TV also found itself airing its broadcast through an unexpected venue. Enter Bill Gannon and his colleagues at Yahoo—the Internet portal with a billion page views per month and 200 million registered users.

Gannon, editorial director for Yahoo, picked up the story of how WWL-TV found its way to Yahoo. On Tuesday, when the scope of the disaster was sinking in, Gannon said the portal looked beyond its normal media partners and layered coverage from many sources. As an example of the spontaneity of the new medium, he said, the arrangement with WWL-TV was consummated in one telephone call to Belo headquarters. “One of our business development guys in Yahoo News called them and said we would like to take a live feed of your live local video and put it on our front page,” Gannon recounted. “And they said, ‘Yahoo?’ and we said, ‘Yeah,’ and they said, ‘Okay.’ They got to ‘yes’ in four minutes, then worked out the details.”

For a competitive television station such a partnership was not in the business model. “Once word got to us, and got to us quickly, about the Yahoo arrangement, we had to again change the way we did business,” Slaughter said. “We went out feeding somebody else, and we had to maintain a constant stream of video.... The video was the whole concept of what we were doing. At that point we were a content provider, and they were just giving us reach we could never dream of having.”

Gannon said WWL-TV’s video was streamed through its front page in a detachable viewer. “People could even leave Yahoo and keep the live video of WWL...[watching] the rescues and everything that was happening.” He said Yahoo users got so attached to the WWL journalists that when one would disappear from the screen for a while, the site would get messages wanting to know if they were safe.

The “Accidental Journalist”

At least since the late 1990s, news executives have debated the value of convergence on the Internet platform; one lesson of Katrina is that the debate is over. Yet the online story of Katrina encompasses more than the fact that convergence worked and newspapers and television stations could keep going on the web. It introduced new players in disaster communication. One of them, Brian Oberkirch, gained national attention as the Slidell blogger. Oberkirch, a consultant who builds blogs for corporate clients, introduced himself to the conference as an “accidental journalist.”

Slidell is a New Orleans suburb near Jon Donley’s hometown of Mandeville on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Unlike Donley’s daughter, Oberkirch evacuated to Dallas as the storm approached. Like Donley, however, he found himself cut off from news about his hometown. By that Tuesday morning, facing a dearth of information about Slidell and hearing Mayor Nagin say the suburb was under water and “gone,” Oberkirch said, “I kind of freaked out. I didn’t know what was going on, and...I started the blog out of desperation, just to find out what had happened.” As Oberkirch described it, he started by aggregating anything he could find about Slidell on mainstream news sites and citizen sites such as Flickr.com, which features pictures posted by the site’s users. As his posts built, Oberkirch increasingly made contact with friends and neighbors, who in turn became contributors. He persuaded the local sheriff’s office to start feeding him information. Almost overnight, the suburb of about 26,000 people had a new media outlet, the Slidell Hurricane Damage Blog, which Oberkirch said drew 80,000 unique visitors in the first week. He described the phenomenon:

If you would recall after 9/11—people posting missing signs on light posts—people used our blog post in much the same way. They didn’t know how to get in touch with their relatives. They didn’t know how to get information, and they were using our posts as ways to get that. Does anybody know what happened on this street? Has anybody seen Aunt Mae? It was very painful after a while. There were good stories as well. Things like, “Hey we didn’t know that so-and-so was alive until we saw his picture on your blog.”

Oberkirch found a moment of fame as CNN and the *Washington Post* reported on the young blogger who, they were surprised to learn, was doing it all from Dallas. But the mainstream media attention, he said, was not how Oberkirch built his distributive network. He used his technical know-how to build up a high search engine ranking—"Google juice," as he described it. He methodically tagged posts to attract search engine attention by using common key words. He also reached out to bigger bloggers to link to his site and persuaded his "correspondents" to do the same. "You get about 50 percent of your traffic via raw search and a lot from blog-specific search, which is where tagging and stuff like that becomes more important," he said. Gannon and others at the conference also promoted the importance of "search engine optimization" as one of the key ingredients for media and disaster responders to incorporate into the design of web sites.

Although Oberkirch's tale was riveting, it came with a confession that goes to a common criticism of the digital environment. Citizen journalism is inherently unruly and sometimes of questionable credibility; personal opinion or unchecked rumor often trumps journalism's discipline of verification—a problem exacerbated during the chaos of a disaster. In Oberkirch's case, he toppled the Slidell water tower.

"If three people tell me, then it must be kind of true," he said. "The weird thing is that everybody kept telling me that the water tower had fallen." He said some people embellished the story even more, saying the tower had fallen on a church across the street. "So after a while, I wrote that." He quickly received feedback that the tower still stood. "People said, 'No, that's not true. I was just there,' and then, boom, you know what, it was corrected." A few days later, when Oberkirch returned to Slidell, he took a picture of the still-standing water tower for his blog.

Issues of Accuracy and Credibility

Questions arose in the conference: Is misinformation a mere by-product in a self-correcting "information ecosystem," as Oberkirch argued? Is there a sort of "wisdom of the mob," as posited by fellow blogger Tom Evslin, a veteran technologist and host of the popular blog *Fractals of Change*? Or is the new environment a recipe for poison entering a media food chain that starts out as seemingly harmless rumor in the blogosphere and finds its way unchecked into the mass media?

The latter concern was voiced by some of the governmental representatives, who sounded notes usually heard from traditional journalists. Perhaps it wasn't so surprising coming from Chet Lunner, acting director of state and local government coordination in DHS and a former national reporter for the Gannett News Service:

I get concerned when I see the term “citizen journalists” and “blogs” lumped in with everything else as if that were journalism in the way that it is practiced by professionals. That is often the problem we have, which is that something that starts out as a blog does not necessarily meet the standards of most source-tested journalism that has been in practice for all these years.... We have enough trouble with things that do go through the [mainstream media] filter. The amount of time and energy and social unrest by readers and/or the people trying to practice in the field dealing with these things that are exaggerated rumors, etc., is a problem, particularly in the framework of these disaster times when people are depending upon or relying on that.

**Is misinformation
a mere by-product
in a self-correcting
“information
ecosystem?”**

Lunner's comment brought a rejoinder—interestingly, not from either of the bloggers or the new media journalists at the conference. What followed was an illuminating exchange between Lunner and CNN's David Bohrman:

Bohrman: “You can't wish away the blogs and the web and what's happening by just being above it because it's there.”

Lunner: “No, no, no. We deal with them straight on. It strikes me...that the journalist's responsibility is not to just say, ‘It's out there,’ and then run with it without checking it. That's what I'm saying.”

Bohrman: “Well, that's a different connection. I think it is our job to figure out what we want to pass on and

what we want to knock down. There is a world of value and content that's going to help us in the next disaster." (To make his point, Bohrman held up a tiny high-resolution digital camera—the kind of technology that is going to stimulate more video from the disaster scene, whether it is in the hands of journalists or citizens.)

Lunner: "Again, it's not about gadgets. That is a very useful technology, but what it provides you with is unedited, out of context, reality. It's just not journalism."

The argument, Yahoo's Bill Gannon said, was getting a little shopworn. He said the new environment had brought a level of sophistication in the public, which is able to parse which sources are more credi-

"...misinformation is out there. Eventually it falls, but there are some consequences during the period when it doesn't."

Charles Firestone

ble than others. "Let's stop wringing our hands about the Internet and all this misinformation," Gannon said. "First of all, there isn't a lot of this [bad] information out there. When we talk about the wisdom of the mob, what happens with this information is that it's disproved and pushed down and doesn't rise up above a certain level."

The problem, moderator Firestone said, was that some observers were too sanguine that misinformation falls to the bottom. "I'm not saying that misinformation doesn't come out in the mainstream media as well," he said, "but I think that misinformation is out there. Eventually it falls, but there are some consequences during the period when it doesn't."

NOLA.com's Donley, who inhabits both worlds—traditional journalism and the new media—tried to sort it out for the conference. He said he was uncomfortable with the label "citizen journalism," although he didn't have a better name for the phenomenon. He also said that he didn't subscribe to the notion that the wisdom of the mob equated to journalism. Whatever one calls it, however, he said the experience of Katrina represented a changed dynamic:

The fact is, when you talk about credibility, the biggest gaffes and egregious errors that occurred during Katrina were stories that passed through the hands of us professional journalists. Nobody can deny that. On the other hand, the very first reports [that] we had of life-threatening flooding in New Orleans came from citizens typing it into cell phones. The very first news we had of clear levee breaks, of looting, of a shooting death, or a suicide in the Superdome—every one of those things we heard first from citizens who we were encouraging to have a two-way dialogue with us.

Donley echoed a point made by Firestone that the new media had fostered a two-way of flow of information, in contrast to the old paradigm in which information flows down from government and media to a passive audience. “I would really encourage everybody to think about this new media age that we’re in, where the audience isn’t playing that game anymore,” Donley said. “We have had a revolution.” Rising generations, he said, are getting their information from multiple digital sources, and for journalists to regain trust, “we have to position ourselves as the shepherds or guides to pick out the wheat from the chaff.”

Jon Donley

Building Trust in an Era of Distrust

Katrina did more than devastate New Orleans and the Gulf Coast; it deepened preexisting divides between American institutions, government and the media, and, to varying degrees, between those institutions and citizens. All levels of government were battered during the storm. Not the least of government’s self-inflicted injuries came from its failure to communicate effectively with the people who depend on reliable information in times of crisis. That was particularly true of populations

that were most dependent on government: elderly residents in nursing homes and the urban poor who were unable to escape the storm.

For the media, the experience was mixed. It emerged with a renewed sense of its need to aggressively question, even to confront, authority as a surrogate for citizens, particularly those who are poor and disadvantaged. At the same time, the media found reason for introspection on its own failings to present an accurate picture during disasters and its role as an information shepherd in a changing digital environment. For example, the media coverage drew protests from African American leaders who complained that the exaggerated violence fed a racial stereotype. In one set of controversial photographs from separate news agencies, blacks were said to be “looting” and whites “finding” supplies as they waded through the water. Some observers complained that even calling the evacuees “refugees” invoked a third world stereotype with racial overtones.

The issue of trust—and how to rebuild it on all fronts—arose often during the conference.

“The trust between government and the press is pretty low right now,” said George Foresman of DHS. “And it makes it hard for me to do my job in securing the homeland from natural disasters or terrorism because there are certain things that we are never going to make public, but at the same time there is information that we do need to get out, and it’s a tough battle.”

The challenge for conference participants was whether the lessons of Katrina would lead to trust building—a topic that moderator Firestone said has been a long-standing focus of the Aspen Institute. The discussion fell into three categories:

- More openness—access and transparency—during disasters, notwithstanding national security limitations and the structural and cultural chasms that separate government and the press.
- More collaboration among media and between government and media, taking into account the distinct roles of the media and government in a democracy and inbred competitiveness among news organizations.
- More exchanges between stakeholders to foster engagement, recognizing both that citizens are part of the new media envi-

ronment and that public apathy about personal preparedness persists even after the events of September 11 and Katrina.

This concept of shared responsibility as first informers provided an interlocking theme for the conference discussion of trust building. Firestone embraced this description: "I love that phrase because it is not just the press who are first informers, it's the public who are first informers, and the government. So we are all first informers."

Access

As Katrina swirled ominously in the Gulf of Mexico the weekend before it struck, Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center near Miami, grew increasingly concerned at the lack of activity in advance of the storm.¹² As several of the conference participants attested, Mayfield did something that is unusual in today's government-press relations: He did not simply rely on his public affairs apparatus; he talked directly to journalists, who had extensive access to him and his center. For example, Donley said, Mayfield called a *Times-Picayune's* reporter on Sunday "and expressed fear for our personal safety...which was a pretty unusual step."

The point isn't that certain agencies of the federal government did a good job communicating but that Mayfield provided something the journalists said they need more of: direct access to operational leaders and subject matter experts (SMEs), instead of public information officers (PIOs) whose job is to manage the message. The journalists also called for direct access to the scene of the disaster and to recovery missions, both of which sometimes were denied during Katrina.

WWL-TV's Chris Slaughter recounted a television crew that was stopped at the point of a National Guardsman's rifle, and he compared the ability to obtain access to local disaster officials as akin to getting an audience with the Pope. Slaughter said state officials were only slightly more accessible, and federal officials were slow to appear.

Martha Carr, assistant city editor of the *Times-Picayune* and part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Katrina reporting team, described the "primitive" conditions that followed Katrina when reporters literally had to track down officials. Journalists who were acclimated to telephones, Rolodexes, e-mail, and web sites found themselves bereft of these modern tools, practicing old-time, shoe-leather reporting with

little help from the government. Carr described how reporters would scribble the names and cell phone numbers of officials they had encountered on a white board in a makeshift newsroom in a downtown hotel. “On the ground,” she said, “there was no federal presence in New Orleans, or there was one FEMA official in the entire city. So, it was a while before the emergency operations in Baton Rouge were up and running and anything coordinated was actually happening.”

Foresman predicted a new posture in DHS in providing access to the media. “Some of the lessons learned that came out of Katrina are that

“...we understand the importance of transparency, and we have to do a better job of articulating to the media.”

George Foresman

we understand the importance of transparency, and we have to do a better job of articulating to the media,” he said. “We’re going to open it up to the press to be embedded with our people who are out in the field, and we’re not going to do it in the context of trying to control the message or manage the message.”

Participants agreed that promptly providing more centralized information centers would be critical in the next disaster. Chet Lunner of DHS said that the department, which is charged with establishing interagency JICs, was prepared to send in teams of communication specialists at “the first sign of a cloud over Texas.” The logistics were being tackled, Lunner said, but the bigger issue—trust—runs two ways.

Speaking from the governmental perspective, Lunner said, “The second step is that trust that you have to develop before you dare say something that is not 100 percent [fact] based and not be afraid of, ‘Ah hah! Got ‘em!’ in the headline.” He pointedly disagreed with a comment by CNN’s David Bohrman that the governmental instinct in a crisis was to hide. “They’re not hiding. They are sort of defensive, in a crouch, as opposed to physically or assertively trying to hide something, because [they] don’t trust the media.”

The government officials uniformly said they would not abandon the public information apparatus that is engrained in the governmental culture and hierarchy. “Responsibilities are limited and decided with specificity, and you do not get out of your lane,” said Lunner. “You do

not get to be a GS-14 or GS-15 by going on television, by upstaging your boss. That is a very big cultural issue.”

The rules should change, however, in the disaster zone, said the *Times-Picayune*’s Carr, who argued for preannounced information centers featuring regularized briefings by top officials, not their public information officers. “Where the whole thing goes down now is when you put a PIO up there who largely tells you nothing. We want General Honore [Lt. Gen. Russel Honore, commander of the Pentagon’s Joint Task Force Katrina] to come in once a day, or we want the highest-level federal government official to make an appearance on a fairly [regular basis].... The presence of high level or the semblance of a presence is very key to us.”

CNN’s David Borhman argued for more direct access across the board. He invoked the example of a federal agency that won praise for its accessibility and performance during Katrina: the Coast Guard. Bohrman said other relief agencies should follow the model of empowering more people to speak directly to reporters and funnel less information through officials whose job is to manage the message.

Trent D. Duffy, former deputy press secretary for President George W. Bush, said he agreed with increased access to leaders and experts, but expectations of a free-talking federal bureaucracy were not realistic: “In a perfect world, maybe, but it’s not a perfect world.” Duffy noted that sometimes government must limit access to information; he offered as an example the Bush White House’s planning to create DHS in secret without tipping off the bureaucracy and the interest groups that big changes were afoot.

David E. Garratt, acting director of FEMA’s Recovery Division, also took a firm stance against journalists bypassing the public affairs apparatus. Garratt demurred on one journalist’s idea to create flying teams of SMEs whose sole duty would be to assist communication operations. Although such an idea has merit in an ideal staffing environment, Garratt said, expert resources are in high demand and are likely to be stretched too thin.

On the other hand, Garratt said he would take back to FEMA the idea of institutionalizing daily press briefings by the federal coordinating officer (FCO) on the scene, with the aim that the briefings also could feature other operational leaders and experts at all government levels involved in a recovery effort. “I see no reason why we can’t do

that,” Garratt said. “If we’re doing that in an organized way...I’m the FCO and every day at this time I need to be at the press briefing. It’s much easier for me to organize my schedule and manage my real duties, which is management of the operation.”

The debate over spokespersons versus frontline operators is old. Tucker Eskew, another former top official in the Bush White House’s communications operation, recalled a similar debate in military-media relations early in the Iraq war. “There were always complaints about not having enough of the frontline military operators doing the briefing.

**“Public safety
requires public
information.”**

Tucker Eskew

They don’t want to do that. They don’t see that as their job, but you tug on them and you get them out there sometimes. It’s just a struggle—the subject matter expert versus the briefer. This thing is just always going to be there.”

Cueing off Garratt’s remark about his “real duties,” however, Eskew offered a suggestion from yet another governmental arena—public diplomacy. Eskew noted that Foreign Service officers are evaluated on how well they perform public diplomacy, and similar discipline might be inculcated in disaster officials. “Maybe you could express it this way: Public safety requires public information,” he said. The issue went beyond just giving interviews, Eskew said, and required a shift in the official job description to “advance the cause of this public interest.”

Transparency

Openness requires more than journalistic access to government officials in the disaster zone. It also includes transparency—operating in the open with data and records that are available to the public and the press, including on the Internet.

During the conference, the strongest criticism of the federal disaster establishment on the issue of transparency came from Lucy A. Dalglish, executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. Two years after hurricanes devastated South Florida, Dalglish said, press lawsuits were still pending to find out how FEMA paid disaster claims. Eight months after Katrina, a Freedom of Information Act request to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to disclose its

analysis of pollutants in the flood waters was still unanswered, she said. Since the September 11 attacks and the war on terrorism, she said, the Bush administration has shut off access to enormous amounts of information that previously was routinely publicly available. Dalglish said that exaggerated fear of national security violations had filtered down to state and local emergency managers.

Dalglish said her task, and the task of journalists, was to convince government officials that over the long run transparency can build trust and save lives:

The same information that a terrorist can use to do great damage can possibly give families information about which escape route to use to get away from a nuclear power plant. I think we're going to find that if we have a flu pandemic, the information that can be used to terrorize and scare people can also be used to save their lives. I think what we have to do is work very hard at convincing people that access to information is ultimately going to be our friend.

“I think what we have to do is work very hard at convincing people that access to information is ultimately going to be our friend.”

Lucy Dalglish

Dalglish also did not spare the media, which she said needs to do a better job of being transparent by “explaining to its readers, viewers, its online users where they get information.” Her presentation added zest to the conference, although the exposure of old fault lines drew little agreement from the government participants.

Former White House spokesman Trent Duffy defended the EPA for what he described as a necessarily cautious approach to disclosing the contents of the flood waters. “A lot of the hesitancy to say what was in the water is because they don’t want to get it wrong. It does take a lot of time when you’re dealing with public health,” Duffy said, noting the air quality scare that gripped New York after the collapse of the Twin Towers.

Although DHS Under Secretary Foresman promised more openness, he argued that being transparent on hurricane relief was one thing, but

transparency on a potential terrorist attack brought national security issues into play. Foresman described the “conundrum” as follows:

We’re talking about Katrina because it’s much easier to be transparent with Katrina, but what happens if tomorrow it is al-Qaeda, and we’ve got valuable national security issues that we’re dealing with? This is the big balance. This is probably, I think, where the greatest amount of tension has occurred, particularly local and state relationships with the media. What is sensitive information that is source sensitive that you don’t want the enemy to know about? So frankly, a lot of tension has been created.

The issue ultimately is trusting, Foresman said. “What I took from [Lucy Dalglish’s] conversation is that you don’t have any trust in government,” he said. “There has got to be an element of trust that if we’re going to withhold something—that you have a reasonable expectation as the press—that we are withholding it for perfectly good reasons.”

Walter Isaacson, former managing editor of *Time* magazine and former chairman and chief executive officer of CNN and now president and CEO of the Aspen Institute, had a different approach: Take a chance with transparency, even at the risk of being victimized by “gotcha journalism.” Isaacson, a New Orleans native, was speaking as vice chairman of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, which is charged with overseeing approximately \$10 billion in federal recovery aid. Isaacson said the Authority was experimenting with “absolute transparency.” He credited necessity, not altruism, for the decision, citing Louisiana’s long history of public corruption and public distrust. He promised that the financing would be an open book available to the media and the public over the Internet and in other ways.

Isaacson said the authority was not naïve and had a “deep worry” that “as we put everything out, thousands of line items and everything we spent, they’re going to find something and going to play gotcha on us. They’re going to find the alligator farm the marketing director buried in there, even if it is for \$5,000.” Emphasizing that he was speaking hypothetically about the alligator farm, he put a question to “both sides of the fence” in the conference: “If you really do put everything out there, does that inoculate you somewhat from the discovery of the

‘gotcha’ that if you put in context, isn’t so bad, but if you pull it out of context, it is bad?”

Former Bush White House aide Tucker Eskew, now an international communications consultant, said there was bargain to transparency. “You will get ‘got’ at some point,” Eskew said. “What I advise people inside government and within [political] campaigns, when they’ve been ‘got,’ is not to be defensive, particularly if they’ve been transparent and they’re trying to remain transparent.”

From the journalism side, David Bohrman of CNN said, “I admit it’s not a total inoculation.” The value of transparency that government officials in times of crisis often miss, he suggested, is that forthrightness is an important image to convey even if the information is incomplete and preliminary. “Let’s tell people what we know, even if we don’t know everything,” Bohrman said.

**“Let’s tell people
what we know,
even if we don’t
know everything.”**

David Bohrman

Multidirectional Flow of Information

The military—and, by extension, disaster relief officials—uses a term that is related to transparency. The military calls it “situational awareness”—a quality in short supply during Katrina. Feeding that awareness in a time of crisis is the upward flow of information from the media. Recognition of this critical role prompted discussions by the conference participants about how the media’s performance not only affects the actions of its audience but also shapes decisions by government and how government is adapting to the new digital environment that is both creating new information sources and accelerating the flow of information.

Richard E. Besser, director of the Coordinating Office for Terrorism Preparedness and Emergency Response at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), recalled difficulties during Katrina in countering misinformation that was flowing in the media and making critical decisions about when to send in public health teams. “I spent a lot of time during Katrina talking to the press about why we did not expect to see a cholera epidemic in the Gulf Coast and why we did not expect to see a typhoid fever epidemic,” Besser said. “There were days

when those [epidemic] stories were on the tickers. They were untrue.” He also recalled the anecdotal reporting from the mainstream media on the high level of violence in the disaster zone and said those reports “really drove a lot of decision making” regarding the safety of sending

“If we waited for the government to release information during a disaster, it would be days before the public would know anything.”

Martha Carr

in public health teams. “The word was that there was looting going on; it’s not safe to send a team in unless we have federal marshals with them. Over time, we got a sense that it wasn’t right.”

Journalists and the governmental officials at the conference diverged on the issue of how fast information should flow in the quest for transparency. A small group of government and press participants broke off as a working group that formulated two sets of objectives to achieve during a crisis—one for the media and one for government (see Appendix, “Media and Government Working Group”). Although the working group

found commonality on several points, it also found that government officials frequently come down on the side of accuracy first, speed of dissemination second. Journalists often put the premium on speed, adjusting the story as it unfolds. As the *Times-Picayune’s* Martha Carr put it, the objective should be “to get information fast, and then to revise.”

In a follow up e-mail, Carr explained that during Katrina the complete deterioration of local institutions made it impossible to verify some information with authorities. Her newspaper conveyed this lack of verification to readers. She also noted that the *Times-Picayune* was the first to publish an extensive report on the rumors and myths being spread by the media and local officials. “My point is simply that if we waited for the government to release information during a disaster, it would be days before the public would know anything. So we reported what we saw, what we heard, and what we could verify using the same journalistic principles that govern our non-disaster coverage.”

Getting it right during the fog of a disaster is an old problem for journalists, and one of the early fears of traditional journalists was that the Internet would accelerate news and erode one of the cherished val-

ues of deadline reporting. That ethic was famously expressed in the motto of the long defunct International News Service: “get it first, but first, get it right.”¹³

In Katrina the motto was tested by technology that allows news to unfold as it is gathered, particularly on television and the Internet. The psychology of self-correcting information was also tested. The problem, former White House spokesman Trent Duffy said, was that the “first perceptions die hard” and the follow-up stories correcting the early reports came after many Americans were paying less attention to the story. Duffy said he doubted the number of Americans who believed the stories of exaggerated violence had dwindled significantly.

One journalist made a plea for the old-fashioned restraint. “We really need to police ourselves and make sure we don’t contribute to the sense of chaos by reporting something that is not the case or reporting it incorrectly,” said WWL-TV’s Chris Slaughter, who put that responsibility on news managers such as himself.

The other issue—how well government is adapting to the new media environment that accelerates information flow—was regarded as both a challenge for cautious governmental hierarchies and an opportunity in which the new media can be used to improve situational awareness. Charles D. Connor, senior vice president for communication and marketing for the American Red Cross, said that during Katrina his staff “paid a lot of attention to blogs and went from one to the other seeing what people were saying.” Connor said that one benefit was discovering rumors that had to be combated or discovering problems in the field that had not funneled back to headquarters. “There is a service delivery problem in Jackson, Mississippi. Well, sometimes our headquarters people don’t know that.” He said efforts to monitor blogs and other new media were “getting bigger by the day.”

Whether federal agencies are taking full advantage of the feedback opportunities offered by new media was unclear. FEMA and DHS have

“If there is a way to mine citizen blogs in the same way that we are getting feeds from all sorts of different places, it would give us some granularity that we’re currently lacking.”

Richard Besser

similar monitoring operations in their public affairs operations, officials said. DHS Under Secretary Foresman said such monitoring was being improved. “We now consider the media to be one of our official feeds of operational pictures as it relates to an emergency or disaster,” he said. “For whatever reason—I don’t know—everybody was relying on the traditional channels of government feeding [information] up to us. We’re going to be surfing blogs, surfing the networks, surfing the newspapers.” The CDC’s Besser said there was probably more to do: “If there is a way to mine citizen blogs in the same way that we are getting feeds from all sorts of different places, it would give us some granularity that we’re currently lacking.”

Collaboration

One of the media workhorses in Katrina was an old standby: radio. The medium’s success, however, wasn’t based solely on the fact that people in the disaster zone could access the medium through battery-powered sets when the electricity failed. The up-to-the-minute information radio stations broadcast was the result of an extraordinary partnership between rival radio companies that four days after the storm created the United Broadcasters of New Orleans. Entercom Communications Corp., owner of New Orleans’s powerful news-talk station WWL-AM, joined Clear Channel Radio in its Baton Rouge facility, keeping the signal alive with shared transmission and content. Radio personalities from both companies sat shoulder to shoulder to keep up a steady flow of news and discussion, taking calls from distressed listeners. The Louisiana State Police placed officers in the station to help out with the emergency calls. The programming went out on six channels owned by the two companies—two AM and four FM—ultimately to be carried by more than a dozen stations along the Gulf Coast.¹⁴

Barbara Cochran, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), offered this example of collaboration as another important lesson of Katrina. Cochran recounted how Entercom and Clear Channel pooled resources and how Clear Channel dropped its music programming for “wall-to-wall news and talk, and they were the one medium that people in New Orleans could actually access.” She noted that television broadcasters also pooled helicopter coverage that provided the dramatic pictures of flooding and rescues. Cochran said

such cooperative efforts require media professionals to overcome another cultural inhibition in the industry, however:

What strikes me...as I hear the news people talk about their planning is that it is buried within the news organization, and it is not reaching out and engaging.... I know from hearing reports that there is some reluctance to think about combining resources because everybody is so competitive, but maybe there is a way to do that.

Hearst-Argyle's Frederick Young pointed to an industry advisory council that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) established after the September 11 attacks. The Media Security and Reliability Council, on which Young has served, has developed templates for broadcasters to use in planning for disasters, individually and in cooperation with other local media and government. Indeed, in March 2006 the council issued guidelines for local market cooperatives to "share the wealth" in times of emergency—much as the radio companies did on an ad hoc basis during Katrina.¹⁵

The conference participants also discussed strategies for collaborative efforts between media and communities. One emphasis was the need for mainstream media to reach out—not only to others like themselves but also to niche media that reach populations with special needs and interests, including ethnic media. Another proposal was for local media to link with community groups, including churches and activist organizations, to sponsor joint forums to bring together the weather forecasters or reporters who cover the story with government and other disaster experts. In the past, such community outreach often has been conducted individually by news organizations; the idea here was to encourage joint effort by media, said WWL-TV's Chris Slaughter. He offered himself as an example of how journalists for competing news organizations need to have more professional contact: "I think we need to find common ground that we work on to benefit citizens"—a word he said he used purposefully instead of "consumers."

Collaboration between media and government officials was a more difficult conversation, much like those that addressed access and transparency. In fact, the "C word" was offered as a compromise after the notion of partnership was dismissed by both sides of the divide. DHS

Under Secretary George Foresman remarked that early in his career he would talk about “this fabulous partnership we had in public safety with the media. One of my more introspective employees reminded me one day that there is not a partnership...that there is a natural tension, and it’s a healthy tension.” Joe Hight, managing editor of *The Oklahoman* and president of the Dart Center for Trauma and Journalism, said, “Terminology is very important, and I can never imagine the media being a ‘partner’ with government. It will never happen, and I can tell you that if that word comes out to my peers, they will repulse in anger. I think the media will be open to ‘collaboration.’”

“Journalists shouldn’t consider themselves first responders, but they are certainly among the first to respond.”

Joe Hight

Even the concept of collaboration proved easier to discuss in the abstract than the specific—a point that became evident as conference participants tried to sketch the boundaries. The RTNDA’s Barbara Cochran suggested that journalists be classified as first responders—a status Hight shied away from. “Journalists shouldn’t consider themselves first responders,” he said, “but they are certainly among the first to respond. They certainly play a role in first response.” Hight

said the emphasis should be on training journalists for that experience. Foresman posed the question of whether government should train journalists for disaster coverage. The question went unanswered, and there was surprisingly little enthusiasm among the journalists for granting themselves special status—elite credentials, press pools, or embedding journalists in rescue units as the military did in the Iraq war. One reason was the new environment. “Who do you decide to embed now?” asked Hight. “Do you embed new media?”

One idea on collaboration that drew a warmer reception was Cochran’s argument that government should enlist the media more often in planning for disaster. “How do we get government and news media to plan together, because I think that it is so critical?” The RTNDA recently completed a program that hosted workshops in 10 cities on preparedness for terrorism attacks that featured a mix of journalists and emergency management officials. “One of the lessons that

we learned from doing these seminars,” she said, “is that it wasn’t just that the media got educated in what the government was up to. The government got educated in how the media thinks and what their likely reactions would be.”

Robert Long, news director for NBC’s KNBC-TV in Los Angeles, said he had come around on the idea of collaborative planning after Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa proposed a city government-news media committee on homeland security issues. Long said one result of the group’s first meeting was that city officials learned that the city’s major television stations were already tied together by fiber optic cables. “If you get to any one place, then you are connected to all of us,” Long said. “This was startling to them. I’m hoping this is the beginning of a continuing dialogue, where local government officials find out more about how we operate, and we are able to do some hard-lining of relationships before the next [catastrophe] hits Los Angeles.”

“I’m hoping this is the beginning of a continuing dialogue...and we are able to do some hard-lining of relationships before the next [catastrophe] hits Los Angeles.”

Robert Long

The Power of Distributive Networks

Overcoming competition among media and bridging the divide between media and government are important issues, though hardly new ones. Trying to envision collaborative efforts between the traditional and corporate media sphere and the dynamic digital world of bloggers and citizen journalists took the conference participants into less-charted territory.

Recognition that the old and new media worlds operate with different distributive models formed the foundation of the discussion. As KNBC-TV’s Long noted, most major news organizations operate on the industrial model perfected by his network’s corporate owner, General Electric. The company has a discrete distribution system that pushes content to its customers. Even as news organizations have moved their content onto the web, the Internet efforts are largely versions of the old

media, still distributing to what in theory is an expanded customer base. For example, Long noted, at the dawn of the Internet age there was an expectation by newspapers that they could tap television partners for video to enhance their web sites. That generally hasn't happened, he said, at least in local media markets.

The Internet can quickly create distributive networks that share content across media and corporate boundaries.

As the crisis atmosphere of Katrina demonstrated, however, the Internet can quickly create distributive networks that share content across media and corporate boundaries. The examples of WWL-TV and Yahoo and creation of the Slidell Hurricane Damage blog were an important aspect of the new networks, and the crisis also stimulated several other spontaneous efforts by both old and new media that tried to match missing relatives among evacuees and raise

money for relief organizations.

Barbara Palser, an Internet expert writing for the *American Journalism Review*, counted 60 separate online bulletin boards that were created to locate missing people within two weeks of the storm.¹⁶ These sites included major portals such as Yahoo and Craigslist, an array of newspaper and television sites, web sites hosted by government and relief organizations, and individual technologists, including a group of programmers who enlisted about 2,000 volunteers to create a database called the Katrina PeopleFinder Project. Another expert, Zephyr Teachout, who helped create the Internet operation of Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign, has argued that these networks were more than just the novelty of the catastrophe at work. "The possibilities for integrating citizen journalism and mainstream are revealed by disasters, and the crude channels and architectures set up for Katrina will likely be used more in the nondisaster realm."¹⁷ At the same time, both experts have written that the networks were, in Palser's words, "splintered and maddeningly redundant," crying out for collaboration and advanced planning.

A second working group of the conference proposed to tackle a piece of the problem with an experiment that KNBC-TV's Robert Long offered to try in earthquake-prone Los Angeles, with the help of the

conference's two bloggers, Oberkirch and Evslin. The plan has two parts: bringing old and new media together to talk about cooperating before and during a disaster, and using Long's television station to create some novel sharing of content and resources during a disaster.

The first step is to try to organize a "BarCamp"—online jargon for a gathering of technologists who respond to an all-comers call to literally camp out to share ideas. In this case, Long promised to line up his fellow mainstream journalists, and Oberkirch promised to help with a call to the blogosphere to come together for "a disaster communication project where we share information and optimize to help word get out faster, quicker, better, cheaper." The results, Oberkirch said, would be documented on a web site for additional information sharing. Although the project sounded improbable, Long said he was serious about staging the meeting, which he jokingly called a "hootenanny."¹⁸

The second step drew from an argument put forward by Evslin that wireless Internet communication, known as WiFi, was a technology that proved itself during Katrina. Instead of replacing or relying on wired telecommunications, he said, dispersed WiFi systems would be more survivable, and he noted that New Orleans was experimenting with a municipal WiFi system. As a step in pushing that idea forward, Long agreed to pursue incorporation of Wi-Fi transponders in selected broadcast facilities set aside for emergencies that could be used by the public and citizen journalists.

"The idea," Evslin said, "is that both professional media people and everybody else who gets to be the person on the scene, whether they took a picture with their camera phone or have a text message of importance...will find some connectivity or know where to go to look for some connectivity in a case where there's been a general communications breakdown."

Long said he was not proposing to provide WiFi coverage for the entire Los Angeles television market—all 55,000 square miles of it—but

"The idea is that both professional media people and everybody else who gets to be the person on the scene...will find some connectivity."

Tom Evslin

a few dispersed “hotspots” could keep information flowing in a major earthquake. He said his fellow broadcasters might join in as a public service campaign that could advertise the hotspots to the public. He said the cost would be minimal, although there might be some political hurdles. (Major telecommunication providers have opposed free systems that compete with them.) Long said that the idea for Los Angeles had merit, however: “Chances are that one zone will survive a major earthquake, and then we’re all linked together after that.”

Exchanges

Although the suggestion to hold a BarCamp was a first for an Aspen conference, it was offered as a form of exchange that can build engagement even when collaboration seems unlikely. The conference participants grappled with the notion of exchanges in two ways. The first was the conventional sense of simply holding a meeting to swap knowledge. The goal was best captured by the *Times-Picayune*’s Martha Carr: “Sometimes I think part of the tension between government and the media is not understanding each other’s business or each other’s organizations fully. I do think sometimes it just has to be demystified.” Second, exchanges are opportunities for a message to penetrate enough to engage an audience and heighten awareness. DHS Under Secretary Foresman offered the conference the concept of the “teachable moment.”

Tabletop Exercises

Emergency managers, local officials, and the public first met Hurricane Katrina by a different name—Pam. In July 2004, FEMA sponsored a tabletop exercise that simulated the arrival of the fictitious Hurricane Pam, a category 3 storm that in simulation looked a lot like Katrina did. More than 250 officials participated, and the coverage in the *Times-Picayune* led to a dire front-page warning: “It’s a recipe for appalling destruction, and it could happen here.”¹⁹ That this particular exercise apparently stimulated little action is another issue, but several conference participants pointed to tabletop exercises such as that involving Pam as a way to create valuable exchanges that should involve the media more often, through coverage or even role playing.

Federal officials voiced support for more media involvement, although with the caveat that some drills might be off limits because of classified information. “That’s going to be far less sanitized doing Hurricane Pam than if you’re doing a bioterrorism [exercise],” said FEMA’s David Garratt. DHS’s Chet Lunner said that local and state officials would invite media more often to participate in tabletop and other exercises, but they feared embarrassment.

“They are designed for people to make mistakes,” Lunner said of the exercises. “The lieutenant governor calls out the wrong division of something to fight the flood, and they learn from that, so there is a natural reluctance to invite the media to watch people screw up.”

The risk is worth taking, Barbara Cochran of the RTNDA responded. “The downside of reporting all the mistakes that are made is far outweighed by the positives and the information that they are going to be able to communicate to the local community about the fact that preparation is going on.”

The CDC’s Richard Besser said he would pursue engaging the media in tabletop exercises around the public health aspects of pandemic flu. “I don’t think...that it would be a downside for people to see some of the gaps because tabletops are really valuable in identifying the gaps, and a lot of the gaps are around public preparedness. So, by engaging media, we’ll be able to share that message.”

Conference participants discussed other forms of exchanges, including periodic lunches or exchange visits by media and government personnel for simple orientations. Cochran said that the real value, however, lies in achieving the initial exchange, which can lead to follow-up meetings. “It’s often the first time that media and government are meeting together,” she said. “What you would hope is there would then be coming into existence a regular group that would get together quarterly, or maybe once you get it all down, every six months to go over this again and talk about what happens in the event of a disaster.”

“Sometimes I think part of the tension between government and the media is not understanding each other’s business or each other’s organizations fully.”

Martha Carr

Teachable Moments

Even after the September 11 attacks and Katrina, Americans are proving stubborn in recognizing the threat of disaster and the need to individually prepare. DHS Under Secretary George Foresman noted that polls have found that fewer than one in five households have devised plans for what to do in an emergency, including where to shelter and how to reconnect with family members who might be separated in a crisis. “The simple fact is that we all want to be safe,” Foresman said. “We all want our families to be safe. We all want our co-workers to be safe. There’s this wide gap between wanting to be prepared and being prepared.”

In part, Foresman said, the problem is one of communication—getting the message of preparedness to penetrate in a fragmented media environment. He offered a “teachable moment” strategy that he had borrowed from the federal fire prevention effort. The key is timing fire prevention public education campaigns around what otherwise are tragic events. “Whenever we have a major fatality-related fire in this country, typically...two or more deaths where children are involved, this is a teachable moment,” Foresman said. “Our National Fire Administration goes out to the national media, the weekly newspaper, the local radio station, with fire information because it’s a teachable moment.” The goal, he said, was to extend that approach to hurricanes, terrorism, earthquakes, cyberattacks, flu pandemics, and other potential disasters. Unfortunately, Foresman added, because of the controversy over the response to Katrina, the government had “missed a good teachable moment for the vast majority of the American public.”

Foresman’s comments struck a chord with the conference, where the focus already was on the role of citizens in the media environment. The teachable moment morphed into “Preparedness Week.” The proponent of the idea was *The Oklahoman’s* Joe Hight, who said he got the idea from an effort launched in March 2005 by the news media to enhance public awareness and support for open government. The effort is called “Sunshine Week,” and hundreds of news organizations have participated.²⁰

A working group of the conference participants proposed scheduling the event during a week in May before the start of hurricane season, enlisting national journalism organizations that represent a

cross-section of media, and focusing on personal preparedness. The idea also raised the inevitable questions: Who would fund it, how could it be tailored to excite all forms of media, how could it be designed as a national effort but customized for localities, and how would it mesh with ongoing public education campaigns of government? For example, DHS's Chet Lunner noted that September already is a federally designated "Preparedness Month." Given that the month is in the heart of hurricane season, Lunner conceded, "It's not terribly timely."

The conference participants did not settle on the timing of the effort—whether to stay with September period, around the anniversary of the September 11 attacks, or to peg it to the start of hurricane season—but CNN's David Bohrman made the point that to make the effort effective, the public education effort must be broadly based.

Bohrman harkened to the duck-and-cover drills of the Cold War era in which he participated as a child. "You've got to get every state and every school district and [everyone] on board with it happening, so that it is absolutely pervasive," he said.

The RTNDA's Barbara Cochran said, "I think what's different about this idea, though, is that it gets the media in as full partners in the effort." Cochran also said that looking for the teachable moment should become part of the media's mindset as well as the government's. "It has to be pounded away with frequency," she said. "It's not going to be a one-shot deal."

Timing is not the only factor that determines whether messages penetrate. The nature of the message, how it's framed, and who the messenger is also matter. The latter issue engaged the participants in an area that deserved more attention than the conference could give: What exchange mechanisms can work to reach the people who were left behind in Katrina's water? How does the message penetrate to people who are poor, immobile, non-English speaking, elderly, or handicapped?

John J. Oliver Jr., publisher and CEO of the Baltimore-based Afro-American Newspapers community newspaper chain, proposed tapping into minority communities by enlisting their leaders as spokespersons

"There's this wide gap between wanting to be prepared and being prepared."

George Foresman

in public education campaigns, including ethnic news media in staging forums, and connecting with community networks that often are off the mainstream's radar. A conference working group agreed with most of Oliver's suggestions and proposed including ethnic and community-based outreach in any public education efforts (see Appendix, "Media and Community Working Group").

Although the racial and class implications of Katrina penetrated into the mass media only after several days had passed, Oliver said there was instant recognition in the African American community, as well as communal anger that he said he had not observed since at least the Los Angeles riots of the early the 1990s. He said the anger also stimulated networking between church leaders, civic groups, and journalists for predominantly black radio and newspapers. "That network is not formalized, but it still exists because distress is still very much evident in my community," Oliver said.

There is a larger lesson from Katrina, however—a bitter one in Oliver's community that he said will take a lot of trust-building to heal. "I think in September 2005 this country took a big step backwards, and I think a conference like this, and many more conferences, really are needed."

Conclusion

Will Katrina's legacy be deeper distrust, or will it serve as a teachable moment? The thrust of the conversation at the conference suggested the latter more than the former; as Oliver noted, however, more conversation is needed. There seemed to be recognition by journalists and government officials alike that the two institutions won't begin to trust each other until there is behavior modification on both sides. In the language of strategic arms negotiations, both realize the need for a little mutual de-escalation, in addition to the demystification sought by the *Times-Picayune's* Martha Carr. At heart, journalists know that if they treat their craft as a blood sport, they are unlikely to get the access and transparency that is critical during a crisis. Similarly, government officials understand that there is no license to spin doctor when lives are at stake. Both are beginning to understand they are less in charge of the information flow than they once were.

At the heart of the case that Katrina witnessed a transformation in communication is the argument made by Yahoo's Bill Gannon, reflecting on the experience. "What we realized is that users wanted not just

to read information, but they wanted to be empowered,” he said. “What they wanted to do was get personally involved either through a message board or simply by making a donation.”²¹ How to channel and sustain that empowerment is the challenge of the next crisis. If there is a new universal role for media, government, and citizens as first informers, it comes with new responsibilities as well. Individuals will need to do a better job of assessing the sources of information themselves; journalists will need to do a better job of playing the role of information guides; and government will need to do a better job of reacting more forthrightly and quickly in a new age of crisis communication.

“What we realized is that users wanted not just to read information, but they wanted to be empowered.”

Bill Gannon

Notes

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Afterword

Jon Funabiki

I didn't realize that Hurricane Katrina had kicked up its own storm in American journalism until I sensed the unmistakable tone of exasperation and disbelief in the voice of Robert Siegel, the unflappable host of National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, over my car radio.

It was Thursday, September 1—four days after Katrina hit New Orleans and the Gulf Coast with the force of a 10-megaton nuclear explosion, leaving behind heartbreaking scenes of death, destruction and desperation. I turned up the volume to hear Siegel, with increasing impatience, repeatedly ask Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff why help had not yet come to more than 2,000 men, women, and children stranded in the New Orleans Convention Center. Journalists from NPR, CNN, FOX-TV, and other news organizations had described miserable, dire conditions—even corpses—at the Convention Center, yet Chertoff appeared to be unaware of the situation and warned against overreacting to a “rumor.”

“But Mr. Secretary,” Siegel interrupted without apology. “When you say we shouldn't listen to *rumors*, these are things that are coming from reporters who have not only covered many, many hurricanes, they have covered wars and refugee camps. These aren't *rumors*. They say there are thousands of people there.”

At that moment, I silently cheered Siegel and the many other journalists who were overcoming great odds, risking death, and challenging authorities to report on our nation's most far-reaching natural disaster. Their eyewitness accounts and tough questioning, I realized, exposed vivid evidence that emergency officials were bungling the rescue effort, allowing people to die for lack of water, food, and medical care. Moreover, Katrina triggered unexpected shock waves in journalism and the media in the United States. By the time Siegel ended his interview with a polite but curt “thank you” to Secretary Chertoff, I had begun to mentally catalog the evidence of a watershed moment in media history.

True, it all started inauspiciously. Many of the ills and weaknesses of today's highly competitive, 24/7 news business were still at play when Katrina started to build up energy over the Gulf of Mexico and began

to bear down on the Louisiana coast. The overhyped hurricane story has become something of an inside joke for television journalists who lean on sensational visuals to grab viewer's attention. Shots of wind-

Far more than hype, Katrina was a real story with real consequences, and journalists were itching to return to serious, aggressive reporting.

blown reporters pointing to knocked down trees and signposts—a ridiculous cliché in the business—were in abundance during the early stages of Katrina. Once the full blast of Katrina's winds and rain whipped through New Orleans, news coverage also was marred by reporting of rumors, false reports, and unsubstantiated allegations. Remember the sensational stories of gunfire directed at rescue helicopters or of a girl being murdered inside the Superdome? They can now be chalked up as the kind of mistakes made under the pressure of dead-

lines, scoop-making, and pack reporting.

Yet despite problems such as these—some of which are unavoidable in crisis situations—Katrina generated a far different legacy for the media. Consider the following developments:

Journalism recovered its voice and returned to the high ground. For years, the American journalist has suffered a tar-and-feather reputation. Journalism has been scarred by high-profile scandals (remember Jayson Blair and the *New York Times*?), neutered by cutbacks imposed by corporate bean counters, and criticized for substituting investigative reports with a grab-bag of crime, sex, and Hollywood-lite. In our highly polarized environment, the news media have been buffeted by furious attacks from the right, left, and in-between for alleged political bias. Prominent journalists complain of receiving anonymous death threats against themselves and their families or of being targeted by e-mail campaigns from the “patriotism police” if their stories are construed to be critical of the Bush administration. Journalists privately acknowledge that they pull punches on sensitive stories, and newsroom morale is at an all-time low.

Something clicked with Katrina, however. Perhaps it was the sheer scale of the disaster and the realization that the real tragedy—bureau-

cratic bungling—was not so much a natural disaster but a human one. Far more than hype, Katrina was a real story with real consequences, and journalists were itching to return to serious, aggressive reporting. To their credit, news companies opened their checkbooks to make this kind of reporting possible. The fact that this disaster was unfolding on home turf—rather than some far-off foreign location—meant that many journalists also experienced the disaster personally. Who will forget ABC Television’s Robin Roberts breaking down into tears as she talked about the plight of her own relatives in Mississippi? This personal involvement helped to imbue the best of the journalism with a sense of empathy and dignity. “The public often says they find journalists callous or insensitive when they confront victims of disaster,” comments Barbara Cochran, president of the Radio-Television News Directors Association. “This time there was no mistaking that reporters were outraged and shaken by what they were witnessing.”

The unfortunate reality has been that often a sensational story or crisis...is required to shock American journalists into taking a hard look at race....

Journalism rediscovered America’s deepest division—race and class. As many media watchers have pointed out, journalists seemed oblivious at first to the fact that the overwhelming majority of people trapped in New Orleans were black and poor. Whereas the more affluent white residents had the wherewithal to pack up and flee in their cars, one of every five residents of New Orleans lives below the poverty line, doesn’t own a car, and is most likely a person of color. The inequities of race and class were so obvious that they became the subtext of virtually all Katrina coverage. “As uncomfortable as it may have made us at times, the coverage also was invaluable for raising two topics so often taboo in American discourse: race and class,” wrote *USA Today* television critic Robert Bianco. “It seems clear that the images streaming out of New Orleans forced the subject into dinner-table conversations across America.” The unfortunate reality has been that often a sensational story or crisis—the 1960s urban riots, the Rodney King police brutality case, the O.J. Simpson trial, and others—is required to

shock American journalists into taking a hard look at race, before they quickly drop the topic again. Journalism professor Erna Smith of San Francisco State University faults ignorance, longstanding journalistic practices, and lack of initiative for the news media's amnesia. She notes

...mainstream journalists...still have a long ways to go in understanding and serving the diverse reality that exists in America today.

that although the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* has done exceptional reporting on poverty, racism, and the danger of the levees in New Orleans over the years, the national media failed to take notice. Even the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which have won prizes for publishing stories on these issues, had to acknowledge that most of their stories about New Orleans in the recent past dwelled on more pleasant topics, such as jazz and jambalaya. "The most frequent sources of news are officials, so if officials

aren't talking about race and poverty, neither will the TV journalists," Smith explains. "Journalists are slaves to officials."

Katrina highlighted the important value of the ethnic news media.

The specialized news media that serve the black, Asian, Latino, and other ethnic and immigrant communities are in the midst of a renaissance as the United States becomes increasingly diverse. Although most other Americans are unaware of these media, these newspapers, television and radio programs, and Internet operations are attracting huge audiences. Because of their understanding of language, culture, history, and hot-button issues, they can provide news that is tailored to these communities—news that mainstream journalists often miss. *La Opinion*, *Korea Times*, and *World Journal* were among the ethnic newspapers keeping a special eye on the needs of the tens of thousands of Hispanic, Korean, and Chinese residents of the Gulf Coast who were affected by Hurricane Katrina. Unlike their mainstream counterparts, the ethnic news media often are more willing to serve as "advocates" for their communities. A prime example occurred when several thousand Vietnamese evacuees from the Gulf Coast streamed into Houston. Radio Saigon Houston, a popular Vietnamese-language AM station, immediately sprang into action, helping to set up a relocation center in an Asian shopping mall

and broadcasting appeals for food, shelter, and clothing. “I believe a journalist sometimes has to put down his pen and camera to help people,” station founder Thuy Vu told the Associated Press.

Yahoo for the Internet and other new technologies. Hurricane Katrina triggered exciting experiments in ways to use the Internet and other technologies in times of crisis. Citizen bloggers—individuals who posted messages and short reports on special bulletin board-like sites on the Internet—provided personal accounts and photographs to augment the coverage provided by the *Times-Picayune* and other news agencies. Bloggers also helped to expose inaccuracies in news coverage. A low-power radio station was erected to provide bulletins to evacuees housed at the Houston Astrodome. With official emergency agencies struggling with the sheer enormity of the crisis—1,000 dead, 1 million people displaced—Internet services such as Craigslist and Yahoo improvised ways to provide emergency information exchanges at a click of the mouse.

These developments raise some long-term questions about the media’s role in times of crisis:

- Will the news media again succumb to Attention Deficit Syndrome? As the more vivid memories of Katrina recede into the past, the recovery process that unfolds in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in the years ahead is likely to be highly complicated and slow moving. Many of the most important decisions and developments may be shrouded by bureaucracy and secrecy. These decisions won’t offer dramatic pictures for the television screens, but they will require tenacious, patient reporting.
- Will the news media begin to take demographic diversity more seriously in all of their news coverage? The stories covered by the ethnic media show that mainstream journalists (and government agencies, by the way) still have a long ways to go in understanding and serving the diverse reality that exists in

Mainstream news media, the ethnic media, the Yahoo-ists, the bloggers, and others all can fill critical information roles in times of crisis.

America today. Karen Narasaki, president of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, notes that the large state, federal, and nonprofit emergency agencies still need to diversify their staffs and provide services in more languages other than English. In addition, she asks, why haven't we seen more news coverage of Katrina's impact on Native American reservations?

- In particular, will issues of race, class, and poverty stay on the news media's front burner? Past crises have prodded the news media to look deeply at these issues—at least for awhile. The news media these days are quick to pounce on dramatic stories of racism—violent hate crimes, for example. Katrina has made abundantly clear that journalists need to look more deeply at the issues that make up what Harvard law professor Lani Guinier calls “structural racism”—segregated housing, entrenched poverty, failing schools, environmental racism, and so forth. Only then will we understand why white families in New Orleans live on high ground and black families live on the flood-threatened low ground.
- Can there be better cooperation and knowledge sharing among the different silos that make up our media system? The Katrina crisis demonstrated that the mainstream news media, the ethnic media, the Yahoo-ists, the bloggers, and others all can fill critical information roles in times of crisis. We are just beginning to see how these disparate elements can actually help, rather than compete with, one another. Can they work together to develop a national emergency information plan in time for the next Katrina?

Finally, the post-Katrina period offers a good time for all of us to reflect on whether and how journalists fulfill the public service role they are taught in journalism school. American journalists might take a cue from their Southeast Asian counterparts, who have had a lot of time to think about what they learned from covering the devastating December 2004 tsunami that struck an even more impoverished and strife-torn area of the world. Roby Alampay, executive director of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance, said that 70 senior journalists from Sri Lanka,

Thailand, Indonesia, and other countries convened to conduct a post-mortem. Some of the lessons were nuts and bolts, such as the realization that newspapers and television stations should create disaster reporting beats so they are prepared for the complex and dramatic stories that will emerge in the next crisis. Other lessons were more subtle, yet extremely profound. For example, the tsunami awakened many of the journalists to the role that gender plays in their societies. Many women drowned, Alampay said, because they were tripped up by their long skirts as they tried to escape. After the tsunami, some journalists were surprised by the sight of women working alongside men in rescue and recovery efforts. This cooperation was a break from traditional male-female roles, and it has taught at least some journalists to apply a gender lens to future assignments.

The tsunami also made the Southeast Asian journalists realize that their role in society is greater and more far-reaching than they previously understood. “The journalists realized that their role is not just about informing the public,” explained Alampay, a former reporter from the Philippines. “They realized that they also have a role in keeping families together, how to help families find relatives and food, how to rebuild families, schools, and even water wells. We have to help keep society intact.”

Many American reporters, steeped in the so-called objective approach to journalism that developed in the latter part of the 20th century, may resist Alampay’s conclusion that they should “help keep society intact.” Yet behind this issue is a more fundamental question: What is the purpose of journalism? Perhaps the scale, complexity, and global interconnectedness of 21st century needs and problems call for different philosophies. With the tsunami in Southeast Asia and Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast of the United States, we have seen that vivid, timely, and penetrating journalism can move the public to open their homes and pocketbooks to help people who are less fortunate. If journalism can promote charity, can it also promote justice?

The post-Katrina period offers a good time for all of us to reflect on whether and how journalists fulfill the public service role they are taught in journalism school.

APPENDIX

Media and Government Working Group

Eight members of the conference—a mix of journalists and officials or former officials—were invited to arrive at objectives to be achieved before, during, and after a crisis. The group returned with two sets of objectives. They are offered here only as insight into the commonalities and differences that can arise, not as representative views.

	Government	Media
Before	Share information Warn people Help people prepare Save lives Empower people for self-help Inspire action Educate Reassure	Share information Warn people Help people prepare Save lives Empower people Inspire action Educate Point out holes in the plan
During	Gather information Save lives Take action Get it right/report it fast Demonstrate leadership Mitigate the impact Encourage calm Work to restore order Deflect blame Take credit Get reelected	Describe what's happening Save lives/get people to safety Instigate action Get information fast/get it right Help community help itself Ensure government performs Maintain ratings/audience Fill news hole Keep business afloat
After	Critically examine event Identify best practices Use teachable moments Sustain focus Educate Explain priorities	Critically examine event Put disaster in context Look critically at response Follow the money Educate Inspire community debate Envision future of community

Media and Community Working Group

Seven members of the conference were invited to arrive at objectives to be achieved by the media in helping communities before, during, and after a crisis. The group found agreement around a checklist for news organizations to employ.

Before Emphasize individual household preparedness plans

Provide constant flow of information, weather, and news

Reach out to disadvantaged populations:

- Enlist churches and community groups
- Print and distribute guides for food and medical needs
- Host community forums of journalists, experts, and leaders
- Engage alternative and ethnic media

Identify and promote information clearing houses,
including web sites

During Assure constant flow of news across all media platforms

Accelerate the two-way flow of information from citizens

Police information for error and exaggeration

After Disseminate information to address immediate and critical needs

- Locate medical emergency sites
- Locate food and water distribution locations
- Locate fuel and other resource outlets

Provide realistic expectations of further assistance

Provide experts with answers

- Outline application process for emergency assistance
- Direct to assistance in relocation and temporary housing
- Identify environmental and health hazards

Work hard to identify unmet needs

**The Aspen Institute
Disaster Communications Project**

Katrina's Lessons

Queenstown, Maryland
May 17-19, 2006

Participants

Richard Besser

Director
Coordinating Office for
Terrorism Preparedness and
Emergency Response
Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention

David Bohrman

Vice President and
Washington Bureau Chief
CNN

Jim Cantore

Meteorologist
The Weather Channel

Martha Carr

Assistant City Editor
New Orleans *Times Picayune*

Barbara Cochran

President
Radio-Television News
Directors Association

Chuck Connor

Senior Vice President
for Communication and
Marketing
American Red Cross

Lucy Dalglish

Executive Director
Reporters Committee for
Freedom of the Press

Jon Donley

Editor-in-Chief
NOLA.com

Trent Duffy

Principal
Duffy Public
Relations Strategies

Tucker Eskew

Founding Partner
ViaNovo, LP

Tom Evslin

Fractals of Change

Note: Titles and affiliations are as of the date of the conference.

Charles M. Firestone

Executive Director
Communications and
Society Program
The Aspen Institute

George Foresman

Under Secretary for Preparedness
U.S. Department of
Homeland Security

Jon Funabiki

Deputy Director
Media, Arts, and Culture
The Ford Foundation

Bill Gannon

Senior Editorial Director and
Managing Editor
Yahoo! Inc.

David Garratt

Acting Director of Recovery
Federal Emergency
Management Agency

Amy Garmer

Director of Journalism Projects
Communications and
Society Program
The Aspen Institute

Joe I. Hight

Managing Editor
The Oklahoman
and
President, Dart Center for
Journalism & Trauma

Walter Isaacson

President and Chief Executive
Officer
The Aspen Institute

Robert L. Long

Vice President and News Director
KNBC, NBC-4 Los Angeles

Chet Lunner

Director
State and Local Government
Coordination Office
Preparedness Directorate
U.S. Department of
Homeland Security

Albert L. May

Associate Professor of Media
and Public Affairs
School of Media and Public
Affairs
The George Washington
University

Brian Oberkirch

Slidell Hurricane Damage Blog

John J. Oliver

Publisher and Chief
Executive Officer
Afro-American Newspaper

Chris Slaughter

Assistant News Director
WWL-TV

Fred Young

Senior Vice President of News
Hearst-Argyle Television, Inc.

About the Authors

Albert L. May is associate professor of media and public affairs at The George Washington University, where he specializes in news coverage of government and politics. He joined the faculty of the School of Media and Public Affairs (SMPA) in 1997, after 23 years as a newspaper reporter and editor. He was SMPA's director of journalism from 1998 to 2005. His recent publications include "Swift Boat Vets in 2004: Press Coverage of an Independent Campaign" in the *First Amendment Law Review* (University of North Carolina 2005) and "The Virtual Trail: Political Journalism on the Internet" (published under a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, 2002).

From 1993 to 1996, Professor May was the government and public affairs editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, overseeing state and local government and political coverage. He joined the newspaper in 1987, also serving as a national political reporter and as the state capitol bureau chief. Previously, he was the Washington correspondent and the chief capitol correspondent for the *News and Observer* of Raleigh, North Carolina. He began his newspaper career as a reporter for the *Arkansas Democrat* of Little Rock, Arkansas. He holds masters degrees in journalism and in political science from the University of Missouri, and he was the recipient of a Nieman Fellowship to Harvard University.

Jon Funabiki began an appointment as Professor, Journalism Department, at San Francisco State University in August 2006. Prior to this appointment, he served as deputy director of the Media, Arts and Culture (MAC) Unit of the Ford Foundation's Knowledge, Creativity and Freedom (KC&F) Program. Funabiki joined the Foundation in 1995. As MAC's deputy director, he assisted in managing MAC program staff in the U.S. and in the development of grantmaking strategies both in the U.S. and overseas. A career journalist and media specialist, he was also responsible for the Foundation's grantmaking portfolio on news media issues.

Prior to joining the Ford Foundation, Funabiki was founding director of San Francisco State University's Center for Integration and

Improvement of Journalism. He is a former reporter and editor with *The San Diego Union*, where he specialized in U.S.-Asia political and economic affairs and reported from Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, the Philippines and throughout the U.S. A graduate of San Francisco State University, Funabiki was awarded the John S. Knight Professional Journalism Fellowship at Stanford University, the Jefferson Fellowship at the East-West Center of Honolulu, and a National Endowment for the Humanities Professional Summer Fellowship at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Selected Publications from the Communications and Society Program

Clearing the Air: Convergence and the Safety Enterprise

Philip J. Weiser

In response to the current crisis in public safety communications, many people advocate “more spectrum and more money” to address what observers often refer to as the “public safety interoperability problem.” The real problem, however, is that the current trajectory focuses too narrowly on public safety entities, too specifically on issues related to radio communications, and, more generally, on the wrong solutions. This report recommends a new strategy. In particular, the public safety community should migrate away from its traditional reliance on specialized equipment and embrace an integrated broadband infrastructure that will leverage technological innovations that are routinely being used in the commercial sector and the military. Notably, by recognizing the power of Internet Protocol (IP) technology, public safety agencies can unite disparate users, adopt enhanced and secure applications that use open standards, and facilitate interoperability through a “network of networks” strategy. In so doing, policymakers can ensure a more effective emergency response strategy and more reliable communications during times of crisis. 2006, 55 pages, ISBN paper: 0-89843-458-0

Slow Fuse: Journalistic Approaches to Climate Change

Larry Pryor

At the first Conference on Journalism and the Environment, leading newspaper editors, broadcast producers, policy experts, and environmental journalists explored news coverage of issues such as climate change that are slow to develop but likely to have serious long-term consequences. The conference report, *Slow Fuse: Journalistic Approaches to Climate Change*, suggests 10 steps to help news organizations develop innovative and compelling reporting on climate change and related issues of science, international affairs, economics, politics, and business. The conference was convened by the Aspen Institute’s Program on Energy, the Environment, and the Economy and the Communications

and Society Program and by the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University, with funding from the Nicholas Institute and the Catto Charitable Foundation. 2006; 53 pages, ISBN paper: 0-89843-448-3

Journalism, Transparency and the Public Trust

Jon Ziomek

Can greater transparency help journalism cope with a decline in public trust in media institutions? This question and several related issues—the fragmentation of the media and media audiences into niches, the effect on quality as journalistic products are tailored toward more individualistic and interactive audiences—drove the discussions at the Eighth Annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society. Conference participants unanimously called for a “presumption of openness” in American journalism—a process through which journalists, media executives, and the public can come together to rebuild trust in the media. Participants urged the field toward *as practical a level of transparency as possible* in news organizations through a set of recommendations to demystify journalistic practices and clarify journalistic values, increase opportunities for audiences to “talk back” to journalists, and encourage investments to strengthen newsroom operations and professional performance. 2005; 47 pages, ISBN paper: 0-89843-424-6

Journalism, Security and the Public Interest

Adam Clymer

The delicate balance between national security and the public’s right to know in the context of the international war on terrorism was the subject of the Seventh Annual Aspen Institute Conference on Journalism and Society. The discussion yielded a set of best practices for journalists, editors, and media executives to consider in reporting stories with national security implications. These best practices, and the discussion that led to them, are included in this report by former *New York Times* national affairs reporter Adam Clymer. Attorney General John Ashcroft addressed the conference on the importance of the USA Patriot Act and the press’s role in keeping America safe. Ashcroft’s remarks to the conference are included in this publication. 2003; 64 pages, ISBN paper: 0-89843-387-8

Reports can be ordered online at www.aspeninstitute.org or by sending an email request to publications@aspeninstitute.org.

About the Communications and Society Program

www.aspeninstitute.org/c&s

The Communications and Society Program is a global forum for leveraging the power of leaders and experts from business, government, and the nonprofit sector in the communications and information fields for the benefit of society.

Its roundtable forums and other projects aim to improve democratic societies and diverse organizations through innovative, multidisciplinary, values-based policymaking. They promote constructive inquiry and dialogue and the development and dissemination of new models and options for informed and wise policy decisions.

In particular, the Program provides an active venue for global leaders and experts from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds to exchange and gain new knowledge and insights on the societal impact of advances in digital technology and network communications. The Program also creates a multidisciplinary space in the communications policymaking world where veteran and emerging decision makers can explore new concepts, find personal growth and insight, and develop new networks for the betterment of the policymaking process and society.

The Program's projects fall into one or more of three categories: communications and media policy, communications technology and the democratic process, and information technology and social change. Ongoing activities of the Communications and Society Program include annual roundtables on journalism and society, telecommunications policy, Internet policy, information technology, and diversity and the media. The Program also convenes the Aspen Institute Forum on Communications and Society, in which chief executive-level leaders of business, government, and the nonprofit sector examine issues relating to the changing media and technology environment.

Conference reports and other materials are distributed to key policymakers and opinion leaders within the United States and around the world. They also are available to the public at large through the World Wide Web.

