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BEST PRACTICES FOR DISASTER COVERAGE: AN ANALYSIS OF HOW THE *SUN*
HERALD NEWSPAPER AND WLOX-TV COVERED HURRICANE KATRINA

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Journalism
The University of Mississippi

by

NICOLE R. SHERIFF

May 2011

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ABSTRACT

A substantial amount of research has been done on Hurricane Katrina and its effects on New Orleans, Louisiana. However, few studies have focused on how the Mississippi Gulf Coast was affected by the hurricane. The purpose of this study is to bring attention to the reporting efforts of WLOX-TV and the *Sun Herald* newspaper to cover Hurricane Katrina. This case study analyzes the practices WLOX and the *Sun Herald* used to cover the hurricane and to explore which practices could be implemented in other newsrooms in the future. A total of four interviews were conducted with members from the newsrooms who had major roles in the hurricane coverage. The individuals who were interviewed provided first-hand accounts of the practices used to cover the hurricane. The data revealed that both newsrooms implemented storm plans, which helped tremendously in covering the news in the days and weeks following the hurricane.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all of those with a voice who have yet to be heard.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most grateful to my advisor Dr. Nancy Dupont, whose patience and insight helped my thesis to unfold. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Kristen Swain and Mr. Joe Atkins, for helping me to perfect my work.

In addition, I appreciate the time WLOX and the *Sun Herald* allowed me to spend with them to share their story. They were an invaluable asset to this thesis.

Lastly, I thank my parents, Gene and Debra, and sister, Stephanie, for always supporting my academic endeavors. I love you all.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

For many years, the *Sun Herald* newspaper and the WLOX television station have been the voice of South Mississippi. The *Sun Herald*, located in Gulfport, Mississippi, was first published in 1884 as the *Biloxi Herald*. Since 1884, the paper has carried several names like the *Biloxi Daily Herald*, the *Daily Herald*, and its current name as the *Sun Herald*. For over 125 years, the *Sun Herald* has covered news and provided information for the state's Southern counties. The Knight-Ridder owned daily covers everything from breaking news to business to entertainment and has a circulation of approximately 50,000.¹

Along with the *Sun Herald* is WLOX, which is the only TV news station for the Mississippi Gulf Coast. WLOX, an affiliate of the American Broadcasting Company, is owned by Raycom Media. WLOX aired their first news segment in 1962 and has since been the provider of daily news segments, weather reports, and other stories.² Like the *Sun Herald*, WLOX provides news across the coast from Ocean Springs to Bay St. Louis. Together WLOX and the *Sun Herald* have been at the forefront of the Gulf Coast's most pressing stories.

Despite the stories they have covered, nothing would prepare the newsrooms for what occurred August 2005. On August 29, 2005, the Mississippi Gulf Coast and New Orleans

¹ Sun Herald, *125 Years of Headlines*, http://media.sunherald.com/static/Centennial/1004centennial_book_all.pdf.

² Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

were hit by Hurricane Katrina. The category five hurricane destroyed much of coastal Mississippi and left much of the city of New Orleans underwater. Along with leaving thousands of residents homeless or displaced, Katrina left several dead and left lasting memories on those affected. As the storm approached, the hurricane caused the *Sun Herald* and WLOX to discover their best newsroom practices to cover the hurricane and provide updates to South Mississippi.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, many South Mississippians thought Hurricane Camille had been the worst storm to ever hit the coast, but Katrina proved them wrong. Jeff Lawson, anchor for WLOX, said:

It [Hurricane Katrina] was a storm that hit with such force and such fury. It caused South Mississippians to rethink the very standard by which they measure hurricanes. On August 28, 2005, that standard was Hurricane Camille, a legendary 1969 storm that devastated the area. One day later, the destruction from Camille would pale in comparison. What people saw was outstanding. It seemed impossible and to some unthinkable that South Mississippi could have a hurricane with more destructive power than and more deadly force than Camille.³

There are a number of disasters that have changed the way journalists cover news, thus allowing newsrooms to discover their best practices for disaster coverage. Several studies have been done to assess how major newsrooms like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have covered disasters. Most of the Hurricane Katrina research that has been conducted revolves primarily around New Orleans and its newspapers and TV stations. However, few studies have been done on how Katrina affected the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Even fewer studies have been done on local newsrooms like the *Sun Herald* and WLOX and their efforts to cover disasters.

³ *Katrina: South Mississippi's Story*. DVD. Produced, directed and written by WLOX (Biloxi, MS: WLOX, 2005).

The goal of this study is to explore the tactics the *Sun Herald* and WLOX used during their coverage of Hurricane Katrina. Chapters are provided containing information on WLOX and the *Sun Herald*'s strategy for covering disasters, as well as how the storm affected both newsrooms. The data provided in these chapters was constructed from a series of interviews that were conducted with staffers from the *Sun Herald* and WLOX who had major roles in the coverage of Hurricane Katrina. A review of the literature is also provided as background knowledge describing how newsrooms have covered disasters and the problems that have occurred. Information is also provided on local journalists' coverage of disasters and how their ties within their communities became a way to bring out the best in their reporting. The significance of this study is to provide insight on the *Sun Herald* and WLOX's hurricane coverage, which was often overlooked by media players and researchers. This study will potentially provide a gateway for future research to be done on local newsrooms like WLOX and the *Sun Herald* and their efforts to cover breaking news stories like Hurricane Katrina.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

“We are watchers, not participants; our role is to stand in for the public to make it possible for everyone to stay abreast of the latest developments in government, the economy, education, science and society,” Brad Kalbfeld said in the *Associated Press Broadcast News Handbook*.⁴ His description of journalists in this handbook is perhaps one of the best definitions of the primary roles of journalists. Under the Agenda Setting Theory, the media does not tell people how to think but what to think about.⁵

Looking back at various styles of reporting over the course of media history, it is evident that the role of journalism has shifted in recent years. In early history, journalists used traditional methods to gather a story and acted as watchdogs in the community rather than participants. That is hardly the case in disaster coverage. The purpose of this literature review is to focus on three main points: 1) how newsrooms have prepared for disasters in recent media history and the problems that have existed; 2) reporting from a local perspective and its place in the community; 3) how the community has affected local reporting. Each of these three components is necessary in order to understand the role of local journalists in their communities and how their communities bring out the best in their newsrooms.

⁴ Brad Kalbfeld, *Associated Press Broadcast News Handbook* (New York: N. Y.: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 27.

⁵ Stanley J. Baran and Dennis K. Davis, *Mass Communication Theory* (Belmont, C.A.: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 316.

Preparing for Disasters

Whether news is reported from a television station or newspaper, the same reporting guidelines apply. With any story journalists have to gather information that answers a variety of questions: who, what, when, where, why and how.⁶ In seeking the answers to each of these questions, journalists have to keep another set of rules in mind. Reporters must be able to produce the story in a timely manner or it may no longer be important. Tony Harcup, author of *Journalism Principles and Practice*, said, “The constant pressure to meet deadlines—including the instant deadlines of rolling news—teaches journalists that an average story delivered on time is of more use than a perfect story that arrives late.”⁷

Aside from producing stories in a timely manner, journalists also have to take into consideration how relevant an issue is to their audience and how likely the audience will want to know about the subject. Another factor journalists consider is the proximity to their audience.⁸ “The geographical closeness of an event to a news audience is often the way news decisions of today are prioritized,” W. David Sloan and Lisa M. Parcell said.⁹ Reporters use a number of rules for determining which stories will be written in the newspaper or aired on television.

One common principle that has been seen in reporting is the people’s right to know or what Harcup refers to as public interest. Public interest requires journalists to report on crimes like robberies as well as more serious offenses like rapes or murders. Reporters may also cover stories on issues that affect public safety like the anthrax outbreaks of 2001. Each of

⁶ Tony Harcup, *Journalism Principles and Practice* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 2.

⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁸ W. David Sloan and Lisa Mullikin Parcell, eds., *American Journalism* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2002), 34-42.

⁹ Ibid, 37.

these events would constitute as the people's right to know, so journalists must perform their civic duty to inform the public.¹⁰

Print and broadcast journalists typically follow the same routine for covering news, but there are some differences in how each newsroom gets a story out. The primary differences between the two are that broadcast allows reporters to get breaking news out to the public immediately. Before the news bites and video clips are aired, they have to be edited, yet broadcast journalists are able to reach an audience much sooner than print journalists.¹¹ Despite these differences, print and broadcast journalists tend to follow the same routine for covering stories. However, sometimes stories develop that change the daily routine journalists use to cover stories.

A concept that has become widely recognizable in journalism is the *what-a-story* concept. The term what-a-story was first used by social scientist Gaye Tuchman to describe a non-routine story that occurs as a result of a combination of unbelievable or extreme scenarios.¹² Newsrooms typically have a schedule for covering day-to-day stories and are able to follow the same routine unless a breaking story surfaces. In his article, "Non-Routine News and Newswork: Exploring a What-a-Story," Dan Berkowitz explored how a local television station covered the traumatic occurrence of a Air Force fighter jet crashing into a hotel lobby causing the hotel to catch on fire.¹³ This was certainly not the first plane crash or the first hotel fire, yet the combination of all the events made the story unlikely. When these events occur, newsrooms have to adapt quickly. Berkowitz said, "Even when dealing with highly unusual, highly unexpected stories, newswriters try to find routine ways of dealing with the

¹⁰ Harcup, 75.

¹¹ Ibid, 142-143.

¹² Gaye Tuchman, *Making News* (New York: N. Y.: The Free Press, 1978), 59-60.

¹³ Dan Berkowitz, "Non-Routine News and Newswork: Exploring a What-a-Story," *Journal of Communication* 42, no. 1 (1992): 82-94.

non-routine.”¹⁴ Although journalists cannot fully predict the outcome of such events, they can adjust to them by using familiar newsroom tactics.

One occurrence that has always changed the routine of the daily news process is disasters. In covering disasters, other news stories are temporarily suspended, so journalists can cover the event immediately. Disasters have always been one of the most challenging types of reporting. Nonetheless, it is an inevitable part that reporters face. In an effort to cover these events, newsrooms have developed plans to prepare for these events. As Berkowitz stated, traumas are far from routine, but journalists try to cover these occurrences using familiar day-to-day routines. Newsrooms develop plans that best fit their newsroom to help with the news flow during traumatic events.

One major newsroom that developed its own routine for covering disasters is the *New York Times*. The *Times* did not develop this routine until after the Oklahoma City Bombing occurred April 19, 1995, when it was not as prepared as it would have liked. When the Oklahoma City federal building was bombed, several newspapers and television stations were on the scene along with *New York Times* reporter John Kifner and several other *Times*' staff members. It was evident that reporters did their best to cover the story, but many reporters were not prepared for what occurred, including Gene Roberts, managing editor of the *New York Times*. After later assessing the Oklahoma bombing incident, Roberts realized that his paper was not prepared for a disaster of that magnitude and sought to implement a plan that would prepare them for the next major disaster.¹⁵

As a result, Roberts developed a doom room that would hold extra laptop computers, notebooks, writing utensils, gas masks, a bullet proof vest, tape recorders and a fax machine

¹⁴ Ibid, 82.

¹⁵ Alicia C. Shepard, "Preparing for Disaster," *American Journalism Review* 24, no. 3 (2002): 54.

among other portable equipment that could be easily set up in another remote location, if needed. *The New York Times* felt the doom room would make it easier to cover major tragedies and disasters and could also result in better efficiency. Initially, the doom room was thoroughly checked to ensure all materials in the room were present and working. As time progressed and fewer catastrophes occurred, the doom room became more relaxed. Consequently, on September 11, 2001 when two commercial airlines flew into the World Trade Center, the doom room fell short. The absence of electricity throughout parts of New York played a major part in why the doom room was not as successful as the *Times* had hoped. Despite setbacks the *New York Times* experienced while covering the Trade Center terrorist attack, the staff learned how to better prepare itself for future events.¹⁶

Like the *New York Times*, other newsrooms and TV stations had to endure several disasters to prepare for subsequent events. However, even in the midst of carefully executed plans, loopholes remained. The chaos of the September 11 attacks helped reporters to assess what they still needed to do to prepare for major events. Because the lack of electricity was a major downfall, several newsrooms invested in satellite phones as one of the ways to accommodate for communication failures during future disasters. In “Preparing for Disaster,” Alicia Shepard said, “Many reporters and editors are incredibly resourceful when it comes to dealing with breaking news, but any journalist who has been steeped in the chaos of a blockbuster knows that it takes more than resourcefulness.”¹⁷

As Shepard stated, journalists know that they need more than supplies to fully prepare for larger events. As a result, newsrooms began to create templates for major stories which would help dramatically in the news flow of actually producing the story. The *Miami Herald*

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 54.

created a template that can be easily accessed when Fidel Castro dies. Other Florida newspapers also have templates for hurricane stories since Florida is threatened by hurricanes each year. Newsrooms feel this type of preparation will allow news coverage to run more smoothly if any of these situations occur. Preparing for disasters has become a typical newsroom practice, and journalists will endure at least one disaster if they cover news long enough. With each new disaster that occurs, journalists are able to assess what plans work best as well as which ones need to be changed.

Covering Hurricane Katrina

One of the most recent disasters that has had an impact on Americans was Hurricane Katrina, which hit New Orleans, Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast Monday, August 29, 2005. In Jane Singer and Frank Durham's conference paper "The Watchdog's Bark: Professional Norms and Institutional Routines in Cable News Coverage of Hurricane Katrina," they argued that Hurricane Katrina changed the way journalists covered hard news.¹⁸ Journalists typically try to report on uncommon events the way they cover routine events; however, Katrina redefined the routines most newsrooms use to cover uncommon stories. Singer and Durham argued:

Particularly for the cable television reporters assigned to stay on top of the story around the clock, the professional norms of detachment and the institutional routines of news coverage were breached nearly as completely as the levees of New Orleans. Reporters let their passion and anger show.¹⁹

In the days before, during and after the hurricane, many newspapers and TV stations like WDSU-TV in New Orleans, prepared to cover the storm. In an effort to brief viewers and listeners before the hurricane made landfall, WDSU, an affiliate of the National Broadcasting

¹⁸ Jane Singer and Frank Durham, "The Watchdog's Bark: Professional Norms and Institutional Routines in Cable News Coverage of Hurricane Katrina," *Conference Papers--International Communication Association* (2006): 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 1.

Company, began airing 24-hour coverage early Saturday morning, August 27. The WDSU crew remained in their New Orleans station until Tuesday when the news director told them to leave the station. WDSU stayed on the air as long as they could, until conditions in New Orleans worsened. Tuesday when the network went off the air, they were still able to send satellite footage to other NBC stations in Orlando, Florida, and Jackson, Mississippi. If WDSU would not have had access to satellites, they would have lost critical coverage of the hurricane that was streamed to survivors. As soon as the crew was able to return to the station, they did. Many of the reporters and videographers slept in the station during the weeks after Katrina and sought every available resource to cover the story.²⁰ WDSU were able to still effectively air hurricane footage using satellites because they had prepared for the hurricane. Despite the preparation WDSU and other news crews took to cover the hurricane, nothing would prepare journalists for the challenges of Katrina.

One of the challenges journalists faced after Hurricane Katrina was triggered by a number of restrictions that were thrusts on journalists. One incident in particular occurred when *Toronto Star* photographer Lucas Oleniuk caught police officers beating individuals who were involved in a shooting.²¹ Oleniuk captured over 350 photographs of the incident as it occurred; however, law enforcement retrieved the camera and took the memory card out. Oleniuk and reporter Tim Harper later retrieved the camera with no memory card and were threatened by officers. Oleniuk and Harper were among several journalists whose materials were retrieved by the police while trying to cover Katrina's destruction. Marko Georgiev, freelance photographer, had his memory card taken after he tried to capture images of the dead. Several reporters and photographers were restricted from freely obtaining the facts,

²⁰ Marla Miller, "Through Hell and High Water," *Quill Magazine* 93, no. 9 (2005): 30-31.

²¹ Melanie Marquez, "Taking journalists by storm," *News Media & the Law* 29, no. 4 (2005): 6.

which has always been one of the primary goals of journalism.²² The media had to find a way around the limitations that were placed on them by law enforcement, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and other groups. Imposed restrictions were one of many obstacles that journalists had to overcome in covering Hurricane Katrina.

Journalists also had to deal with a great deal of psychological stress during Katrina. For local journalists covering Hurricane Katrina, the aftermath was extremely challenging because not only did journalists have to cope with their own devastation, they also had to cover the hurricane during all hours of the day. New Orleans *Times-Picayune* features editor James O’Byrne said it was extremely difficult being the voice for the community since everyone was dealing with the same issues.²³

It was particularly difficult for *Times-Picayune* columnist Chris Rose. For several years prior to Hurricane Katrina, Rose had covered lighter, celebrity influenced stories.²⁴ However, Rose’s writing shifted as Katrina took a toll on him emotionally, physically and mentally. Rose was used to providing New Orleans with stories about celebrities like actress Lindsay Lohan and others who traveled to New Orleans. After being affected by the hurricane, Rose, a former alcoholic, turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with the pain Katrina left behind. O’Byrne, Rose’s editor, recalled being worried about Rose because his stories reflected his state of depression. Rose was no longer covering superficial celebrity gossip. His columns became “a real-time diary of a descent into madness,”²⁵ Rose said about his own writing. After recognizing his problem, he sought help for depression and took antidepressants to help with the pain.

²² Ibid.

²³ Marquez, 6.

²⁴ Barry Yeoman, “The Redemption of Chris Rose,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 46, no. 5 (2008) 32.

²⁵ Ibid, 35.

Times-Picayune reporter Mark Schleifstein remembered throwing himself into work to cope with the aftermath. As a whole, the hurricane took a toll on everyone in the newsroom, but the staff found their own ways to cope. Some found healthy ways to cope, while others found destructive ways to cope with their pain. Regardless of the coping mechanism, Hurricane Katrina affected journalists heavily. One emotion that seemed to follow several journalists was rage. In an editorial published in *The Mississippi Press*, news director Lance Davis said to Hurricane Katrina: "I hate you with every fiber of my body and ounce of my soul, you cold-hearted witch. You have taken every good memory I have of the Gulf Coast and ripped them to shreds."²⁶

From a journalist's standpoint, critics have different opinions on how journalists are affected by traumatic events. In *Covering Violence*, Roger Simpson and William Coté acknowledged that some studies suggest journalists are rarely affected by traumatic events, but recently those opinions have changed.²⁷ More critics believe journalists are in fact affected by traumatic events like members of the *Times-Picayune* suggested. Simpson and Coté stated:

Hurricanes that thundered across the Gulf of Mexico in the late summer and autumn of 2005 to batter Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, and Mexico reminded the profession of the dire need for attention to the emotional health of journalists...Journalists rose to the demands of the disaster, some enduring exhausting and dangerous conditions to cover the story.²⁸

Traumatic events like Hurricane Katrina reminded many about the challenges journalists face during disasters and their abilities to cope in the ways they see fit.

²⁶ Becky Gillette, "Katrina not just another story for Gulf Coast journalists," *Mississippi Business Journal* 27, no. 39 (2005): 12.

²⁷ Roger Simpson and William Coté, *Covering Violence* (New York: N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2006), 37.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 267.

Another major challenge of disaster reporting is dealing with ethical dilemmas like reporting inaccurate information. One of the issues that later surfaced about Hurricane Katrina media reports was that some journalists were writing stories that contained false information or facts that could not be proven. In Brian Thevenot's article "Myth-Making in New Orleans," he explained how rumors began to surface during Katrina.²⁹ Many accounts of murders and rapes were exaggerated and passed from person to person. Some of the myths that surfaced said dead bodies were being stored in freezers, babies were being raped, survivors were being shot by law enforcement,³⁰ and sharks and alligators were in the floodwaters.³¹ Time magazine editors said, "There is not a single credible report of a sighting of sharks or alligators in the flooded, polluted streets of the city."³² A few reports also alleged that hundreds of dead bodies were left inside the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center; however, only four dead bodies were found in the Convention Center and only ten in the Superdome.³³

Essentially, Thevenot argued the media reported false information because it had not been thoroughly investigated. As a result of the outlandish accounts that the media produced, many situations grew out of control. There was a trend that began to ripple throughout the media. One source reported inaccurate information, and the next media source reported the same information simply because the facts had already been released. Former vice president and executive ABC News Producer Av Westin stated the following in Thevenot's article:

²⁹ Brian Thevenot, "Myth-Making in New Orleans," *American Journalism Review* 27, no. 6 (2005): 32.

³⁰ David E. Boeyink and Sandra L. Borden, *Making Hard Choices in Journalism Ethics* (New York, N.Y.: 2010), 107.

³¹ TIME, *Hurricane Katrina: The Storm That Changed America* (New York, N.Y.: TIME Books), 55.

³² *Ibid.*, 55.

³³ *Ibid.*

There's something I call the 'out there syndrome'—it's okay for us to publish it because someone else already has, so it's 'out there.' With 24-7 news, the deadline is always now, you go with whatever you've got, you stick it on the air.³⁴

Westin's explanation of how these mistakes became widespread signifies the media's attention to a lack of in-depth investigative reporting in early Katrina coverage.³⁵ Several media critics hold different opinions on why so many facts were exaggerated during the early coverage of Katrina. As Westin stated, some journalists were essentially led to produce reports because of the need to keep up with deadlines. In his article "Made-for-TV Crisis Communication," Dr. Mobeen Rathore argued, "The news media loves to sensationalize and wants you to be a partner in this effort."³⁶

In his article, "The Search for Non-Existent Facts in the Reporting of Disasters," media critic John Scanlon highlights how much of the inaccurate information that is reported during disasters is a result of loopholes that existed before the disaster occurred. Scanlon said, "The real problem isn't that information is not available immediately. It's that it may never be available."³⁷ Many topics and statistics that are newsworthy after a disaster were not important prior to the disaster. As a result, it is difficult for the media to release accurate information about how many people died during a catastrophe such as Hurricane Katrina. Scanlon credits this to the fact that many victims' bodies may never be found, some who died may have died from reasons that were unrelated to the disaster, and other factors that affect the outcome of the story. Furthermore Scanlon pointed out that, "There is no place a reporter could get an accurate count, not at the time, not ever."³⁸

³⁴ Thevenot, 35.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Mobeen H. Rathore, "Made-for-TV Crisis Communication," *The Physician Executive* 34, no. 5 (2008): 38.

³⁷ Joseph Scanlon, "The Search for Non-Existent Facts in the Reporting of Disasters," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 53, no. 2 (1998): 52.

³⁸ Ibid.

Another important point in Scanlon's argument is the lack of information available to reporters. This is a reason why exaggerated stories surface in the media, he said. Scanlon argued similar points that Thevenot argued by bringing attention to the media's need to get the story out, so assumptions are made in order to keep up with continuous deadlines. Scanlon goes further with this argument by suggesting that initial disaster reports are almost always inaccurate because no one is aware of how bad the impact really is. Scanlon said, "Missing information is not a function of reporter competence or official concealment."³⁹ Because this type of uncertainty arises with almost any disaster, Scanlon suggests the media should handle these stories by interviewing victims or survivors who have first-hand accounts of the events. Essentially, by the time officials and other key players in the community receive the information, the facts have been altered.⁴⁰

Kitch and Hume emphasized how important it is for journalists to "quantify" a disaster once the initial impact is made.⁴¹ Looking back at the September 11 attacks, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and, more recently, the earthquake that rattled much of Port au Prince, Haiti, the media have always sought to publish numbers immediately. This estimate, which is more than likely an exaggeration, reports the number of deaths, missing and injured persons that are believed to have occurred. As previously mentioned, Scanlon argued that it is difficult to be certain how many victims exist after a disaster considering there was never an accurate report prior to the disaster.⁴²

These accounts are just a few that demonstrate how the line between fact and myth has been blurred in disaster coverage. This brings about the issue of whether future disasters will

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume, *Journalism in a Culture of Grief* (New York, N. Y.: Routledge, 2008), 3.

⁴² Scanlon, 52.

result in the same type of carelessness in reporting because of a need to readily produce stories. Despite the false accounts that surfaced, several newspapers and TV stations stepped up and dedicated their time and efforts to report the most accurate accounts of Hurricane Katrina. However, there is one major factor that has changed the face of disaster reporting throughout the course of history: local journalists and their commitment to community journalism.

Localizing the News

Before understanding the role local journalists have in disaster coverage, it is essential to understand the role of local reporters in the community as a whole. One of the biggest factors that separate local newsrooms from national newsrooms is the idea that locals have to interact with their readers and viewers on a regular basis. Although one of the primary duties of journalists is to act as a watchdog who remains detached from the environment, local reporters do not have the freedom of detachment.⁴³ One of the more popular trends that have derived from journalists' efforts to reconnect with their communities is community journalism or what media critics Edmund B. Lambeth and James Aucoin refer to as "new community journalism." According to Lambeth and Aucoin, "The 'new community journalism' we define is not a radical departure from past traditional journalistic values. It does recognize, however, that many news outlets may have lost touch with their communities."⁴⁴

One of the biggest factors Lambeth and Aucoin emphasize is community journalism will allow journalists to extend beyond the traditional reporting role and become a contributor

⁴³ "Civic journalism gives voters a voice--but does civics drown out journalism" *American Journalism Review* 19, no. 2 (1997): 10.

⁴⁴ Edmund B. Lambeth and James Aucoin, "Understanding Communities: The Journalist as Leader," *Journalism Educator* 48, no. 1 (1993): 13.

to the community, which has been strongly discouraged for years.⁴⁵ The issues that many critics have expressed with community journalism is the reporter would no longer act as an outsider, yet would become a key player in ensuring the needs of the community are first. J. Herbert Altschull argued, “Community journalism demands putting the public interest ahead of the maximization of profit.”⁴⁶ As described by Jock Lauterer, professor of journalism at Pennsylvania State University, the definition of community journalism essentially lies in a newsroom’s commitment to make local news its focal point.⁴⁷ In 1995, Lauterer wrote *Community Journalism: The Personal Approach*, which explored community journalism from several perspectives. Lauterer noted the different types of community papers that exist—from the family-owned papers to the chain-owned papers—and the ethical issues that arise. More importantly, he addressed what makes local community papers different from large dailies like the *New York Times*.⁴⁸

Throughout media history, many interpretations of community journalism have been constructed:

The contemporary relationship between newspapers and their community began to be studied by social scientists systematically by Robert Park in the 1920s, Robert Merton in the 1940s and 1950s, and Morris Janowitz in the 1960s. Park and Janowitz attempted to demonstrate how newspaper use precedes and contributes to readers’ ties to their communities. Merton reversed Park and Janowitz’s theory, saying community ties precede newspaper use.⁴⁹

Since the 1920s, the connection between journalism and community has been constantly studied, debated, and criticized. Reed Smith, professor at Georgia Southern University, agreed with Lauterer in stressing the importance of understanding the role of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ J. Herbert Altschull, “A Crisis Conscience: Is Community Journalism the Answer?” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 11, no. 3 (1996): 171.

⁴⁷ Jock Lauterer, *Community Journalism: The Personal Approach* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1995).

⁴⁸ Ibid, 14-16.

⁴⁹ Lambeth & Aucoin, 17.

community papers and local newsrooms in their communities. There are similarities between national and local newsrooms, but local newsrooms' approach to journalism overall is very different. Of the community journalism studies that have been conducted, Smith argued, "What none of these works did, however, was examine in-depth the career of a nationally unknown community journalist to determine how his or her work impacted a town or region over time."⁵⁰ Smith said, local journalism has not been studied as widely as national journalism, and much of the research that does exist seeks to criticize the idea of community journalism other than promote it.⁵¹

Criticisms of Community Journalism

Of course, with any concept, some critics have brought attention to the negatives of community journalism and why the practices are not always successful. One of the major issues that exist with journalists involving the community is the backlash if the story is not received well. In the article, "A Sacrifice for Civic Journalism," G. Douglas Floyd recapped the events of Karen Boone and her attempt to tackle the lack of diversity in Spokane, Washington. Floyd said, "Karen Boone agreed to write a column, not pull the pin on a hand grenade."⁵² Boone, an African American in a predominantly white area, chose to write an article that was sparked by "her painful realization that even she had become desensitized to the feelings of ethnic invisibility faced by minorities in Spokane."⁵³ After the *Spokesman-Review* published Boone's article in their "Your Turn" column, both Boone and the paper began receiving criticism. Boone began receiving hate mail from members in the community suggesting that she and the other minorities were only good for causing problems. Aside from

⁵⁰ Reed Smith, "How Two Veteran Journalists in Opposing Media Encouraged a Sense of Community in a Georgia Town," *Journalism History* 34, no. 2 (2008): 108.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² G. Douglas Floyd, "A Sacrifice for Civic Journalism," *American Journalism Review* 19, no. 6 (1997): 15.

⁵³ Ibid.

the attention that was brought about by Boone's article and the responses she received, it was evident that the *Spokesman-Review* tried to handle the situation the best way it could. The editorial staff published the letters that criticized Boone and followed up by addressing the issue and acknowledging ways to promote diversity within the community. "The Karen Boone Incident" as it was referred to, was a result of journalists' attempt to engage their citizens in their papers.

The price the *Spokesman-Review* and other local newsrooms pay when they stop acting as watchdogs is almost inevitable. Not every story or idea will be well received. Had the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* published an article on Spokane's diversity, there may have been controversy, but neither staff would have had daily interaction with those individuals. Hence, the only individuals who would have been affected would have been the Spokane community. The *Spokesman-Review's* efforts to publish articles from community members and to later intervene by addressing the hate mail Boone received would be questionable by some media critics.

The above idea, which would be an example of civic journalism, is one of the many criticisms that have surfaced as a result of these attempts. *The Daily Tribune* (Ames, Iowa) editor Michael Gartner argued:

My second objection is...that reporters under civic journalism must end their detachment. What's the opposite of detachment? It's attachment. I don't think that reporters should be attached to anything—to any cause, to any politician, to any view. One of the great things about journalism is detachment.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ "Civic journalism gives voters a voice--but does civics drown out journalism" *American Journalism Review* 19, no. 2 (1997): 10.

Craig Klugman, editor of *The Journal Gazette* in Fort Wayne, Indiana, also argued, “When you become a player, no matter how innocent it is, you go from being detached to attached...and your role as the outside reporter becomes...irrevocably compromised.”⁵⁵

Gartner and Klugman both suggest that journalism can only stay true to itself if journalists remain detached from their environment and only act as watchdogs in society. The watchdog role that has been the crux of journalism for many years has been restructured in many newsrooms as journalists, essentially local journalists, have sought to bring more of the community into their stories. Although these attempts have proven to be both successful and unsuccessful at times, local journalists struggle with being detached, according to some critics. Is being attached to a certain cause necessarily bad? Many local reporters strive to remain unbiased yet still possess some degree of attachment to their stories. As Lauterer argued in *Community Journalism: The Personal Approach*:

For us, news is not some detached, impersonal set of occurrences happening to nameless, faceless news sources...At a community paper, news is not events happening to inanimate objects. News is people, your people, and how the changing world affects their everyday lives.⁵⁶

Because of the role local journalists have acquired over the years, it is easy to understand how they cover disasters is essential to their communities. In the midst of Hurricane Katrina, local journalists are doing more than covering a story. They are looking in the eyes of parents they have gone to PTA meetings with, children who they have watched play softball, and members of their church congregations. Even as the fury of Hurricane Katrina destroyed their towns, those journalists knew they had to do more than just tell a story. They had to be the pulse of the community. It is merely impossible for those journalists to only be bystanders.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Lauterer, 24.

The focus of this study is to thoroughly explore the practices implemented by South Mississippi newsrooms to cover disasters. More importantly, this study examines two newsrooms' efforts to be the voice of South Mississippi during harsh conditions. While several studies have been done on disaster reporting, few studies have fully given attention to how local newsrooms have covered major disasters. In the subsequent chapters, information is provided addressing the importance of having a disaster plan in a newsroom and how Hurricane Katrina was covered by the *Sun Herald* newspaper and WLOX television station on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This study was designed to bring attention to local newsrooms and their efforts to cover disasters. As a result, the following research questions were developed for this study:

RQ1: Are traditional reporting rules abandoned in the local coverage of Hurricane Katrina? If so, how are the rules abandoned?

RQ2: What practices did the *Sun Herald* and WLOX exercise in the face of disaster?

RQ3: What effect does "community" have on a newsroom's best practices?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

There are essentially two research methods that are used in communication studies: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research seeks to quantify its results through numerical values like tables or statistics. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, “yield words that are not easily reduced to numbers.”⁵⁷ For this study the qualitative method was chosen to analyze how WLOX and the *Sun Herald* covered Hurricane Katrina. This method was chosen because a qualitative study can yield the best results needed to answer the research questions.

This study was constructed as a case study to outline the practices the *Sun Herald* newspaper and the WLOX TV station exercised to cover Hurricane Katrina before, during and after the storm. The case study method “involves an in-depth, longitudinal examination of a single instance or event: a case.”⁵⁸ The term case study was used as early as 1934 to describe a method used in the medical field to analyze unfamiliar occurrences in medicine. In 1967, researchers Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss developed case study methods that could be applied in social sciences like psychology, sociology and communication.⁵⁹ Since Glaser and Strauss introduced case studies to the social sciences, a number of studies have been done using this method to analyze single events like Hurricane Katrina.

⁵⁷ Mildred L. Patten, *Understanding Research Methods* (Glendale, C.A.: Pyrczak Publishing, 2009), 19.

⁵⁸ Mozharul Islam, “Case Study Guide,” *Markets and Livelihood Program*, Accessed April 15, 2011, <http://community.eldis.org/.59b8e89c/GUIDELINE%20AND%20TOOLS%20FOR%20CASE%20STUDY.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

The case study method was chosen to study WLOX and the *Sun Herald*'s hurricane coverage as a single event that occurred and to understand what it reveals. The collected data will also show the complications WLOX and the *Sun Herald* faced while covering Hurricane Katrina. Most of the studies that have been done on Hurricane Katrina thus far have focused largely on New Orleans and how major newsrooms like the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* covered the hurricane. However, few studies have been conducted on Katrina's affect on the Mississippi Gulf Coast from a media standpoint. Not only will this study lay out the methods WLOX and the *Sun Herald* used to cover the hurricane, but it will also provide a template for other newsrooms to follow when covering disasters.

A series of interviews was conducted with some of the key players who covered Hurricane Katrina. News director Brad Kessie and station manager David Vincent were interviewed from WLOX; interactive editor Kate Magandy and city editor Blake Kaplan were interviewed from the *Sun Herald*. These interviews were conducted for several purposes: to provide first hand accounts, to provide perspectives that cannot be found elsewhere, and to shed light on the journalism practices that were used to cover Hurricane Katrina. Essentially, these interviews are informant interviews, which is an interviewing style that is typically conducted with "people whose knowledge of a cultural scene proves to be valuable for achieving research objectives."⁶⁰ These interviews are the crux of this study due to the fact each of the participants had very active roles in covering Hurricane Katrina.

⁶⁰ Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, C.A.: Sage Publications, Inc., 2002), 176-177.

CHAPTER FOUR

PREPARING FOR KATRINA: THE IMPORTANCE OF A “GAME PLAN”

In journalism, no two days are ever alike; however, the *Sun Herald* and WLOX do follow a general schedule for each day. Brad Kessie, news director for WLOX, said their day usually begins at 4:30 a.m. and does not end until about 10:30 p.m.⁶¹ The news airs for 2 ½ hours in the morning and follows up with 30 minute segments at 11 a.m., 4 p.m., 5 p.m., and 6 p.m., to conclude their day with a 35-minute segment at 10:00 p.m. The time they spend on the air does not include the material they are constantly updating online. Even though they have a set schedule, it often fluctuates when a breaking news story comes along.⁶²

The *Sun Herald* operates under a different schedule. Kate Magandy, interactive editor, said she typically does not arrive into the office until about 8:30 a.m., but she starts her day at 5:30 a.m. before she leaves home.⁶³ Magandy spends her early morning time preparing the website for the day, while a reporter does the morning police calls. The other editors are usually not in the office until 9:30 or 10 a.m. Around 10:15 a.m. each morning, they have a budget meeting to set the daily schedule and make the other assignments that are not already planned for the day. The staff has another meeting at 3:15 p.m. to set the line up for the day before the editors edit the paper and send it to press by 7 p.m.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Each day is subject to change, but the *Sun Herald* and WLOX use this schedule for most reporting days. However, disaster reporting is always handled differently. For many years WLOX and the *Sun Herald* have utilized disaster plans which they used to prepare the newsroom staff in the event that a major storm or hurricane threatens the Gulf Coast. With any newsroom, it is imperative to have a game plan in effect for crisis situations. The *Sun Herald* has a committee which consists of all the division heads and key people, and they meet to ensure that everything is in place before major emergencies such as tornados, fires, storms or hurricanes. Each year before hurricane season, the storm committee meets. This committee arranges to have the generators checked and makes sure there are enough supplies on hand. The committee also establishes plans for off-site printing locations and other important contacts that may be used during the hurricane. During Hurricane Katrina, Magandy was the paper's city editor and was very active in ensuring that everything went as smoothly as possible during storms. Essentially, everyone had a job to do and knew where they were supposed to be.⁶⁵

The WLOX staff uses a hurricane plan to prepare for what should be done in a particular scenario, and the station has a different strategy depending on the level of the storm. The plan begins with the threat of a tropical storm and describes a different plan for every scenario ranging from a storm to a hurricane that is going to directly affect the Gulf Coast. The plan is updated often and sets the general guidelines for what should be done during a storm watch, a warning or if the storm forms into a hurricane and is headed toward the Gulf Coast.

In hurricane forecasting, a mathematical system is used that allows forecasters to get a general idea of the storm's direction, speed and force. Forecasters also take into account

⁶⁵ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

errors that may occur by using a term called the cone of uncertainty. The Pacific Disaster Center describes the cone of uncertainty as, “a visual aid used in hurricane forecasting of the track that balloons outward from a station’s current position, three to five days into the future.”⁶⁶ Once the storm is tracked, there is over a 60 percent chance that the storm will remain inside the cone.⁶⁷ When the cone of uncertainty includes the Mississippi Gulf Coast, a different set of guidelines is implemented than for a typical storm. Although the storm plans are not permanent, the newsrooms use them to set the tone for covering stories in the days leading up to a storm.⁶⁸

In the days leading up to Hurricane Katrina, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* followed the standard guidelines that they would have followed with any hurricane. Once the storm was named, Kessie, who was a news reporter during Hurricane Katrina, said they paid attention to see which direction it was headed. As the storm approached the Gulf of Mexico, the staff was alerted to keep an eye on the hurricane. As the cone of uncertainty moved towards the Gulf Coast, the station began to put out warnings. The closer the hurricane moved to the coast, WLOX aired updates every three hours to alert the Gulf Coast community on the storm. When the storm grew closer, WLOX went from three hour updates to doing hourly updates. Then there was a point when the crew was on the air for 24 hours a day.⁶⁹

As WLOX aired hurricane updates, the *Sun Herald* prepared to send staffers to the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* in Georgia, which was used as their alternate printing site. The *Sun Herald* was printed at the Knight-Ridder-owned newspaper for two weeks.⁷⁰ Assistant

⁶⁶ Pacific Disaster Center, *5-Day Cone of Uncertainty*, <http://www.pdc.org>.

⁶⁷ Alan Boyle, “Cracking the code for hurricane forecasts,” *MSNBC*, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9439555/ns/technology_and_science-science/

⁶⁸ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Quincy Collins Smith, “Journalists tell about covering impact of storm,” *Sun Herald*, May 19, 2006.

city editor Blake Kaplan, along with a team of seven other journalists, traveled to Columbus to help put the paper together in case the *Sun Herald* was not able to print from its main location in Gulfport. Little did the staff know when they sent a team to Columbus that they would be there for two weeks. While Kaplan was preparing his Columbus team for what needed to be done, Magandy was in Gulfport briefing the newsroom on where each person needed to be during Hurricane Katrina and the days immediately following the hurricane. Essentially, everyone knew where they needed to be before the hurricane made landfall to eliminate as much chaos as possible.

The *Sun Herald* and WLOX had storm plans in effect prior to Hurricane Katrina that helped them to effectively cover the hurricane from beginning to end. WLOX began doing 24-hour coverage Saturday, August 27, 2005, by briefing the Gulf Coast on the severity of the storm and how crucial it was to evacuate the area. This continued through late Sunday evening when there was no longer time to evacuate and the individuals who had not evacuated needed to take shelter.⁷¹ The *Sun Herald* staff also continued to publish as much information as possible until the hurricane made it to land.⁷² Late Sunday night as the hurricane approached the Gulf Coast, both the *Sun Herald* and WLOX took shelter in their newsrooms while they waited for what would later become the most destructive hurricane to ever hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

⁷¹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

⁷² Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

CHAPTER FIVE

**HURRICANE KATRINA: THE STORM THAT CHANGED THE MISSISSIPPI GULF
COAST FOREVER**

Early Sunday morning, August 28, Hurricane Katrina was upgraded to category five by the National Hurricane Center in Miami, Florida. Shortly after Katrina was upgraded, President George Bush, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagan urged the city of New Orleans to evacuate. As people prepared to evacuate, transportation was sent to New Orleans to shuttle people to the New Orleans Superdome, one of 10 designated hurricane shelters. Food and water was also taken to the Superdome and other shelters for those who chose to seek shelter there. Late Sunday evening, as chaos began to stir in New Orleans, Alabama and Mississippi were declared “federal states of emergency”⁷³ by the president. Throughout Sunday night, many of the hurricane reports still had New Orleans in Katrina’s crosshairs. Those crosshairs soon shifted, putting Mississippi on the east side of the storm, which is the deadliest side.⁷⁴

When the hurricane began shifting toward the Gulf Coast, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* took all precautions in updating local communities. As soon as they knew the hurricane was moving closer to the coast, WLOX aired updates each hour and continued collecting information from the civil defense and other agencies. Saturday, WLOX began doing 24-hour

⁷³ TIME, *Hurricane Katrina: The Storm That Changed America* (New York, New York: TIME Books), 37.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 39.

coverage and urged people to evacuate. The decision to evacuate was an individual toss-up for many Mississippians living on the coast. Some evacuated because they had survived previous hurricanes and did not want to endure what Katrina had in store for the coast. Others remained for several reasons. Some stayed because they assumed no hurricane could be as bad as Hurricane Camille that ravaged the coast in 1969. Some like the *Sun Herald* and WLOX also had work to do which would affect the entire coastal community. Others simply had nowhere to go.⁷⁵

The later it grew on Sunday as the storm was closing in on the coast, WLOX informed people to seek shelter because it was too late to evacuate. The remainder of the night, WLOX continued airing updates while waiting for Katrina's fury to arrive.⁷⁶ When the National Hurricane Center saw the crosshairs shifting, their advisory reports reflected the changes, and WLOX updated the Gulf Coast on what to expect once the hurricane reached landfall. Monday morning, August 29, Hurricane Katrina shifted east and moved toward the Mississippi Gulf Coast with 145 mile per hour winds. As the majority of Katrina's media attention remained heavily on New Orleans, the Mississippi Gulf Coast was in a position to face utter destruction. Around 6 a.m. Monday, Katrina began leaving her footprints across the towns of Long Beach, Gulfport, Biloxi, Pascagoula, Bay St. Louis and Waveland.⁷⁷

Among the struggles and difficulties that each town faced, the *Sun Herald* and WLOX had a much different perspective. Not only did both newsrooms have to personally deal with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, but they also had to do their jobs as journalists. Each newsroom faced very challenging circumstances in their quest to tell the story of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

⁷⁵ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ TIME, *Hurricane Katrina: The Storm That Changed America* (New York, New York: TIME Books), 66-73.

The *Sun Herald's* Story

During the approach of Katrina, the *Sun Herald* contemplated whether to evacuate or to take shelter inside of the building. Although their building was only about three blocks from the gulf, they chose to stay in the building since it was built to withstand harsh winds. The *Sun Herald's* office was once located downtown. However, after Hurricane Camille, the *Sun Herald* publisher wanted the new location to be safer in terms of withstanding hurricanes. They also wanted a building that would still be useable after a hurricane. Luckily for the staff that took shelter in the building during Katrina, they were still able to use the building.⁷⁸

When Hurricane Katrina hit the coast, the operations manager and several reporters rode out the storm in the office. Once the storm passed over, the staff who remained in the building began putting stories together to publish in the next edition of the newspaper. Regardless of what their individual duties were prior to the storm, each staffer had a different task to execute after the storm subsided. Sports writer Don Hammack began blogging as many updates as he could on the newspaper's website until the use of communication was no longer accessible. Once communication failed on the Coast, Geoff Pender, another member of the *Sun Herald* staff, began blogging in Hattiesburg. After Pender could no longer blog, Blake Kaplan took over the blogging once he arrived in Columbus, Georgia. The *Sun Herald* began blogging as soon as they could after the storm to provide information to outsiders who may have had family on the coast or to give people a better understanding of what was going on.⁷⁹

In addition to communication failures in the newsroom, Kate Magandy faced her own challenges the Sunday before Katrina made landfall. Sunday morning as Magandy was on her way to church service, she was involved in a vehicular accident that totaled her car. Her

⁷⁸ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

⁷⁹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Blake Kaplan, March 9, 2011.

accident occurred not long after a friend warned her that she needed to evacuate since Katrina was a category five storm. However, Magandy did not evacuate because, like so many others, she wanted to fulfill her duty as a journalist. To add to the urgency of what was going on, Magandy received a call from Kaplan asking her to return to work because they needed to print the paper sooner than they anticipated. After informing Kaplan of her accident, Magandy continued to handle personal matters before returning to work.⁸⁰

As time dwindled Sunday morning, the *Sun Herald* finally was finally able to put a paper together. Around 1 p.m., the Sunday edition paper was published and Kaplan drove to Columbus to set up their alternate news desk. Having an alternate printing desk had always been part of the *Sun Herald*'s storm plan and fortunately it had the alternate location. Kaplan and his team faced several challenges while attempting to print the paper because Columbus also had to put its paper together before its filing deadline. The weeks Kaplan was in Columbus, he said he remembered seeing team members come together in a way they had never done before.⁸¹ One of the greatest challenges they faced was setting up an impromptu presentation desk. The only problem they had was being able to get information from the Gulf Coast using failed communication. After overcoming all of the technology glitches, the presentation desk was set up and 20,000 copies of the *Sun Herald* newspaper were printed. Prior to the communication failures, the editorial team had an order in place to print 20,000 copies if they could no longer communicate. After everything was set up and the papers were printed, they were driven to the coast and arrived between 11 a.m. and noon on Tuesday.⁸²

Meanwhile on the coast, Magandy prepared to return to work but not until she drove past her house to see what Katrina had left of it. Magandy expected her home to be destroyed,

⁸⁰ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

⁸¹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Blake Kaplan, March 9, 2011.

⁸² Ibid.

but to her surprise, much of it was still in tact. She had some structural damage but was relieved to see that her home had survived the storm. After Magandy assessed the damage of her home, she returned to the office. Her primary duty Tuesday morning was to ensure everyone was accounted for and that each person knew where they were supposed to be. The *Sun Herald* was fortunate that Knight-Ridder sent help from each of their locations. Magandy said she felt like she was a traffic cop who needed a whistle because there was so much going on. She was receiving calls on her cell phone and the office phone while also trying to assist the staff in the office.⁸³

Kaplan dealt with essentially the same issues in Columbus because so many people in the journalism community were trying to reach Stan Tiner, executive editor and vice president for the *Sun Herald*. Because there were communication failures on the Gulf Coast, Tiner was inaccessible, so Kaplan answered phone calls from anyone who was trying to reach Tiner.⁸⁴ Until the underground phone lines were breached Tuesday afternoon, there were still working phone lines on the coast. After traditional methods of communication were lost, the *Sun Herald* used satellite phones to communicate with their Columbus team and other important contacts. However, satellite phones were not as practical as cell phones, so the conversations had to be very limited and only contain pertinent hurricane information. They were also able to obtain information about Hurricane Katrina that they could not access directly from the coast.⁸⁵

Magandy was still able to make outside calls on her cell phone from the coast even though she could not make local calls. Her cell phone was used largely to help those who were stranded to let someone know that they had survived and were safe. One of the biggest

⁸³ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

⁸⁴ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Blake Kaplan, March 9, 2011.

⁸⁵ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

advantages to having a working phone was the staff was able to directly relay updates to Knight-Ridder in Washington, D.C. If she was not able to reach someone in Knight-Ridder directly, Magandy used other contacts like a friend in New Hampshire, who was also a former *Sun Herald* employee. Essentially, each staff member communicated with whomever they could reach since conditions were so bad on the coast.⁸⁶

Once the papers arrived on the coast, the *Sun Herald* had to figure out how to get the newspaper to the community. Delivery routes closest to the water were inaccessible because the streets were covered with the remains of houses, cars and churches as well as debris. There was no electricity, few working phones and hardly any access to the outside world, which made it even more important for the *Sun Herald* to get the paper out. Because there was no electricity, with the exception of generators, gas stations were also inaccessible. However, Knight-Ridder brought in a gas pumping rig to pump out enough gallons for the *Sun Herald* to deliver papers to certain locations. Anyone that was leaving the office was asked to take newspapers with them. There was no gasoline on the coast, so Knight-Ridder had to use a truck to crank out gas for the *Sun Herald* to deliver the papers. Knight-Ridder cranked out roughly five gallons of gasoline per vehicle for any automobile that was leaving Gulfport. Magandy said anyone who was going further out like to Stone County received 10 gallons, so they could get to their destination and back. Essentially, anyone in the office that had to leave for any reason took papers with them. Aside from delivering papers, the *Sun Herald* also arranged for papers to be delivered to shelters and distribution centers for food, water and ice. Several thousand copies of the paper were hand delivered in areas that were inaccessible by automobile.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

The newspaper became a beacon of hope for the Gulf Coast community because it was one of the few connections they had to the outside world. “The newspaper became really important again in a way that it hasn’t been seen probably since early in the century, in that there was no Internet, no phone, no cell phone, no texting, no tweeting...there was no source of information other than the printed word,”⁸⁸ Kaplan said. Kaplan said he also remembered people depending on the newspaper and being extremely grateful with the work the *Sun Herald* was doing to ensure that so many people received a copy of the paper. The community was also grateful because without the paper, people did not know what was going on with their own neighbors, let alone the next town. There was no way people knew how devastating Katrina had been beyond what they could see in their immediate proximity. Essentially, the *Sun Herald* provided the Gulf Coast community with valuable information that came at a time when all hope appeared to be lost.⁸⁹

WLOX’s Story

When the National Hurricane Center upgraded Hurricane Katrina to category five, WLOX worked around the clock providing updates on the status of the hurricane. As WLOX began its nonstop coverage of the hurricane, the news anchors alternated to give each other breaks, yet they never went off the air. Kessie began his shift Sunday evening at 7 p.m., and worked every day until the following Friday. As the storm approached the coast Sunday night, several reporters and cameramen were still out gathering information and showing live storm footage. Kessie said the crews wanted to get as much information out as they could before they had to take shelter. With water levels rising, the WLOX crew that was reporting from the beach knew that conditions were becoming less safe. One of the teams mobilized to locations

⁸⁸ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Blake Kaplan, March 9, 2011.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

that were higher above sea level in order to get more live shots before returning to the station. Some stayed about another hour to get more footage, but after the water had risen to their knees, they returned to the station as well.⁹⁰

Eventually, all of the WLOX crews had returned to the station, but they still remained on the air. Around 3 or 4 a.m., Kessie said they were trying their best to provide as many updates as possible. However, they did not really know just how bad things were. It was dark, so they could not see what damage the storm had done. One of the best sources WLOX was able to use during the early morning hours was law enforcement. Kessie said it was easy for them to keep calm during those hours because they did not know what was happening. Information was slowly coming in although Kessie was able to contact Governor Haley Barbour around 4 or 5 a.m. For the most part, with the exception of a few phone calls, WLOX was only able to provide updates as they received them because it was so dark outside.⁹¹

As Hurricane Katrina moved over the coastal land, WLOX began to see its effects. “There wasn’t much...until the mid morning hours where things started to fall apart. And when I say fall apart, this building started to fall apart. The roof started to peel away,” Kessie said.⁹² There was even more chaos outside of the station. The station had two towers on the outside of it, one of which had a camera attached at the top. The camera showed footage of the roof coming off the building. Also to make matters worse, one of the towers had fallen. “One tower didn’t work and was supposed to come down anyway,” Kessie said. “Mother nature brought it down.”⁹³ The tower fell to the Westside of the building into the grass. A lot of the staff was startled by the fallen tower because if it had fallen to the east, they could have

⁹⁰ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

been killed. At that moment, the staff had to act quickly and get all of their equipment moved to a safer location to keep it from getting damaged. They also had to find a way to remain calm.⁹⁴

Kessie became one of the key people who helped others remain calm, and he said it was not an easy task. “You could step outside or look at the few windows that were in the building and see something was happening outside. When a building is falling apart, nerves get frayed,” he said.⁹⁵ WLOX had about 50 people who were actually in the station at the time, most of whom were on the news team. The others who were not at the station during Katrina were from other departments like sales or advertising. Others sought shelter at home. Overall, WLOX had roughly 12 staffers who lost everything. One in particular, WLOX news anchor Rebecca Powers and her husband Ben were at home when Katrina made it to land.⁹⁶

Sunday evening before the storm, Powers went home to sleep for a few hours before returning to work. When Powers woke up, she saw a pine tree had fallen, obstructing their street. Before the storm got worst, Powers and her husband packed a bag and tried to leave their home. Water levels began rising on the coast and the wind was extremely high. The hurricane picked up a jet ski and threw it into the Powers’ Toyota, before both of the vehicles floated away. Without the car, the Powers had to find another way to seek shelter. Her husband suggested that they go upstairs and get to higher ground. So she called the station to let them know where she was and to send rescue help as soon as they could. As water continued to rise, Ben told her to get off the phone because they had to move again.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Katrina: South Mississippi's Story*. DVD. Produced, directed and written by WLOX (Biloxi, MS: WLOX, 2005).

Luckily, their hot tub had floated to the top of the water, and they were able to jump inside of it before it floated away. Initially, they were going to jump on the neighbor's roof, but they chose to stay inside the hot tub and continued moving in the direction of the water. "We thought about almost jumping to our neighbor's house," Powers said. "Thank God we didn't; that was obliterated."⁹⁸ The Powers kept moving with the water until a piece of plywood floated by. They moved from the hot tub to the plywood and were able to float to a neighbor's house. When they made it to the neighbor's house, they sat on top of his Lincoln Continental for about three hours until the storm subsided. The car was held in the driveway by the same pine tree that had fallen earlier that evening. Powers said she sang songs and prayed while they waited for the water to descend. To assess the water level, Powers and her husband counted the bricks on the wall. At first, they could only see about 10 bricks, but as the water level decreased they counted over 30 bricks. When the water dropped significantly, they went inside the neighbor's home and called for him because they knew he did not evacuate. Fortunately, the Powers found their neighbor inside, and the three of them waited for the storm to subside. As they waited for the rescue crew, Powers and her husband looked out the window and were devastated. "It felt like Armageddon. It really felt like there was no way out, and we were going to be stuck there for days."⁹⁹ Once the rescue crew arrived, Powers contacted WLOX to let them know she had survived because they had not spoken to her since earlier that morning.¹⁰⁰

Despite the challenges each of the staff faced, a sense of togetherness and teamwork prevailed and they were still able to do their jobs. As everything was falling apart, they still were never able to grasp how bad things were, largely because they did not see water.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

“Because we didn’t see water, we didn’t see disaster,” Kessie said. The building was only a few blocks from the water. Luckily, even though they had structural damage, they did not experience the worst parts of the hurricane.¹⁰¹

As the staff adjusted to the catastrophe, they were not able to leave the building for 12 hours, which Kessie said “was an eternity.”¹⁰² The most frustrating situation was not being able to do field reporting because they were stuck at the TV station. Kessie said he felt the most difficult moment of that period was not being able to do what journalists do. Once it was clear to leave the building, Kessie and former news director David Vincent were not prepared for what they were going to see.¹⁰³

Vincent said he was glad they were still alive, but knew they had to update the community with as much information as possible. They wanted to provide photographs of the damage, news updates, and as much helpful information as they could. WLOX had to give people a sense of what conditions were like and they were in awe when they realized just how devastating the storm had left the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Hurricane Katrina was by no means their first hurricane, but she certainly left her mark. “Everything was destroyed. Anything north of the beach was gone. We had never had a storm do anything like that...that’s pretty major,” Vincent said. “We thought it was going to be bad, but no one could consciously say they thought it would be as bad as it was.”¹⁰⁴

As soon as they were able to leave the building, they did. Some wanted to immediately return to work, while others wanted to go home and face what Katrina had left behind. Kessie said he remembered not having to go far down the road to see the damage Katrina had done:

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Nicole Sheriff, interview with David Vincent, March 7, 2011.

What I saw, I'll never forget. What I saw was utter devastation. What I saw was restaurant buildings that were gone. A concrete monument with eight flagpoles that was on the beach disappeared; and roadbed that was coming up; and buildings that had decayed; and casinos that were suddenly sitting on highways instead of floating in the water; and homes that only had slabs; material in trees replacing the leaves that were there; and chicken carcasses in pools; and cargo trucks with paper rolls that were in them, slammed into homes. I'll never forget it.¹⁰⁵

One memory Kessie will never forget was being able to go home each night while so many others had lost everything. He felt embarrassed because he was spared and only had about \$30,000 in damages. Katrina caused several emotions to surface in the newsroom. Some cried tears of joy because they were spared, while others cried at the thought of losing everything.¹⁰⁶ However, WLOX staffers knew they had to look past their own personal struggles and come together.

For the next several days, WLOX stayed on the air. Most of the people who were affected by Hurricane Katrina were in areas where electricity was scarce. However, people managed to watch or listen to the news reports anyway. The station's primary goal was to be a direct source for information and link the viewers to the outside world. WLOX was able to act as a liaison for agencies like the civil defense, which relied heavily on the station to get information to the community. They were also able to provide information on where distributions centers were located for food and water, and also healthcare information for people who needed insulin, dialysis or other types of medical care.¹⁰⁷ WLOX became vital to the community because it provided 12 days of consecutive updates. They were able to reach individuals who may not have had access to the *Sun Herald*. During those 12 days, WLOX tried their best to help people make sense of everything that had happened and where they could seek help. Essentially, WLOX helped link the Gulf Coast community to the rest of the

¹⁰⁵ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

world since communication was extremely limited. They carried out their civic duties as journalists and provided information to the community that was crucial to their survival, sanity and livelihood.¹⁰⁸

After the Hurricane: Selfless Service

WLOX and the *Sun Herald* were very committed to telling the Gulf Coast's story. Essentially, they knew the community had no access to information; therefore, they had to be the eyes and ears of what was taking place. Also, the journalists experienced the same devastation as their audience, which made it even more important to tell their story. However, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* did more than just tell a story. Both newsrooms came together during a time when humanity needed them most and did everything humanly possible to reach their community.

Both newsrooms could not have reached the masses without help. The *Sun Herald's* corporate parent, Knight-Ridder, mobilized individuals from each of their properties to the coast to help. Knight-Ridder sent reporters, photographers and editors from all across the United States to assist the *Sun Herald* with covering stories and taking photographs of the destruction. Magandy said it was a collective decision of the newsroom to continue publishing a print version of the newspaper, especially since they had never missed a publication date in 121 years. When the *Sun Herald* chose to keep publishing, Knight-Ridder provided them with whatever they needed. Kaplan said one of Knight-Ridder's vice presidents went to Montgomery, Ala., the Sunday before Katrina to stock a truck full of supplies like food and water. Shortly after the hurricane was over, the truck arrived on the coast providing storm

¹⁰⁸ Nicole Sheriff, interview with David Vincent, March 7, 2011.

supplies to survivors. Knight-Ridder's valiant efforts helped the *Sun Herald* tremendously in continuing to publish a paper during such harsh conditions.¹⁰⁹

Magandy said:

It was amazing to walk in on Tuesday and see the corporate vice president and managing editors from other papers helping out, and they weren't trying to take away from what the *Sun Herald* was doing. They just wanted to help the best way they could. It was really a Godsend to have those extra resources in the newsroom.¹¹⁰

WLOX also had the help of its corporate parent, Liberty, to depend on after the hurricane. Liberty sent food, water and other resources to help the conditions. They also sent people to help with essentially anything the newsroom needed like cleaning up debris and distributing food.¹¹¹ WLOX and the *Sun Herald* formed lasting relationship with the people Knight-Ridder and Liberty sent to the coast. They share a common bond that has linked them for a lifetime.

Not to discredit the help WLOX and the *Sun Herald* received from their corporate parents, having a storm plan worked to their biggest advantage. Kessie said, "If you have a plan and are able to follow the plan, you are able to accomplish in a storm the things you need to accomplish."¹¹² WLOX was able to stay on the air for 12 consecutive days because it had a game plan. By no means was it easy, but many of the reporters and anchors practically lived in the station during that time period. It really brought them closer in a big way because they were dependent on each other to get stories out.¹¹³

The *Sun Herald's* game plan also worked largely to their advantage. Using the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* as their alternate print site for two weeks allowed the *Sun Herald*

¹⁰⁹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

to print 20,000 copies of the paper and to distribute them for free the Tuesday after the storm. After they began printing in Gulfport again, the *Sun Herald* continued to print copies and distribute them free of charge for four weeks. With 35 of their delivery routes destroyed, they still managed to deliver 82,000 newspapers in a six-week period to every person they could reach.¹¹⁴

Despite extensive storm plans, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* had to adjust to circumstances beyond their control, but they managed to adjust to each situation. The second night after Hurricane Katrina, the *Sun Herald* experienced a number of transmission problems and was not able to send their information to the team in Columbus. As a result, all of the information that was going to be in the next edition of the newspaper was put on a CD ROM and driven to Mobile, Alabama. The Mobile Knight-Ridder newspaper then drove the material to Columbus. The Columbus team received the disc around 8:00 and had to file everything before their 2 p.m. deadline the same day.¹¹⁵ Magandy said there were always stories they wish they could have included after the paper was published, yet they took each day as a learning experience. They used every feasible resource to have the paper printed and driven back down to Mississippi each day.¹¹⁶

WLOX did not experience nearly the same complication as the *Sun Herald* because it was still able to shoot all of its live footage from the coast. It was still able to access their equipment despite structural damage to the TV station. Kessie said he felt they should have had more cameras in certain areas to get different shots or should have even stayed out a little longer before Katrina made landfall. As a result he said they have upgraded much of their technology and equipment, so they have the capability to reach more people than they did

¹¹⁴ G. Mitchell, et al, "10 That Do It Right," *Editor & Publisher* 140, no. 7 (2007): 34.

¹¹⁵ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Blake Kaplan, March 9, 2011.

¹¹⁶ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

prior to Katrina. User generated content, such as people using their mobile phones to send information directly to WLOX, has helped tremendously with their access to information. User generated content also helps them to retrieve photos and videos from areas they may not be able to reach during disasters. Despite the issues they faced, Kessie said: “Other than the fact the building shook and the roof peeled away and we had the damage we had, from a standpoint of trying to cover a story, we wouldn’t have done anything differently.”¹¹⁷ From a technical standpoint, WLOX was able to get the news to the community during trying conditions, yet they have learned how to be “more efficient” for future disasters.¹¹⁸

There was one issue the *Sun Herald* faced from a journalism standpoint. One of the primary tools of good reporting is objectivity. Some of the reporters in the newsroom asked if there was a way to remain objective when they were covering the same topics that had directly affected them. Magandy said one of their reporters who was covering the insurance issues had lost her home, so it would have been nearly impossible for her to be completely objective. They were all affected by the hurricane so the journalists did their best to cover both sides of the stories. However, being directly affected helped them to write the stories from a unique perspective that an outsider could not have written. They knew exactly what the community needed and provided them with helpful information. Essentially, Magandy said there was no one else who could have covered the topics because they were all affected, but they did their best to remain objective and do their jobs as journalists.¹¹⁹

Although some may have raised questions about objectivity, there really were not any ethical issues the *Sun Herald* and WLOX faced. For the most part, they used Katrina as a time to bring the newsroom closer together. Moreover, it was a life-changing experience for each

¹¹⁷ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

of them. Vincent, WLOX's station manager, said Katrina made him realize that material possessions are not the most important thing in life. He said, "I've seen people who have lost everything in life but they bounce back and are just as happy with what they have as they were before."¹²⁰ What he did say was most important was the relationships with people because they can never be replaced. Even though people want nice possessions, Katrina taught them that there is more to life than material values.¹²¹

Kessie also said WLOX became closer as a newsroom after Hurricane Katrina. News anchor Rebecca Powers nearly lost her life, but she returned to work as soon as she could. There were a couple of people in the newsroom who chose not to stay after the hurricane because Katrina was too much to bear. However, the main group that weathered the storm remained with WLOX.¹²² The *Sun Herald* also had a few members from their newsroom that chose not to stay with the paper. Those who chose to leave were primarily some of the ones who worked from Columbus. Kaplan said when it was time to return to Mississippi, many were reluctant about returning for several reasons. Some worried about sanitation and safety, while others did not want to face the reality of what Katrina left behind. Kaplan said, "The plan was always to get back as soon as possible."¹²³ He understood there were legitimate concerns, but he knew they had to return and help out their fellow staffers. After several meetings and conference calls, Kaplan convinced the majority of his Columbus team to return to the Gulf Coast with the exception of a couple of page designers who simply did not want to return home. Overall, Kaplan said the newsroom was brought closer together in a way that he has not seen many newsrooms, especially for a paper with a circulation of 50,000. WLOX and

¹²⁰ Nicole Sheriff, interview with David Vincent, March 7, 2011.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

¹²³ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Blake Kaplan, March 9, 2011.

the *Sun Herald's* drive to keep reporting was largely because they knew if they did not cover the stories, who would?¹²⁴

WLOX and the *Sun Herald's* commitment to service paid off in more ways than one. The Gulf Coast community was extremely gracious for the work they were doing. Vincent said:

You always hope you will be able to be a good leader or provide a service to the community when you're back against the wall or working against a severe handicap, and you never know if you will or not until you're faced with it. I'm glad to say the staff was able to provide such a great service but you never know. It's like when a person goes into combat, how will you react when the bullets start flying? Will you crawl down in the foxhole or are you able to fight back?¹²⁵

Both newsrooms were able to do just that. They were able to dive into the action after the storm subsided. The community depended on the TV station and the newspaper in ways it had not before. As WLOX and the *Sun Herald* helped the community by providing them with critical information, several organizations reached out to the staff. Their corporate parents, the American Red Cross, the Society of Professional Journalists, TV stations, broadcasting groups, churches and other groups sent as much manpower, food and resources as they could to help on the coast.¹²⁶ Groups had cook outs for both staffs, and those that could not come to the coast sent care packages. Knight-Ridder brought in psychologists to help people cope with the devastation and campers for people who had lost their homes.¹²⁷ The *Sun Herald* and WLOX had access to every imaginable source available. Even though they both endured emotional times, Magandy said: "You got your hand in it and you're just in the trenches and

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Nicole Sheriff, interview with David Vincent, March 7, 2011.

¹²⁶ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011; Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

¹²⁷ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

you're thinking that no one understands what you're going through. Then a care package will come through, and you realized that people did understand or at least they were trying.”¹²⁸

Kaplan said they all worked hard as a team and working was good for them because staying busy helped people to cope with what was going on. The staff was able to remove themselves from the aftermath by helping others with their problems. Katrina was emotionally taxing on the newsrooms as people used work as a healing mechanism while they pieced their lives back together. The initial weeks after Katrina were just the beginning of what was to come. WLOX and the *Sun Herald* continued to do their jobs. The *Sun Herald* covered insurance stories for those who had lost their homes or had significant amounts of structural damage. They covered stories that helped rebuild the Gulf Coast while also making changes to their newsrooms to increase their efficiency.¹²⁹ WLOX installed equipment on their laptops that allowed them to edit video from any location during disasters.¹³⁰ The *Sun Herald* and WLOX never stopped working hard after Hurricane Katrina, and their hard work was recognized not only by the Mississippi Gulf Coast but also by the entire journalism community.

Gaining National Attention: A Bittersweet Experience

During the spring of each year, selection committees comprised of notable editors, television critics and professors from the journalism industry gather to honor those who they feel have done an extraordinary job in print and broadcast journalism. The highest honor a journalist can receive during his or her career is the George Foster Peabody Award or the Pulitzer Prize. The Peabody Award, which was first presented in 1941, was designed to “recognize distinguished achievement and meritorious service by broadcasters, cable and

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Blake Kaplan, March 7, 2011.

Webcasters, producing organizations, and individuals.”¹³¹ Since 1941, the award has been given to Walter Cronkite, Oprah Winfrey and other notable persons and groups to acknowledge their outstanding service.¹³² The Pulitzer Prize, named after Joseph Pulitzer, was created in 1917 to honor the best in journalism and the arts in categories like public service, fiction, poetry, reporting and other categories.¹³³ After the Pulitzer Prize and the Peabody Award were created, it has been an honor for journalists, broadcasters, photographers and writers to receive such an award.

On April 5, 2006, WLOX was informed that it was among the recipients that would receive the 2006 Peabody Award. The Peabody committee acknowledged WLOX and its commitment to delivering non stop information to its communities despite their roof blowing off and one of its towers falling down. WLOX was one of four local TV stations to win the Peabody that year. Although the Peabody committee noted WLOX was selected for their “comprehensive Hurricane Katrina coverage,”¹³⁴ Vincent said he believed they were selected for “coming together for the betterment of the community.”¹³⁵ Regardless of the reason WLOX won the award, it was one of the biggest honors the station received that year. However, under the circumstances, they could not celebrate like they would have if they had won for a different scenario. The staff previously won a Peabody Award in 1989 for their project, “Did They Die in Vain?” WLOX won the award for revisiting the 1964 Neshoba

¹³¹ The Peabody Awards, *Overview & History*, http://www.peabody.uga.edu/overview_history/index.php.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ The Pulitzer Prizes, *Pulitzer Biography*, <http://www.pulitzer.org/biography>.

¹³⁴ The Peabody Awards, *65th Annual Peabody Awards Winners Announced*, http://www.peabody.uga.edu/news/press_release.php?id=134.

¹³⁵ Allison J. Waldman, “A Defining Moment in Afermath of Destruction,” *Television Week* 25, no. 22 (2006): 22.

County murders of three civil rights activists and revealing how such events shaped Mississippi after the Civil Rights Movement.¹³⁶

In 2006, WLOX won essentially every major award that could have been won, which was truly phenomenal from an industry standpoint. Initially they all congratulated each other for winning; however, they could not bask in happiness because so many people suffered as a result of Hurricane Katrina. WLOX continued to win awards like the Alfred I. duPont award and the Edward R. Murrow award and also received recognition from groups all over the country. Vincent said, “We won every major award you could win. You’re lucky in your career if you can win one of those awards, but to win every one of them in one year is phenomenal.”¹³⁷ Being the only TV station in town, WLOX has always had the support of the Gulf Coast behind them and were able to share each of their awards with south Mississippi. Even though it was applauded by the journalism industry, WLOX worked hard for the community during a time when communication was scarce and the people of the Gulf Coast did not have much access to anything outside of their own backyards. WLOX maintained a close relationship with the community and did what it has always done. WLOX delivered information that was crucial to the Gulf Coast, and award committees recognized that.¹³⁸

Later that month on April 17, 2006, Stan Tiner and the *Sun Herald* were informed that they were selected as recipients for the Pulitzer Prize for public service. The *Sun Herald* shared the public service award with the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, La., for their coverage of Hurricane Katrina. The Pulitzer Prize was awarded to the *Sun Herald* “for its valorous and comprehensive coverage of Hurricane Katrina, providing a lifeline for

¹³⁶ The Peabody Awards, *Did They Die in Vain?*, <http://www.peabody.uga.edu/winners/details.php?id=553>.

¹³⁷ Nicole Sheriff, interview with David Vincent, March 7, 2011.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

devastated readers, in print and online, during their time of greatest need.”¹³⁹ Much like WLOX, the *Sun Herald* celebrated their award when they were first informed of winning. However, the celebratory period did not last. Kaplan, who has been a journalist for over 20 years, said winning the Pulitzer was one of the biggest moments in his career although he hopes he wins again under better circumstances.¹⁴⁰

Magandy said:

The Pulitzer is usually celebrated with champagne, toasts, and big cheers, and while we were all very gratified, there was no champagne popped. You don’t pop champagne when you’ve won an award on the backs of so many people suffering.¹⁴¹

Essentially, the *Sun Herald* still did what they felt the Gulf Coast needed most. They covered stories and provided information to the community, which the journalism industry felt was commendable. The *Sun Herald* allowed the Gulf Coast’s stories to be heard and reported first hand accounts that outsiders did not have. They did all of this while being affected by the same circumstances as their fellow men. Magandy said the stories they covered were not only for their community but for the staff as well. They all suffered the same losses and were fighting the same battles.¹⁴² Beyond winning the Pulitzer Prize for public service, the *Sun Herald* was also recognized by Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour for its service.¹⁴³ Although the *Sun Herald* was recognized by a number of people and organizations, nothing could replace the fact that Hurricane Katrina had left so many people devastated and had shattered so many lives.

¹³⁹ The Pulitzer Prizes, *The 2006 Pulitzer Prize Winners*, <http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2006-Public-Service>.

¹⁴⁰ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Blake Kaplan, March 9, 2011.

¹⁴¹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Geoff Pender and Tom Wilemon, “*Sun Herald* wins Pulitzer Prize for coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” *Sun Herald* (Biloxi, MS), April 17, 2006.

WLOX and the *Sun Herald*'s coverage of Hurricane Katrina is undoubtedly one of the best jobs that can be seen in journalism history. The newsrooms persevered during trying times and executed the plans they laid out prior to the storm. Without up-to-date game plans, the *Sun Herald* and WLOX's coverage may have fallen short of their expectations. In the midst of destroyed roofs, alternate print sites, and transmission issues, to name a few, their plans allowed them to effectively cover the hurricane. WLOX and the *Sun Herald* endured minor setbacks, but the Gulf Coast, the state of Mississippi, and the journalism community all recognized their relentless commitment to covering the storm. So many people appreciated the work WLOX and the *Sun Herald* did and have not forgotten the hard work that was put into their reporting.

Hurricane Katrina: Gone but Not Forgotten

I hope that no one would have to go through what we went through. It's exhilarating from a "reporter" standpoint, but the reality is there was death and destruction and it's going to take a long time for the community to come back from that.¹⁴⁴

In August 2005 Hurricane Katrina ransacked South Mississippi and left her mark in the memories of so many Mississippians. People began to clean up the damage and returned to work as usual in an effort to try to regain some sense of normalcy. The *Sun Herald* and WLOX continued to cover stories about insurance claims and other issues that have affected Katrina victims even years after the storm. Over five years later, Hurricane Katrina is still seen as the most destructive storm to ever make landfall on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Katrina changed their lives forever, some for better, others for worst. However, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* have used Katrina as a time to learn and grow, not only as journalists, but as individuals. They were all left with memories that changed their lives forever.

¹⁴⁴ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

Vincent said he remembers the people who traveled from all over the world and extended their hands to help rebuild South Mississippi. Although he remembers the destruction and chaos of Katrina, he does not let the bad memories overshadow the good memories of people coming together for the greater good. Of all the groups that helped rebuild the coast, mission groups and churches helped Mississippi to recover sooner than they imagined.¹⁴⁵ Essentially, the small moments have helped the *Sun Herald* and WLOX to overcome Katrina.

Kessie said he remembered reporting nonstop for himself and his family in addition to the entire Gulf Coast community because they all had the same needs. He also recalled working non stop to cover as many stories as possible. “You work as hard as you can work for as long as you can go. You take your break, then you do it again the next day,” Kessie said.¹⁴⁶ There was no power except for the station generators. The water supply was very limited and there was hardly any air conditioning. When Kessie got off work, he went home long enough to fix what Katrina had broken and to take a bath in water his wife had already used. Living conditions have never been so harsh, yet he found ways to keep his spirits up and to lift the spirits of others. Despite the problems they endured, Kessie only focuses on the positives. He remembers the cheers of people waiting in lines at distribution centers as water and ice arrived. There were definitely downsides to Hurricane Katrina, yet Kessie said he had to look past that in order to deal with such a catastrophe.¹⁴⁷

At the *Sun Herald*, Magandy and Kaplan built lasting friendships with people who traveled to the coast to help rebuild. Those friendships still exist several years after Hurricane Katrina along with the other positive memories they chose to take away from Hurricane

¹⁴⁵ Nicole Sheriff, interview with David Vincent, March 7, 2011.

¹⁴⁶ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Katrina. One of Magandy's most vivid memories was "people came to appreciate that the newspaper was a provider of information that is important to them, and a lot of people still haven't forgotten that and it stays with them."¹⁴⁸ As with any relationship between a newspaper and its community, the *Sun Herald* has covered stories that have made their readers proud, while also making them angry. However, the *Sun Herald's* coverage of Hurricane Katrina was widely appreciated by the Gulf Coast. Magandy and Kaplan made a conscious decision to take away the good memories from the hurricane and to reflect on the times that helped people come together when they needed each other the most.¹⁴⁹

Since Hurricane Katrina, people in the newsrooms of WLOX and the *Sun Herald* have grown closer. Some roles have changed, yet they still have storm plans that they constantly update and use to prepare for future storms. At WLOX, Vincent became the station manager after Hurricane Katrina and Kessie became the news director. Also at the *Sun Herald*, Magandy became the interactive editor and Kaplan was moved up from assistant city editor to city editor. Of course when positions change, dynamics change and the newsrooms had to adjust to the changes. As roles changed, the *Sun Herald* and WLOX ensured that the disaster plans remain up to date. The newsrooms still contain primarily the same group that was there during Katrina and they have continued to remain a close team. Hurricane Katrina definitely taught them how to be more efficient in some ways. However from the standpoint of great reporting during trying times, Kessie said, "I don't think we can improve on the perfection of Katrina."¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

¹⁴⁹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy and Blake Kaplan, March 9, 2011.

¹⁵⁰ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

A number of trends emerged that reveal the best practices the *Sun Herald* and WLOX used during Hurricane Katrina. The trends that will be discussed are 1) the importance of having a storm strategy; 2) persistent journalists; 3) affirming the role of journalists in society.

The Importance of Having a Plan

It is evident that one of the reasons WLOX and the *Sun Herald* were so successful in covering Hurricane Katrina was because they had a disaster plan. The *Sun Herald's* storm committee prepared the newsroom for Katrina well in advance. The committee ensured there were working generators and other storm supplies prior to the hurricane to allow the coverage of Katrina to run as smoothly as possible.¹⁵¹ Magandy, as city editor, also ensured that each member of the staff knew what his or her specific duties would be prior to the storm. What was most crucial to the *Sun Herald's* success was the ability to continue publishing the paper. In an effort to do this, the *Sun Herald* mobilized a team to the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* in Columbus, Georgia. The team that was sent to Columbus printed the paper for two weeks from the location and had the papers driven to the Gulf Coast each day. Prior to Katrina, the *Sun Herald* had never missed a day of publication and the staff was determined not to let Hurricane Katrina stop them from publishing the paper.¹⁵² The *Sun Herald* was successful in

¹⁵¹ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

¹⁵² Ibid.

publishing the paper for several reasons but largely because a group of dedicated journalists refused to stop doing their jobs.

At WLOX, the newsrooms had a hurricane plan that outlined instructions for covering tropical storm threats, storm watches and storm warnings. For each scenario, WLOX had a different plan. When WLOX received the hurricane advisory report that Katrina had been upgraded to category five, the news crew went from doing hourly updates to 24-hour coverage. WLOX began their 24-hour coverage Saturday, August 27, 2005, and stayed on the air for 12 consecutive days.¹⁵³ Although WLOX was not prepared for the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, it stayed on the air and adapted to other situations as they occurred. When their roof blew off, WLOX acted quickly and moved to a safer location in the station in order to stay on the air. The news crew reacted with precision although they had not anticipated the roof damage. The execution of their storm plan allowed them to stay on the air.

The way the *Sun Herald* and WLOX covered the hurricane appeared as if it were calculated. Both newsrooms experienced structural damage, a loss of electricity, and other issues that were beyond their control, yet they managed to provide information that the public needed. For 12 hours WLOX was stuck inside the station and the *Sun Herald* experience transmission problems sending the paper to Columbus, but equipment like satellite phones helped them communicate with people outside the Gulf Coast to stay briefed on what was taking place.¹⁵⁴ Despite the challenges they faced, sufficient storm plans allowed WLOX and the *Sun Herald* to cover the hurricane as if it were a routine occurrence, thus abandoning what had been routine prior to the hurricane.

Persistent Journalists

¹⁵³ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

¹⁵⁴ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011; Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

Another trend that occurred in WLOX and the *Sun Herald's* coverage of Katrina was their tenacity to be the voice of South Mississippi at a time when they were isolated from the rest of the country. Perhaps the most important role the journalists had was providing South Mississippi with news. For decades, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* provided daily news to the Southern counties. During Katrina, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* became the only link between the outside world and South Mississippi. Because there was no electricity, communities could not watch national news casts. Newspaper delivery routes were also inaccessible for the most part. However, WLOX stayed on the air, so residents with portable televisions and radios could still listen to the news. The *Sun Herald* also found ways to deliver newspapers to areas that were not accessible by automobile. The staff walked through rubble and debris-covered streets to deliver the papers.

Katrina was a time when each newsroom came together as a team in a way it had not done before. There were reporters sleeping in the stations, some because they had lost their homes and others because they did not want to leave the staff. Kessie helped many of the staffers at WLOX keep their spirits up during trying times.¹⁵⁵ Essentially the newsrooms helped each other in any way they could. The *Sun Herald* had their staffers who were not reporters helping deliver papers. Other members of the paper helped cook hot meals while Magandy and others put the paper together.¹⁵⁶ Although both newsrooms had several staffers to lose everything, they put the needs of the community first to cover stories.

One of the driving forces behind WLOX and the *Sun Herald's* reporting was their community. Magandy said they worked so hard to get the news to the community because

¹⁵⁵ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Brad Kessie, March 7, 2011.

¹⁵⁶ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

there was no other way for them to receive news.¹⁵⁷ This was the attitude for both newsrooms. The reporters felt they had a civic duty to fulfill to their communities. The *Sun Herald* and WLOX covered the news not only for the community but for themselves as well since they had all been affected by Katrina. No one had been excluded from Katrina. Therefore, the reporter's efforts to cover Katrina extended beyond the public's need to know since the public's needs were also the reporter's needs.

The help Knight-Ridder and Liberty sent to the Gulf Coast was invaluable. Knight-Ridder and Liberty provided manpower and resources when both were scarce. The companies sent reporters, photographers, food and other resources to help the *Sun Herald*. Perhaps the best resource Knight-Ridder provided was the gas rig that allowed them to crank out gasoline for the cars to deliver the newspapers. The resources their corporate parents provided accounted for what was lacking in the newsrooms.

The efforts WLOX and the *Sun Herald* exercised as reporters helped tremendously in covering the hurricane. Their commitment to producing news kept South Mississippians briefed while there was no electricity and no where to go. WLOX and the *Sun Herald* knew they had a duty to the community to tell their story and relate information to them. This civic duty also included the individuals within both newsrooms because they were affected as well. As Magandy said, some may have raised questions about whether the reporters could have remained objective.¹⁵⁸ However, the fact that the newsroom staffs were affected was two-fold. On one side, there were reporters who were expected to be objective. On the other side, the reporters were citizens who had been affected like everyone else. Despite the reasons WLOX

¹⁵⁷ Nicole Sheriff, interview with Kate Magandy, March 9, 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

stayed on the air and the *Sun Herald* kept publishing a paper, they used admirable measures to cover Hurricane Katrina.

Affirming the Role of Journalists

If WLOX and the *Sun Herald* did not accomplish anything else, they helped affirm the role of journalists at best. WLOX and the *Sun Herald* demonstrated the importance and effectiveness of having a disaster plan. Although the plans could not prepare them for everything, it best prepared them for situations within their control. WLOX did not anticipate their roof being blown off; however, proper planning allowed them to set up a news desk in a short time frame. The *Sun Herald* was not prepared for the aftermath of Katrina, yet they were prepared to hand deliver newspapers or fulfill any other tasks to reach the community.

Such efforts allowed the *Sun Herald* and WLOX to affirm the role of journalists that has been observed for years. Journalists have always been expected to act as outsiders who only report on events, yet have no attachment. WLOX and the *Sun Herald* have demonstrated how that outsider role is changing. WLOX and the *Sun Herald* were unintentionally became a part of their news when Katrina made landfall. If they were reporters who had not been affected by Katrina, the staffs could have remained detached. However, they inadvertently became involved in their stories because there were no other journalists to cover Katrina. They were all affected, so no one was removed from the event. The fact that they were not excluded helped WLOX and the *Sun Herald* to unleash some of their best reporting practices. Objectivity is one of the most essential parts that journalists adhere to, but local newsrooms like WLOX and the *Sun Herald* have changed these standards. As more local journalists engage in similar practices, the definition of journalism is slowly evolving into a field in which journalists no longer act as outsiders but key players in society.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

When Katrina made landfall on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* had one main duty to fulfill as journalists. That duty was to keep South Mississippians briefed on the hurricane as often as possible. Their first strategy for accomplishing this goal was having a storm plan and implementing it during the hurricane. Because the Gulf Coast is threatened by hurricanes each year, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* have worked with their staff and city officials to develop storm plans. Not only do these plans include tasks like checking generators, but the plans also lay out what the newsrooms should do during inclement weather. WLOX's plan outlined when they should air updates and how often. The *Sun Herald's* plan established the need for an alternate printing site. The *Sun Herald* planned to use the alternate site if conditions on the coast no longer allowed them to print the paper from Biloxi. The *Sun Herald* and WLOX's early preparation for the hurricane helped tremendously in the days following Katrina.

The storm plans helped both newsrooms to react to unexpected situations as well. WLOX stayed on the air at all times, even when they were not aware of outside conditions. The *Sun Herald* also had to adapt to transmission problems that prevented them from getting the stories to Columbus to be published in the paper. However, there was not a moment of hesitation in covering the news. WLOX and the *Sun Herald* endured a number of problems in

order to continue reporting. There was no electricity, no water, no gas, limited food and communication failures among other problems, but the journalists were able to adapt to each situation as it occurred.

One concept that will better explain how the *Sun Herald* and WLOX covered the hurricane would be through Dan Berkowitz's description of making non-routine events routine.¹⁵⁹ The issues that occurred during Katrina were not routine occurrences for the newsrooms. Eventually, covering the hurricane became a routine. No other news was relevant at the time. As a result, WLOX and the *Sun Herald* went from covering stories that were not hurricane related to providing updates about the storm with information that helped survivors. Even though many of the survivors were unreachable, the public's right to know exceeded the physical boundaries the *Sun Herald* and WLOX were subjected to. WLOX and the *Sun Herald* became the only sources of information for the community. They provided information that was essential to the survival of every South Mississippian who was affected by the hurricane.

During Hurricane Katrina, the newsrooms were able to come together and discover their best newsroom practices. Essentially, they used basic reporting rules to cover the stories, but they exceeded the norms of reporting in the ways they covered Hurricane Katrina. Journalists cover a variety of stories in their careers, but there is no handbook on how to deal with disasters like Katrina. As David Vincent mentioned, Katrina was a situation when they had to decide whether they would hide in the trenches or stand up and fight.¹⁶⁰ That is exactly what WLOX and the *Sun Herald* did. They used Katrina to reveal their best newsroom practices and carried out these practices as journalists. WLOX and the *Sun Herald's* number

¹⁵⁹ Berkowitz, 82.

¹⁶⁰ Nicole Sheriff, interview with David Vincent, March 7, 2011.

one goal during Katrina was to provide information for a group of people who did not have access to news otherwise. WLOX and the *Sun Herald*'s reporting efforts could act as a template for other newsrooms to follow during disaster coverage.

WLOX and the *Sun Herald* accomplished several tasks through their Hurricane Katrina coverage. They demonstrated a set of guidelines that other newsrooms can follow to cover disasters. The practices that worked best for WLOX and the *Sun Herald* that can be implemented in other newsrooms were: 1) having a plan in place to prepare for major events; 2) ensuring that everyone in the newsroom knows his or her specific duty; 3) maintaining open lines of communication with corporate parents; 4) having an alternate publication site. The newsrooms showed the effectiveness of having a storm plan and being prepared. They also never lost the need to get news to the community, and they used every imaginable resource to ensure the news was heard or read by the community. Each of the goals the *Sun Herald* and WLOX used helped them to discover their best practices for covering future disasters.

Recommendations for Further Research

WLOX and the *Sun Herald* have provided a gateway for researchers and scholars to study local journalists in a way they may have failed to do before. They have also provided a template that other newsrooms can follow to cover disasters. Not only has this study outlined the practices the *Sun Herald* and WLOX used while covering Katrina, but also raised the awareness of local journalists for future studies to be done. Further studies should potentially be conducted on newsrooms like WLOX and the *Sun Herald* and their roles as journalists. Some critics have argued that community journalists do not cover substantial topics. On the other hand, this study can provide insight that breaks down the barriers of the negative

connotations that surround local journalists, which suggests they are participants in their communities as opposed to watchers. A substantiated amount of research has also been done on the *Times-Picayune*'s coverage of Hurricane Katrina. A study could potentially be done comparing and contrasting the *Time Picayune*'s coverage with the *Sun Herald*'s coverage. Few studies have gone in depth into the effects of Hurricane Katrina on Mississippi and its newsrooms. Therefore, more research is needed on the effects of Hurricane Katrina on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

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