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Hurricane Katrina: Local Radio And Community Responsibility

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The following paper conducts a single case analysis of how local radio in New Orleans, Louisiana, during one of the most devastating hurricanes in American history, advanced itself as one of the most aggressive, trusted and valuable members of the media community. Results of this study suggest that local radio's aggressive efforts during Hurricane Katrina were not a quest for a public relations victory or profit, but more about the medium's ethical and moral responsibility to community during times of crises.

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Hurricane Katrina: Local Radio and Community Responsibility

Generations of New Orleanians worked for 300 years to raise a great city in the often in-hospitable terrain along the banks of the Mississippi River. It took Hurricane Katrina less than six hours to put that labor of love under water, damaging 200,000 homes and killing more than 1,200 people."

Bob Marshall
New Orleans *Times-Picayune*
Sunday, May 14, 2006[1]

The effect of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans, Louisiana was cataclysmic. The storm caused an estimated $75 billion in damages, making it the costliest hurricane in United States history. Thousands were killed. Some lost to the sea, while others were lost to the swamps of Louisiana.

Two days after the storm washed ashore, Karen Swensen, a WWL-TV reporter, related a particularly heartbreaking account:

> A New Orleans woman waded through the streets of the city, trying to get her husband to Charity Hospital. Although he was already dead, she floated his body through the flooded streets on a door that came off their home.[2]

Associated Press writer Mary Foster quoted one hairdresser's impression of the storm: "Oh, my God, it was hell," Kioka Williams, who had to hack through the ceiling of the beauty shop where she worked as floodwaters rose in New Orleans' low-lying Ninth Ward, V, said. "We were screaming, hollering, and flashing lights. It was complete chaos."[3]

New Orleans *Times Picayune* writers Brian Thevenot, Gordon Russell, Keith Spera and Doug MacCash related 52-year-old Daniel Weber's account:

> Sitting on a black barrel amid the muck and stench near the St. Claude Avenue bridge, 52-year-old Daniel Weber broke into a sob, his voice cracking as he recounted how he had watched his wife drown and spent the next 14 hours floating in the polluted flood waters, his only life line a piece of drift-wood. "My hands were all cut up from breaking through the window, and I was standing on the fence. I said, 'I'll get on the roof and pull you up,' he said. And then we just went under."[4]

WWL radio's Dave Cohen, news director of that station's all-news format, recalled the moments after the storm's arrival:

> It was surreal, bizarre, frightening and unbelievable. . . . [W]e were getting calls from people who we feared would not be with us much longer. It still haunts me to this day. It's never what I expected to do as a broadcaster.[5]

Katrina's high winds and subsequent flood-ing caused extraordinary destruction of com-munications facilities. Almost three million telephone lines were knocked down; 911-call centers were put out of action, and more than one thousand cell towers were left useless. Without these communications systems it be-came enormously difficult for victims to get emergency information and to communicate with family and friends. Newspapers, radio and television stations were flooded and lost power. Transmitting towers were blown down. Leaders in the industry described such conditions as the longest and largest outage of media facilities in a large U. S. media market.[6]

The New Orleans *Times-Picayune* relocated its editorial staff to Baton Rouge and Houma, Louisiana, posting its reports on nola.com be-cause it could not print a hard copy of the paper. WWL TV's transmitter stayed in the air, but the station's news operations moved to Ba-

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ton Rouge. TV staffers from WGNO and WNOL television moved to Baton Rouge, contributing news stories to WBRZ-TV in Baton Rouge. WVUE TV joined WALA, its sister TV station in Mobile, Alabama. WDSU TV lost its transmitter, but sent news staffers to Jackson, Mississippi and to Orlando, Florida.[7]

In the midst of the chaos, however, several local radio stations were able to continue broadcasting; some at low power; others in a network-based configuration.

WWL radio, an all-news A.M. radio station, and a long-time media tradition in the city of New Orleans, quickly returned to the air under generator power. The station first aired programming from its downtown studios on Poydras Street, then from an emergency bunker in nearby Jefferson Parish, and finally from studios in Baton Rouge.[8] During it all, WWL's street reporters stayed behind for a historic 72 days to report the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina and recovery efforts. "WWL made for riveting radio, and I found myself listening at all hours in the car late at night via WWL's booming signal," wrote Marc Fisher in the *American Journalism Review*.[9]

Other New Orleans radio stations, some smaller and less resourced, followed WWL's lead, while others did not return to the air for months. Those that could keep afloat extended radio's lifeline to the thousands of listeners, with nothing more than crank-up radios or sets powered by batteries. Listeners were treated to street reports and statements from public officials who were eager to utilize a communication system that worked. When all was said and done, local radio was credited with saving thousands of lives.

How did local radio in New Orleans advance itself as one of the most aggressive, trusted and valuable members of the media community before, during and after Hurricane Katrina? What do the results of this research suggest about local radio's unique role in serving the public interest in times of crises?

The following case study focuses on the characteristics, circumstances, and complexity of a single case–local radio's coverage before, during and after Hurricane Katrina. The study's methodology involved collecting first-person accounts of what happened with radio in New Orleans by researching previously printed materials, and by conducting numerous personal interviews with those involved. Information, statistics, facts, figures, numbers and records were acquired from local and national mainstream media coverage. Personal interviews were conducted by the researcher with New Orleans local radio executives, program managers, news directors, news anchors, field reporters, and network personalities and local political leaders associated with Hurricane Katrina. Personal testimony was given by "first responders" during congressional hearings. Those at the hearings included governmental and medical professionals who were prepared, equipped and trained for any situation, such as a terrorist attack, natural disaster or other large-scale emergency.

BACKGROUND

Radio is a mass medium capable of easily delivering a message to a mass population, one that can be sliced up into smaller segments based on demographic, lifestyle and/or geography characteristics. To this day, more than 93 percent of consumers aged 12 years and older listen to the radio each week. Radio reaches people wherever they are: at home, at work, in the car–nearly everywhere. Regardless of one's age, the time of day or the listening location, Americans depend on radio as a reliable media companion for entertainment, news, information, community service and, increasingly, social networking.[10] Such numbers challenge the notion that local terrestrial radio is a dying medium. A good bit of research has suggested that radio is among the most hardy, accommodating and available system of communicating information to the community following a major crisis.[11] When a community is threatened, radio characteristically helps to bring society together and inspire community leaders and social groups to toil together to achieve common goals.[12] Listeners see radio announcers or "personalities" as stars and connect with them emotionally.[13]

Participants in a 1999 study conducted by Hindman and Coyle saw local radio coverage of

the April, 1997 Red River Valley floods in North Dakota as central in helping their communities come together. Respondents said local radio helped them feel more linked with the communities. Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne, a series of very destructive hurricanes in 2004, caused a great deal of mayhem for people along the Gulf Coast.[14] Again, radio provided critical information and comfort to residents during and after those storms.[15]

David Bartlett's essay "News Radio: More than Masters of Disasters" most aptly describes the public service potential of radio: "When disaster strikes and usual channels of communication are cut, radio remains our most reliable means of keeping in touch with the outside world."[16]

Radio coverage is likely to include personal statements from listeners troubled by the emergency, reports from reporters, and statements from public officials who may or may not have communication resources.[17] In such situations, battery-powered or hand-cranked radios are customary household devices, making radio less difficult to manage and more appropriate for emergency communication than other media.

SERVING THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Many in the industry argue that radio's greatest role to society is its ability to give attention to the needs, public interest and well-being of its local audiences, while others contend radio's principal job is to make money and entertain. In any event, the outsourcing of news and the downsizing of local radio news staffs (an end result of deregulation and consolidation) has lessened radio's identity and its link to the local community.

Using focus groups and a national online listener survey, Torosyan and Munro focused on the idea of "local" and where local radio fits into the changing media environment. Results of the study indicated that local broadcast radio is not only viable, but also critical to listeners who largely perceived it as a valuable public service and wish for it to remain a medium of choice in their foreseeable futures. Among findings they reported in the *Journal of Radio and Audio Media*:

- Most listeners defined "local news" as hometown (26 percent) or regional (35 percent), not statewide (9 percent).
- At least half of all survey respondents named these features of local radio as "very important:" speed and reliability of emergency information, music choices, caring about listeners and friendly personalities.
- Most (90 percent) of the residents of small towns and rural areas expressed the same general programming preferences as residents of larger communities, giving top preference to local news, weather and traffic, with music second.
- Some 90 percent of all respondents predicted that in the future they will spend the same amount of time or even more listening to their local radio stations.[18]

Torosyan and Munro further defined "local" as one having "geographic proximity to the community it serves, direct or indirect connection to the local community by means of live broadcasts, contests and giveaways, relevance to local life through news, weather and traffic, interactivity, accessibility or personal familiarity of hosts and newsmakers and local ownership."

The concept of "localism" refers to a local media outlet's capability to attend to the distinct needs and unique interests of local communities, and has long been considered the heart of U.S. communication policy. There is little, if any, agreement on what accurately defines "public interest" in the minds of broadcasters, especially in today's era of media consolidation and deregulation.[19]

The "public interest, convenience and necessity" provisions were integrated into the U.S. Radio Act of 1927 and became fundamental requirements for broadcasters to acquire and hang on to their broadcast licenses. The logic was simple: The broadcast band of frequencies was considered a limited resource belonging to the community, and only those with the intent and resources to serve the public interest would be awarded a broadcast license.[20] Today's deregulation and media consolidation have tested the notion of whether "the public interest, convenience and necessity" have been realized.[21]

HURRICANE KATRINA AND LOCAL MEDIA

Media coverage that followed Hurricane Katrina was noteworthy for its emphasis *on* and the portrayal *of* the poor and black citizens of New Orleans.[22] Jesse Jackson Sr., an African-American civil rights activist and Baptist minister, was quoted as saying "Katrina's impact was multiplied if you were African-American or poor, and so many facing the worst flood were both."[23] Researchers and theorists alike have asserted that minorities, especially African- Americans, were revealed in a negative light, with officials and the media sometimes embellishing reports of violence during and after the storm in New Orleans.[24] Such reports involved unconfirmed reports of murders and rapes that apparently never took place. According to Thevenot: "While anarchy indeed reigned in the city, and subhuman conditions in the Dome and the Convention Center shocked the nation's conscience, many if not most of the alarmist reports of violence were false, or at least could not be verified." [25] New Orleans police struggled with keeping order.[26]

THE IMPULSE TO BLAME

The impulse to blame individuals or groups in authority during and after Hurricane Katrina was "eminent" because the public is quick to insist on a scapegoat or a responsible party when problems or difficulties arise.[27] People began to ask 'what went wrong during Katrina.' [28] In its final report, a select bipartisan committee set up by the House of Representatives found the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Red Cross "did not have a logistics capacity sophisticated enough to fully support the massive number of Gulf coast victims and shared responsibility of the disaster between the three levels of government."[29] Yet, FEMA continued to pat its workers on the back in press release after press release as having done a fine job with handling matters.[30] This assessment also identified failures at all levels of government that "significantly undermined and detracted from the ability of first responders, private individuals and organizations, faith-based groups, and others," said the report. Furthermore, the failure of local, state, and federal governments to respond more effectively to Katrina "demonstrates that whatever improvements have been made to our capacity to respond to natural or man-made disasters we are still not fully prepared."[31]

The disastrous effects of Katrina were not a shock and had in reality been envisaged before the 2005 storm. Greg Brouwere contended levies surrounding New Orleans were only designed to withstand a Category 3 storm. With a Category four or five storm, New Orleans could find itself under more than twenty feet of water. As such, the majority of media focused on the failure of the Federal Emergency Management Agency on post recovery.[32] However, an analysis of FEMA's press releases during the relief effort, positioned the agency as a "superhero" and "instructor."[33]

NATIONAL FOCUS ON NEW ORLEANS

Although Katrina produced physical destruction in other areas of the Gulf Coast, New Orleans received the most media attention because of its size and status.[34] Many people were rescued immediately after the storm, including legendary music great, Fats Domino. Levees designed to protect the city failed after the hurricane passed, causing 80 percent of New Orleans to flood. Such flooding had a devastating impact on communications in the four parishes making up Region 1 in Louisiana.

According to Dr. Peter M. Fonash, Deputy Manager, National Communications System, in testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, February 6, 2006, all voice radio communications were lost except for very limited radio-to-radio communications, commonly known as "simplex." Simplex is a limited mode of communication because it does not take advantage of communication repeaters on towers that greatly extend a radio's reach.[35]

In St. Bernard Parish, extreme winds took away communications towers and antennas. Flood waters swamped the 911 call center and forced personnel to leave buildings that housed communications for Fire and Sheriff's depart-

ments. The government in Plaquemines Parish lost its communications tower and communications center, along with an assortment microwave dishes. The Plaquemines Sheriff's department lost the 911 communications and dispatch center and all its towers. It would be almost three weeks before the parish had any means of voice communications. The Jefferson Parish Sheriff's office lost the main tower supporting its communication system and suffered damage to other sites within the system. For a few weeks, antennas were temporarily mounted on the 400 foot boom of a crane in Jefferson Parish. During and in the aftermath of the storm, the region's only means of voice radio communications was the use of a few mutual aid channels. In metro New Orleans, one tower was put out of action by the storm's water surge. Two other towers had damaged equipment, while others lost power. The city's 911 centers and police, fire, and EMS dispatch centers were also down. Vast areas of the Gulf Coast, from Louisiana to Florida, had no conventional telephone or wireless service. Thousands of the switches and cell towers that made the region's telecommunications network were unavailable or left without power, if not wrecked.[36]

LOCAL RADIO'S RESPONSE

WWL radio, the city's only AM, all-news outlet, and the flagship station of a cluster of stations owned by Entercom in the New Orleans market, watched weather developments around the clock. On August 26, the Friday before the storm, news director Dave Cohen was told by the National Hurricane Center that Katrina was projected to hit the Florida panhandle. New Orleans was safe. A second call later in the day from Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center, informed Cohen that Katrina had changed track and was now headed on a course that would bring the eye of the storm within 150 miles of New Orleans. "In New Orleans, people go home at lunch on Fridays. They're not consuming very much media this late in the week," Cohen said. "It was going to be a problem to get people in the city to adjust and just react to the news."[37]

Timing was everything but right. The NFL football Ravens were in town to play the New Orleans Saints that Friday night in a preseason game at the Superdome. Friday night was also high school jamboree night, a night when schools kicked off their first football game.

Cohen aired periodic news briefs on WWL during the Saints' game about Katrina's shift to the west. By 7 a.m. the next day, August 27, Katrina was taking a dead aim for New Orleans. The city was on the verge of its greatest calamity since Hurricane Betsy, some forty years earlier. Betsy was one of the most powerful, deadly, and costly storms to hit the shores of the United States at that time. The storm killed seventy-six people in Louisiana, triggered $1.42 billion in damage which, when adjusted for inflation, amounted to 10 billion-12 billion in 2005 U.S. dollars.[38]

Clear Channel Radio stations, competitors to those owned by Entercom (WWL's family) watched the progress of Katrina, as well. Those chains of local radio stations broke into regular music programming with weather reports and information. Since most of the stations in the Clear Channel cluster were primarily music formats, information from each station tended to be limited than that given by WWL and that station's sister stations. Additional stations, those not owned by Clear Channel or Entercom, aired reports and information, too, but stuck close to regular programming for the time being.

Within hours, a mandatory evacuation order was issued by parish president Benny Rousselle for Plaquemines Parish, a county seat to the southeast. Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin appeared at a press conference to warn residents of the storm. Nagin declared a state of emergency in New Orleans, but stopped short of declaring a mandatory evacuation. The mayor would later defend his actions before a senate committee charged with investigation the city's role in recovery operations.[39]

Such action prompted WWL's Cohen, an engineer and two reporters to scramble across the Mississippi River Bridge to a concrete bunker in Jefferson Parish, just two miles from the station's transmitter site. Here they set up operations to broadcast reports back to the main

studios on Poydras Street via a microwave link. If that link were to go down, the team would send reports directly to the transmitter, located elsewhere in the city.[40]

The emergency bunker was supplied with food, a generator, and a small air conditioner. Cohen had experienced a hurricane once before and could easily understand the gravity of the situation when others could not. The storm was bigger than a conventional hurricane–some 400 miles wide. Even if the storm went left or right, New Orleans would still sustain serious damage. New Orleans' "bowl" configuration would become a lake with tidal action, "with sharks and manatees and all the rest."[41]

Cohen called in his broadcast troops, mostly those who worked as on-air news personalities. Garland Robinette, a former TV anchor, would become a leading force in the station's coverage of Katrina. Robinette was joined by anchors Don Ames, David Blake, and Cohen. Talk show hosts included John "Spud" McConnell, Deke Bellavia, and Vince Marinello, and others. Reporters stationed in the streets were Kaare Johnson, Chris Miller, and Richard Hunter.

Robinette was only a part-timer at the station before the storm and was relatively new to the radio side of WWL. Only weeks before, David Tyree, a popular talk-show host at the station and a close friend of Robinette's, asked for his help. "David said 'look, I have a second round of cancer, and every once in awhile I need treatments,' so I said I'll go in for a few days until they can get someone to replace him then I'll go home. During that period I probably helped him out once a week," Robinette said in a personal interview for this study. Tyree was suffering from prostate cancer and was buried two weeks after Hurricane Katrina came ashore. In any event, Robinette came in the night before Katrina as a favor to Diane Newman, the station's operations manager. "I figured I'd be there over night and then go home the next day," Robinette said, seeing the approaching storm as just another hurricane that would go the other way. [42]

Robinette's relaxed mood that Sunday night switched to apprehension. Douglas Brinkley in his book *The Great Deluge* quoted Robinette as opening the WWL microphone and exclaiming to his listeners: "You're going to think I'm stone-cold crazy . . . but the birds are gone. . . . I know the powers *that be* say not to panic . . . but I'm telling you, panic . . . worry . . . run! The birds are gone. Get out of town! Now! Don't stay! Leave! Save yourself while you can. Go . . go . . . go."[43] Robinette began to feel the gale-force winds from Katrina, then at 2 a.m. the eye of the hurricane was passing 130 miles south-southeast of New Orleans. Winds were blowing at almost 155 mph. At 4 a.m., the eye of the hurricane was ninety miles south-southeast of New Orleans. Suddenly the studio's windows exploded. Bits and pieces of glass sprayed into the main broadcast studio. Satellite dishes once anchored to the building's rooftop broke loose and morphed into chunks of torn and twisted steel. Diane Newman, the station's operations manager and a co-worker, held Robinette's microphone as both retreated down a hallway for safety. "The microphone looked like it was on an IV stand with wheels," Robinette recalled. "Three people were holding me because of the wind. They shoved me down the hallway and stuck me in a closet with the microphone so I could keep a connection with the audience."[44]

Robinette's narration of the live-on-air retreat farther inside the building was described by *Times-Picayune* TV and Radio writer Dave Walker a "horrible, wonderful broadcasting–a horror to listen to, but a wonder, too."[45]

When the storm passed, news director Cohen and his reporters changed into weather gear and charged out into the flooded streets. They reported images of a city drenched and swamped by broken levees. Kaare[46] Programming was packaged as a free flow of information, Cohen said. "It was essentially 'here's what's happening.' We felt the responsibility to keep broadcasting to people...we had to keep taking these calls from people who were standing in chest-deep, asking us as they held their two-month old baby, 'what should I do? What should I do? The water is coming up.'[47]

Clear Channel officials felt the studio facilities and technical wherewithal of Clear Channel stations, and the news gathering skills of Entercom's WWL and its sister stations

would make a successful merger.[48] What resulted was an unprecedented cooperative effort between two companies, normally at odds with one another as competitors. They called the new network the *United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans*. Never before had two competing rivals, much less industry conglomerates, combined broadcast resources in such a way. "We decided we would become friends," said Dick Lewis, Clear Channel's regional vice president at the time. "We wanted our listeners to have as much information as possible, and decided the best way to provide that was to work together."[49] As such, logic, necessity and the mutual respect of broadcasters resulted in an unprecedented cooperative arrangement, according to WWL's operations manager, Diana Newman, in testimony before the FCC, September 15, 2005.[50] Programming originated from temporary quarters in Baton Rouge and audio feeds were sent to all stations in New Orleans via a satellite uplink provided by the Louisiana Network. Radio station reporters, those primarily in the employ of WWL and Entercom, would stay behind to cover the storm's aftermath.

The first few days of the United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans were all about rescue and recovery. The second phase was assessing the damage. By the third phase, listeners began asking "why did this happen?" Clear Channel and Entercom gave permission to any radio station to carry programming from the new network. Stations carrying the signal included broadcast outlets as close as Birmingham, Alabama and Panama City, Florida, to stations as far away as Rochester, New York; Boston, Massachusetts; Lacrosse, Wisconsin; Duluth, Minnesota, and Salt Lake City, Utah. Audio feeds were also carried on shortwave station WHRI, allowing the signal to go worldwide.[51]

The development and success of the United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans partnership was made successful in part by Clear Channel's and Entercom's proactive and down to business stance days ahead of the storm. On Thursday, August 25, when it was established that Katrina might first hit Florida, Clear Channel officials held a preparation conference call with over 140 of its employees in Florida and along the Gulf Coast. At issue was how to provide uninterrupted live, local news to the community from its primary studio facilities. Steve Davis, chief of engineering for over 1,200 Clear Channel radio stations that existed at the time, said in a personal interview for this study participants decided on a list of equipment and supplies that would be needed–fuel, generators, transmitters, satellite phones, satellite uplinks, portable transmitters, antennas, studios, and trucks.[52] Such resources were dispatched to southeast Florida, where landfall was expected. Officials discussed evacuation plans, contingency and emergency operations, communication methods." Clear Channel positioned its resources close to the affected area, but far enough away from the damaging winds of Katrina. "We called our engineers from outside the area to move in and help our local engineers and broadcasters after the storm had passed," Lewis said in a personal interview for this study.[53]

That Saturday, after Katrina made its first landfall in Florida, and after learning the storm was likely to re-intensify and hit the Gulf Coast, Clear Channel officials held a second preparation conference call and decided to redirect all the resources that had been intended for southeast Florida be "repurposed" for Mobile, Alabama.[54] On Sunday, August 28, it became clear: Clear Channel workers would have to leave behind their New Orleans studios and head for cover. Engineers first made certain they could feed live local news via satellite to their New Orleans stations from anywhere out of market, such as from Baton Rouge. "When it became clear that we would have to leave our studios, we set up our systems in New Orleans where we could 'pipe in' programming from other out-of-market studios in our chain if we had to," said Clear Channel's Gabe Hobbs.[55]

At the Clear Channel technical management headquarters in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the response after Hurricane Katrina's passing was immediate. Chief engineer Davis coordinated Clear Channel's broadcast efforts from that location. Staff members, sent from corporate headquarters to New Orleans, discovered broken windows and misaligned or destroyed microwave links.

Clear Channel's WYLD AM, the group's gospel station, lost two of its five broadcasting towers when the towers crashed to the ground. The transmitter sites of WRNO (rock format) and WNOE FM (country format) were flooded and all equipment destroyed. The company was forced to fly in smaller transmitters and use other tower sites to broadcast at reduced power levels.

Keeping generators cranked, running and fueled was the highest priority for Clear Channel engineers, who managed six stations for the Clear Channel radio group. With the assistance of FEMA escorts, Clear Channel's large trucks—used for the company's outdoor advertising business-- transported fuel over flooded roads to keep operations on air. The FCC helped Clear Channel obtain security passes and clearances necessary to travel restricted locations and provided federal protection for transmitter sites and studio site locations.

Entercom chose three of its highest corporate lieutenants to run an emergency crisis center from Seattle.[56] Those chosen included Entercom's Marty Hadfield, vice president of engineering; Ken Beck, Entercom's vice president of news and sports programming, and Noreen McCormick, Entercom's vice president of human resources. "The three of us coordinated the actions of our engineers and programmers in the affected area," Hadfield said in a personal interview for this study. "We made a number of decisions away from the emotional core of the crisis," he added. Having an out-of-area crisis management team gave Entercom officials a perspective that could not have been obtained had all the decisions been made in New Orleans. "Coordinators in New Orleans forgot how emotionally fragile they could become," Hadfield said. "Our engineers told us that having someone in the 'crow's nest' really helps."[57] Entercom rotated its engineers in and out of the situation. Out-of-market engineers were cycled in to work alongside a co-worker for a day or two, then took over the job so the first person could take much-needed rest away from the affected area. The recycling program was critical to Entercom's response because of the amount of stress workers experienced. "They were all heroes. They loved their com-munities. Sometimes they had to be told to stop and sit out for some time. If they go too long they might have needed to be rescued them-selves," Hatfield added.[58] The biggest challenge for Entercom was how to keep track of the company's 135 people who evacuated before the storm's landfall. Those that stayed on the job were mostly news anchors, reporter, and talk-show personalities. Tracking them and making sure they were safe was an extraordinary job. A number of staff members lost their homes in the hurricane, yet all did their best to keep their "radio face" on and deal with their personal issues separate from their work, Ken Beck, VP of Entercom stated.[59]

Programming between Entercom stations and those of Clear Channel consisted of continuous news, information and coverage of local relief efforts. Live feeds from street reporters and interviews and updates from local officials and relief coordinators were a dominant part of programming. A toll-free 800 number was made available to listeners share their experiences with others and to provide eyewitness reports. The network embraced a community of voices more so than any other medium, often deputizing listeners as unofficial reporters.[60] Dave Walker, radio and TV editor for the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, visited the network's hurricane operations center in Baton Rouge. He found the partnership a bit "surreal," stating that Entercom and Clear Channel would have normally be cutting "figurative throats" to compete for every advertising nickel, but "with the market's economy temporarily submerged and listener lives on the line, had combined to keep an essential stream of news and information flowing to hurricane survivors." Walker wrote: "Hold lights blinked on the studio phone for three days as listeners called in to tell the world about the terrible things that were happening to them. Their minds fogged with fear, they [listeners] ask radio hosts how they should get to their roofs. The answer–climb out on the windowsill. Hand the children up."[61] Walker was quick to sense the congestion during the few days he was "embedded" with the members of

the United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans in their makeshift studios in Baton Rouge. The Baton Rouge facilities were not set up for the volume of bodies. Everyone was either working at everyone's desk or shoe-horned into corners. "They had piled equipment from offices out into the hallways so that they would have room to house the news and talk people," he wrote. "It was clearly like a M-A-S-H unit type operation. Strewn around are boxes, plywood boards, computer monitors, office supplies and furniture. Suitcases sit in cubicles."[62] Emotional fragility was evident among the New Orleans staffers, including the Baton Rouge staffers because of the stress of dealing with extra people and working in close spaces. Staffers were sleeping on floors of offices, out in RVs, and in office chairs. Some staffers wore the same clothes for days on end. "We went to Wal-Mart to get some decent T-shirts and shorts, so I would have been surprised if there had not been some tension," Clear Channel's Gabe Hobbs said. Staffers were running on adrenalin and caffeine and were visibly stressed, even those who had not lost their house during the hurricane but were having to deal with the people who did.[63]

The line-up of personalities on the United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans worked well, WWL news director Cohen said, because it was made up of true New Orleanians, people who lived in the community. "They didn't have to be talk show hosts to tell the story of what was happening with Katrina," Cohen said. "Anybody who experienced Katrina could come and tell the story, and tell it with a different perspective. They all had a story that was worth listening to."[64]

Primary members of the WWL staff included Cohen, David and Heather Blake, Chris Miller, Don Ames, Richard Hunter, Deke Bellavia, Vince Marinello, John "Spud" McConnell, Karre Johnson, and former TV legend, Garland Robinette. Cohen also brought in reporters from other Entercom stations from across the nation, and stationed them in New Orleans. "The story was too big and we needed more people to help tell it." According to Cohen, his station and the network were facing the biggest natural disaster in human history, and while WWL radio had the largest radio news staff in the Gulf south, he didn't know of any radio station who had a news team big enough to cover a storm that big by themselves, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for 72 days. Reporters were brought in from Seattle, Kansas City, Buffalo, and Boston. "They came in and stuck it out," Cohen said. "I told them every day to fill their tanks and get two cases of water before they made the trek down to New Orleans, which had none of those items readily available."[65]

One out-of-town reporter, forty-year radio veteran Dan Verbeck, from Entercom-owned KMBZ-AM in Kansas City, spent four days virtually without sleep upon his arrival in New Orleans. He was struck with the magnitude of damage, and overwhelmed like everyone else. Verbeck interviewed elected officials, emergency officials, law enforcement, and whoever came into the Jefferson Parish emergency center, where he rode out the storm with Dave Cohen and others.[66]

Members of the Clear Channel staff included A.J. Appleberry, Adrian Long, former TV newsperson, Monica Pierre, Loretta Petit, Gerry V, Eddie Edwards, and Ray Romero. Gerry Vaillancourt was a sports talk-show host on Clear Channel's WODT-AM in New Orleans, but that night he was a talk show host providing comfort and aid on the United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans.

Although Entercom and Clear Channel radio stations became dominant voices on the local airwaves, they were not alone. Other radio stations in the market were able to play leading roles and provide coverage, even if for only a limited time.

WTIX AM (690 KHz), a popular music station not affiliated with Entercom or Clear Channel, was a popular radio station with the younger generation during the 1950s and 1960s. WTIX was one of the last local radio stations to go silent as Hurricane Katrina crashed into southeast Louisiana. The day before the hurricane, the station's Rob Hunter went back to his apartment between broadcasts and packed a couple of days' worth of clothes. At that time,

he thought he would have to spend the next couple of days working at the radio station. But, he was wrong. Hunter didn't return to his apartment for another three weeks after the hurricane. "We all packed into our second-floor studio just as the rain started Sunday night. The rain kept falling for hours," Hunter said. "The wind howled at well over 100 miles per hour. At some point that night, the power was knocked out. Katrina hadn't even made landfall yet.[67] Hunter's boss, station manager, Dan Alexander, fired up the generator in order to keep the station broadcasting well into the night. Hunter and others gave storm coordinates, talked to local officials and interviewed listeners via phone.

By Monday morning, WTIX was knocked off the air. Katrina's force knocked over the radio station's towers and a surge of water destroyed the transmitter. Hunter and his friend Shane sat and watched. They felt the building sway in the wind. They saw water rise to the door. By Monday afternoon, the rain died out as Katrina moved on. Hunter and staff went up to the roof to survey the damage outside. There was three feet of water as far as the eye could see, maybe more. Down the street, buildings were damaged. Roofs were ripped off. Street signs and traffic lights were blown down. Trees were everywhere. Far off in the distance, Hunter and his friends could see the damaged Superdome roof, a facility used as a last-minute shelter. "That night, all nine of us slept at the radio station. It was quiet, eerily so. It was dark. Pitch black. Not one light was on. We were isolated. There was no power. No Internet. No cell phone service. We had no idea the levees had been breached and water was pouring into the city," he said.[68]

Flooding destroyed WBOK's studio and offices, and severely damaged the station's transmitter and transmitter tower. WBOK was not a member of the Entercom or Clear Channel. When the station returned to the air, it would serve as an instrument for black political leaders to voice their opinions about the relief effort.[69]

WTUL (91.5 FM), a Tulane University radio station managed completely by students, staff, and alumni, found its music library and equipment intact, thanks to a second floor location. However, the Tulane campus building from which the station broadcast was damaged by flood waters. WTUL streamed pre-recorded radio programs made by Tulane students, New Orleans locals, faculty and staff DJs. When the station returned to the air, it broadcasted out of the mezzanine of the Rue de la Course coffee shop.[70]

New Orleans National Public Radio (NPR) affiliate WWNO (89.9 MHz), a non-profit public radio station licensed to and operated by the University of New Orleans (UNO), was one of the first stations to return to the air. Program director Fred Kasten set up a temporary studio in his undamaged home in the Carrollton neighborhood of New Orleans and gave daily post-Katrina updates until the station was able to return to its UNO studios. Kasten remembered making his way up the four story stairs to the studio in the pitch black night after the storm. One hundred degree heat made removing undamaged equipment to his home a struggle.[71]

WWOZ, a non-profit community-supported radio station in New Orleans broadcasting at 90.7 FM, was also independent of the Entercom or Clear Channel groups. WWOZ made the decision to go off the air two days before Katrina. Although the station's studio suffered minor damage, and station's transmitter atop the Tidewater Building on Canal Street in downtown New Orleans was found to be whole and serviceable, power in the area was down and not likely to be repaired anytime soon. Within a week, WWOZ initiated a webcast as "WWOZ in Exile" via Internet servers at WFMU in New Jersey. On October 18, 2005 WWOZ resumed limited hours of broadcasting in New Orleans, using studio space made available by Louisiana Public Broadcasting in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.[72]

KGLA (1540 AM) was the first and only Hispanic owned-and-operated Spanish radio station in Louisiana. The station had served the New Orleans community for more than 40 years. KGLA's efforts after Hurricane Katrina were recognized by two of the largest national Hispanic associations in the country–the Na-

tional Council of La Raza and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. The station used a small gasoline-powered generator to broadcast emergency messages for those who had no other means of communications in the first few days after the storm.[73]

WBSN (89.1 FM), a local Christian music station not affiliated with either Clear Channel or Entercom, built a website to track Katrina in advance of the storm's arrival. The station gave storm warnings and encouraged listeners to evacuate, said Dan Duke, director of development at the station at the time of the storm. WBSN staffers evacuated but stayed in touch because "we knew it was going to be bad," Duke said. "We thought the storm would come in and two days later we'd come back and do business as usual," he added. However, the breached levees and flooding changed the station's plan. Staffers evacuated to Atlanta to make preparations. The station's transmitter site was a loss. According to Duke, there was an outpouring of support from the community. "We took it one step at a time and did what we could to get back on air," said Duke. "The outpouring and financial support, emails and phone calls we received from our listeners told how proud they were to have us back on the air. It was really touching."[74]

WGSO (990 AM), a talk radio station with news, sports, business and political commentary, was not part of the Entercom or Clear Channel cluster of stations. The station went into automation mode and carried audio from a local TV station. "Our building went through a power surge, then powered off. Such a surge and power down messed up our systems," said Randy Dixon, a morning show producer at the time. When Dixon returned to assess the damage, most of equipment was intact except the computers. The computers ran the commercials and satellite feeds. Unfortunately, they were all fried from power surges. "We had to get a whole new system . . . a forced upgrading," he said. Once back on the air, Dixon changed the morning line up by tying into local news stations feeds.[75]

WRBH (88.3 FM), a non-profit organization not associated with the major chains, and the only full-time reading service on the FM dial in the United States at the time, had its struggles, as well. The station's Natalia Gonzales, the interim executive director at the station at the time of Katrina, and later to become executive director, had returned from vacation ten days before landfall. The first day of Gonzales' new position was the Monday before Katrina made land fall.

"I was in Baton Rouge as an escapee. It was very challenging. I had no training in the position. I had to fly by the seat of my pants. But it was very liberating," Gonzales said. "I was able to establish myself with no board of directors breathing down my neck since they were dispersed."[76]

While in Baton Rouge, Gonzales was in communication with Ernie Caine, the contract engineer/maintenance. According to Caine the damage to the station was catastrophic. The station's transmitter in Chalmette, Louisiana was beneath twenty feet of water. With a Corporation for Public Broadcasting emergency gift of $20,000, Gonzales was able to buy a smaller, twenty-five kilowatt transmitter that would broadcast a signal strong enough to reach within the city limits. With the help of the National Guard, the station was able to obtain a cell tower and air news updates between regular broadcasts. Guests included representatives of FEMA, the Red Cross, and other first responders. The station's prerecorded series of twelve-hour "loops" kept listeners attuned to the latest storm coordinates, interviews with local officials and interviews with a few people who were riding out the storm at home.[77]

HURRICANE KATRINA CHANGES LIVES OF RADIO COMMUNITY

Hurricane Katrina undoubtedly changed the lives of local radio broadcasters in New Orleans. "While working in radio I've always felt I had an obligation to my community to provide up-to-date breaking news. This was especially true during the lead-up to Katrina," WTIX's Rob Hunter said. "Five co-workers and I were busy broadcasting storm updates and evacuation routes. Our obligation motivated us to stay through the storm. Not just us, but our girlfriends, boyfriends and dogs, too."[78]

Hurricane Katrina taught WODT's Gerry

Vaillancourt the value of the transistor radio. "People were in an area couldn't escape, he said. By having a transistor radio and a cell phone, they were able to tell folks where they were." "The transistor became the lifeline. It wasn't the computer, the lap top, high speed Internet, TV, or cable TV. It was simply radio" Vaillancourt recalled the stream of calls he received: "I can't find my baby! My sister lost her baby! I saw a dead man! I've never seen a dead man! I can't find my 4-year-old son! I can't find my husband." Vaillancourt, known by his audience as "Gerry V," was humbled by what he heard, and was astonished with the role radio played during Katrina. "There's a family with 15 people in a house with no power, but they can listen," he said. "You're on the next shift, and you're keeping them company, and it's frightening."[79]

"What made it easy was the show was coming to you," WNOE's Eddie Edwards, a long-time radio veteran, said. "The listeners *were* the show. All you had to do as a talk show host was to comment on what they said. It wasn't about ratings. It was just a real personal level thing. It was like we were the voice of what everybody was going through. . . . We gave them their voice." [80]

Loretta Petit was the voice of the popular gospel station, WYLD 940 AM, a Clear Channel station in New Orleans. Petit was most remembered during the time of Katrina for her partnership with Spud McDonald. Both McDonald and Petit were at odds with each other and barely spoke off-air after an altercation in which Petit accused McDonald of not being compasssionate about victims of the storm while on the air. McConnell walked out the studio, but returned to apologize. "We became instant talk show hosts and had to learn as we went," Petit said, referring to her many hours on the air with the more experienced news people from WWL radio. "We had to try to take a little bit of that command from them [WWL] so we could feel like an equal. That was a challenge," she added, saying that challenges made her and members of her radio station work harder and do a better job. "We became three-dimensional. . . . We became bigger than what we were pre-Katrina"[81]

Deke "the Big Chief" Bellavia, a nighttime sportscaster on WWL-AM, was a leading authority on high school football in southeast Louisiana and programmed a daily talk show on sports. "He has a rolling, syrupy accent and an enormous girth, which he is not too shy to mention on the air," wrote *Los Angeles Times* staff writer, Ellen Barry. Barry retold Bellavia's story: "Deke did not expect to find himself, as he did last week, instructing a dehydrated listener to punch a hole in a can of corn and suck out the liquid, or soothing a woman who called from her cell phone while wading through water that had bodies in it. Bellavia's normal duties were to be a sportscaster. This was not what he was hired to do.[82]

Monica Pierre, a member of Clear Channel's New Orleans hip-hop radio station WQUE-FM, labeled the broadcasts of the United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans "historical, needed and necessary." Working with such diverse personalities was easier than expected, she added. "I told myself that it was not really about me, but about the information." As a radio broadcaster, she felt compelled to stay, to be on the air with her listeners, and communicate emergency information. As a wife and a daughter, she felt compelled to evacuate, to preserve the well-being of those she loved. In the end she made a deal with Ray Romero, another Clear Channel broadcaster, that she would stay with him until midnight; but at midnight she would leave the city and return once the storm passed to relieve him.[83]

Making the move from a radio personality to a talk show host was a natural move, said Adrian Long, a mid-day host at WYLD FM, Clear Channel's urban adult station in New Orleans. "I had always wanted to be a talk show host, and now had a chance to be one," she said. "It was like the old days . . . the theater of the mind. It was right there . . . something you could always rely on. We were feeling the pain and agony of our listeners. I believe this came through on the radio." She and her 4-year-old child rode out the hurricane alone, while her husband attended to his military duties at the Pentagon. Long lost everything during Hurricane Katrina. "The roof caved in and destroyed everything," she added. Six months after Hurricane Katrina, Long and

her child were still living in a FEMA trailer.[84]

WYLD's A. J. Appleberry, in a personal interview for this study, said Hurricane Katrina gave him the true perspective of the role of radio in a catastrophe. "A lot of radio people lose sight of our real duties, that of serving the community," he said. "The storm shook a lot of people up and brought us to the forefront. We joined forces, doing what we knew we had to do. This was not the time to compete. This was the time to come together."[85]

Born and raised in Bayou country, WWL's Spud McConnell held a master's degree in acting. His career had taken him to Hollywood for three seasons on ABC's *Roseanne Show* and to a successful run Off-Broadway in the one-man show, *The Kingfish*. The night before Katrina, McConnell could hear the outer bands of rain coming in about 6 a.m. He pulled another four-hour shift, and then retired to a room in the adjacent Hyatt Regency that Entercom had secured for workers that night.

"I slept for about three hours, and then couldn't sleep anymore, so I went back down to the station and never went back," he added. When not gathering information and doing other station duties, McConnell slept on the floor in his office. It got scary. He saw a pigeon out the window, flapping its wings fiercely but going backwards because of the wind. "No one wants to admit it, but we're all stressed and depressed," McConnell said.[86]

For forty-year radio veteran Vince "Vinny" Marinello, Hurricane Katrina was the most catastrophic news event in the history of the United States, "and I was part of it." Speaking in strictly a journalistic context, Marinello would not have missed it for the world. "These are the kind of events you live to cover, if you are a true newsman," the WWL veteran said.[87]

WWL street reporter Chris Miller never pictured his WWL and sister stations would have to leave town and broadcast from Baton Rouge. "I always thought the engineers had contingencies to keep our main studios on line with something like this," he said. "I was amazed at having two highly competitive radio groups partnering and cooperating the way they did, he added. Miller, a 10-year veteran of radio news, didn't have to stay in the RV's in the back parking lot. "I was lucky I had some family-friends in the area that I stayed with," he said. Miller was one of the few on staff that did not lose their home. His Westbank house was not exposed to the levee failures like most of New Orleans.[88]

David Blake, a news anchor on WWL, covered Hurricane Frederick's arrival in Mobile in 1979. But, Frederick had no similarity to Katrina. "It [Katrina] was like broadcasting from Beirut," his wife Heather reported him as saying. "You would have thought a bomb had gone off."

Heather painted a picture of her husband as one who was the consummate professional. "He left personality at the door and did whatever needed to be done to get the job done," she said.[89] Kaare Johnson, a WWL street reporter, remembered the waist deep water and the wind coming between the buildings downtown. He had never before witnessed such devastation and mayhem. "We had to avoid all kinds of floating material in the waters. It was very uncomfortable, Johnson said.[90]

Perhaps the most regarded of the United Broadcast staff was WWL's Garland Robinette, described by Douglas Brinkley (2006) in his book *The Great Deluge*, as "the most respected broadcaster in Louisiana."[91] Robinette provided some of the most captivating media moments during the Katrina disaster. It was Robinette who conducted the celebrated "get off your asses" interview with New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin. Robinette was expecting a typical routine report from Nagin, but what he got was a guest frustrated over President Bush and the federal government's slow-moving reaction following Hurricane Katrina.[92]

Nagin's interview was carried on all three TV networks. A day later, President Bush made a visit to New Orleans, some say because it was a "camera op." Clear Channel's Dick Lewis thought numerous rebroadcasts of Nagin's appearance were part of the reason President Bush had been to the Crescent City more than a half a dozen times, and helped focus national attention on the city's plight.[93]

PARTNERSHIP COMES TO AN END

The United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans partnership between Entercom and Clear Channel came to an end after seventy-two days on November 9, 2005. That's when the last of the Clear Channel and Entercom stations returned to their regular formats. Officials considered it appropriate because listeners can be over saturated with news. Most Entercom stations returned to New Orleans. However, WWL stayed in Baton Rouge because of the satellite services the station needed. WWL used a Louisiana Network satellite uplink to feed its programming from the Baton Rouge studios back to the New Orleans studios, where commercials were played out of the Dalet system, a computer automation system that all Entercom stations used for commercials. With WWL in Baton Rouge, its news reporters continued to work their "beats" in New Orleans. They gathered material on laptops and sent audio reports to Baton Rouge using the Verizon Wireless' data network.[94]

Although Entercom stations returned to New Orleans, they were not able to return to their original quarters in the Dominion Tower on Poydras Street downtown. They found a temporary home in the former Jefferson Parish Administration Building (JAB) in Gretna, a suburb of New Orleans. One floor of JAB, as it became known, served as general office space for stations WEZB, WLMG, WTKL, WKBU and WSMB AM. The second floor functioned as studios for three of Entercom's FMs. The cluster's fourth FM, WTKL (FM), suffered serious damage at its transmitter site and was being operated from a low-power auxiliary transmitter, simulcasting WWL's news-talk programming.

Entercom went to work, reconstructing four transmitter sites around New Orleans. The WWL transmitter location was in a bayou south of the city, and experienced very little damage. Entercom installed two new generators, one which powered the station's powerful 50 kW transmitter signal into a directional antenna tower system. The second generator powered a smaller 10 kW transmitter that was used for a backup transmitter.[95]

WTKL, which long carried the WWL signal, was renamed WWL FM. "To fully service the community you have to work both sides of the dial," WWL's Newman said. "We kept getting calls from the community, letter after letter, from people who said they could not get the AM signal in the buildings, computer interference . . . so we made the flip in formats and renamed WKTL (oldies) to WWL FM." In March 2006, Entercom's cluster of stations, including WWL, was finally able to move back into its former facility, the Dominion Towers, on Poydras Street.[96]

CONCLUSION

Since the introduction of newer technologies, the concept of "local" has been at the center of debate. The consolidation trend and the practice of outsourcing have added fuel to discussion among broadcasters, regulators, and the public over how radio in the United States should best serve its traditional community. Despite such a debate, consolidation was clearly seen as an asset in what happened before, during and after Hurricane Katrina.

Katrina reacquainted the community with the value of radio and reaffirmed its importance. When Katrina was at its worst, local radio announcers went into emergency mode and became determined to be the eyes and ears of its listeners. With a collapsed telephone system, no power, and several television stations off the air, local radio provided critical information to a drowning city. Local authorities, including the Mayor of New Orleans, the President of Jefferson Parish, and officials from other municipalities, depended on local radio to get rescue and relief information to their citizens..

Local radio in New Orleans proved that the medium still has staying power and resilience to inform and comfort its local listeners, especially in times of disaster and catastrophe. The Katrina experience helped change the radio industry by helping renew interest in the local radio news department and by helping focus more attention on local broadcasting. Radio took the lead, recognizing local coverage and local perspective can provide meaning, historical analysis and ultimately solutions to events in the community.

As such, local radio in New Orleans advanced itself as one of the most aggressive, trusted and valuable members of the media community. Local radio's aggressive efforts during Hurricane Katrina were not a quest for a public relations victory or profit, but more about the medium's ethical and moral responsibility to community during times of crises.

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