Communicating Katrina: A Resilient Media

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This case study on news media operations during disaster examines the impediments experienced by newspapers and television stations in two states that were hard hit by Hurricane Katrina. Through management surveys in Louisiana and Mississippi, this research reveals that, although both states are hurricane prone areas, almost half of the respondents did not have a disaster plan in place. Even more interesting to note, one year following Katrina, many still did not have a plan—although a majority said they were currently working on one. These findings are consistent with existing research on communications and on other businesses that seldom have plans in place for a disaster even when business owners’ risk perceptions are high. This research also suggests that, similar to other research on businesses in disaster, large news media operations may be better prepared than medium to small sized businesses. Furthermore, lessons learned from this research suggest crisis plans for media outlets should address human resource issues (such as aiding families of staff members), technology issues, and the unique needs for information distribution when there are power outages and workplaces destroyed.

Keywords: News media, Disaster operations, Business continuity, Hurricane Katrina

Introduction

During disasters, people need information (World Disasters Report 2005). In fact, “people need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter” (World Disasters Report 2005). And, who better to disseminate that information than the mass media (Fisher 2005)? Yet, in August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast Region (Townsend 2006) the media found themselves in the midst of the crisis—with flooded newsrooms, power outages, and destroyed workplaces (Magandy 2007; Pope 2007; Poynteronline 2005). As one TV news director said, “We lost everything in our newsroom: all equipment, some vehicles, dishes, wiring, all news offices and anything in the offices” (News Director Interview 2006). At the same time, those covering the story were personally part of the story themselves, losing loved ones (Magandy 2007) and
leaving behind flooded homes, some stranded by the rising water (Pope 2007; Poynteronline 2005).

This case study examines newspaper and television newsroom operations in Louisiana and Mississippi, two of the hardest hit states. Through management surveys where news teams covered Katrina, the researcher reveals lessons learned and how the media might better prepare for the next natural or man-made disaster.

Furthermore, unlike much other research on disaster journalism that focuses on the content of the news media (Scanlon 2006), this research addresses impediments to covering the story. Few disaster research scholars discuss news media operations in disaster (Quarantelli 2002; Quarantelli 2006; Duhe’ and Zoch 1996). Perhaps what may be even more significant is how businesses such as media operations fare in disaster situations and how this current research contributes to the business disaster literature.

**Literature Review**

While Hurricane Katrina has been judged to be one of the worst natural disasters in our nation’s history (Townsend 2006), it also was one of the biggest domestic news stories of 2005 (PBS 2005). Hurricane Katrina was the most destructive natural disaster in U.S. history (http://www.whitehouse.gov/reports/katrina-lessons-learned.pdf, accessed December 2007). In fact, estimates vary, but Hurricane Katrina is America’s first disaster—natural or technological—to cost more than $100 billion USD (Wolf 2006), left more than a thousand dead, and caused the greatest displacement ever of a U.S. population (Graumann et al. 2005; Greenough and Kirsch 2005). Although there have been disasters such as 9/11, the Indian Ocean Tsunami and other horrific tragedies, the visual images of dead people lying in the streets and the cries for help brought into our living rooms—day after day after day—made this a natural disaster of unbelievable magnitude. The enormous impact of Katrina put news teams from across the country along the Gulf Coast to report on the devastation.

With the flood of media also came a surge of media criticism (Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski 2006)—from “framing low-income blacks in the streets of New Orleans as a collection of deviant criminals” (Counterpunch 2005) to New Orleans’ Mayor Ray Nagin chiding the media for “embellishments” and “things that were stretched” (Fox News 2006) during Hurricane Katrina’s coverage. However, while some have criticized the media for its coverage, others have expressed praise (Smith, Campbell and Lee 2006). For example, those displaced by Katrina appeared most satisfied and complimented the media for providing hurricane preparedness information, providing survival information during the flood, and giving them a sense of connectedness as they tried to cope with the devastation and put their lives back together (Smith et al. 2006).
Communicating During Disaster

Although disasters such as Katrina may not be preventable, proper measures through preparedness and response communication can decrease their effects (Guion, Scammon and Borders 2007; McEntire and Myers 2004; Spence, Lachlan and Griffin 2007). During an emergency, timely and coordinated communication is essential to effectively helping the community (FEMA 2007). “Effective and accurate communication can save lives and property and helps ensure credibility and public trust” (FEMA 2007, p. 1).

The media can play an effective role in disasters. In fact, “They can act as a single link between the public and officials and be the single most important source of public information” (Scanlon 2007, p 413). “Without doubt, this [the passing on warnings of impending disasters] is the clearest and most consistent role played by the mass communication system in a disaster response” (Quarantelli 1991, p. 23). Furthermore, social science literature has established that the media may be what binds societies during disasters (Scanlon 2006).

However, with Katrina, as with most other crises, came disruption. Disorganization during disaster often stems from the fact that normal methods of communication are often disrupted. Individuals have to be contacted immediately for mobilization, materials requested, and information sought to make decisions (Dynes 1970). While most American communities are served by radio, television and newspapers, their public service function is often compromised during disasters. However, much of the published literature to date regarding media and disasters lack any systematic discussion of news room operations (Scanlon 2006). That is what this study explores. Are newsrooms ready to cover disasters? Specifically, were newsrooms in two of the hardest hit states by Hurricane Katrina prepared for a disaster of that magnitude?

Disaster Preparedness by the News Media

During disasters or what some may classify as catastrophes (Quarantelli 2006) like Hurricane Katrina, scholars have found that preparedness planning among local news media organizations is very limited and of poor quality.

Little attention is paid to emergency and disaster planning in most such organizations. The majority have no crisis plans whatsoever, giving no consideration to problems they would have if, for example, their facilities were affected, or to the difficulties of coordinating coverage of a major story in an altered and turbulent social environment (Quarantelli 2002).

For example, in one field study that focused on disaster prone cities, only 33% of the radio stations, 54% of the television stations (15 out of 28), and three of the five papers studied had disaster plans of any kind (Quarantelli 2002). Furthermore, a 1996 study on television newsrooms found that only one in three had a written crisis coverage plan.
(Duhe’ and Zoch 1996). However, in that study, nearly half of the stations without written plans said they were currently developing them. Moreover, of the stations that reported having a plan, almost all (94%) said they followed it and nearly 70 percent said they changed or amended it from one disaster to another (Duhe’ and Zoch 1996).

In contrast, a later study found that only 37% of the organizations actually used their planning in their community disaster (Quarantelli 2002). Another study found that media plans themselves “were usually outdated, never exercised and often could not be located by the staff” (Wenger and Quarantelli 1989, p. 33). Furthermore, even when media organizations have plans, the question remains whether they are effective. “Media outlets may have plans for covering major incidents, though even that is rare, but they usually do not have plans about how they will continue to operate in destructive incidents” (Scanlon 2007, p. 421).

While literature reveals a consistent theme of lack of planning for media operations, there are a few bold exceptions. On 9/11, for example, the Wall Street Journal had a backup facility with equipment (Baker 2001; Scanlon 2006; Scanlon 2007). As soon as the first plane hit the first tower, a decision was made to activate the backup location (Baker 2001; Scanlon 2006; Scanlon 2007).

Whether media outlets have planned for disaster or not, the public expects the media to continue reporting during a crisis (Fearn-Banks 1996). It is certainly not typical for the media to be a part of the story. During Hurricane Katrina, for so many media, not only were their workplaces damaged or destroyed, so were their homes (Pope 2007; Tiner 2007). Furthermore, in many cases, journalists were reporting in horrendous situations with few or no tools of the trade. As news report after news report revealed, even basic cell phone coverage was non-existent (Williams 2006).

Overall, existing research shows, the mass media have done little to prepare themselves for disaster. This lack of preparedness is happening when the public depends on the mass media for information more than ever.

**Business Disaster Planning**

Are the news media any less prepared than other businesses? Prior to the 1990s, there were few studies assessing disaster impacts on the economy (Tierney and Webb 2001). Typically, that work involved small businesses (Alesch et al. 1993; Kroll et al. 1991) or firms representing specific economic sectors (Drabek 1994) on disaster preparedness and response among tourism-oriented businesses and preparedness measures undertaken by hazardous material facilities (Lindell and Perry 1998).

In 1993, the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware initiated a series of studies on disasters and business which sought to identify factors that contribute to the ability of businesses to weather turbulent environments (Tierney and Webb 2001). From a practical perspective, this research also aimed at identifying lessons learned and developing guidance for businesses and policymakers. Based on data collected from...
some 5,000 businesses in five communities, as well as other disaster studies on business preparedness, research shows the overwhelming majority of businesses place a very low priority on anticipating and planning for disasters (Tierney and Webb 2001). Evidence also suggests that when businesses do prepare, they favor measures that are easy to do and require little investment rather than more difficult tasks such as making plans to move to alternate locations in the event of major damage at the workplace—even when such measures could help reduce business interruption and positively impact the businesses’ recovery (Tierney and Webb 2001).

What may be even more intriguing is that low levels of preparedness persist even when business owners’ risk perceptions are high and even in the aftermath of disasters (Tierney and Webb 2001). Even experiencing a disaster is insufficient to induce many businesses to plan. In fact, surviving a disaster with few negative consequences may lead some business owners to conclude that planning is frivolous and unnecessary (Tierney and Webb 2001).

The one consistent finding is that larger businesses are more likely to prepare than smaller ones (Alesch et al. 1993; Drabek 1994; Perry 2001; Tierney and Webb 2001). After the 1994 Northridge earthquake, for example, improvements in disaster preparedness were greatest among larger businesses and firms that had already been relatively well-prepared, as well as those that had experienced business interruption as a result of the earthquake (Dahlhamer and Reshaur 1996; Tierney and Webb 2001).

More needs to be known about mass media preparedness for disaster. To examine these issues, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. Were the news media staff able to work at their newsroom facilities during Hurricane Katrina?
2. Did these staff utilize a crisis communications plan for the workplace during Katrina? If so, what made those plans effective or ineffective?
3. What were the lessons media managers learned regarding disaster coverage during Katrina?
4. Were large news media organizations better prepared for Hurricane Katrina and did the large news organizations do more after the storm to prepare for future disasters?

**Method**

The research questions were addressed by means of an Internet survey of all television news directors and daily newspaper editors in both Louisiana and Mississippi. To develop the list of TV news directors, the researcher conducted a thorough analysis using the Internet for all TV stations with news programming. That list was cross referenced with a list of all news directors belonging to the Radio Television News Directors Association, the world’s largest professional organization devoted exclusively
to electronic journalism. Email addresses, phone numbers and the names of current news directors were then gathered from the stations’ Internet web pages.

For newspaper editors of daily newspapers in Louisiana and Mississippi, the researcher began with the *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook* (2005). However, that book proved to not include current management in many instances. Therefore, the researcher used the Internet to search for daily newspapers’ websites in Louisiana and Mississippi for management names, email addresses, and phone numbers. When this information could not be obtained from the website, student assistants made telephone calls to get the missing information. This procedure identified 26 television stations in Louisiana and Mississippi with news programming, 15 in Louisiana and 11 in Mississippi. This procedure also identified 49 daily newspapers, 26 in Louisiana and 23 in Mississippi.

Email messages were sent via the Internet to both TV news directors and newspapers editors requesting their response to an attached link to the Hurricane Katrina Survey. Initial survey requests were sent August 26, 2006, but that initial email request produced few results. A follow-up email was sent and phone calls were made to increase the response rate. Those who were successfully contacted were asked to respond to the survey. Those solicitations continued through October 9, 2006.

The survey included 15 questions addressing issues surrounding newsroom operations during Hurricane Katrina. Specifically, the survey asked respondents if they were employed at their current workplace when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and if the staff were able to work at the newsroom’s facilities during the duration of the storm. It also asked if, during Katrina, their facilities were damaged and, if so, to what extent. The questionnaire also asked if they had to evacuate their facilities and, if so, for how long.

A number of survey questions also dealt with whether news outlets had established crisis/disaster plans. Specifically, such questions asked whether the organization had a written crisis/disaster coverage plan for its newsroom at the time of Katrina. If so, overall, did they consider their plan to be effective during Katrina and to explain why or why not. They were also asked whether they had changed or amended their plans since Katrina and, if so, to tell how their plans had changed. If they had not established a crisis/disaster plan before Katrina, respondents were asked if they had a written plan in place for their newsroom since then. Finally, respondents were asked what were the greatest lessons they had learned regarding disaster coverage from Katrina and also to describe an extraordinary event that occurred to them or someone on their staff during the hurricane.
Results

A total of 25 TV news directors and newspaper editors in the two states responded to the survey for a response rate of 33 percent. Of the 25 respondents, 12 (48%) were TV news directors and 13 (52%) were newspaper editors. The range of size in the television station markets can be judged by the 2007-2008 Nielsen designated market areas (DMAs), of which there are 210 in the United States (DMA 1 is the largest TV market). The largest market represented in the sample was DMA 54, the New Orleans media market, followed by what would be considered medium to small sized markets—DMAs 82, 94 and above. (Nielsen Designated Market Area 2007-2008). This breakdown in market size is similar to market size research from the Radio Television News Directors’ Association. Regarding newspaper respondents, the largest circulation newspaper represented in the sample was also from New Orleans. Like the television markets, other newspaper respondents were from medium to small sized markets. All but one of the respondents, a TV news director, was employed at their current workplace when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast.

Research question 1 asked: Were the media staff able to work at their newsroom facilities during Hurricane Katrina? Only one TV news director and one newspaper editor reported that their staffs were not able to work in their newsroom facilities during the storm, even though five of the 25 workplaces were damaged during Katrina. For example, one television news director in New Orleans reported, “We lost everything in our newsroom; all equipment, some vehicles, dishes, wiring, all news offices and anything in the offices.” A Biloxi, Mississippi TV news director also reported severe disruption.

“The roof of our newsroom came off; we gathered up all of the equipment we could to save. Also a tower fell at the station destroying our sales area. We lost our newsroom during Hurricane Katrina.”

Newspaper outlets had infrastructure challenges as well. For example, a Gulfport, Mississippi newspaper editor said his workplace also suffered damage during the storm. The roof was damaged, some water damage from the roof damage; however, their equipment was okay. While they did not have to evacuate, they did have to print offsite.

At the Daily News in Bogalusa, Louisiana, there was “extensive building damage” as well. At the Hammond newspaper, there was a “lack of electricity, minor damage to the building and a leaking roof.”

According to respondents, that damage meant television stations and newspapers had to evacuate their facilities, while at least one newspaper had to print offsite. For at least one television station, WVUE in New Orleans, they reported they were out of their newsroom for 4 months. However, one TV news director in New Orleans boasted that
they never had to go off the air. When their transmitter had to be evacuated, they relocated to Baton Rouge.

Research question 2 asked: *Did the staff utilize a crisis communications plan for the workplace during Katrina? If so, what made those plans effective or ineffective?* Overall, 14 of the 25 respondents (56%) said they had a plan in place during Katrina. Furthermore, the answers to this question suggest the TV stations were better prepared than newspapers. When asked whether they had written crisis/disaster coverage plans, nine of the 12 (75%) TV station respondents said they had a plan compared to five of 13 (38%) newspaper respondents. It is interesting to note that only one television station had previously developed plans to *relocate* if a catastrophe would happen. Nearly two years before the storm, WWL-TV executives met with Louisiana State University officials in Baton Rouge to discuss using the University as an emergency facility from which they could broadcast if necessary (LSU Highlights 2007).

On Sunday, August 28, 2005, David Kurpius, associate dean of LSU’s Manship School of Mass Communications, received the call on his cell phone—the satellite trucks were on their way. Another call came in hours later, this one from the New Orleans Times-Picayune newspaper. Its staff was also headed to Baton Rouge and needed a landing spot (LSU Highlights 2007).

Of those media organizations with a plan, only one TV station and one newspaper (2/14 = 14%) reported that their plans overall were *ineffective*. Interesting, both the TV station and the newspaper who said their plans were ineffective were located in the same market—Baton Rouge. Other organizations with plans all reported that their plans were effective. When stating that their plan was effective, one manager said: “Everything worked according to the guidelines stated in the plan. We were prepared for any contingencies created by the storm including off-site locations that would enable us to continue to operate.” Another reported: “The plan gave us guidance during a very hectic and difficult time; it was helpful to have a clearly written plan during a crisis.” Others said: “We had contingencies in place to ensure that we could continue publishing. We never missed a day of publication despite Katrina.” Nonetheless, some stations who had said their plans were effective also mentioned ineffective portions of the plan. For example, one news manager wrote about his plan: “Effective: clear direction… Ineffective: state’s inability to follow its plan/communications.”

One news manager cited a deficiency in their plan that failed to prepare them for the duration of the storm. The manager said: “Our plan outlines procedures for 3 days of wall-to-wall coverage not the more than 2 weeks we experienced during Katrina.” Some though believed that one could have never been fully prepared for a storm such as Katrina. Even though they had a plan, the fear was if they had been in Katrina’s direct path, things would have been much worse.

When news directors were asked whether they had changed or amended their plan since Hurricane Katrina, more than one-half (8/14 = 57%) said yes. When asked how
management had changed or amended their crisis/disaster plans since Katrina, one news director said in an open ended response: “We have addressed communication issues and put a greater emphasis on gathering emergency information ourselves instead of relying on the state agencies.” Other respondents said they had changed or amended their plans since Katrina to include such provisions as having more web involvement, adding ham radio operators, preparing for a longer disaster duration, and adding bathroom and living facilities.

Even one year after Katrina, of those news media organizations who reported they did not have written plans (eight newspapers and three TV newsrooms), seven (7/11 = 64%) reported they still did not have a plan. Of those seven, five did report that they are currently developing a plan.

Research question 3 asked: What were the lessons media managers learned regarding disaster coverage during Katrina? Respondents gave a variety of answers including people just want the facts, rely on alternative communications, you can never have too many supplies including power generation, and the overall need to be flexible and have a workable disaster plan in place. When asked to share extraordinary stories encountered during Hurricane Katrina, there were many reports of news media staff who knew that their own homes had been destroyed, and yet were still able to make life altering decisions for others. As one news director said, there were “Far too many extraordinary stories of heartache, tragedy, courage, incompetence and heroism.”

Finally, the fourth research question asked: Were large news media organizations better prepared for Hurricane Katrina and did the large news organizations do more after the storm to prepare for future disasters? To help determine the level of preparedness among newsroom operations, the researcher first asked media managers whether they had written crisis/disaster coverage plans. As reported earlier, out of the 25 total respondents, 14 respondents (14/25 = 56%) reported having a written plan. Eleven respondents (11/25 = 44%) did not have a plan. Of the 14 with a plan, nine were from TV (9/14 = 64%) and five (5/14 = 36%) were from newspapers. Of those nine TV stations with a plan, three (3/14 = 21%) were from what is considered a large media market (DMA 54). The remainder of the TV stations and newspaper outlets with plans (11/14 = 79%) came from medium to small sized media markets. The eleven respondents with no written plans (11/25 = 44%) came from media to small sized media markets (see Table 1).

While these numbers appear interesting, the difference in proportions 100% for large markets vs. 50% for medium and small markets) cannot be tested for statistical significance because some cell frequencies are less than five.

It should also be noted that in the Louisiana and Mississippi TV and newspaper markets, only the New Orleans market would be considered large based on DMA and circulation. Of the respondents from the New Orleans market, all had written crisis/disaster plans.
Table 1: Media Operation Market Size and Written Plans During Katrina

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<th>Market Size</th>
<th>Written Plan</th>
<th>No Written Plan</th>
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<tr>
<td>Large (1-70 DMA)</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medium and Small</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>(70-210 DMA)</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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To determine whether news media organizations in large markets did more to prepare after Hurricane Katrina, the questionnaire asked news directors whether they had changed or amended their plans since the hurricane struck. Out of all respondents with a plan, as reported earlier, more than half (8/14 = 57%) said they had changed or amended their plans since Katrina. Of those eight respondents who amended their plans, five were from TV (5/8 = 63%) and 3 (3/8 = 38%) were from newspaper outlets. Also important, two of the eight (2/8 = 25%) respondents who had changed or amended their written plans since Katrina were from a large media market.

Conclusions

Despite a significant amount of research on the news media in disaster, there is still much to be learned about disaster response—particularly in the area of newsroom operations. Thus, this study was aimed at exploring such issues to better prepare media organizations for future manmade and/or natural disasters of Katrina’s magnitude. In response to Research Question 1, although only two of the respondents said their staffs could not work at their media outlets during Katrina, it was evident that others were working in very challenging conditions including building damage, a lack of electricity and leaking roofs. For several, the damage brought by Katrina meant they had to evacuate their facilities and even print offsite making their tasks even more difficult. Furthermore, many of those working in the media had damage to their own homes while they were also attempting to report the news for others.

Regarding whether staffs utilized a crisis plan during Katrina, answers to Research Question 2 showed that, even though both Louisiana and Mississippi are hurricane prone areas, nearly half (44%) of the respondents did not even have a disaster plan at the time of the hurricane. These findings are consistent with earlier literature that found that preparedness planning among mass communications systems is very limited (Duhe’ and Zoch 1996) and of poor quality (Quarantelli 2002). Even more important to note, one year after the country’s worst natural disaster, of the 11 respondents without a crisis plan during Katrina, seven (7/11 = 64%) news media operations still had not established a plan, although five of those said they were working on one. This is consistent with
literature on other businesses where scholars have noted that even experiencing a disaster is insufficient to induce many businesses to plan (Tierney and Webb 2001).

Regarding effectiveness of the crisis plan, the findings of this study are consistent with the Duhe’ and Zoch (1996) study, a decade earlier, which found TV news directors said their plans were effective. However, it should be noted that even in this study where respondents overall said their plans were effective, newsroom managers suggested many ways to make covering such a disaster better and offered many lessons learned—from “you must have a crisis plan” and “how you must prepare for impact to the tragedy on your own personnel.” Such responses may suggest that self reporting on plan effectiveness may not be reliable.

What were the lessons media managers learned regarding disaster coverage during Katrina? Managers faced the challenge of running a news operation when many of their own staff had been personally affected by the tragedy. That challenge did call attention to the need for such information to be included in news media crisis response plans. In addressing Research Question 3, this study revealed that a crisis plan should include information from the following three areas: impact, technology and information.

First, the plan must address the impact on an organization’s staff. That is, the plan should cover everything from how to deal with staff affected by the tragedy themselves, to their families and all the things necessary to help them recover personally. This also would include the need for plans to share human resources (staff) with sister stations and other news outlets. Are there cooperative agreements already in place? If so, where will those people be housed, etc. during the duration of the tragedy?

A second area of lessons learned category was technology. News managers said not to rely on cell phones and identified needs for power generation backup, gasoline, and other tools and equipment that could work in anyplace at anytime. One manager even hired a ham operator. What should the media use for basic communications during disasters and is that technology in place now?

Finally, a third area that managers outlined regarding lessons learned from Katrina was the continuing importance of information and how it is disseminated during a disaster. People want and need information continuously during a disaster. But, how do people get that information when the power is out? How do the media best communicate when its “local” population has been displaced beyond its coverage—even when electric power is available? That may mean a need for a better Internet presence or perhaps alternative media altogether.

Finally, when examining whether large news media organizations were better prepared for Katrina and whether they did more after the storm to prepare for future disasters, findings from this study primarily were consistent with the business literature. Specifically, this research revealed that the lack of crisis planning in media outlets is consistent with other businesses that seldom have plans in place for a disaster (Tierney and Webb 2001)—even when business owners’ risk perceptions are high. It appears from
this research that news media operations are similar to a majority of other businesses that place a very low priority on anticipating and planning for disasters.

Furthermore, these findings are somewhat consistent with the literature (Tierney and Webb 2001; Alesch et al. 1993; Drabek 1994; Perry 2000) regarding size of the business and type of planning. All three of the respondents from a large sized media market did have a written crisis/disaster plan. However, only one large market television station also had a relocation plan in place for a catastrophe. That lack of a relocation plan among other respondents too is consistent with the literature (Tierney and Webb 2001; Scanlon 2007) that suggests that when businesses do prepare, they favor measures that are easy to do and require little investment rather than the more difficult tasks such as making plans to move to alternate locations in the event of major damage in the workplace—even when such measures could help reduce business interruption and positively impact the businesses’ recovery.

It should also be noted that two of the eight respondents who had changed or amended their written plans since Katrina were from a large media market. (While 2/8 = 25% from large markets who changed or amended their plans since Katrina, compared with 6/8 = 75% from medium to small sized markets—it should be noted however that there were only 3 responses from major markets; therefore, that shows that two-thirds of the respondents from large markets changed or amended their plans after Katrina.)

Thus, TV stations and newspaper organizations appear to be no different than other businesses when it comes to planning for disaster. It should be noted that this research shows TV stations may be somewhat better prepared than newspapers when it comes to having a plan in place. Seventy-five percent of TV respondents had a plan in place compared with only 38% of newspapers.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the mass media are the single most important organizations to disseminate information when a crisis or disaster occurs. That is what sets the media apart from other businesses—both large and small. Whether that means having plans to include alternative places to publish a newspaper, a web presence, or power generation, it is critical that the media provide necessary, perhaps life saving, information to the public. The news media were quite resilient during and after Hurricane Katrina—covering the disaster in horrendous work and personal situations and circumstances. But, lessons can be learned. And the media, like other businesses, can be even better prepared for the next man-made or natural disaster. Although there are lessons to be learned from this research, there are limitations to this study including the size of the sample. Respondents were also asked to recall the experience months following the disaster. A follow-up survey to determine whether media management had truly amended their plans would be useful. This study too only questioned media managers, the TV news directors and newspaper editors. A survey of those field journalists who actually covered the storm during Katrina might prove even more insightful.
References


